

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Leader's Guide, Lesson Eleven

PSALMS 34 AND 41

The Protected One and the Betrayed One

Lesson at a glance

Two psalms, held up side by side, showing the two things that happen to a righteous man in this world. Psalm 34 comes out of the strangest hour in David's life, when he escaped the king of Gath by pretending to be insane, and it is an alphabetic acrostic of thanksgiving that turns halfway through into plain wisdom instruction. Its promise that the LORD "keeps all his bones, not one of them is broken" is what John reaches for at the cross when the soldiers break the legs of two men and not the third. Peter takes up the same psalm twice, once in a phrase he does not even flag as a quotation and once in a long citation aimed at Christians who are being mistreated. Psalm 41 is the prayer of a sick man surrounded by visitors who are counting the days, and its ninth verse is about the friend who ate his bread and lifted his heel. Jesus quoted that verse in the upper room about Judas, with Judas at the table, and He quoted exactly half of it. The lesson has two hearts, one in each psalm: what God's protection actually guarantees, and what the love of Christ looked like on the night He was sold. The class should leave with both, and with a sharpened sense of how carefully the New Testament handles Scripture.

Goals for this session

First, that each person would read both psalms in their own settings, a fugitive's thanksgiving and a sick man's complaint, before hearing a word about how the New Testament uses them.

Second, that the class would be able to say honestly what Psalm 34:20 promises and what it does not, and would leave holding a protection that broken bones and a grave cannot touch.

Third, that everyone would see, from Jesus quoting half of Psalm 41:9 and from Peter stopping short of the end of Psalm 34:16, how exactly the New Testament handles the Old, and would carry that habit into their own reading.

Fourth, that each person would face one particular betrayal in their own life with the basin and the towel of John 13 in front of them, and would take one concrete step this week.

Preparing to lead

Read both psalms out loud before you read anything else, and read 1 Samuel 21:10 to 15 and 22:1 to 2 with Psalm 34 in front of you. The story is short and strange, and the class will enjoy it, but the reason it

matters is that David gives God the credit for a rescue he engineered with his own cunning. Read Psalm 41 slowly enough to notice that verse 4 is a confession of sin. If you do not notice it in your own preparation, you will not be ready for the question about it in class.

Read John 13:1 to 30 as one piece, and then read it again watching only Judas. Then read John 19:31 to 37 with Exodus 12:43 to 46 and Numbers 9:12 open beside it, and read Acts 1:15 to 26 in full. Look up 1 Peter 2:1 to 5 and 3:8 to 12 in their paragraphs rather than as isolated verses; Peter's argument in chapter 3 is about not repaying evil for evil, and the psalm is quoted in the service of that argument.

Pray before you teach this one, and pray about your own history. Almost every leader has a person whose name still tightens the chest, and an hour on Psalm 41 can be used by the enemy as easily as by the Lord. Ask God to make you honest and not bitter in front of your class. Pray also for anyone in your room who is ill, and for anyone whose child or spouse has walked away from the faith, because both of them are going to hear their own life read aloud.

Sensitive topics in this lesson

Betrayal by an intimate friend. This is the pastoral center of the hour, and it will be raw for someone. Divorce, a business partner, a church member who repeated something told in confidence, a family member who took sides. Let the psalm say it plainly and do not hurry to the application. But guard the discussion in one specific way: do not let anyone tell a story that identifies a person the class knows. Ask for the shape of the wound, not the name attached to it.

The people in the room who did the betraying. In any group of adults there are some who have been the friend who lifted the heel, and a lesson like this one can land on them as condemnation. Make sure that somewhere in the hour you say out loud that Peter also failed his Lord on that same night, denied Him three times with oaths, and was restored and put back to work, and that the difference between Peter and Judas was not the size of the sin but what each man did with it afterward (John 21:15 to 19; 2 Corinthians 7:10).

Protection that did not come. Someone in your class prayed for a child, a marriage, or a body, and the answer was no. Psalm 34:19 to 20 can sound like a promise God broke. Handle this head-on in question 4 rather than letting it fester. The psalm itself admits that the afflictions of the righteous are many, and its last verse defines the deliverance as redemption of the life and freedom from condemnation. Then Jesus, the righteous One, was not spared the cross. Say plainly that God has not promised His people a hedge around their comfort, and that what He has promised is far harder to break.

