

Christ Saves

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[0 : 00] Please take the Bible in front of you and turn to Psalm 34, page 463, 464.

And as you turn into the Psalm, I'll tell you my favorite part of the Bible camp was during the play. It was the full contact sword fight. But, wooden swords, wooden shields, and it was pretty dramatic, and the kids were oohing and ahing.

There was even a number of people killed in the sword fight in drama. No children were harmed during Bible camp, but I can't say the same for the teens.

Well now, this is such a happy Psalm, Psalm 34. And you know, if you're feeling grumpy, it's going to be almost impossible to get inside this Psalm.

It comes as a sort of a cure for the common spiritual cold and cynicism. And it's very rich and very full, but it's really about two different kinds of fear.

[1 : 12] It's about a negative, harmful fear, and it's about a positive, life-giving fear. And we know, don't we, we know this negative kind of fear.

We know all about it. It's a basic, it's a fundamental human emotion. You become aware of danger and all your systems go on alert. It's what we use when we speak of terror or dread or anxiety.

And it's not always a bad thing, particularly if you really are facing real danger. But if you live under that sort of fear, ongoingly, it affects you mentally, it affects you physically, changes our brains and bodies and our behaviours and our relationships long term.

And the experts reckon that this kind of fear lies underneath a lot of other things in our lives, like shame and guilt and anger. But there is, on the other hand, such a thing as positive fear.

Some people call it awe. It's the experience and feeling when we are in front of someone or we are in front of something that is absolutely, overwhelmingly magnificent and wonderful.

[2 : 29] And after Bible camp this week, many of us have got Narnia and the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe on our mind. And Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, who played in the drama, they have this second kind of positive fear of Aslan, the great king of the woods, the Christ figure.

It's not a grovelling terror, because even though Aslan is thoroughly powerful, he is also thoroughly good. And as Mrs. Beaver goes into his presence for the first time, she's checking and seeing if she's got all her fur right.

She doesn't want to disappoint him in some way. And yet it's the greatest delight of her life to be in his magnificent presence. Everybody in Narnia has a negative fear of the White Witch.

She's evil. But most of the animals have this positive fear of Aslan, not just because of his raw power, but because of his kindness and his goodness.

And if you haven't read the book and if you haven't seen the movie, I'm not going to spoil it for you. And the thing about negative fear is that you can't overcome it with techniques.

[3 : 41] You can't get rid of it by willpower, you know, taking a positive mindset or exercise or talking about it, all of which are very helpful.

But the way negative fear works is it creates a void in us. It creates a lack in us. And if you try and just call it a delusion and detach yourself for it, in the end it will kick back in a different way.

The only way to ultimately deal with this form of fear from a Bible point of view is by replacing negative fear with positive fear. Or perhaps more accurately, exchanging, growing and exchanging our negative fears for the great positive fear.

And that is what Psalm 34 is all about. It's how the fear of the Lord brings delight and deliverance from every fear. It's not a prayer to God from David.

There's not a word spoken to God. It's an invitation and a summons to us to fear the Lord. And it begins with a quick testimony from David, how he gave in to negative fear.

[4 : 53] And how despite the fact that he gave in, God came amazingly to his rescue. And in verses 1 to 6, again, we have this deeply personal record of David's delight.

In verse 4, I sought the Lord, he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. That's the negative fear. And then the rest of the Psalm is an urgent call and an invitation so that we could be included in the praise of God, the positive fear of the Lord.

And there's a string of happy commands like verse 8. Taste, oh, taste and see, the Lord is good. Blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

And if you want a key verse summarizing David's purpose, it's verse 11. Come, oh children, listen to me. I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

But before he does that, he has to make a confession. And some Psalms, if you go back to the beginning of 34, some Psalms have headings. In fact, if you look at the bottom of page 463, you see the bolded heading.

[6 : 01] That's written by the printer. That's not part of the text of the Bible. But in caps, that is part of the Bible text. In the original, this is a Psalm of David when he changed his behavior before Abimelech so that he drove him out and he went away.

This is one of the rare times that David was in mortal fear. There were lots of people that lived in fear of him. And the story comes from 1 Kings 21.

David had been anointed king, but the old King Saul did not want to give up the throne. And twice now, Saul has tried to murder David. And the entire army of Israel is hunting him for his life.

David is on the run. He has nothing. He has no food. And he makes a decision which... It's hard to say this about Bible characters.

