

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 34

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Psalm 34 is an acrostic psalm of David, attributed in its superscription to his feigned madness before Abimelech (more precisely, Achish of Gath — 1 Samuel 21:10–15), a moment of personal humiliation and divine deliverance. The psalm moves in three broad waves. It opens with David’s personal vow of praise and his invitation for the afflicted to join him in magnifying the LORD (vv. 1–3). It then narrates and universalizes the deliverance: “I sought the LORD, and he answered me” becomes “this poor man cried, and the LORD heard him” — and then becomes “the angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him” (vv. 4–7). The middle section issues a sustained invitation to “taste and see that the LORD is good” (v. 8), followed by wisdom-shaped instruction on the fear of the LORD as the path to life (vv. 9–14). The psalm’s final movement shifts toward didactic declaration: the LORD sees the righteous and hears their cry; he is near to the brokenhearted; he delivers the righteous through many afflictions; he redeems his servants (vv. 15–22). Throughout, the personal testimony of one delivered man opens outward into universal instruction about the character and ways of God toward those who fear him.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish two inseparable things through this psalm simultaneously: *to draw the afflicted into trusting him* and *to form the fear of the LORD* in his people as a governing orientation toward life. The psalm is not merely reporting what happened to David. It is an act of recruitment — “O magnify the LORD with me” (v. 3) — addressed specifically to “the humble” and “the afflicted” (v. 2, v. 18). God intends that the hearer, confronted by David’s testimony and by the psalm’s wisdom instruction, would move from fear of circumstances to fear of the LORD — which is the only fear that casts out all other fears. The tasting-and-seeing metaphor (v. 8) signals this intent precisely: God is not asking for intellectual assent to propositions about his goodness but for the experiential trust that comes from drawing near.

Subject Sentence: The LORD delivers the brokenhearted who fear him — and calls the afflicted to taste his goodness and trust him fully.

Primary Claim: God is summoning the afflicted, the fearful, and the brokenhearted to abandon lesser fears and draw near to him — because the fear of the LORD is the one

orientation that resolves every other terror and brings his people into the fullness of his deliverance.

Interpretive Evaluation

The fear of the LORD — orientation or emotion?

The central interpretive question in this psalm concerns the nature of the “fear of the LORD” that runs as a thread through the entire piece (vv. 7, 9, 11). Some traditions — particularly certain strands of evangelical and charismatic exposition — flatten the phrase into reverential awe or worshipful affection, emptying it of its conative (will-shaping) force. This reading can be acknowledged at one level: the fear of the LORD is indeed distinct from terror and includes wonder and adoration. But the psalm actively resists reducing it to an emotional posture. Verses 11–14 define the fear of the LORD concretely — it turns from evil, does good, seeks peace, keeps the tongue from deceit. The fear of the LORD in this psalm is a *governing orientation* that shapes behavior, not merely an internal feeling. The Reformed reading, which understands the fear of the LORD as a comprehensive disposition of the whole person toward God — including but exceeding reverence — is preferred because it accounts for the wisdom-instruction section’s behavioral specification.

The prosperity/protection question (vv. 9–10, 19–20)

A significant interpretive pressure point is the apparent promise in verses 9–10 and 19–22 that those who fear the LORD lack nothing, while the wicked perish. Prosperity-gospel readings have used verses like these to promise material immunity from want. This reading must be refuted. The psalm itself immediately qualifies any simplistic reading: verse 19 explicitly states that “many are the afflictions of the righteous” — the promise is not exemption from suffering but deliverance *through* suffering. The poor man of verse 6, the brokenhearted of verse 18, the crushed in spirit — these are not peripheral figures in the psalm; they are its target audience. The psalm promises relational presence and ultimate redemption, not material prosperity. The New Testament development of verse 20 in John 19:36 (applied to Christ’s unbroken bones) grounds the ultimate fulfillment of this protection promise in the suffering Servant himself, not in the believer’s circumstantial comfort.

The acrostic form and authority

Some interpreters treat the acrostic structure as a primarily mnemonic device of limited theological significance. This can be acknowledged without adopting it as the primary frame. The acrostic form in Hebrew wisdom literature also signals completion and comprehensiveness — the poet is saying something about the whole of life, from aleph to taw. The form reinforces the psalm’s claim that the fear of the LORD is not a partial or

situational response but a total orientation. This structural observation should inform exposition without becoming the main point.

The superscription — historical occasion and canonical function

The superscription connects the psalm to a moment of personal humiliation (David feigning madness) — not a moment of obvious triumph. This is exegetically important: the psalm's confidence in God's deliverance is not born from easy circumstances but from extremity. The Reformed reading rightly emphasizes that testimony born of suffering carries greater weight and recruits more effectively than testimony born of comfort. The historical occasion should be named briefly in exposition to honor the canonical anchor, then released — the psalm quickly universalizes beyond David's specific experience.