Judas, and whether he ever had a choice. Someone will ask it, and the question matters. Scripture says the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand about him (Acts 1:16) and that Jesus knew from early on who would betray Him (John 6:64 and 6:70 to 71). Scripture also holds Judas fully accountable: "woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed" (Matthew 26:24), and Acts 1:25 says he turned aside "to go to his own place." God's foreknowledge of a choice is not the same thing as God's causing it. Do not let the class drift into the idea that any man is created for damnation without a real choice, and do not let it drift the other way into the idea that God was caught by surprise. Peter puts both truths in one sentence

at Acts 2:23: delivered up according to God's definite plan and foreknowledge, and crucified by the hands of lawless men who are held responsible for it.

Sickness and the visitors who wound. Psalm 41:5 to 8 describes people who come to a sickbed, say the right words, and go out and repeat everything. Nearly everyone who has had a long illness has met that visitor, and a few in your class have been that visitor without meaning to be. This is a good and gentle place to talk about how the church visits the sick, and about the difference between gathering information and giving comfort.

Suggested 60- to 75-minute schedule

Five minutes: welcome.

Five minutes: open in prayer. Read Psalm 34:1 to 8 aloud, and then Psalm 41:9, and let the two of them sit next to each other without comment.

Five minutes: warm-up. Ask the class to finish the sentence, "The thing that hurts about being betrayed by a friend, and not by an enemy, is..." Take four or five answers and move on.

Thirty-five to forty minutes: discussion. Choose six or seven questions in advance.

Five to ten minutes: "Your response" reflection.

Five minutes: closing prayer.

Discussion priorities

Make sure these are among the questions you discuss: 4 (what Psalm 34:19 to 22 actually promises), 5 (the unbroken bones at the cross, and especially 5d), 7 (Peter quoting Psalm 34 to mistreated Christians), 10 (the basin, the towel, and Judas), and 11 (the half of the verse Jesus did not quote). If time runs out, protect 5 and 11. Question 9b should be read aloud and felt even if there is no time to discuss it.

Notes on key questions

Question 2. The story is in 1 Samuel 21:10 to 15. David, running from Saul with no weapon and no bread, goes to Gath, which is Goliath's city, and the servants of Achish recognize him at once and quote the victory song about him. He scratches on the doors of the gate and lets his spittle run down his beard, and Achish dismisses him as a lunatic. The superscription names the king Abimelech, which is best understood as a Philistine royal title rather than a contradiction; compare the Abimelech of Genesis 20 and the Abimelech of Genesis 26, a generation apart, and compare our use of Pharaoh. If someone in the class has met this as an alleged error, answer it briefly and without heat and move on. The real payoff of the question is the second half. David saved his own life by deceiving a king, and the psalm he wrote about it never mentions his cleverness once. "I sought the LORD, and he answered me." "This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him." Scripture reports the deception without commending it,

which it does often. The "poor man" of verse 6 is David himself, using the Old Testament word for the humble and afflicted, the same class of people who gathered to him at Adullam in 1 Samuel 22:1 to 2.

Question 4. This is where the lesson either becomes honest or becomes sentimental. Verse 19 concedes before it promises: many are the afflictions of the righteous. Verse 18 is the tenderest line in the psalm and is worth reading twice, especially the word "near." On verse 20, in its own setting the unbroken bones are a picture of complete keeping, in the same way we say that not a hair of someone's head was touched (compare Luke 21:16 to 18, where Jesus says in one breath that some of them will be put to death and that not a hair of their head will perish; that pair of sentences is the best commentary in Scripture on Psalm 34:20). Push the class to part c. Verse 22 is the larger promise: the LORD redeems the life of His servants, and none who take refuge in Him will be condemned. That is a promise no illness, no accident, and no executioner can touch. Make sure nobody leaves thinking the psalm guarantees a safe life, and make sure nobody leaves thinking God's protection failed.

