

Sharing the story of salvation

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[0 : 0 0] Evil will slay the wicked. The foes of the righteous will be condemned. The Lord will rescue his servants. No one who takes refuge in him will be condemned. Amen.

So, here is David sharing the story of salvation in his own experience. Now, I guess we know and appreciate the power and appeal of personal stories. You maybe read in the news this week that Prince Harry has just signed a contract for his biography, and even before pen is put to paper, you can guarantee that's going to be a bestseller. We love to learn about rich, famous, powerful, influential, important people to learn what makes them tick. In a very different vein, as a child growing up in church, one of the highlights for me on either a Friday night or a Sunday night on occasion, the church would gather for, I guess, kind of testimony evenings, and sometimes that would be folks from within our church. One that sticks in my head was a local fisherman. Sometimes it would be folks coming to visit. I remember hearing African missionaries come to visit, and they were sharing their stories of coming to faith in Jesus and how they had known God's help and God's guidance in their lives. Psychology recognizes that the stories that we tell about ourselves are important to creating our sense of identity, indeed helping to sustain us in difficult times. And that kind of fits with testimony. We understand as Christians that we are children of God, that we've been saved, that we have eternal hope, and that helps to sustain us and create our sense of identity. Well, today we're in Psalm 34, and in Psalm 34, we have personal testimony from King David. King David has been saved from trouble, and because of that, he is now praising God.

And what we discover is David saying, my life is not defined by the troubles that I experience, but by the redemption from God that I came to know. And then he encourages the people more widely and says, this can be your story too. So our approach today is that we're going to listen to Psalm 34 as personal testimony from King David, and see how we can connect that to our own lives, and also to connect it to the story and the life of King Jesus. Well, look with me at the first three verses, where in a sense we get a summary and we get David's heart, where in effect he's saying, I will praise God and you should join me.

So verse one, I will extol the Lord at all times. His praise will always be on my lips. And then verse three, glorify the Lord with me, let us exalt his name together. So we didn't read the story of David's escape, but you can find that in 1 Samuel 21. This is a period in David's life where God has anointed him as future king, but the current king Saul is jealous of David, wants to kill David. So David has been running from Saul, finds himself in the enemy country of Gath, taking shelter with the king there. But then David's reputation as a warrior, serving the people of God, becomes known.

And so there is fear in the palace there at Gath. And so in response to that danger that David is now facing, he pretends that he's gone insane. So the king thinks, well, this guy is no threat, and then he runs away. But it's really important for us to recognize when it comes to how David thinks about this story, how does he think he's been saved? He doesn't praise his own cunning plan. He praises God, the Savior.

[4 : 08] And he tells this story to emphasize God's glory as Savior. And he has a further aim. Verse two, I will glory in the Lord. That's what I'm going to do. And then he says, let the afflicted hear and rejoice. This is what you ought to do. Here is hope, David is saying, for those who are afflicted.

We feel ourselves needy. We feel ourselves troubled. David reminds us to hope in the Lord, the one who is committed, committed to love his people, to rescue and to be for his people.

So here is King David, as we so often find him functioning as a praise leader. And his story is that God rescued me. And he wants to encourage God's people, the church, so that we together, we'd praise our God. It's a reminder of that point that C.S. Lewis made so well about praising, completing our joy. We know that when we share recommendations of something, a book that we read, a TV show that we watched, a restaurant that we went to, our joy is heightened, completed when we pass that review on to someone else. And they too enjoy that. So David wants to do for the people of God, as he comes to remind himself once again of God's saving power. So it's a reminder for us as Christians that we praise our God and our Savior in our stories, so that others will join the praise.

It's a reminder to us about the conversations that we have together and the conversation that we have with folks around us. Maybe especially today, it reminds us about the privilege and the purpose of singing together as God's people. What do we do? We gather around the message of salvation.

We sing songs that focus on who is our God, that focus on God's truth and God's love and the gospel of the Lord Jesus, so that together we join in the praise. We are saying to one another, I believe this. And we're saying to people who join with us, we're saying to the watcher, I believe this.

[6 : 21] And so when it comes to our lives and sharing our story, we want to highlight, if we're Christians, the fact that God has saved us, that God is with us and for us, showing us mercy, that he is good even when times are bad. Because that gives glory to God and that encourages our brothers and sisters in Christ and that helps to point a watching world to Jesus. So moving from David's summary in David's heart, let's get into the main message, David's testimony. That really takes up the rest of the sound. And again, we could summarize it and he's saying, this is my story, it can be yours too.

