

Shaped by experiences

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[0 : 00] If you'd like to turn with me, please, to Psalm 34, I'm going to read out the entire psalm, which is always my intention when dealing with a text, to read out the whole part.

But as we come to understand the psalm as we go through it, I'm going to be taking out of it, one of its main points.

And so as you read through this, pay close attention to the type of words that David is using here. Pay close attention to how he uses, I'll give you the heads up perhaps straight away, of how he concentrates almost entirely on experiences rather than on what to believe or what to think the whole psalm here is really about feelings, it's about emotion, it's about experiences and of course the power that they have to shape the believer.

So I'm going to pick it up of course at the very beginning and read through to the end. So now hear God's word. I will bless the Lord at all times, his praise shall be continually in my mouth. My soul makes it boast in the Lord, let the humble hear and be glad. Oh magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt his name together. I sought the Lord and he answered me, he delivered me from all of my fears.

[1 : 39] Those who look to him are radiant and their faces shall never be ashamed. The poor man cried and the Lord heard him and saved him out of his troubles. The angel of the Lord encamps round those who fear him and delivers them.

But taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him. Oh fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack.

The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. Come, oh children, listen to me. I will teach you the fear of the Lord. What man is there who desires life and loves many days that he may see good?

Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn away from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it. The eyes of the Lord are towards the righteous and his ears towards their cry.

The face of the Lord is against those who do evil to cut off the memory of them from the earth. When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.

[2 : 47] The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all. He keeps all his bones, not one of them is broken.

Affliction will slay the wicked and those who hate the righteous will be condemned. The Lord redeems the life of his servants. None of those who take refuge in him will be condemned. Well, may God bless both the reading of his word to us and, of course, the hearing of it also in a moment. We're going to come back to that after this next hymn.

Amen. Several years ago, there was a conversation between me and my mother.

And my mother pointed out to me, as graciously as she could, that I was born with no sense of urgency. I'm not entirely sure what that meant, but I think it was a call to get a move on.

[4 : 01] And I think there is times that we ought to just get a move on. But then there are also times when we need to understand the word weight most appropriately.

Now, there are many psalms in particular. Psalm 37 would be the clearest psalm of all where you're told to wait and be still upon the Lord.

Psalm 34, which is what we're dealing with this evening, is different. But it carries with it, nevertheless, that still, that patientness that you need, the patience you need to have.

I want to draw your attention quite closely this evening to the text of Psalm 34. And as we do, I want you to pay attention to the fact that it's something that you're going to have to slow down this

evening.

And I want you to take it in. But I also want you to take it in at perhaps a slightly deeper level than just reading over the text. What David says here, we all know.

[5 : 08] Whether we're all able to put it into the same words David is, is another matter. Or whether we're able to explain it if someone asked us, that might be a little bit difficult.

But what David says here, you know. And as we go through it and you hear what David is saying, you will know that you know it. But it really needs to be understood.

This way, we are protected from the dangers which David speaks of here. And we're also led in the very past that God wants us to be led in. If I can put it this way, these words are encouraging.

But David wants you to know why they're encouraging. It's one way to give words of encouragement to someone. And someone go away and think, well, that was encouraging.

But then that encouragement tends to wear off quite quickly. Okay. At the time, the words were great to hear. And they give that momentary lift.

[6 : 08] Where you're feeling better, at least after that conversation for a while. But then not long after that, perhaps that evening or the next day, you're down again.

And the reason that you're down is because there are two ways to understand encouragement. So encouragement should never be a form of inflation.

You know, when someone says things about you, which may be true, but if they come across and they inflate you, you know, and then you're feeling quite wonderful, then you automatically know that the deflation is going to come at some point.

The point is, is there's a big difference between encouragement that builds up, that remains solid, and then there's that kind of inflation.

You're wonderful. Without giving any reason for why you're wonderful. Or you're fantastic. Without giving any reason why you're fantastic. In order for those words to build you up, they need to have the building blocks.

[7 : 10] You need to understand what it is that keeps those things true. What makes the statement you're wonderful true? If there is no explanation that goes with it, it's just an inflation.