Question 5. The Romans broke the legs of crucified men to hasten death by suffocation, and the Jewish leaders requested it because the bodies could not remain on the cross into a Sabbath that was a high day (John 19:31). The soldiers broke the legs of the two others, came to Jesus, found Him already dead, and one of them thrust a spear into His side. John breaks off in the middle of the paragraph to say that the man who saw it has borne witness and that his testimony is true (19:35). He then cites two texts: verse 36 is our psalm and the Passover statute, and verse 37 is Zechariah 12:10, "They will look on him whom they have pierced." On part c, the Greek verb for "broken" in John 19:36 is the same verb used in the Greek Old Testament at both Exodus 12:46 and Psalm 34:20, so the question of which text John is quoting has no certain answer, and it does not need one. Tell the class that the honest position is that both stand behind it, and then ask the better question: why do the two texts say the same thing? Add 1 Corinthians 5:7 and John 1:29 and note John's mention of hyssop at 19:29 next to Exodus 12:22. Part d is the question the whole first half of the lesson exists for. God did not keep His righteous One from affliction and did not keep Him from death. What He kept was the body itself, intact, for the third day, and the life that verse 22 promised to redeem. Do not answer it for them. Let the silence do some work.

Question 7. Take question 6 first if you have time for it, because the two belong together. 1 Peter 2:3 is Psalm 34:8 in the exact words of the Greek Old Testament, and Peter does not flag it as a quotation at all; it is simply how a man talks who has a psalm in his bones. The payoff is the next verse: "As you come to him, a living stone" identifies the good Lord who has been tasted as Jesus Christ, which is the same move the class watched Hebrews make in Lesson Ten with Psalm 102, and it opens into the living stones passage they studied in Lesson Nine. Notice too that the sins listed in 2:1 are largely sins of speech, and that Peter uses the word "deceit" in 2:1, again in 2:22 where he says no deceit was found in Christ's mouth, and again in 3:10 where he quotes Psalm 34:13. Now to question 7 itself. 1 Peter 3:10 to 12 quotes Psalm 34:12 to 16 at length, and the way Peter quotes it teaches as much as the content does. He begins in the middle of the psalm's wisdom section and he stops before the end of verse 16; the psalm's last clause, "to cut off the memory of them from the earth," is not taken up. He turns the psalm's question, "What man is there who desires life?" into a description, "Whoever desires to love life and see good days," and he turns the psalm's second-person commands into third-person ones. None of this is carelessness; it is a writer fitting an inspired text into an argument with great precision. And the

argument matters. Read 3:8 to 9 with the class first. These Christians are being told not to repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but to bless, and Peter's support for that command is a psalm written by a man who had every earthly reason to bite back. The practical center of the psalm for them, as for us, is the tongue.

Question 9. Verses 5 to 8 describe enemies asking when he will die, a visitor who says the right things and then goes out and tells everything, whispering, and a verdict: he will not get up again. Then verse 9. Give the class the two details that make the verse land. "My close friend" is literally "the man of my peace," and "who ate my bread" is covenant language; in that world, sharing a man's table put you under obligation to him. On the phrase "lifted his heel," be honest that the exact image is uncertain, most likely the kick of a well-fed animal or the trip of a wrestler, and that the force of it has never needed explaining to anyone. Part c will be the hardest. Verse 10 asks God to raise him up "that I may repay them," and the New Testament does not let a Christian pray that; vengeance belongs to God (Romans 12:19), we do not repay evil for evil (1 Peter 3:9), and Christ Himself did not revile in return but entrusted Himself to the One who judges justly (1 Peter 2:23). Do not soften the psalm and do not scold David. Say what changed: not God's justice, but our place in it. We have been given the freedom of not having to be the judge. The class met this same ground in Lesson Six with the imprecations of Psalm 69.

Question 10. John 13:1 sets the frame: He loved His own to the end. Verse 3 says He knew the Father had given all things into His hands and that He had come from God and was going back to God, and it is precisely then that He gets up and takes the towel. Authority in the hands of Jesus produces a basin. Then make sure the class registers what John has already told them at 13:2 and 13:11: the betrayal was decided, and Jesus knew who. He washed Judas' feet anyway. On part c, the dipped morsel handed to a guest was a gesture of honor, most likely offered to the person seated nearest the host, and it was the last kindness Judas received from anyone. The last four words of 13:30 are "And it was night," and John, who has written about light and darkness since his first chapter, did not put them there by accident. Read the verse aloud and stop. Some leaders will be tempted to fill the silence. Do not.

