

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Lesson Eleven

PSALMS 34 AND 41

The Protected One and the Betrayed One

He was drooling into his own beard on purpose. The anointed king of Israel, the man who had dropped Goliath with a stone, was standing in the gateway of Goliath's hometown scratching at the doors like an animal and letting the spit run down his chin, because it was that or be killed. It worked. The king of Gath looked at him and said he had all the madmen he needed, and had him put out. David walked away alive, ran for a cave, and sat down and wrote one of the calmest songs in the Bible.

This week you have two psalms instead of one, and they belong together because they show you the two things that happen to a righteous man in this world. In Psalm 34 God protects him, and the psalm is so sure of that protection that it says the LORD keeps all his bones and not one of them is broken. In Psalm 41 the man is sick in bed, his enemies are counting the days until he dies, and then the door opens and the person who hurts him worst is the friend who has eaten at his table. Both psalms are quoted in the New Testament of Jesus. One of them is quoted by a Gospel writer standing at the foot of the cross. The other is quoted by Jesus Himself, in an upper room, with the man He was talking about sitting at the table.

Read Psalm 34 and Psalm 41 all the way through, more than once, before you answer anything. Then read 1 Samuel 21:10 to 15 for the story behind Psalm 34. Then read John 19:31 to 37, 1 Peter 2:1 to 5, 1 Peter 3:8 to 12, John 13:1 to 30, and Acts 1:15 to 26. Carry one question through all of it: what does God's protection of His righteous one actually turn out to look like?

First impressions

The two psalms come to us differently. Psalm 34 carries one of the fullest superscriptions in the book: "Of David, when he changed his behavior before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away." The Abimelech named there is the Achish of 1 Samuel 21. Abimelech means something like "my father is king," and it appears to have been a royal title in Philistine country the way Pharaoh was in Egypt; two different kings named Abimelech deal with Abraham and with Isaac in Genesis 20 and 26. Psalm 41 carries only "To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David," with no occasion attached, but it sits in a place of honor. It is the last psalm in Book One of the Psalter, and its final verse is not part of the psalm at all but the doxology that closes the whole first book: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen."

1.
 - a. Read Psalm 34 and Psalm 41 through, once quickly and once slowly. Which psalm sounds more settled, and which sounds more wounded? Mark the verse in each one where you can hear it most clearly.
 - b. What surprises you most about either psalm?

The king who played the madman (34:1-7)

Go back and read the story first, because the psalm makes a different kind of sense once you have. David has fled from Saul with no sword, no bread, and nowhere to go, and he runs to the last place anyone would look for him: Gath, a Philistine city, Goliath's city. The servants of Achish recognize him immediately, and they quote the song the Israelite women had sung about him, which is not a good sign. So David pretends to be insane, and the king of Gath throws him out as useless. From there he goes to the cave of Adullam, and the men who gather to him are the distressed, the indebted, and the bitter in soul (1 Samuel 22:1 to 2). That is the congregation the psalm was written for. Notice what David does not say in the psalm. He never mentions his own cleverness. He says, "I sought the LORD, and he answered me," and, "This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him." Scripture reports the deception without commending it. David gives the credit to God.

2.
 - a. Read 1 Samuel 21:10 to 15 and then Psalm 34:1 to 7. What did David actually do to save his life, and what does the psalm say saved him?
 - b. How often does David say he will bless the LORD in verse 1, and who does he invite to join him in verses 2 and 3?
 - c. Read 34:4 to 7. Write down every verb that describes what God did. Who is the "poor man" of verse 6?

Study Skill, Reading a Psalm That Was Built on the Alphabet: Psalm 34 is an acrostic. In Hebrew, each verse begins with the next letter of the alphabet, and the poem walks the alphabet from one end to the other. Nothing of that survives translation, but knowing it is there changes how you read. First, it tells you the psalm is a teaching psalm, built to be memorized, the way a child learns a rhyme. Second, it warns you not to hunt too hard for a tight argument from verse to verse, because the shape of the poem is partly governed by the alphabet. Third, the exceptions become interesting. Psalm 34 skips one letter, waw, and then

adds an extra verse at the end beginning with the letter pe, and verse 22 is that extra verse: "The LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned." Psalm 25 is missing its waw line too, and it also closes with an extra line beginning with pe, built on the same Hebrew verb for "redeem." Look at Psalms 9 and 10, 25, 37, 111, 112, 119, and 145, and Lamentations 1 to 4, all of which are acrostics. Ask of each one what the alphabet is doing there: covering the whole of a subject from A to Z, or holding grief together in a frame when nothing else will hold.