We're going to focus on four truths to highlight from this part of David's life. Four truths that I think in many ways speak to deep human longings. I'm sure that we will resonate with some, if not all of these. The first thing to draw our attention to is this, God hears his people's prayers.

Verse four, I sought the Lord and he answered me, he delivered me from all my fears. This week, we've seen lots of stories, tragic stories of people getting into difficulty in open waters because of the heat. I was reading one story of a beach rescue, one that ended well. And as the mum was sharing her story, she said in that moment, I prayed to God. And that's often people's instinct in a crisis, isn't it? Even when people don't have faith, when trouble comes, when we get beyond ourselves, often people will find themselves praying to the God they do not know. But for David, that's not his story, David is crying out, he's praying to the God he knows, the God who is his Lord. His covenant-making personal God, the one who he knows, acting for him as a father. And so David is inviting us to know this God and to put our faith in God such that we would pray to this God also.

Now, it needs to be said, other Psalms, Psalms of David, focus on the experience of silence from God, of waiting and of prayers not being answered. And perhaps we have known, perhaps we're in a season where that's how we are feeling. But it's important to say that that doesn't make Psalm 34 any less true.

Sometimes we may find silence, but sometimes we hear God speak and act. And so there is an encouragement for us here to persevere in our praying, to press on with those things that are on our hearts. Look with me if you have a Bible at the pattern of verse 4 and verse 6. There's a wonderfully basic pattern that David prays. Verse 4, I sought the Lord. Verse 6, as he's reflecting, this poor man called. And then we see God responds. In verse 4, it says, God answered me. In verse 6, it says, the Lord heard him. And then we see God acts. In verse 4, the word is, he delivered me from my fears. Verse 6, saved him out of all his troubles. David prayed, God heard, God acted. And then in verse 15, there's a lovely picture of God towards his people. The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry. Doesn't that remind us of God as our loving Father in heaven? Attentive, caring. It's his love and his care that prompts him to response, to action, ultimately to send Jesus.

[10 : 33] David's story is one in which Saul wanted to kill him, in which Achish and his leading men were beginning to threaten him. But he can say, I prayed and God saved. Now let's think about another king.

Let's connect this to King Jesus. What do we know about Jesus and prayer? Wasn't Jesus' life characterized by prayer? He, of course, taught his disciples the Lord's prayer. And how does that prayer begin?

Begins, our Father. Jesus wants his followers to know that we have a Father who loves us and who cares for us. And he's in heaven. He is powerful. He is full of glory. This is the God that we pray to, our loving, powerful, caring, glorious God. Jesus' life was marked by times of praying to his Father, enjoying fellowship with him, sometimes spending all night, sometimes getting up early for hours of undivided time with his Father in heaven. But we know, too, there was one time in Jesus' life where he prayed and he experienced silence. Jesus prayed the night before the cross, if it is possible, if it is possible, take this cup, this cup of suffering, this cup of bearing the anger of God against sin. Take this cup from me. For the next day, Jesus, we know, would suffer in the place of sinners. He would feel alone as the sin bearer of the world, so that by faith in Jesus, you and I can know that even if we are met with a feeling of silence, we know that we will never be abandoned, even when our prayer is not answered. Think about connections to our stories.

So many people are wondering, not is Christianity true? Many people are asking the question, does Christianity work? Does it make any difference to a person's life? And so here's an opportunity for us to talk about answered prayer, to talk about how we invite God into our troubles and how we see God, whether it's give us peace or give us answer. We want, again, to give glory to God. We want to demonstrate our view of the world. Our instinct as Christians is not to try and sort all the problems ourselves and just sort of bash on and get on with it. We want our instinct to be dependents, to be dependent children, to be prayerful, and to be open to see God working. And then we can share those stories, again, to encourage one another, but also to speak to a faith that is credible and is real. So God hears us when we pray. That's David's testimony. Another part of David's testimony is that God saves from shame. Verse 5, those who look to him are radiant. Their faces are never covered with shame. Ed Welch, who's a biblical counselor, has written a very helpful book on shame called

Shame Interrupted. And he has lots of other good resources as well. When he talks about shame, he talks about that feeling of being unacceptable, of feeling unclean. That sense of shame being like dirt that clings to us no matter how hard we try and get rid of it. Shame can come because of something that we do. It can be guilt that we, shame that we feel from the past or something we've done in the present. But shame can also be because of actions that others do to us. We can feel shame because of association. Those connected to us or situations that we are connected with can bring us shame. That sense of shame comes from a feeling that a community, a group of people, look at us and say, you don't belong. You are a disgrace. You are unworthy. Shame is a very powerful feeling still in modern culture. We can think very basically about what we still see happen today of naming and shaming of offenders. For example, after the trouble at Wembley, after the Euros, we saw images on our television screens of some of the worst offenders named and shamed. We see social media shaming of those who don't share our beliefs, values, causes. Why is shame so powerful?