You feel good for a moment, but it'll disappear. David, of course, understanding that hubris, ego, is something that the human heart has to deal with, wants to make clear distinctions, and he wants us to understand that simple answers never do.

It's okay to give simple answers, but if you can't find answers to some of the most troubling questions that you have as a believer, or even as a non-believer, some of the most troubling questions that you have, either you come to Scripture knowing that God has answered them, or you read Scripture and you scratch your head as to where the answers actually are.

What David is saying here, though he's only dealing with a couple of issues, is essentially God's given you answers, but they have to be understood in a particular way.

So I'm just going to take you through Psalm 34 quickly. So here's the summary. In verses 1 and 2, you'll notice that out of David's mouth, he is blessing the Lord himself.

[8 : 33] He is blessing the Lord at all times, verse 1. His soul even boasts in the Lord. But he doesn't stop there because he moves on to verse 3 where he tells you to praise God in the same way that he is praising God.

But now you begin to see, hopefully, where the problem is. Because there's a big difference between somebody praising God and knowing why they're praising God, and then that person looking at you and saying, now you do it.

Now you praise God. And the issue is this. Well, I may not feel the same way you do, David. I may not see the same things that you do, David. I can understand why you're praising God.

I can understand what's coming out of your mouth and why you're praising God. But when you tell me to magnify the Lord with you, okay, I may not feel the same way that you do.

Right? And that's a big issue because we're told to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. And, you know, I've been in the ministry long enough to hear on the same day someone passing away and someone planning their marriage, planning their wedding.

[9 : 50] We've got engaged. You know, you have to go from one emotion to another emotion in the space of a Sunday morning. You know, how do you do that? Well, it's very difficult in one sense, but you know that even the very best news, when you're not feeling great yourself, doesn't always come across as the very best news.

But when you're feeling on top of things and then good news comes your way, you're able to rejoice with that person far easier than if you are having quite a perhaps a down day, perhaps a negative day.

So David is saying, praise the Lord. And then he says, you do the same. And of course, the discerning reader or the person who reads it with a heart, which I'm sure you all do, will go, okay. But I don't know if I can do it in the same way you can. I don't know if I can do it with the same enthusiasm that you can. I know that the reasons are the same because God deserves to be worshipped and God deserves to be glorified.

But I also recognize that my experiences of life are kicking in. And I just don't, today, I just don't happen to feel the same way as you do. And I'm honest to admit, and I think you ought to be as well, that it's possible to get out of bed in the morning.

[11:06] And that sort of, that sinful motivation comes across you. I don't know if I want to be like Jesus today. Right? We know that we ought to be like Jesus, but it just kicks in.

And this is something that David spells out when he moves on. So we can feel like something one day, and we have the same opportunity to do the same thing the following week, and all of a sudden, we don't want to do it.

But what's changed? Well, it's a week later. Okay, apart from the week, the opportunity is exactly the same. We just don't feel the same way about the opportunity this week as we did last week. Now, you think about that in terms of coming to church. Think about that in terms of praying. You think about that in terms of perhaps reading and studying your Bible at home. It's possible to have, you know, one day where you think, I'm fired up to do this.

And you have the same opportunity to do the same thing the following day, and you don't do it. You don't do it. You know. And the reason why this is a real truth of life is because why do the sales of tennis rackets and tennis pools increase every time Wimbledon's on TV?

[12:21] Right? Because the reason it does is because, right, now I'm going to go do the same. How long does it last? Well, not always the length of Wimbledon. David understands.

We understand how that works. We get that initial yes, and then it doesn't last. We buy the pair of trainers that think we'll be able to do 10 miles in these, and we haven't taken them out of the box yet, okay?

The trainers don't run. You run in them. So these are real-life things that David understands. But David says, well, I sought the Lord, and God answered me.

So David's now getting on to the reasons for why he's able to praise God the way that he does. He's saying, I needed answers to my prayers. I went to God, and God answered me.

Right? Now, when you get answers to your prayers, of course you praise God. But it's an awful lot harder to praise God when you don't get answers. Or you feel that God's not answering, right?

[13:24] So David here is saying, I sought the Lord, and he answered me. He delivered me from all my fears. Well, now I understand why you're praising God. I understand what's causing you to praise God.