Taste and see (34:8–14)

Verse 8 is the invitation at the center of the psalm: "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!" It is not an argument. It is a plate pushed across a table. David is not asking his hearers to be convinced of God from a distance; he is asking them to try Him, the way you learn what bread is by eating it. Then at verse 11 the psalm changes gear and turns into a classroom. "Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD." What follows in verses 12 to 14 is straight wisdom instruction of the kind you find all through Proverbs, and it is startlingly practical: watch your tongue, stop the lying, quit doing evil, do good instead, and go chasing after peace. Hold on to those three verses. An apostle is going to quote them at length to Christians who are being mistreated.

3.
 - a. Read 34:8 to 10. What are the two things the reader is invited to do in verse 8, and what is promised to the one who does them? What does "take refuge" mean for a man who was hiding in a cave?
 - b. Read 34:11 to 14. What does David say he is going to teach? Make a list of the five commands in verses 13 and 14. How many of them concern what comes out of your mouth?
 - c. Verse 12 is a question: who is it addressed to? Would you say the psalm is promising a long comfortable life, or something else?

For Further Study: Verse 7 says, "The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them." The same figure turns up in the very next psalm, at 35:5 to 6. For a picture of what the line means, read 2 Kings 6:15 to 17, where Elisha's servant wakes up to a city surrounded by an enemy army and is shown that the hills are already full of horses and chariots of fire. Read also Genesis 32:1 to 2, where Jacob meets the angels of God and names the place Mahanaim, "two camps." Then read Hebrews 1:14, which tells you plainly what angels are for. Two cautions before you build anything on this. Scripture never invites us to pray to angels or to be curious about them (Colossians 2:18; Revelation 22:8 to 9), and the point of Psalm 34:7 is not the angel but the LORD who sends him.

He keeps all his bones (34:15–22)

The last section of the psalm sets two futures side by side. The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and His ears are toward their cry; the face of the LORD is against those who do evil. And in the middle of it sits verse 18, which has probably been read at more hospital bedsides than any other verse in the Psalter: "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." Then comes the honest sentence that keeps the whole psalm from being sentimental. Verse 19 does not say the righteous man will be spared trouble. It says, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous," and only then, "but the LORD delivers him out of them all." Verse 20 puts that keeping in the most physical words available: "He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken." In its own setting that is a picture of complete protection, the way we might say that God has not let a hair of someone's head be touched. Read it in its own century first. We will come back to it standing on a hill outside Jerusalem in the middle of the afternoon.

4.
 - a. Read 34:15 to 18. What is God's posture toward the righteous, and what is His posture toward those who do evil? Who exactly does verse 18 say He is near to?
 - b. Read 34:19. What does this verse admit, and what does it promise? Why does it matter that the admission comes first?
 - c. Read 34:20 and 34:22 together. What does verse 20 promise about the body? What does verse 22 promise about the life and the judgment? Which of the two is the larger promise?

For Thought and Discussion: Christians have had their bones broken. Stephen was stoned. James was killed with a sword. Believers have gone to prison, to the arena, and to the fire, and God did not stop it. So what does Psalm 34:20 mean, and what does it not mean? Read the verse again beside 34:19 and 34:22, and then beside Romans 8:35 to 39. What is the deliverance that God has actually guaranteed to every one of His people, and how would you say that to a Christian who is about to have surgery in the morning?

Not one of his bones was broken (John 19:31–37)

Crucifixion killed slowly, by exhaustion and suffocation, and the Romans had a way of hurrying it along. They broke the man's legs so that he could no longer push himself up to breathe. It was standard, brutal, and quick. On that particular Friday the Jewish leaders asked for it, because the bodies could not stay up over the Sabbath, and that Sabbath was a high day. So the soldiers came with the mallet and broke the legs of the first man and then of the other. Then they came to the middle cross, and there was nothing

to hurry. He was already dead. One of them put a spear into His side instead, and out came blood and water. And John, who stops in the middle of the paragraph to say that the man who saw it has borne witness and that his testimony is true, breaks off the narrative to tell you why it mattered: "For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: Not one of his bones will be broken." The Greek word John uses for "broken" is the same word the Greek Old Testament uses both at Exodus 12:46 and at Psalm 34:20, which is why careful readers have argued for centuries about which of the two he is citing. Before you decide, notice that he has mentioned hyssop a few verses earlier at 19:29, and read Exodus 12:22 to see what hyssop was used for on the night of the first Passover.

