

Let us pray.

"BLESSED Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen."

I want to focus on Psalm 34 today; we heard a portion of it read beautifully just a moment ago, but let me take a moment to read it for us in it's entirety...

### **Introduction and Recap:**

A bit of recap before we take a look at the text. Over the past few weeks the lectionary readings have led us to reflect on suffering and the Christian life. Last week in particular, Fr. Doug reminded us of the great hope that we have in Jesus. As Ratzinger has said, one of the primary things that distinguishes the Christian faith from all other religions is the nature of our hope. Our hope is founded not on the esoteric, but the concrete. We are not buddhists, who turn inward, seeking to detach ourselves from all things that we might escape the endless cycle of suffering. Rather we recognize the ultimate victory of God over sin, suffering, evil, and despair through a historically verifiable event: The resurrection of Jesus Christ. The reality of his resurrection assures us of the certainty of our own, that, in the words of the creed: "He will come again in glory to judge the quick and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

That, my friends, is good news! But it leaves us with a question: what do we do in the meantime? Having a future hope is so beautiful and necessary, it is "an anchor to our soul, firm and steadfast" but when we're working absurd hours to make ends meet, when we get phone calls we hoped to God we'd never get, when an endless war rages in Afghanistan and Russian bombs fall in Syria, when people who claim the name of Christ are brutally murdered by militants... well, that hope can seem so far away. The sense of helplessness we sometimes face can be overwhelming, threatening to smother the very spark of hope we desperately need to stay alite. So how do we cling to hope and keep despair at bay when circumstances are overwhelming?

Fortunately we're not the first people to ask that question, the people of God have been wrestling with it for millennia. Not least among those faithful saints is king David who speaks to us now from afar through an ancient song.

### **Background:**

Let's set the stage, shall we?

When David pens Psalm 34 he's running for his life from a power-crazed king Saul. Having just been informed by Jonathan that Saul intends to kill him, David flees to the region of Gath where he meets a king named Achish. Unfortunately, Achish's servants recognize David. Is not that the one the one of whom it is said "Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands," they ask? Fearing retribution from Achish, David decides to literally act the fool, frothing at the mouth and scrabbling at the gateposts until Achish turns away in disgust. This gives David the space he needs to escape to a cave and rally support. It's probably safe to assume that it was in this cave (called Adullam) that David's voice first carried the strains of the 34th Psalm heavenward. If you like, you can read more about all this in 1 Samuel 21-22.

Now, If I were David I would be seething with rage. I'm the king elect, for crying out loud, and I've been driven out of my home and hunted like a dog. If that weren't enough, whatever shred of dignity I had left went out the window the moment I lay down in the mud by the gates of Gath!

If I was David, Psalm 34 might have sounded more like psalm 69: "Pour out thine indignation upon them, And let the fierceness of thine anger overtake them. Let their habitation be desolate; Let none dwell in their tents."

What emerges instead, is what most scholars refer to as a wisdom psalm. Now, when we think of wisdom our minds often turn to something kind of heady; philosophers, theologians, these are the kinds of people who possess "wisdom." Not so with biblical wisdom, however. If Solomon, for example, were alive today, he would more likely point to your family doctor or a seasoned farmer to illustrate wisdom. Biblical wisdom is intensely practical; it is, as Spurgeon said, "the right use of knowledge." Psalm 34, then, is meant to be a practical Psalm, a sprinkling of the book of proverbs set in midst of praise, lament, and thanksgiving. It is not meant primarily to impart deep theological truth (although it may contain a good deal thereof), but to inform the way we live... it is meant to teach us how to "Fear the LORD," which is, after all, the beginning of wisdom.

That said, let us draw a few lessons in wisdom from the lyrics of the king: How did David respond when his circumstances were overwhelming?

### **Unconditional Praise:**

The first way David responds is amazing to me, he responds with unconditional praise. He writes, "I will bless the Lord at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

I don't think there's any biblical character who illustrates this principle as well as Job. Remember in the beginning of the book, right after he's lost everything, The word says "Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

You know, I guess I have a confession to make. Some days I just don't want to be anywhere near God. Sometimes, maybe more often than I care to admit, it's because I'm wrapped up in some besetting sin and my heart is just hard. But more often, it's because I'm mad at him. Some of you who know me well know that I am incredibly prone to depression... I can milk a good melancholy spell for days if you give me the chance! And its in seasons like that when I'm prone to do nothing but look inward, you know what I mean? I focus on my own misfortune and all the ways my life isn't turning out the way I want it too. And when that happens I tend to get angry at God. He's sovereign after all, so it's clearly his fault.