I think it's stupid. It's unmistakably stupid. The commentaries say ill-advised. Unwise. But what he does is he goes and he grabs the sword of Goliath whom he'd killed as a boy and he goes right to the town that Goliath comes from, right to the king of Gath, where Goliath's family is still there, carrying Goliath's sword and he asks the king for refuge and shelter.

[7 : 25] And everyone recognizes him as the giant slayer and they know the tune on the radio. Saul has killed his thousands. David is ten thousands. And he comes before the king and everyone in the court and the king wants nothing better than to pin David to the wall and kill him.

And David realizes it. And we read in 1 Samuel 21, David took his words to heart and was much afraid of the king of Gath.

That is the terror word. It's the negative word. Instead of trusting God as he did when he faced Goliath, he takes things into his own hands and he comes up with a cunning plan.

He pretends to be insane. He drools from the mouth and he carves graffiti on the wall of the king's rooms with his sword. And it's an award-winning performance.

And the king says, like any sane political leader, look, I've got enough madmen around me. I don't need another. And he sends David out and David escapes and he goes to a place called the Cave of Adullam with a group of people who are faithful to him and he writes this psalm.

[8 : 37] And what's so helpful for us is that this is a psalm for losers and for failures and for people who are disappointed with how we're living. David's performance in front of the king had been a bit of a disgrace.

This is not the same David who stood in front of Goliath and said, you come to me with sword and spear, I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts. This is the cringing, conniving, cunning David who's making decisions to save his skin.

Now, no doubt, if Hollywood got a hold of this story, it would look like this, how clever David was in his subterfuge. What skill in pretending madness? There's not a syllable of that in the psalm.

David doesn't offend himself or excuse himself. He knows he acted out of fear and he's ashamed.

And he's part of a long line of people in the Bible and in the church who let our negative fears get a hold of us and we forget God and we use deception to save our own skin.

I've done it this week. So the heading is a kind of confession of David when he changed his appearance before Abimelech. Because David is doubly conscious of God's grace.

[9 : 50] Not just that God delivered him, but God delivered him when he used a dirty and sneaky plan to get out of the situation. Isn't that great? So he says, verse 1, I'm not going to talk about myself.

I'll bless the Lord at all times. His praise will continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord. Let the humble hear and be glad.

Oh, magnify the Lord with me. Let us exalt his name together. It's a great thing, isn't it? When you experience the rescue of God, some concrete experience of the grace of God, forget yourself and turn it into praise so that other people can be encouraged.

Let the humble hear and be glad. So the psalm is not just for those who are feeling ashamed. You might have been overwhelmed by fears. It's for those who are humble, those who are hungry for God.

And David quickly moves to what it means to fear the Lord. And this is a tricky thing for us, but it's actually a very difficult psalm to break up.

[11:00] And I wasn't going to say this, but it's an alphabet psalm. First, the Hebrew alphabet, each two lines start with the next letter of the alphabet, which means David can dance around and say whatever he wants.

So it's very hard to put a structure on it. Just feel sorry for me for a moment. So I'm imposing this structure. And there are three questions.

Where does the fear of the Lord come from? How does it grow? And where does it end? So verses four to six, where does the fear of the Lord begin? And I just, I want to go back to this positive fear. It's difficult for us to grasp this. We're so used to thinking of fear as a negative thing. It's a strange thing for us to think that the fear of the Lord is connected to happiness and delight and joy and love. That being filled with the fear of the Lord means in the Psalms being filled with happiness. You know, in Psalm 2, David writes, serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.

[12:02] Rejoice with trembling. Not being scared of God, but being overwhelmed by his power and goodness. And I think all of us have probably had that experience where you realise something of what God has done for you and you stand there in open mouth wonder, in fear, wanting to please him, wanting to learn to reverence him.

And if God is gracious and he sees us as we really are and he's powerful and he still loves us, it enables us to be radically honest and truthful about ourselves.

Verse four, I'll just read it again for a moment. I sought the Lord. So somewhere in that whole escapade, David sought the Lord and he answered me and delivered me out of all my negative terror and fears.

David is quite happy to call himself this poor man in verse six. He's quite happy to confess that he was terrified.

He's open about the fact that he looked away from the Lord and took things into his own hands. But where did the fear of the Lord begin? I sought the Lord. Seek God.

[13:08] And what does that mean? Verse five, those who look to him are radiant. Their faces shall never be ashamed. I think this is a lovely hint of the verse that comes later in Paul's epistles to the Corinthians.