But then he moves on, saying that those who look to the Lord, even the poor man, who doesn't share the same kind of lifestyle that David does, even though David at this point doesn't have, isn't at the peak of his life, but nevertheless, the poor man can even cry out to God and receive the same kind of deliverance.

Okay? This is why? Because God is the same. God is the same. Whether it's David or the poor man, both men, if they cry out to the Lord, can experience God delivering them because God is the same.

And so he moves on and says, therefore, verse 8, taste and see that the Lord is good. Taste and see that the Lord is good. I want you to notice that David doesn't tell the reader here to go to a Bible college.

He doesn't even send the reader, strictly speaking, to study hard. He's asking the reader to enter into tasting and seeing that the Lord is good.

[14:38] Now, you may do that through praying. You may do that through studying his word. You may do that by coming to God through the means of grace, what God has given us. But David focuses here very much on an experience, a taste, and seeing that the Lord is good.

In other words, you seek the Lord and see what comes your way. So he's not sort of belittling education or even biblical education.

What he's saying is that you need the same experiences from God or equivalent experiences from God in your own life. And you can have them if you seek the Lord.

You can have them if you seek the Lord. So David's sort of moving on to the fact that there may be people that he's speaking to that don't share in the same experience that he does, that doesn't share equivalent experiences that he does, and therefore are going to be unable to praise the Lord. So he says, look, taste and see that the Lord is good. Find out for yourself. And the reason you can is because God will be the same towards you as he is towards me.

[15 : 44] And I know that because he's been this way towards me and the poor man down the street. God has done the same for both of us. Why? Because God is the same. So he takes the focus of where you are and your current experiences and realigns it to where God is and how God can bring you both in to the same experiences.

Therefore, you're both able to praise God. He tells us not to be like the young lions. And then he gives us some very practical lessons, you know, to desire what is good, to keep your tongue away from evil, to don't hang around with wickedness or be involved in it any kind, to recognize that God favors the righteous, but he doesn't favor those who do evil, verses 15 through to 16.

That God hears both the righteous and the brokenhearted, verses 17 and 18. But then he goes on to say that you're never going to be without affliction. So even the life that is clearly in tune with God here is not going to be without affliction of some kind.

Okay, what does that mean? Well, that means that even your Christian life, even on the very best day, doesn't stack up in that it gets better from here on in. And that's what David's saying.

The best thing, verse 22, is that those who take refuge in the Lord are never going to be condemned, but it doesn't necessarily mean that their life is not going to be without particular difficulties in the future that haven't been current in the present or the past.

[17 : 23] Okay, the point here is life doesn't always get easier. And it's tempting to think, you know, that when you're sort of 40s and then you're 50s, and then perhaps even when your children have left home, and perhaps, you know, your grandchildren, right?

You're tempted to think, aren't you, when you're at that stage, that the main source of life's troubles should be behind you. Right? When you get to that kind of age, you think, I shouldn't really have too many difficulties now to deal with.

But you know that's not the case. You know that while you personally may not have to, right, there are other things around you which still can cause you afflictions of some kind.

The devil gets in to families, the devil gets in to our children, and suddenly a pain that's not through us is now being, we experience it through our children or our grandchildren or a number of different things, okay?

And that's a reality, and this is something that David wants us to be aware of and also protect our heart from. So notice how all the way through this psalm, David is very concerned, or not necessarily concerned, but he highlights the important role of experience in forming and shaping a person when it comes to praising God or not praising God.

[18 : 45] David understands that how you feel matters. What you experience shapes what you do next.

You can have a bad day and not pray. Even, right, these overflow. And why they overflow, why they're even always connected, it's not always sure.

So let me just point out to you the role of experience. One of the things that Scripture is quite clear on is that life's experiences shape a person.

They form a person. And education, at least Christian education, understands that it's not, biblical education, Christian education, that it's not meant to concentrate purely on the mind alone.

That simply to sit us down in front of the Bible and learn it like a text, like we would any other text, geography, history, mathematics, or whatever it may be. And we're going to learn a lot, but there are a lot of other things which will not come that way.

