



## Introduction

NOTE: In Session Three we treat a new biblical psalm (we have already seen a biblical psalm in reflecting on Jonah 2). If you were part of our previous discussion of a psalm, please bring to this session some of our learnings about the workings of the psalms’ poetic, symbolic, and even “mythological” language. *The verse numberings of various psalms differs greatly between English translations, the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), and the Hebrew Bible. This study guide uses the verse numberings found in the NRSV.*

Psalm 34 represents very mature spiritual and sophisticated poetry from the tail end of Old Testament times. It is a psalm of wisdom, written as an acrostic poem (click [HERE](#)), one whose poetic lines begin with consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The psalm also takes up the form of a thanksgiving poem used in temple liturgy. This form (or genre) of psalm aims to fulfill the promises of praise and sacrifice that one makes when crying out to God for help (as in Psalm 7:17). Episcopalians might well call Psalm 34 a liturgy of gratitude. It is used six times in our Lectionary, including three consecutive Sundays (Propers 14B, 15B, and 16B). These characteristics make Psalm 34 ideal for our Lenten study. It bears a strong spiritual witness to deliverance out of the abyss of despair while also teaching us wise instruction for coping with and rejecting painful and suicidal ideation.



## Reflect

The psalmist writes about their fears and sings God’s praises at the same time. He or she also speaks about suffering. Why do you think the psalmist can speak about fear and still praise God? Also, how does this mesh with your thoughts about suffering?

**Notes:** When that voice in our head shouts out “Curse God and Die!” we need to either re-direct our attention or directly talk back to the negative shouting. The psalms of thanksgiving are a proven witness declaring that the nasty “shouts” of life are wrong about calling it quits. The psalmists have emerged safe from the miry depths of despair and are recounting their deliverance to teach us God’s liberating reality. The psalms of thanksgiving, like Psalm 34, convince us that ideas of despair and fatalism don’t deserve our allegiance.



## Study

1. Read Psalm 34:1-10 (click [HERE](#)). Consider all the ways that “David” praises God. How often should one praise God and why?
  
2. Who would the psalmist like to join him and why?

3. “David” sought God, who delivered him from his fears (v. 4). How might have God delivered him? What might that be like?

**NOTE:** One wise insight for reflecting on this question is found in v. 10, which finds many different translations. Consider the paraphrase of the verse in E. Petersen’s *Message* version (click [HERE](#)). God’s human servants are obviously no match for the power and strength of lions. Thus, the verse is unlikely to be about overcoming our fears through building up any natural, physical human competencies or skills. In what theological and spiritual senses might God’s people become mightier or more at peace than lions?

4. In verse 6, the author’s writes, “This poor soul cried?” Imagine the kind of despair that caused his soul to cry. What would that be like? What would you say to someone with that feeling?

**NOTE:** The superscription may provide some theological and spiritual guidance in answering this question. Consider the episode in 1 Samuel 21:10–14 as the backstory of this psalm (click [HERE](#)).

5. In his commentary on *The Spiritual Canticles* (Stanza 16), John of the Cross writes, “[The devil] is sometimes the cause of many movements of the sensory part of the soul and of many other disturbances, spiritual as well as sensory. It is not in a person’s power to be free of these until the Lord sends his angel, who, as is said in the psalm, is found about them that fear him and delivers him [Ps. 34:7], and until he brings peace and tranquility in both the sensory and spiritual parts of the soul.”

Have you ever felt as if an angel of God has encamped around you? What was that like? If not, try to imagine what that would be like.

**Optional Reflection:** Reflect on the symbolic artwork of the Jewish painter Moshe Berger ([click for Bio](#)) illustrating the angel of Psalm 34:7 (click [HERE](#)). Pay particular attention to the way the different colors may stand for strong emotions, feelings, and “vibes”. How do the colors interact? Reflect on the depiction of motion and dynamism in the artwork. What mental and spiritual struggle(s) may be in play? Where might you place yourself or a friend who is suffering within the painting’s dynamics? According to v. 5, those who receive God’s mercy have “radiant” faces. Consider Moses, whose face glowed after meeting God on Sinai (Exodus 34:29–35). Can a believer become a mirror for God’s glory after an experience with the Almighty?

