

To Be Delivered

Psalm 34:1-10, 22

THE CONTEXT

Have you ever heard a conversation out of context? Maybe hearing someone say, "I'm going to slaughter that guy..." and jumping to the wrong conclusion? The person may have been talking about murder, but knowing the full story would have cleared everything up because you would have known that the person was talking about one-on-one basketball.

Reading scripture can be a similar experience if you're doing so without knowing the background. Nothing in the Bible was written in a vacuum; every word was written to address a certain situation and respond to what was happening at the time it was written. When we know the bigger picture, *then* we can then relate the scripture to what's going on in our own lives. Knowing only a fragment of the story leads to misinterpretation, and we end up learning the wrong lesson. Knowing not just the scripture but the story that surrounds it is the way God uses words written thousands of years ago to speak the truth to us living now.

Today's scripture is a good example. Psalm 34 is attributed to David, who sang it to God before he became the king of Israel. He was thanking God for something, and we need to know what had just happened in David's life to deserve that thanksgiving. To do this, we need to do a little digging into David's history.

DAVID'S STORY

You may be familiar with the highlights of David's life as recorded in scripture. David was the youngest son doing the grungiest work of the family as a shepherd when the Prophet Samuel pulled him out of the pasture, anointed him with oil, and named him king of Israel. To complicate matters, there was already a king of Israel, named Saul, who had fallen out of God's favor because he had been disobedient to God. When King Saul found out that he had been rejected by God, scripture tells us he was tormented by an evil spirit. The nature of this spirit is unknown, but you can be sure that Saul was grieving the loss of God's favor, and grief is often accompanied by anger and fear. Any of these strong emotions may have been responsible for Saul's torment, and he began to behave erratically and become paranoid. Saul's servants suggested that music might ease his anguish and recommended David to play his lyre for him. David came and did just that, and for a wonder, Saul was relieved. This was the beginning of David's relationship with the royalty of Israel and the first of many steps he would take toward his own reign.

The next step along this journey was David's encounter with Goliath on the front lines of the war between the Israelites and the Philistines. Goliath was an enormous man from Gath who offered to end the conflict based on the outcome of single combat between himself and a champion of the Israelites. David volunteered to be that champion and managed to kill the giant with a sling and stone. This was the beginning of David's fame. As King Saul, David, and the Israelite army traveled home, women lined the streets playing instruments and singing, "Saul has killed his thousands, and David his TEN thousands."

DAVID SUCCESSFUL

Saul became resentful of David's fame and increasingly paranoid and afraid. To take care of his rival, Saul put David in command of 1,000 soldiers and sent him to the front lines of the Philistine war. Despite the danger, 1 Samuel 18:14 tells us that "David had success in all his undertakings; for the Lord was with him." Because Saul's plan backfired, he tried another tactic and told David he could marry his daughter if he brought back proof that he had personally killed 100 Philistines. David succeeded in this as well and was able to marry into the royal family. David had it all. He was successful in battle, famous, married to a princess, anointed by God and filled with God's spirit, and the future king of Israel.

SAUL'S PLANS FOR MURDER

David was on top of the world, or at least he thought he was; King Saul had other plans for him. Scripture tells us that the more David grew in success and fame and influence, the more fearful Saul became. When the king saw how much his daughter loved him, that was the last straw, and Saul began to plot David's murder. He started by speaking with his servants and his son, Jonathan, about his plans. Jonathan, however, was devoted to David and warned him of his father's plans. This convinced David to flee from Saul's court altogether. David was now worse off than he was when he was a lowly shepherd boy. He was a wanted man, he had lost his wife, he had lost his best friend, and he was out of options. I think it's possible that David felt that he too had lost God's favor. What more evidence did he need?

GOLIATH'S SWORD

David fled to Nob, a town near Jerusalem, and sought provision from the priest Ahimelech. David told him that he was on a secret mission of the king and that he needed food and a weapon. Ahimelech fed David and gave him the only weapon he had which just happened to be the sword of Goliath, the giant David had vanquished near the beginning of his story. What a strange coincidence. Perhaps it was this sword that convinced David to take the next step in his journey, for he chose to go to Goliath's hometown of Gath.

TAKING ON THE ENEMY

It's not clear what good David thought would come from traveling to this place. He had killed their hero and led armies of men against them. Why would he go there? Was he hoping no one would recognize him? Or did he feel like he had something to prove? He had turned tail and run when his life was threatened by Saul, and this was after scripture tells us that David's success in everything was because the Lord was with him. What if Saul turning on him made David question whether God was still on his side? What if David wanted reassurance that God was still with him? What better way to do that than to go deep into the heart of enemy territory with the very sword that had been raised against his people and take on the Philistines singlehandedly? If he were truly God's anointed, if the Lord was still with him and filling him with power, then he would win ... wouldn't he?