Question 11. This is the sharpest teaching moment in the lesson. Psalm 41:9 reads, "Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me." John 13:18 quotes only, "He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me." The omitted words are "my close friend in whom I trusted," and the omission is exact rather than accidental. Jesus had not been deceived by Judas; John 2:24 to 25 says He did not entrust Himself to men because He knew what was in man, and John 6:70 to 71 records Him saying a year earlier that one of the Twelve was a devil. He would not say of Himself something that was not true, even in a quotation, even in that hour. The second half of the question is just as important. The psalm's fourth verse says, "heal me, for I have sinned against you," and that verse could never be in the mouth of Jesus, who committed no sin and in whose mouth no deceit was found (1 Peter 2:22; Hebrews 4:15; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Connect this straight back to Lesson Six, where the class learned that Psalm 69:5 says something that cannot be true of Jesus while the psalm is used of Him repeatedly. The New Testament takes what fits and leaves what does not, and it does so with a care that ought to reform the way we quote Scripture ourselves. If one thing survives the week from this lesson, let it be this.

Question 12. Acts 1:16 is one of the plainest statements in the New Testament about how the Psalms came to us: "the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David." David spoke, and the Spirit spoke, and the two are not in competition. Verse 17 is sobering: Judas "was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." He was not an infiltrator; he was an apostle who preached and who returned from the mission with the others. On part b, the two quotations in verse 20 are Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8, not Psalm 41; the first justifies treating the place as vacant and the second calls for it to be filled. The class studied both in Lesson Six, and it is worth saying so. Psalm 41:9 stands behind the whole episode without being quoted here, because Jesus had already quoted it in the upper room. On part c, the qualifications in verses 21 and 22 are that the man had accompanied them the whole time from John's baptism to the ascension, so that he could serve as a witness to the resurrection. That is what the apostles understood their office to be: eyewitness testimony to a risen Christ, which is not an office anyone can hold today.

About the Study Skills in this lesson

Two Study Skills appear in Lesson Eleven. Reading a Psalm That Was Built on the Alphabet explains the acrostic behind Psalm 34, which no translation can show. Make three points with it: an acrostic is built to be memorized, its verse-to-verse logic is looser than in ordinary prose so we should not force tight arguments across its lines, and the places where the pattern breaks are worth noticing. Psalm 34 skips the letter waw and adds an extra line at the end beginning with pe, and Psalm 25 is missing its waw line as well and closes the same way, on the same Hebrew verb for "redeem." The second skill, Noticing Where a Quotation Starts and Stops, is the one that will be used for the rest of the students' lives, and this lesson gives you three live specimens in one hour: Jesus quoting half of Psalm 41:9, Peter stopping before the last clause of Psalm 34:16, and Peter reshaping the psalm's question and its commands. Do at least one of them with two Bibles open on the table where everyone can see. The habit being taught is not suspicion; it is attention.

A suggested closing prayer

Pray your own prayer. A sample, if you would like one:

"Father, thank You for a Bible that tells the truth about how much it hurts to be wounded by a friend. Thank You that You put a song about it in Your own book of songs, and that Your Son took that song on His lips in the hour it came true. Teach us what Your protection really is. We have asked You for a fence around our comfort, and You have given us something stronger and harder to see: a life You have redeemed and a judgment we will never face. Thank You that not one of His bones was broken, and that the tomb could not keep Him. Where we have been betrayed, keep us from bitterness, and give us the courage to pick up a basin and a towel. Where we have been the one who lifted the heel, thank You that Peter also failed on that same night and that You did not throw him away. Make us people who taste and see that You are good. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen."

Looking ahead to Lesson Twelve

Next week is the last lesson of the series, and it is the capstone: the Psalms in the worship of the church. Hebrews 2:11 to 12 quotes Psalm 22:22 and puts the words in the mouth of Jesus, "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise," which means that the risen Christ is the lead singer of His people's praise. From there the lesson gathers what the New Testament actually says about our singing: Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16, Hebrews 13:15, 1 Corinthians 14:15, Matthew 26:30, Acts 16:25, and James 5:13. The class will look back across all twelve psalms they have studied and forward to the worldwide worship of Psalm 22:27 to 31. Ask them to read those New Testament passages this week, and to come with two things written down: the psalm from this series that has stayed with them most, and one line from any psalm that they would like the congregation to sing. Tell them there will be time for both.