That we all with unveiled faces beholding the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. We seek God by turning our faces to him, by turning away from little me, by turning ourselves to big him.

Moses came down the mountain from the presence of God with his face shining. And when we look to him, it changes our faces.

It changes what we look like. We've welcomed new believers in our congregation over the last couple of years. Their faces have changed. Because God is more ready and willing to deliver us from our cries than we are to ask.

You know, in Psalm 130, the psalmist says, The fear of the Lord begins in forgiveness and increases as we recognize the grace of God to us and then seek him with truth and honesty.

[14:33] That's where it begins. Secondly, how does the fear of the Lord grow? Verses 7 to 14. And the simple answer to that question is, Through knowing the unlimited goodness of God.

Verse 8, taste and see that the Lord is good. Verse 10, those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. Let me try and explain this. See, God is God.

He is without boundaries. He is limitless. His glory is immeasurable. It is inexhaustible.

It is incalculable. It is everlasting. He is limitless in power and in holiness and in sovereignty and grace.

He is limitless and boundless in majesty and honor and blessing and kindness and faithfulness. It's not just that he's limitless in power.

[15 : 37] It's also that his goodness is limitless. And when you put those two things together and come to know that God, that is how you grow in the fear of the Lord. That's a God worth knowing.

Now, I think this is very helpful to us because things are happening so fast around us in our culture. The great fear in our culture today is that you're not special.

That you're just normal. David Brooks, who lots of people quote his book, *The Road to Character* in 2015, he says this. As I look around the popular culture, I keep finding the same messages everywhere.

You are special. Trust yourself. Be true to yourself. Movies from Pixar and Disney are constantly telling children how wonderful they are. Commencement speeches are larded with the same cliches.

Follow your passion. Don't accept your limits. Chart your own course. You have a responsibility to do great things because you are so great. It's a terrible burden, isn't it, that we put on our kids?

[16 : 38] It's also not true. Some pundits have called our age the age of narcissism. We're so preoccupied with ourselves.

We want ourselves constantly recorded and transmitted online. The great fear is to be invisible. Is that someone recording me now?

Brooke says, Psychologists have a thing called the narcissism test. They read people's statements and ask if the statements apply to them.

Statements such as, quote, I show off if I get the chance because I am extraordinary. The median narcissism score has risen 30% in the last two decades.

And 93% of young people score higher than the middle score just 20 years ago. It's what the Australian commentator, Paul Kelly, calls the big me. He says, and I don't think he's a Christian, he says, We've replaced the concept of any objective moral order found in the Christian tradition with individual autonomy and human rights.

[17 : 45] Man, he says, not God is enshrined at the center of the universe. I say these things because I think we're in a new moment as Christians. And I think we need to take a hold of this as an opportunity.

Because if you fear the Lord, if you live a life of fearing the Lord, you will have a unique shaped life. Your life will be completely distinctive more and more.

You have a different view of what it means to be human, of what human flourishing is. You've got a different calculus when you make ethical decisions. It's not about serving the big me, it's about serving the big God.

That's what it means to live in the fear of the Lord. And it's not just as though God is big or bigger than any of us or bigger than any ideas that we have of him. He is vastly, limitlessly, eternally good. If you look at the way David drives at this in verse 7, he says, The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and delivers them.

[18 : 48] It's not that God is up there far away and somehow we're surrounded by difficulties. We are surrounded by difficulties. We're set in the midst of very dangers.

And it does feel as though we are. Verse 19 says, There are many afflictions for the righteous. And the fear of the Lord doesn't make us immune to difficulty. But David is saying that if you look, if you lift your eyes just a little bit, behind every affliction is a host of God's servants, God's angels, ready to bring God's presence to us and rescue us in the midst of those dangers.

You see, it's limitless. Or verse 9. I fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack. He doesn't say, we have everything we need.

If he says, you've got everything you need, you can curl up in the corner and not care about anyone else and not care about God. Now, he says it in the negative. We have no lack in our connection with him because in God alone is everything good.

And his goodness is vastly beyond measure. And as we fear him, he supplies our needs. Marilyn Robinson says in her wonderful book, *Lila*, she talks about Lila is a woman who's lived with extreme deprivation.

[20 : 05] And she tries to tell herself that she doesn't need anyone else. And she marries an older minister. And even though she's holding herself back for him, when they go walking, he often takes his coat out and wraps her in it.