Before that could happen, however, David got word that he had been recognized by the king of Gath as the famous warrior of Israel. This information sucked the last bit of wind from David's sails, and he became afraid. Maybe as he approached the city, David remembered that the sword wasn't enough to save Goliath; David killed him before he had a chance to even draw it. So instead of doing battle, 1 Samuel 21:13 tells us that David "pretended to be mad when in [the presence of the king's servants]. He scratched marks on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle run down his beard." When servants brought David before the king, he was no threat at all. This was the man people sang about? This was the mythic soldier who killed tens of thousands? Whatever! The king of Gath turned to his servants and said, "Look, you see that the man is mad; why then have you brought him to me? Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this fellow to play the madman in my presence?"

DAVID'S ESCAPE AND THEME SONG

Scripture then tells us that David "escaped", but this may have been an exaggeration; I imagine the king's servants taking him out of town and dumping him like garbage, which allowed David to simply walk away. As he did, he sang a song to the Lord that we know as Psalm 34:

- ¹I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
- ²My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad.
- ³O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together.
- ⁴I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.
- ⁵Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.
- ⁶This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble.
- ⁷The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.
- ⁸O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.
- ⁹O fear the Lord, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want.
- ¹⁰The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.
- ²²The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

If you read this Psalm without knowing the background, it sounds like David had just won a battle, but we know better. David sang this song at one of the lowest points in his life after having to act mentally ill to save his own skin. He thanked God not because he had succeeded in battle but because he was ignored by the enemy.

DELIVERED FROM DESPAIR

The very fact that David was grateful tells us something. It tells us that at some point David recognized he couldn't take on his enemies as he had done in the past, nor would doing so prove that God was with him. David had to choose between believing his success meant God was with him or believing that God was with him regardless of his circumstances. He chose the latter. Once he made that decision, he was able to radically change his behavior and truly take refuge in the Lord. Then David could be fully grateful – not because his situation had improved, but because he was able to feel God's presence once again. David wasn't rendered invincible and delivered from the enemy all around him. In his weakness, he was delivered from the enemy living within himself. He was delivered from despair.

THANKSGIVING FROM THE DEPTHS

It can be incredibly difficult to feel God's presence when you are in the depths of despair. This is especially true when you hit a brick wall during a mountain top experience – when everything you touch seems blessed by God. Perhaps you know what it's like to come to a screeching halt in the middle of doing God's work because of you became seriously ill or had experienced an enormous loss. Has this happened to you? Did you wonder where God had gone? Did it feel like you were praying to the ceiling instead of to the Lord? Did you find yourself charging in the wrong direction in hopes that you'd recapture your sense of God's presence?

David knew these things as well, and it wasn't until he realized that God remained present and loving even in the worst situation that David was able to sense God was with him and on his side. It was only when he recognized that God had never left him and would never abandon him that David could truly be grateful.

THE GOOD NEWS

The good news we can learn from this is that no matter what we are going through, we can be victorious. It may feel like a stretch to consider David's situation a victory, especially considering the lengths to which he had to go to "win," but David was able to recognize it for what it was and feel God's loving presence as a result. Perhaps the only reason he could see the light of God was because he was at the very bottom of a very deep hole.

This lesson can speak to us as individuals, but it can also address our entire congregation. When I've asked members of this church to imagine its future and tell me what they liked best about it, almost everyone said, "More members." Many people have then told me, "We are doing what has worked for us in the past, why are we dwindling? Where are the young people? Where are the children?"

Our congregation isn't alone. Many churches have continued to do business as usual, as the walls of change in the world have risen around them. While we weren't looking the Church has become buried in shadow. What we can learn from David's story and the psalm of thanksgiving he sang is that the shadow doesn't mean we have been abandoned by God. The success our efforts have had in the past and the way we have measured that success are no longer suited to the situation that surrounds us. The ways we came to understand and accept God's grace aren't enough to bring understanding to people outside the church today. The people who don't know the gospel of Jesus are exposed only to its opposite. The sins committed by the congregations who get the most press have driven people away from the gifts of God's acceptance, forgiveness, and love. There are people in our community who only see rejection waiting for them in the church because they are unlike the people who worship there. There are ones who don't understand the language of faith we've been using and are confused by traditional theology.

To reach these people with the truth, we have to act in ways that may seem crazy when compared to what we've done in the past. The good news for us is that when we surrender to God, we make room for God to deliver us from our fear. As fearless people, we can bravely act in new ways and be confident that the shadow that covers us and the people around us will be replaced with the light that reveals the Realm of God.