Anyway, it's in those moments when I most need to pray, and I'm fortunate to have a wife who frequently reminds me of that fact. So I'll go and I'll sit at my makeshift desk, covered with its makeshift tablecloth, which also serves both as my makeshift altar and a spare bookshelf. And I'll just sit there and stare at my books for a while until I finally overcome my stubbornness and pick up my favorite hymnal or my old King Jimmy that's literally held together with duct tape. And for a while I'll lose myself in the stories and songs of a past generation of faithful believers. I'll celebrate their victories and mourn their losses. I'll give thanks with the voice of the sons of Korah, and I'll cry out in wrath in the voice of David, and sooner or later I'll find that the tears of the saints have given way to some tears of my own. I find myself face to face with God just like Job, and just like Job I find myself saying "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you... [surely] I uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know."

### **Rehearsal of God's Past Faithfulness:**

The second way David fends off despair is to remind himself of God's faithfulness, both to himself personally and to the people of Israel as a whole. Personally, he writes in verse 4: "I sought the LORD, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears." Very likely he's referring to his oh-so-recent, oh-so-narrow escape from the clutches of King Saul. But certainly he could have recounted countless other episodes in which the Lord has been on his side, taking him from among the sheep to be the nation's champion against Goliath, for example. And then in verse 7 he also recounts the

faithfulness of God to the nation of Israel corporately, retelling the story of Israel's exodus from egypt: "The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them."

What stories could we tell, I wonder? What tales of God's faithfulness lie locked in the recesses of our collective memory, just waiting to be let out if only we dared say "Lord open thou our lips, and our mouth shall shew forth thy praise."

Much to my shame, I don't call my mother nearly as much as I should, but one day on a particularly arduous journey to Steak and Shake after church I decided to give her a call. There wasn't a whole lot of our conversation that was particularly memorable or out of the ordinary. We exchanged the usual niceties, she did her usual naggy mom thing (get used to it kids it never goes away) and I did my usual "don't worry mom, I got it" thing... and then I told her about life. I told her about how tired and frustrated I was, and how absent God seemed. After a while she spoke up again, and it seemed for a moment like she'd gone on some crazy rabbit trail; she started telling me about some crafty thing a friend has shared on facebook, and it was a moment or two before I realized how incredibly relevant it was to our previous conversation. She told me to take a mason jar and label it "God's faithfulness," and every time we saw God move, she told us to write it down on a slip of colored paper and stick it inside. Then, whenever the going got rough again, we could pull out one of those bright strips of paper, read it, and remember.

Remember that time last summer when I was out of work, and our trailer was infested with mice to the point where we could barely even sleep anymore. We had to move but before we could move in I had to have a steady job. At the last possible minute, everything fell into place. I got a call to come in for an interview and was hired on the spot, and the following monday we signed our lease paperwork.

Or that other time when I was going 75mph down 40 on my way home from work when I blew my first tire ever. By sheer grace I was able to get across four lanes of traffic and pull over to the side of the road without a problem, and to top it all off, I just happened to be driving with a friend who was a licensed mechanic and could walk me through how to change the thing.

And then there's that time every week, where after joining our voices with saints and Angels in heaven and on earth we hear these words recited and recall the greatest of icon of God's faithfulness ever beheld by humankind:

We give thanks to you, O God, for the goodness and love which you have made known to us in creation; in the calling of Israel to be your people; in your Word spoken through the prophets; and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus, your Son. For in these last days you sent him to be incarnate from the Virgin Mary, to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world. In him, you have delivered us from evil, and made us worthy to stand before you. In him, you have brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life.

Taste and see, O people of God, that the LORD is good.

### **Reminder of Covenant Obligations**

After rehearsing the faithfulness of God both to himself and his people, David turns his gaze inward, exhorting himself and his hearers to fulfill their covenant obligations to God. He writes: (v 12-14) "What man is he that desireth life and loveth many days, that he may see good? Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile. Depart from evil and do Good: seek peace and pursue it."

"Seek peace and pursue it," what a powerful phrase coming from the lips of David at a time like this. Saul is hot on his trail and peace is the furthest thing from *his* mind... I mean this is a guy whose favorite pastime is trying to skewer David with a spear, right? And yet despite that fact that David could probably have mustered a decent army and taken an eye for an eye here, he is able to recognize that this is not what God has called him to here. He's called instead to--in the words of Jesus--love his enemy, and pray for those who persecute him.

I wonder how those words wounded when he David first sung them? "Turn from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it." The very first time he said it, I bet he said it through gritted teeth, as though he could barely get it out. But I'm willing to bet that the more he said it, the easier it became. Until one day, he's standing concealed in a cave (this is 1 Samuel 24 by the way) with the life of Saul in his grasp, and he lets him live, even seeks to reconcile with him.