[15 : 35] Well, isn't it because we instinctively want to feel that we are clean? That we want to feel that we are worthy, that we are welcomed by others?

Perhaps today we come with a burden of shame. And if we do, then King David has good news for us. Think about David's story for a moment. He was honored by God, anointed as God's future king. So, that's part of his story. But right now, or just previous to writing the psalm, he's been despised, rejected, hated by King Saul. He's on the run. He's living in a land regarded as unclean. He's been rejected, refused honor and welcome even by these foreigners. And so, he is living in a moment where shame could have defined his life. But he knows God working in his life. And so, he can say, those who look to God are radiant. Their faces are never covered with shame. Radiant and unashamed.

God has reversed his status and given him honor. When we use the idea of radiant, we can perhaps think of that idea of delight when someone's face lights up. Think of children on Christmas morning, see the presents under the tree. Radiant faces. We can think about Moses, when his face was radiant, shining because he'd been in the presence of the God of glory. David knows delight because no matter what happens to him, he enjoys fellowship with, living in the presence of the God of glory.

That's a wonderful privilege for all of God's people. There is no shame for him because of that reality. He may be an outcast in the eyes of others, but in God's eyes, he's God's child. He's loved and he's valued and that's going to define him. When you start thinking about shame in the Bible, you discover that the removal of shame is actually a powerful gospel image.

And then we think about the ministry of Jesus, what Jesus came to do. He came to bear our sin and our shame on himself at the cross. Jesus took the most shameful death it was possible for a person in his time to experience. And he did that for people like us. People who fall short of God's glory.

[18 : 31] People who dishonor God. People who do not deserve a welcome from God. By faith in Jesus, God in his love and kindness changes our status too.

So that before God, we can be considered righteous. That we can know honor from God. A wonderful truth. Jesus in his story, he went through shame. He went through the cross. But now, after the resurrection, he's returned to the glory of heaven, he's crowned with glory and honor.

And by faith in Jesus, this is our story too. Jesus can and he will end shame in the lives of his people by his powerful love and grace.

So if you're here today and you have that sense of feeling unclean, come to Jesus who promises to wash us white as snow, to give us that clear conscience, to give us the joy of forgiveness.

If we feel unworthy, recognize what's going on in the life of Jesus, he came and he took our dishonor so that we, by trusting in him, might be crowned with honor and glory. His status, in that sense, becomes ours as we trust in him.

[20 : 07] If we feel unwelcome, outsiders, there's an invitation to trust in Jesus as our way home to a father who's waiting to love, to welcome, to delight in us.

And there is here for us too as Christians, of course, a reminder to live out our true identity, that we are loved and valued children of God. And we can share that story. We can share how God changes our lives and changes even how we feel about ourselves by the power of his grace.

Next part of David's testimony, verses 8 to 14, God gives what is good. I was watching a TED talk this week by a New York professor called Barry Schwartz called The Paradox of Choice.

It's a very helpful talk, actually. And he makes the point that as modern Western society in particular, we have never had it so good or been at the same time so dissatisfied.

He was making the observation that the choices that we have, so freedom means freedom to choose, but all these choices that we have in every part of life, they raise expectations. Somewhere there's a choice that's going to be absolutely perfect.

[21 : 32] So it raises expectations, but at the same time increases our disappointment with the choices that we make. I was living this this week. In our heat wave, I decided to try to make iced coffee at home.

Some of you will like iced coffee. Maybe you can resonate with my desire to find the perfect iced coffee. So my first attempt last week, I simply went iced coffee, milk. Didn't think about it too much.

It was good. And then I made the schoolboy error of Googling how to make iced coffee at home. And I found dozens of recipes. And now every day my news feed will tell me, here's another way to make the perfect iced coffee.