5.
 - a. Read John 19:31 to 37. Why were the legs of the crucified men broken, and why were Jesus' legs not broken? Who does John say saw this?
 - b. John says two Scriptures were fulfilled here. Verse 36 is the one we are studying. Look up verse 37 as well and find where it comes from. What does it tell you that John cites two texts about one moment?
 - c. Now read Exodus 12:43 to 46 and Numbers 9:12, the law of the Passover lamb. What is said in both places about the bones of the lamb? Read 1 Corinthians 5:7 and John 1:29. Which Old Testament passage do you think John had in mind at 19:36, and does it have to be only one?
 - d. Read Psalm 34:19 to 20 once more with the cross in front of you. God did not keep His righteous One from affliction, and He did not keep Him from death. What did He keep?

Peter had this psalm by heart

Some time in the sixties, an old fisherman wrote a letter to Christians scattered across what is now Turkey who were being slandered, shut out, and made to suffer for the name of Christ. He calls them exiles. He tells them to put away malice and deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, and to long for pure spiritual milk like newborn babies, "if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good." That last line is Psalm 34:8, in the exact words of the Greek Old Testament, and Peter does not announce it as a quotation at all. It is simply the way he talks. Then watch what he does in the next breath. "As you come to him, a living stone." The Lord who has been tasted and found good in verse 3 is the Lord Jesus Christ in verse 4. A psalm written about the LORD, the covenant God of Israel, has just been said of Jesus without a word of explanation. Two chapters later Peter reaches for the same psalm again, and this time he quotes five straight verses of it as a rule of life for people who are being mistreated.

6.
 - a. Read 1 Peter 2:1 to 5 and then Psalm 34:8. Which words has Peter taken from the psalm? Who is the "him" of 1 Peter 2:4, and what does that do to the psalm's line?
 - b. Look at the sins Peter lists in 2:1 and then at Psalm 34:13. What do most of them have in common?
7.
 - a. Read 1 Peter 3:8 to 12, then read Psalm 34:12 to 16 beside it. Where does Peter's quotation begin, and where does it stop? Compare his last line carefully with the whole of Psalm 34:16. What is left off?
 - b. The psalm asks a question ("What man is there who desires life...?") and gives commands in the second person ("Keep your tongue"). How does Peter phrase the same material? What is the effect of the change?
 - c. Read 1 Peter 3:8 to 9 to see what Peter is arguing for when he reaches for the psalm. What are these Christians being told to do to people who are mistreating them, and how do Psalm 34:12 to 16 support it?

Optional Application: Of the five commands in Psalm 34:13 to 14, two are about the mouth: keep your tongue from evil, and keep your lips from speaking deceit. Peter quotes both of them to Christians under pressure, because pressure is exactly when the tongue goes. Take one week. Every time you are about to say something about a person who is not in the room, stop and ask whether it is true, whether it is necessary, and whether you would say it with that person standing beside you. Write down now the one relationship where this will be hardest.

Blessed is the one who considers the poor (41:1-4)

Psalm 41 opens with a beatitude, and it is not the one you would expect from a man in a sickbed: "Blessed is the one who considers the poor! In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him." The Hebrew word behind "considers" is not about pity but about paying attention, giving thought to somebody, the opposite of looking away. What David asks God for in verses 1 to 3 is what he himself has given to others. Then verse 4 turns, and it turns in a direction that ought to stop you: "As for me, I said, O LORD, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you!" That is a sick man confessing his own sin and asking to be healed. Keep your finger on that verse. It is going to matter a great deal in the upper room.

8.
 - a. Read 41:1 to 3. What kind of person is called blessed, and what four things does the psalm say God does for him? What is the setting of verse 3?
 - b. Read 41:4. What two things does the psalmist ask for, and what does he confess? Could the Lord Jesus have prayed this verse? Explain your answer.