And she says it was a shock to her how much comfort there was in that because it was a need that she discovered only when it was satisfied.

And I think we have all sorts of needs we don't even know of until they are satisfied. And part of the richness of the fear of the Lord is the ongoing discovery of having no lack.

That God doesn't give us all his goodness in one dollop. We couldn't bear it anyway. That we taste and we see and we grow in awe as we seek him and discover his satisfying needs we never knew we even had.

That's why I think verses 7 to 14 are full of commands. Taste and see the Lord is good. We have to be commanded to this because there's this bizarre irrational resistance to God in us.

[21 : 17] But there's nothing on God's side stopping him from blessing us with more of the experience of his goodness. And since goodness is not limited, since his goodness is not limited, the best way to love life is to fear the Lord.

You see verse 12. Do you want to see good? You want to see good in this life? Verse 14. Turn away from evil and do good.

The fear of the Lord is not about pursuing your dream. It's about, if you read through those verses, how we treat each other and speak to one another and about each other and deal with our neighbours.

It's about how we seek peace and pursue it. And if we're motivated and controlled by negative fears, we will never be able to serve other people unselfishly.

It's only the fear of the Lord that's able to free us to serve others. And that's how his fear grows. But thirdly and finally, what is the end?

[22 : 22] Where does it lead? What is the end of the fear of the Lord? And we quickly look down at verses 15 to 22. And these were not read for us.

So let me just read them as we go through. There's a radical realism here that we live in the midst of evil. The eyes of the Lord, verse 15, are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry.

The face of the Lord is against those who do evil to cut off the memory of them from the earth. We face evil. We face troubles. We face afflictions. But as we become more mature as believers, verse 17, when the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted. He saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers them out of them all.

So that the fear of the Lord moves toward a sort of an inner strength, even when we are brokenhearted and crushed in spirit. You can be fearing the Lord and crushed in spirit and brokenhearted at the same time.

[23 : 32] Brokenhearted because you might have given in to a negative fear again. Or brokenhearted because just of the difficulties of life. But the Lord sees. The Lord hears.

And the Lord is unlimited, limitlessly good. And it says there in black and white, he draws near to the brokenhearted. And he saves us out of all those things.

And in verse 19, David begins to look beyond death itself. And he says, what about death? Can God deliver me out of that? Yes, he says he delivers us out of all troubles. And then we come to verse 20, which seems very strange.

He keeps all his bones. Not one of them is broken. Why on earth is that verse there? I mean, really? I won't get you to put your hand up, but I've broken bones. Does that mean God's let me down?

David is speaking as a prophet here. He looks backward to the Exodus. On the night of the Exodus, when God provided the Passover, the sacrifice of the Passover lamb.

[24 : 41] The lamb to be sacrificed could not have any of its bones broken. It was a sign that it was pure and spotless in Exodus 12. And in John's gospel, when Jesus is still on the cross, having cried out, it is finished and then given over his life.

The soldiers pierce his side, seeing that he's dead, and they do not break his legs. And John says, Jesus fulfills this verse, which means David is speaking above his pay grade here.

He's speaking of Jesus. And what that means is he looks completely to the judgment day, verse 21 and 22. Affliction will slay the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.

That's the ultimate, bear their guilt language. The Lord redeems the life of his servants. None of those who take refuge in him will be condemned. Many of us probably harbor the fear that on the day of judgment, God may change his mind with regard to us.

He might say no to us. We're not really confident that God's goodness is unlimited to me. You know, we know our own record. We feel God can't really be delighted in me.

[25 : 50] But here is the promise in verse 22. The Lord redeems the life of his servants. None of those who take refuge in him will be condemned. We have more reason to know the truth of this verse than David did.

Because we know that Christ himself was condemned in our place so that we need not be. He was the purest Passover lamb. He bore our sins.

He bore my fears. So now there is no condemnation. No condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. And his grace is deep enough and high enough and wide enough and long enough.

There's nothing you can do that can take you outside the range of his grace and limitless goodness. Even when you act out of fear. Taste and see that the Lord is good.

And there is only one thing ongoingly that may drive out the negative fears. It's the great good news. You don't have to redeem yourself. We don't have to make ourselves special or worthy.

[26 : 53] But there is safety and rest and refuge in no one else. Because there is no goodness like his. And though we struggle with fears, this is our resting place.

This is our ballast. The fear of the Lord leads to life. Whoever has it rests satisfied. Amen. Amen. You are the Lord. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.