Since then, I have been juggling. I've been trying. They're getting worse. I'm feeling worse. And it's proving the point. Choice doesn't necessarily make us feel any better.

But it does point to the fact that instinctively, we want to find the good life. Whether that's in a drink, whether that's in a career, whether it's a relationship we want, what's truly good. Now, I guess what is good?

[22 : 36] Where do we find it? And David gives a profound answer in verses 8 and 10. There's an image here in verse 8.

He says, taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

Conjures up the image of a delicious meal. Oh, there's always two mistakes. Well, probably at least two mistakes that we can and should avoid.

One is not just to settle for either looking at the menu and admiring all those wonderful fresh ingredients that are going to go onto the plate or to just look at the plate but never actually to sample it.

What is good is to be experienced personally. Knowing God isn't just something that's in our heads. It's to be in our hearts. It's not enough to just know about Jesus.

[23 : 34] We need to know Jesus personally as Lord and Savior. So we must experience. But the other mistake when we get this delicious meal in front of us is simply to wolf it down and to not notice how wonderful it is.

Goodness is supposed to be savored, to be truly enjoyed. And David is saying, if you want to know what is truly good, you need to know God.

You need to experience God in your life and you need to enjoy God, to savour a relationship with Him, the love that He gives, the truth that He is.

Verse 10 has another image. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.

So it's the image of a hungry lion pride. They've been out all night hunting, but come back empty. The king of beasts may find themselves dissatisfied and hungry, but David is saying in his story, to know the king of the universe is to be satisfied by true goodness.

[24 : 47] Not something that's temporary, but something that's eternal. Not a goodness that's partial, but one that is complete. Not one that relies on finding something good in creation, but finding true goodness in God, the Creator.

Question, verse 12 says, whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good deeds, see many good days rather, keep your tongue from evil, your lips from telling lies.

There's an implied question, I think. How do we enjoy the good life? How do we enjoy life to the full? And David's answer is in part to know the God who is good and to then live under the rule of the king who is good.

Goodness is a life that centers on knowing and enjoying and living for God. Now we connect this with the story of King Jesus and we start to think about his sayings and we see that he points in the same direction.

Jesus says, I am living water. I am the bread of life. I have come that you might have life, life to the full. He's come to give eternal life. He's saying, I am the something more that every heart is longing for.

[26 : 08] In Jesus, we know true goodness. That longing for what is good is found. Jesus has come to die so we might truly live and to live knowing the God who is truly good.

So again, when we think about our stories, when we think about our own lives or how we talk about ourselves, do we have that focus on God and true goodness?

Do we focus, for example, on the eternal weight of glory still to come or are we fixated on the here and the now? Do we think about that and do we meditate on, do we savor with joy and satisfaction knowing Jesus?

And do we talk about being satisfied in knowing Jesus come what may? The last part of David's testimony, in a sense, it wheels back to the introduction.

Fourth thing to say, God rescues the righteous. Verse 15 to 22. Let me read verse 17.

[27 : 16] Let me go back for a minute to psychology research.

There was a study done of a thousand volunteers and they were simply given a piece of paper and a pencil untold, write down your life story. And as they looked at those stories and as they considered the people before them, they recognized that those who told redemption stories, those who were able even in difficulties to find the good, they had more well-being and a greater sense of satisfaction in life.

They drew a connection between redemption stories and personal well-being. Well, think about David's story here. He finds himself in true danger, in the hands of the forces of evil, but God rescued and David praised and David is satisfied.

He has joy in his God. In verses 15 to 22, you may have noticed as we're reading and if you flick down it, you'll see a repeated word.

The word is the righteous. David describes himself as a righteous person. He says there is a category of people who are righteous. Let's just see that. Verse 15, the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous.

[28 : 44] 17, the righteous cry out and the Lord hears them. 19, the righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers from them all. When David says, I am righteous, he's not saying I am perfect.

He's not saying I have never sinned. And when we hear someone in the Bible say that they are righteous, we are not to think, oh, here's just another self-righteous Pharisee, another hypocrite.

Rather, we recognize all through the Bible that this idea of being righteous, in God's eyes, is a gift from God. It's something that's received through faith.

To have clear conscience before God, to have right standing in God's sight, is not something that person has earned, but rather it comes as a gift. Ultimately, we understand that in the coming of Jesus, who dies for sinners and who credits his perfect righteousness to sinful people.