[19 : 55] They'll come a different route. They'll come through affliction. They'll come through having prayers answered. And suddenly you begin to realize that your life is shaped by them.

Okay? I'll never forget the story that Paul Miller told of one of his daughters when he took them on a camping trip and her sister was disabled. And she had prayed to God for her sister countless times that God would heal her.

And of course, God didn't heal her. And she lost her glasses on the camping trip. And so her dad, Paul Miller, who wrote a wonderful book called *The Praying Life*, tells this story at the beginning. And he turns to his daughter and says, well, have you prayed about it? And she says, what for? And he understood right at that moment that her heart was beginning to harden towards God.

You know, the what for is clearly a hardening of the heart. So he wanted to find out, well, how did her heart begin to harden in this way? And he said, well, why wouldn't you pray? And she says, well, I've prayed to God all these years for my sister to be healed and he hasn't done it.

[21 : 01] Why would he help me to find my glasses? Right? Now, you know whether that's right, it doesn't matter anymore because it's real. Okay?

It's real. And David understands and we understand that those real experiences shape us. Hence why he's telling us to taste and see that the Lord is good.

He's telling us that we need those equivalent God-shaping experiences from God in abundance compared to the ones that we have in the world that shape us in the other way.

Education's important, but so too, David says, are these shaping experiences. Why? Because when a person grows up, it doesn't matter how young or how old they are, they're always growing and being shaped somewhere along the line.

We're to remember that God has provided everything to shape the will, to shape the emotions, to shape feelings, to shape desires. And yet too often, sometimes we can think that God has only given us something to shape our mind.

[22 : 12] He's given us the Bible. He's given us something to, so that we can form a set of beliefs. And that's certainly true. God has given us his word to shape us biblically, to shape us mentally in our minds so that we believe the right things.

But in that word, that tells us to be educated biblically, in that word tells us that we are also shaped through desires, through will, through experiences.

And God has also provided and taught us how we will be shaped through them. You know, when you're dealing with a young child who doesn't want to do what you want them to do, it's not just an issue of they don't understand and you do.

Okay? I know better because I've been there, I've done it before, I know what I'm talking about, you don't understand yet, and so you're better off listening to me. You know that when, when, in the heat of the moment, it's not understanding which is the issue, it's a battle of wills.

Okay? Whose will is actually going to win here? Because understand, right, on that end, they don't understand that they don't understand. You understand that they don't, so that, it sort of nullifies it out.

[23 : 27] What it comes down to is whose will is going to, whose will is going to win here? And God is providing a way through his word and through tasting and seeing that the Lord is good to shape us, to form us, not just through our minds, through what we learn, but through our experiences.

God has provided everything that we need to have our desires shaped accordingly, to have our will shaped accordingly, to have, right, because too often we think, well, we can educate the mind, but we can't do anything about a person's desire.

Well, that's just not true. That's just, that's just not true. So let me try and put it a slightly different way as we, as we move through it.

Think, try and think about it this way. Imagine having something once and then after having it once, you want it again. Okay, you've had it once and then all of a sudden you want it again.

Now, before you had it the first time, you had no desire to have it. There was no desire. Someone just happened to say to you, here, give it a taste or give it a go. Up until that point, there was no desire for it.

[24 : 39] But the moment you tasted it, the moment you had it once, then suddenly desire kicks in. And all of a sudden, you don't just have the opportunity, but now you have this, this desire that comes from tasting it that now drives you to want a second helping.

Right, now I want more. Can we go back there again and do the same thing? Right? And the reason that is is what's being introduced into a person's life creates desire.

Desire doesn't exist beforehand. What is brought into a person's life creates a desire. Imagine eating food where you recognize you have to cut down on your preservatives, your salt, or your sauces, whatever it is, and you're going to go back on to eat.

It takes a lot of training to come off of E-numbers or whatever it may be. It takes a lot of training to come off the amount of salt you have on your food or vinegar or whatever it is and to come back to taste the food as it actually tastes.

And the reason it's so difficult is because you've had all of these additions all over the time that made you eat it. Right? So like peas. They're fantastic with tomato sauce over them.

[25 : 51] They're not all that great on their own. Right? That's the type of things that we do. I can swallow it if it comes with these other things.