If you're anything like me, when life get's hard, you get impatient. Everyone around you is doing there best to encourage you, and though you know they mean well, everything kinda feels like pious platitudes: " all things work for good for those who love God... you just need to wait on God's timing... I know things are tight, but God has the perfect job lined up for you, you just need to be patient... Sure Joey's a little wild right now, but he'll come around eventually, just wait and see..." Sometimes you just want to scream, I'm

sick and tired of waiting on God, I've got to *do* something, or I'm gonna go mad!" And God today, through David, says to folks like you and I "okay, you want to do something? Be faithful even when it kills you... especially when it kills you."

Because Christianity, as friend said to me the other day, is a bit of a death cult. We worship a crucified Savior who died to rescue us from eternal death and rose to carry us from death to life and the only way to live is die everyday because life, more often than not is a lot like purgatory; And the pain we feel is a lot like a blacksmith's forge where dull, twisted raw material is hammered and burnished under heat and pressure until it starts to look an awful lot like the burly middle-eastern man whose nail-scarred hands wield the hammer.

Sometimes the hard thing we're called to do is reconcile with an enemy like Saul. More often it's reconciling with an estranged friend or relative. For me recently it's been enduring what I like to call "the agony of the mundane." It meant giving up a pastorate at a small church and putting seminary on hold to put the health of my marriage first. I firmly believe I made the right decision, but after 10 years of dreaming about serving in full-time Gospel ministry, going into a job I can't stand every morning causes an almost tangible ache. But God has called me to be faithful in the moment, to serve him where he has me, even in the ebb and flow of a dying call center.

### **Assurance of God's Future Faithfulness and Justice:"**

Finally David sets his eyes on the character of God. He's seen God's faithfulness in the past, it's written on scrolls of parchment in every corner of his cultural memory and pervades his own experience. There is no doubt in his mind that though the world is twisted and unjust now, ruled by wicked men who breath "threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord," one day God will set things right; the righteous will be vindicated and the unrighteous will be condemned. He writes beginning in verse 15: "The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry. The face of the LORD is against them that do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth."

Here's where the wisdom literature aspect of this Psalm shines forth most clearly; we see this all throughout the book of Proverbs... a firm assurance that God keeps a close eyes on the scales of justice, monitoring the deeds of those who govern the civil sphere and the market; "A false balance is abomination to the LORD," we read, "but a just weight is his delight." There is often this sense in wisdom literature that feels a bit like popular characterizations of karma: the just will be rewarded and the unjust will be punished.

Books like Job and ecclesiastes, on the other hand, turn that on it's head as Solomon writes things like this: "In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: the righteous perishing in their righteousness, and the wicked living long in their wickedness."

Certainly this assessment of reality rings true with us; we need only look around. Economic disparity increases as the rich get richer by standing on the backs of the poor both at home and abroad. The owners of sweatshops and brothels prosper, while the working class man can barely feed his family. Wicked men rise to positions of political power and influence while honest men are crushed under the weight of a corrupt civic system. Even in our places of work it is too often those who are willing to stab a friend in the back who climb the corporate ladder while the honest person gets laid off. Oh God, we wonder, where is your justice?

We're especially prone to think like this when we're the righteous victims. We find ourselves identifying with Job a bit, questioning God, challenging him to answer us. Which of course, we are more than welcome to do... as long as we are willing to be questioned by him ourselves. Faced with the blazing holiness of God we are remind that "none is righteous, no not one." We come face to face once again with our own depravity, with the monster that dwells within us. We find that we have more in common than we care to think about with the people St. Paul wrote about "whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things." And we discover that the same institutions of violence and fear we cry out against are the very ones we perpetuate unthinkingly in our day to day lives, and we find that standing before the bar of Yahweh's justice none can stand.

None, that is, but one. The one who was led as a lamb to the slaughter, who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows; who we esteemed "stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed" for the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Christ will "come again to judge the quick and the dead," and every person who has ever lived will be held accountable for every ill gotten gain, every homeless child left to starve on the side of the road, every unborn life taken, every angry word spoken to friend or spouse, and the great King who sits upon his throne will deal out perfect justice as only he can. All things on heaven and earth will be set to rights, and the intended relationship between God mankind and creation will be restored. A new eden will be set in the midst of a new Jerusalem, and the will of God will finally be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Those of us who have laid hold of Christ by faith, will find ourselves gently guided down the aisle by the Father, and our tattered dirty, sin-stained robes will be traded for garments of white as we are dressed in the righteousness of Christ alone. We will discover that the Lord truly does redeem the life of his servants, as David wrote, and none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned. Seated together at the wedding supper of the lamb we will behold our Saviour's face to face as he takes bread and wine... this is my body... this is my blood. And in one thunderous voice we will hymn the blessed trinity and sing the glory of our redemption:

"O the love that sought me, O blood that bought me, O the grace that brought me to the fold of God."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*