6. How does God save and deliver people in distress? Write about some of the many ways that God saves. As you reflect on this, please consider the psalmist’s invitation in v. 8 to “taste and see.” God’s WORD is as sweet as honey for those who make the effort to grasp divine wisdom. The Old and New Testaments alike make the powerful appeal to live by God’s word, not by bread/food alone. In the Episcopal Church, this is a powerful Lenten theme.

**NOTE:** As mentioned earlier, our wisdom text is in the form of an Acrostic Poem (click [HERE](#)). This literary artistry is not just for show or decoration but serves a spiritual and therapeutic purpose. The acrostic form of the psalm overlays suffering, darkness, and lamentation with **structure and boundaries**.

As it covers the alphabet from start to finish the acrostic engages our lamentation from beginning to end. Thus, it covers our darkness in its totality, and it assures us of God's presence in totality. Martin Buber once quoted a famous rabbi as saying that there is no end to human darkness, but there is an end to the alphabet. As the poetry of the psalm washes over us, we begin to feel this new perspective.

7. Consider: "For those who fear him have no want" (v. 9). What does that verse mean to you?

**NOTE:** Be cautious about finding any sort of "prosperity gospel" here. The promise of lack of want has no immediate and uncomplicated sense. Verse 19 says this plainly: "Many are the afflictions of the righteous." And, after all, the entirety of Psalm 34 arises out of a painful encounter with the abyss!

8. Read Ps 34:11-22. The psalmist turns to giving advice and instruction involving "the fear of the Lord" and God's actions toward the innocent and righteous and toward the wicked. Name four actions the psalmist advises the reader to follow. See especially verses 11-14.

9. How could these actions help a person seek life, giving them a reason to live?

**Optional Reflection:** Read 34:18-19. The psalmist seems to move from deathly darkness to light at the end of the tunnel. Consider this shift of mood in relation to the painting "Herd of Sheep in the Snow" by George E. Colby (1889). Click [HERE](#).

10. How could verses 34:18-19 be a comfort to those in distress?

11. In what ways could someone's journey through darkness help others?

**NOTE on v. 20 and the symbolism of "bones":** The majority of the over one hundred references to bones in the Hebrew Bible do not really relate to physical bones but rather to the bones as symbolizing the essence of the human self, the central metaphorical repository of physical (Job 20:11; 30:17, 30), mental (Ezek 37:11), and spiritual wellbeing (Prov 3:8). The spirit infuses the bones of the developing human fetus in the mother's womb (Eccl 11:5).

12. How can a reminder of the body's healthy state steady an anxious person?



### **Mental Health Key Points**

Mental health has a spiritual component.

For some, God's presence or the presence of an angel can be felt.

Another person's journey of darkness can help one's distress, answering the feelings of loneliness.

When one's thinking is compromised basic actions can give one meaning and peace.

Unbearable pain, be it physical, emotional, or spiritual, can point or lead to a suicidal crisis.

A reminder that anxiousness and panic are not the same as a physical ailment can help someone relax. One's rapid heartbeat may be due to anxiousness and not a heart attack. But medical advice in such cases is warranted.

Bringing up the topic of spiritual affliction or suicidal thoughts will not make someone suicidal. Instead, it often brings relief.



### **Prayers**

Loving God of all, some days my soul cries to your from the moment I open my eyes. Life can be too much, and my poor spirit has nothing more to give. Send me an angel to pitch a tent near me and stand watch over all my comings and goings. Let me taste all the goodness of your wisdom and learn from it. I fear your power and majesty, O Lord, but even so, I thank you for hearing my prayers whenever I seek you. Amen.

Gracious and holy Lord, from you comes goodness and truth. Teach us, your children turn from evil and seek peace so that our days may be many and we may see good. Turn your eyes toward those who follow your path, even when they are afflicted with pain, abuse, or injustice. Protect us and in your mercy sustain us, your servants who take refuge in you. Amen.