And what happens in life is that there are sinful additions like preservatives, like salt, that we welcome into our life just to make, as it were, the rest of life taste better.

You know, I don't know who made the, came up with the sentence. I don't even know if it's true. I wouldn't believe it to be true. But someone once said, why does, why does the devil have all the good music?

And I'm thinking, I don't, I'm not sure he does. You know, you know, all the rock and roll bands and all the Ruby Tuesdays and all that kind of stuff. Well, why does, why are those songs so, why does the devil have all the good music?

Well, one, I don't believe that he does, but I can understand the comment. There does seem to be, even in the Christian life, that, that sort of, we want those sinful additions to sort of somehow give our life that bit of flavor it lacks.

[27 : 00] or that, or that bit of taste that it lacks. And, and what I would argue is, is you're, you're simply choosing additions over here, okay, because you're lacking the taste and see that the Lord is good.

Okay, the reason why you're going for the preservatives is because, as it were, the sinful additions is because you've not, you've not really, really tasted and see that the Lord is good. Because my, my, my belief would be, and I'm sure yours would, that nothing can taste better than God.

There can be nothing better than God. So we've not truly tasted and seen that he is good if we think other things are better. It just, it just cannot be the case.

And this is what David is encouraging us to do. The way that you create a desire for God is, of course, with God. God creates his own desire of him.

And the way that that happens is by you coming and tasting and see that the Lord is good. And the way that you do that is by having your prayers answered. It's by trusting in him.

[28 : 06] It's by leaning on him. This is why the young person in Proverbs is told to trust in God with all his heart and lean not on his own understanding. Why? Because almost the first experiences of God for all people doesn't just come through what we believe, but it actually comes through the fact that I've seen God work in my life.

I've seen God at work in the church. I've trusted him and he's proven faithful. I've prayed to him and he's answered. These are the things that seem to shape us and convince us the most rather than just believe these things.

Right? Because sometimes they believe these things can often be without the foundations that they should have. And so the point here, like the man in Psalm 1 who meditates on God's law day and night, receives the results of his life being like a tree planted by streams of living water that bears fruit in season for himself and for everyone else and vice versa, is then, he has such a desire for those results that it drives him back to meditate on God's law day and night.

In other words, the desire leads to the results, sorry, doing it leads to the results, the results creates the desire which drives him back to do the very thing of meditating on God.

It sort of reinforces itself like anything. When you're trying to establish a habit, you'll learn to love it. You know, well, sometimes that happens and sometimes it doesn't happen depending on what the thing is.

[29 : 45] But if David here is saying, I taste and see that the Lord is good, I don't see how that can end negatively. I don't see how anyone can come and go, I don't like the taste of that.

I just don't see how that can happen other than the fact that sin is so powerful that it can alter the realities of God just like it did in that little girl's life.

So we are meant to encourage one another primarily to taste and see that the Lord is good, to taste and see that the Lord is good, to enter into the very blessings that God has for us.

If we do it, then David is convinced that he will answer us in the same way he did him, in the same way he did the poor man. So let me address this question then.

Why is what I've just said so important? Well, it means this. Do you imagine young people and old people in the church? Whatever they gain a taste for, they gain an affection for.

[30 : 51] And suddenly that creates desire, that creates a direction in life. Suddenly I want more of it. I want a second help and I want to go back for some more. And whatever that thing is, of course, then ends up dictating the person's life.

But there's an inherent danger here and here's the danger. that sometimes that you can be so far away from experiencing what David is saying that you can't see why it's true.

That you are so far away from the type of experiences that I've been explaining and the type of experiences that David is explaining. I'm just explaining what David is explaining. That you're so far away from those same kind of experiences that it renders you almost incapable of understanding that the Lord tastes that good.

That you're unable to interpret God's word that way because you don't share in the same experiences. And you know that to be true whether or not you've ever articulated it.

Where you've spoken to other people and they go that you won't know until you've gone through it. You won't know until you've gone through it. In other words, that what's lacking in your understanding is not your ability to understand, but actually the same experience.

