

BaptistWay: Desiring Life and Finding Its Source

March 29, 2013

- *The BaptistWay Bible Study lesson for April 14 focuses on Psalm 34.*
- [Download a powerpoint resource for this lesson here.](#)

An alphabetic acrostic is a poem whose lines begin with successive letters of the alphabet. Shaping a poem in this way creates an appealing aesthetic feature and also offers a helpful memory device. The Psalter has a number of acrostic psalms, one of which is Psalm 34.

When you read the psalm in the Hebrew Bible, you find each of the lines begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (with a slight variation at the point of the sixth line and the last line). While this feature cannot be observed in our English translations, we can appreciate how grateful ancient Bible students must have been to have a prompt for what came next, line after line, by just recalling the alphabet. Even more important than its structure, however, is the message of Psalm 34, which speaks powerfully to every culture and generation about what it means to be grateful for God's goodness and help in difficult times.

Song of Thanksgiving

Psalm 34 is classified best as a "song of thanksgiving," just like Psalm 32, the text last week. This type of psalm typically gives testimony about petitioning God for help in a time of trouble, experiencing deliverance and then publicly thanking the Lord for the blessing of answered prayer. Psalm 34 also reflects an affinity with the Old Testament wisdom tradition, which is found elsewhere in Scripture in such places as Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and a few other psalms.

The psalm begins with an invocation to praise (vv. 1-3) that involves the psalmist's own all-consuming adoration and an invitation to other worshippers: "Let us exalt his name together." Verses 4-7 contain the author's personal testimony about a time when he cried out to God for help, and the Lord answered with deliverance from what terrified and shamed him. This testimony is mixed with affirmations about the way God provides for anyone who fears the Lord and seeks his assistance.

The psalmist's words provide an example to us of the most effective way to witness to others, which is by telling our own story of how God has helped us. Another person may be able to challenge our theological ideas, but no one can contradict the reality of our own experiences of God's goodness.

Taste and See

Verses 8-10 are an invitation to the reader that begins with the astounding words, "taste and see that the Lord is good." This language, according to Artur Weiser, implies the psalmist is "sensitive to the reality of God's goodness and to his living presence to such a high degree that they actually become for him objects which he is able to perceive with his senses, since they are so near to him." While the ancient psalmist could not understand that one day God would come in Christ nor imagine the experience of the Lord's Supper, the remarkable metaphor in Psalm 34 of "tasting" the goodness of God did later find an amazing echo in the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, who invited disciples to "take and eat" his body and blood. This metaphorical linkage inspired the practice in the ancient church of reading Psalm 34 when there was a celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Psalm 34:11-16 forms an instructional piece in the style of the wisdom tradition. The psalmist invites his "children" to learn from him, a metaphor for a teacher appealing to students. The instruction of the psalm is in "the fear of the Lord," which is equivalent to the ethical behavior of telling the truth, turning from evil, doing good and pursuing peace. In other words,

obedience to God, especially in terms of the way you relate to other people, is the chief evidence you truly “fear the Lord.”

God is watching

As is common in wisdom literature, the psalmist adds a motivation to his instruction in practical morality by pointing out God is watching and ready to reward the righteous and punish the wicked. This instructional section of the psalm (vv. 11-16) also is quoted in 1 Peter 3:10-12, where it serves as an encouragement for the church to live in harmony and treat one another with compassion.

The remainder of the psalm (vv. 17-22) returns to the theme of the psalmist’s own experience and testimony that when a person suffers and then cries out to God for help, the Lord will deliver. The psalmist keenly is aware that the faithful are not immune to pain, but when trouble comes, the most important response is prayer. Then, through prayer, God draws close with the gifts of his presence, protection, refuge and salvation. Psalm 34 indicates while the Lord cares for all who fear him, God especially is attuned to those who are poor, weak and suffering either physical or emotional pain.

Weiser comments: “The true happiness of a godly life consists in the nearness of God and in the living experience of his help and not in being spared suffering and affliction. On the contrary, suffering is an essential part of the life of the righteous, and only he who is brokenhearted and crushed in spirit will experience what the nearness of God and his help can really come to mean.”