Now, how does God act for the righteous? In this last section, we see two aspects. We see one, that he judges their enemies. Verse 16 is a good example.

[29 : 57] The face of the Lord is against those who do evil. There's the unwelcoming face of God, as it were, as a reminder of the holiness of God, the judgment of God.

So, he judges their enemies, but then there is salvation for his people. Perhaps we can look at verse 22, the last verse, which says, the Lord will rescue his servants.

No one who takes refuge in him will be condemned. There's incredible confidence in that, isn't there? Guaranteed salvation and rescue. Guaranteed no condemnation.

Maybe sounds too good to be true. Some might say, sounds a bit pie in the sky, perhaps. But notice that David is very realistic in his view of the world. We read it, we'll read another one.

Verse 19, the righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all. God's people, Christians, we face the same pains and struggles and grief as everyone else.

[31 : 01] We know this to be true. We are not immune from suffering because we come to trust in God. But we have this wonderful promise that in the end, God will save, God will deliver.

We will not be condemned. David understands that his hope is rested, rooted in God's character and God's covenant promises that are unbreakable.

He has that hope that is unshakable because he knows his God and the promises of God. Now, how does that connect with the story of Jesus?

Jesus comes as the great king. Jesus comes and he faces down all our enemies. Satan, sin, death, defeated there at the cross. We see Jesus' victory at the resurrection and his return to glory.

We know that Jesus is the fulfillment of the righteous sufferer who is saved and delivered because God raised him in glory.

[32 : 05] Now he's on the throne of the universe. Now he's close to the brokenhearted and he promises there is no condemnation for those who are trusting in him. So how does this connect to ourselves as we close?

To have Jesus as your king is to know that rescue from sin that leads to death, to be given the promise of eternal life, to know that there is no condemnation awaiting us because the judgment fell on Jesus so it will not fall on us.

And so David's story of praise here, his testimony is all about the God who saves. And he calls the church, the people of God, to have that same story at the heart of our life together.

So let's pray that that would be true for us and be true for our church for the sake of God's glory and honor and to help others and to see and to delight, to taste and see that God is good.

May we share our salvation stories in that light. Let's pray together briefly. Lord our God, thank you for David's wonderful testimony.

[33 : 23] A testimony that you're a God who hears our prayers. May you encourage us to keep praying if we feel flat or we feel that we've been praying for certain people or situations for a long time.

Will you help us to pray with that trust in your character, in your goodness? Lord, we thank you that you are a God who rescues from shame.

Lord, you know our hearts, you know our lives. You know how much we need to hear that hope and that truth. Lord, we thank you that you are the one who is truly good.

We so often find ourselves in that exhausting search for goodness. We find ourselves so easily dissatisfied. We take up so much attention on stuff that doesn't last.

We pray that you would turn our focus to what is true and lasting, eternal and eternally good. That we would look to you. And we thank you so much that you are the God who rescues the righteous.

[34 : 28] That in Jesus, the rescuer, his record of righteousness is credited to us, sinners as we are. That by faith in Jesus, we can be reckoned to be righteous so we can stand in your presence and we can call you our Father.

Lord, as your people, we have a wonderful story. We pray that you'd help us as a church, as individuals, to share that story, to encourage one another and for the good of those around us. We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Now, let's stand together and let's sing again, this time the hymn, All I Have Is Christ.

I once was lost in darkest night, yet thought I knew the way, the sin that promised joy and life had led me to the grave.

I had no hope that you would own a rebel to your will.

[35 : 53] And if you had not loved me first, I would refuse you still. but as I ran my help and race indifferent to the cause, you looked upon my helpless state and led me to the cross.

And I beheld God's love displayed, you suffered in my place, you bore the wrath reserved for me, now all I know is grace.

Alleluia, All I have is Christ.

Alleluia, Jesus is my life. Alleluia, All I have is Christ.

Alleluia, Jesus is my life. Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Now, Lord, I would be yours alone and live so all might see.

[37 : 58] The strength to follow your commands could never come from me. O Father, O Father, use my ransom life in any way you choose and let my song forever be my only boast Christ is you.

Alleluia, Alleluia, All I have is Christ.

Alleluia, Alleluia, Jesus is my life.

Alleluia, All I have is Christ. Alleluia, Jesus is my life.

Lord, may that be the story and the joy of every one of us to be able to say, all I have is Christ. Jesus is my life. And for that to be an item of praise.

[39 : 27] And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.