[32 : 11] The thing that's actually missing is the experience. And this is what David is saying here. When he tells you to taste and see that the Lord is good, he's not accusing you of not being able to understand that God is good.

He's not saying you that you're unable to work out that God is good by looking at all the promises in scripture, by looking at how God has saved his people and done all this for his people.

What he's saying is, is that you may be able to understand all of that and still not know it, because what you lack is the same experience or the equivalent experience that really brings you into knowing it.

That's why it's so important, so that you don't just know it in your head, you're actually formed by it in your heart, you're actually shaped by it in your heart.

Okay? You taste and see that the Lord is good. By how? By listening to him, by trusting him, by submitting to him, by praying to him and entering into his presence and God makes it real, because it is real.

[33 : 19] So there's the danger. The danger is that if you don't share in any of these experiences, you could be so far away from these experiences that you're listening to this and go, I just don't get it.

But it's not that you don't get it because you don't understand, you don't get it because you know that you're unable to share in the same experience. But what I'm saying is, or what David is saying is, taste and see for yourself.

Taste and see for yourself that the Lord is good. Here's the exhortation then as we close. David understands, and David wants us to understand, that people are not just learners, they're experiencers.

Okay? They don't just change by what they learn over the course of their life, they change through what they experience through the course of their life.

In other words, people become the people that they do through a mixture of learning and experiencing. And of course, both of those things have to be modified and shaped and understood by God's word.

[34 : 30] You know, the formation of a person never seems to be static, ever. We're always being shaped, we're always being molded, whether we're a young person or an old person.

The next experience can make us feel one way. It can shape us. You know, when we have sinful thoughts of perhaps bitterness or unforgiveness or whatever it may be, we know that they're wrong, we know that we don't want them, but we're able to spot perhaps where they've come from.

And sometimes we don't mind feeling them because we kind of feel there's a little bit of a justification to feeling them because I now have a right to feel this way because of what's happened. Now, well, one, there is no right to feel that way, but I understand why it's real because David is showing us here just how much experiences play in to the shaping of a person.

And this is why he's telling you to taste and see that the Lord is good. Trust God. Love God. Put Him first. Listen to Him first.

This is how you come to taste and see that the Lord is good. People are not shaped, as I said a bit ago, by their beliefs alone. Okay? Psalm 115.

[35 : 55] People are formed into the image that they become by what they trust and love the most. And this is kind of what David is saying here. Taste and see that the Lord is good and receive that experiences that will then shape you to be the person that God wants you to be.

But you know, as I know here this evening, that there are some experiences that we pray would never happen to us because we're not so sure our faith would be able to take it.

We're not so sure I can cope with a lot or perhaps not as much as I think, but I'm most definitely sure I couldn't cope if that happened to me. And part of our praying life then becomes, Lord, keep that far from me.

Lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil. Lead me not into that type of experience, Lord, but always deliver me from it. Because I recognize my faith could cope up to that point, but if that happened to me, I think I'd be a mess.

And that's just reality. That's just a recognition of just how powerful we know life experiences to be. And therefore, understand, as we conclude, what David is saying.

[37 : 11] The importance of tasting and seeing that the Lord is good. This can shape you. This can form you. This can have that very powerful influence over you.

But it comes through you bringing yourself before God. It comes by you doing the same thing that David did, by seeking the Lord and having your prayers answered.

And you've got to remember that not everyone in Scripture got their prayers answered. Even the Lord Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane was met with a no. He said, not my will be done, but yours.

He knew the answer. He knew that, you know, and so even the Lord Jesus Christ said, why, from the cross. So these aren't sinful questions to say, why, Lord?

Jesus asked that from the very cross. My God, my God, why have thou forsaken me? Okay, it's just real experience at the moment of a great trial, of a great, you know, painful moment.

[38 : 17] And those aren't beyond us. Asking why in those moments doesn't make us weak Christians, just elevates our realness before God.

But recognize what David is seeing. That if you can recognize everywhere else in your life that you are shaped by experiences, then also recognize that you'll be shaped by tasting and seeing that the Lord is good.

Okay? If you can recognize everywhere else that you are shaped by those experiences, then recognize also that you will be shaped by taste and seeing that the Lord is good.

Amen. Amen.