The friend who ate my bread (41:5–13)

Verses 5 to 9 are one of the most uncomfortable passages in the Psalter, because they describe the visitors. The enemies are asking when he will die and when his name will finally be forgotten. Then one of them comes to the bedside, says all the right things, and goes out and repeats everything he has seen and heard. They whisper together. They have decided he is finished: "A deadly thing is poured out on him; he will not rise again from where he lies." And then comes verse 9, and the psalm goes from cruelty to something worse than cruelty: "Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me." The Hebrew behind "my close friend" is literally "the man of my peace," the one you were at peace with. "Who ate my bread" is not a description of a meal. In that world, to eat a man's bread was to be under his protection and to owe him loyalty; you did not do this to a man whose table you had shared. The picture in "lifted his heel" is debated. It may be the kick of an animal that has just been fed, or the trip of a wrestler, or a heel held up in contempt. Whatever the image, nobody has ever needed it explained.

9.
 - a. Read 41:5 to 8. What are the enemies saying about him, and what does the visitor of verse 6 do? Have you seen this in a hospital corridor?
 - b. Read 41:9 slowly, three times. Name the three things the verse says about this man: what he was to the psalmist, what he had done at the psalmist's table, and what he has now done. Which of the three hurts most?
 - c. Read 41:10 to 13. What does the psalmist ask God to let him do in verse 10, and what does he say he knows in verse 11? Compare his request with Romans 12:17 to 21. What has changed for us, and why?

For Further Study: The psalm does not name the friend, and neither should we. Many readers have thought of Ahithophel, David's trusted counselor, whose advice was valued as though it were the word of God and who went over to Absalom's rebellion and afterward hanged himself (2 Samuel 15:12 and 31; 16:23; 17:23). Scripture does not make that

connection, so hold it loosely. What Scripture does do is come back to this wound again and again. Read Psalm 55:12 to 14, where the same betrayal is described at length by a man who used to walk to the house of God in company with the one who turned on him. Then read Job 19:19, Jeremiah 20:10, and Micah 7:5 to 6, and then Matthew 10:35 to 36, where the Lord quotes Micah. Ask why God gave His people so many words for this particular grief.

The upper room

It is the last night. John begins the chapter by telling you what is in Jesus' mind: He knew the Father had given all things into His hands, He knew where He had come from and where He was going, and He had loved His own who were in the world and He loved them to the end. And knowing all that, He got up from supper, took off His outer garment, tied a towel around His waist, filled a basin, and washed their feet. All of their feet. John has already told you at verse 2 that the devil had put it into the heart of Judas to betray Him, and he tells you at verse 11 that Jesus knew who was going to do it. So when the basin came around the circle, it came to Judas too, and the hands that would be paid thirty pieces of silver were dried with the same towel. Then Jesus sat back down and quoted the psalm.

10.
 - a. Read John 13:1 to 20. What does verse 1 say about how Jesus loved His own, and what does verse 3 say He knew when He picked up the towel?
 - b. Read 13:2 and 13:10 to 11. How much did Jesus know about Judas, and when? Whose feet did He wash?
 - c. Read 13:21 to 30. In that culture, handing a guest a choice piece of food dipped from the dish was an honor. What is the last thing Jesus does for Judas before Judas goes out? What are the last four words of verse 30?

The half of a verse that Jesus did not quote

Here is the sentence, in John 13:18: "I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me." That is Psalm 41:9, and it is exactly half of Psalm 41:9. He leaves off the first half, "even my close friend in whom I trusted." It would be foolish to think that this is an accident or that He ran out of the verse. John has already told us, back in 2:24 to 25, that Jesus did not entrust Himself to men because He knew what was in man, and John 6:70 to 71 records Him saying, a full year earlier, that one of the Twelve was a devil. The Lord had washed the feet of a man He knew perfectly well. He had not been fooled, and He would not say a word about Himself that was not exactly true. And notice what else He did not take up. He did not use verse 4 of the psalm, "heal me, for I have sinned against you," and He could not have, for He committed no sin

and no deceit was found in His mouth (1 Peter 2:22; Hebrews 4:15). He took the line that fit and left the lines that did not, and He did it on the worst night of His life.

Study Skill, Noticing Where a Quotation Starts and Stops: When a New Testament writer quotes the Old Testament, do not just look up the verse. Find with a pencil where the quotation begins and where it ends, and then read what comes immediately before and after it in the psalm. Ask three questions. First, is the whole verse quoted, or only part of it? Second, is anything inside the quotation changed, such as a question turned into a statement or a "you" turned into a "him"? Third, and most important, what stands right beside the quoted words that was deliberately not taken up? You have three test cases in this one lesson. Jesus quotes the second half of Psalm 41:9 and not the first. Peter quotes Psalm 34:12 to 16 in 1 Peter 3:10 to 12 but stops before the last clause of verse 16. And Peter changes the psalm's question into a description and its second-person commands into third-person ones. Do this exercise often enough and one conviction settles in for good: the men who wrote our New Testament handled Scripture with an accuracy that ought to shame the way most of us quote it.

11. Look up the whole of Psalm 41:9 and then John 13:18. Write out what Jesus quoted and what He left out. Then write one sentence explaining why the omission is exactly right. Now do the same with Psalm 41:4. What would have been wrong with putting that verse in His mouth?

Let another take his office (Acts 1:15–26)

A few weeks later, before Pentecost, about a hundred and twenty disciples are gathered and Peter stands up to deal with the empty place among the Twelve. Listen to how he begins: "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus." That single sentence tells you what the apostles believed about the Psalms. David spoke, the Holy Spirit spoke, and the two are not competing. Peter then says something worth weighing: Judas "was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." He was not an outsider who infiltrated. He was one of the Twelve, he preached, and he came back from the mission rejoicing with the rest. When Peter finally quotes Scripture in verse 20, he reaches for two psalms, and neither of them is Psalm 41. He quotes Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8, which the class met back in Lesson Six. Psalm 41 stands behind the whole speech; these two supply the practical decision, which is that the vacancy is to be filled.

12. a. Read Acts 1:15 to 26. What does verse 16 say about who spoke the psalms, and what does verse 17 say about Judas' place among the apostles?

b. Find the two quotations in verse 20 and look them up. What does each one contribute to what Peter is proposing?

c. What are the qualifications given in verses 21 and 22 for the man who would take Judas' place? What does that tell you the apostles understood their job to be?

The protected one and the betrayed one

Put the two psalms side by side one last time. God protected His righteous One so completely that not a bone of Him was broken, and God let His righteous One be sold by a friend, arrested in a garden, and nailed to a Roman cross. Both are true, in the same week, of the same man. That is the hard, good, unsentimental thing these two psalms teach together, and it is the answer to a question most of us have carried since childhood: if God takes care of His people, what was that? The protection God guarantees is not a fence around our comfort. It is a grip on our life that death itself cannot break, and Psalm 34 said so in its last verse before it ever said a word about bones: the LORD redeems the life of His servants, and none of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned. And the betrayal is not a failure of the plan. It is the place where the love of Christ shows at its most inexplicable, because the One who knew exactly who was going to sell Him knelt down and washed that man's feet anyway.

13. What is the difference between saying "God will keep me from harm" and saying "God will keep me"? Which one does Psalm 34 actually promise? Which one did Jesus receive?

Your response

14. Somewhere in your life there is a person who ate your bread and lifted a heel. Name it privately, on paper. Then read John 13:1 to 5 again and ask what Jesus did with the towel and the basin on the night He was betrayed. What is one thing you could do this week that looks like that, even a small one?
15. Psalm 34:8 does not say think about it, or agree with it. It says taste and see. Where in your walk with God are you living on secondhand reports rather than firsthand experience? What one habit, practiced this month, would change that?
16. Write one specific step you will take in light of this lesson, and one prayer you would like the class to pray for you.

For the group

Warm-up. Ask the class to finish this sentence out loud: "The thing that hurts about being betrayed by a friend, and not by an enemy, is..." Take four or five answers and do not comment on them. Then read Psalm 41:9 aloud and go straight into the lesson. Keep this short. The room will go quiet on its own.

Discussion. The hour turns on questions 5, 7, 10, and 11. Question 5d, asking what God actually kept when He did not keep His Son from death, is the question the whole first half of the lesson has been building toward, and it should not be rushed. Question 11, on the half of the verse Jesus did not quote, is the sharpest teaching moment in the lesson and is where the Study Skill pays off; do it with two Bibles open. If time is short, read question 10 aloud and let the class simply sit with the fact that Jesus washed Judas' feet, even if you cannot discuss it fully.

Wrap-up. Close by reading Psalm 34:18 and 34:22 aloud, and then John 13:1, with a pause between them. Then sing together. Tell the class that next week is the last lesson of the series, that it is about the Psalms in the worship of the church, and that they should come ready to look back over all twelve psalms and forward to a song that is not finished yet.