Key Canonical Support

- **1 Samuel 21:10–15** — The historical occasion of the psalm: David in extremity, feigning madness, apparently abandoned. The psalm's confidence is born precisely here — in humiliation, not triumph. This anchor gives the psalm its experiential authority.
 - **Proverbs 1:7; 9:10** — “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” The Psalm 34 fear-of-the-LORD instruction (vv. 11–14) belongs to the same wisdom tradition, establishing that the fear of the LORD is not irrational but the deepest form of rationality — the beginning of all right knowing and living.
 - **Isaiah 57:15; 66:2** — “I dwell with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit.” The LORD's nearness to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18) is grounded in God's own character as declared in Isaiah — his condescension toward the broken is not occasional but definitional to who he is.
 - **John 19:36** — John applies Psalm 34:20 (“He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken”) to the crucified Christ. This canonical anchor establishes that the ultimate fulfillment of the psalm's promise of protection and deliverance is Christ himself — the righteous one who passes through the deepest affliction and is delivered through resurrection. Every believer's deliverance is grounded in his.
 - **1 Peter 2:3** — Peter directly quotes Psalm 34:8 (“if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good”), applying the psalm's tasting-and-seeing invitation to the new covenant community. The invitation to experiential trust in God's goodness is not confined to Israel's covenant life but extends to all who come to Christ as living stone.
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Aim: To call hearers to abandon the lesser fears that govern their lives and move into the fear of the LORD — the one orientation that casts out all other fears and brings them into the full experience of God’s deliverance and goodness.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	David’s vow: “I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.” The humble will hear and be glad.	Opens with a personal vow that is simultaneously an invitation. “At all times” — not only in relief, but in the midst of affliction.
3	Corporate invitation: “O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together.”	The pivot from personal testimony to communal recruitment. The psalm becomes a summons.
4	“I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.”	The personal testimony anchoring the psalm’s claim. Fear met by seeking, seeking met by answering, answering resulting in deliverance.
5	“Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed.”	Moves to universalization: “those who look” — not just David. The posture of looking/seeking produces radiance, not shame.
6	“This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.”	A third-person self-reference — David narrates his own experience as exemplary and universal. “Poor man” signals the psalm’s target audience.
7	“The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.”	The theological ground of the deliverance: divine encampment. Fear of the LORD here introduced as the condition of this protection.
8	“Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the	The psalm’s most famous verse. An experiential

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	man who takes refuge in him!”	invitation, not a propositional claim. The tasting metaphor signals that trust must be enacted, not merely assented to.
9–10	Exhortation to fear the LORD — those who fear him lack nothing; lions may be hungry but those who seek him lack no good thing.	Wisdom-shaped promise. “Lack no good thing” must be read in light of v. 19 — the promise is covenantal completeness, not material immunity.
11	“Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.”	The wisdom-teacher posture: David becomes instructor to the community. Signals the didactic section that follows.
12–13	Rhetorical question: who desires life and years of good? Then keep your tongue from evil and lips from deceit.	Wisdom’s method: desire for life is the entry point; the instruction on the tongue comes first. Speech as the index of the heart’s orientation.
14	“Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.”	The behavioral specification of the fear of the LORD. Not passive but actively pursued — “seek,” “pursue.”
15–16	Contrast: the LORD’s eyes are on the righteous, his ears attentive to their cry. His face is against those who do evil.	The theological grounding of the wisdom instruction: God’s attentiveness is not indifferent. He sees and responds differentially.
17	“When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.”	Reinforces v. 6 at the universal level. The pattern: cry → hear → deliver.
18	“The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.”	The most pastorally dense verse in the psalm. Nearness, not distance. The broken and crushed are his primary addressees.

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
19	"Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all."	The explicit qualification of any prosperity reading. Afflictions are expected and many; deliverance is certain and total.
20	"He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken."	Applied by John 19:36 to Christ. In the original context: God's protective care over the righteous even in affliction.
21–22	The wicked are condemned by their own evil; the LORD redeems his servants; none who take refuge in him will be condemned.	The eschatological bookend: ultimate outcomes disclosed. Condemnation for the wicked; redemption and no condemnation for those who take refuge.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–3	Personal Vow, Corporate Invitation — "Magnify the LORD with me"
2	4–7	Testimony Universalized — From "I sought" to "those who fear him"
3	8–10	The Tasting Invitation — "Taste and see that the LORD is good"
4	11–14	Wisdom Instruction — "I will teach you the fear of the LORD"
5	15–19	God's Differential Attentiveness — The LORD near to the brokenhearted
6	20–22	Eschatological Verdict — Redemption secured, no condemnation for those who take refuge

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD delivers the brokenhearted who fear him — and calls the afflicted to taste his goodness and trust him fully.

Primary Claim: God is summoning the afflicted, the fearful, and the brokenhearted to abandon lesser fears and draw near to him — because the fear of the LORD is the one orientation that resolves every other terror and brings his people into the fullness of his deliverance.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe what you are afraid of by examining what you actually fear most. (Mind/Belief)

The psalm's diagnosis is that the afflicted live in the grip of lesser fears — fears of circumstances, of people, of loss, of shame. David's testimony is not "I had no fears" but "he delivered me from all my fears" (v. 4). The first application is cognitive reorientation: identify the fear that is actually governing your decisions and relationships right now. Name it. Then set it against the fear of the LORD — the one fear that, when it takes hold, makes every other fear shrink to its actual size. You are not being asked to have no fears; you are being asked to fear the right One, whose power over your circumstances is total and whose care for you is proven.

2. Move toward God specifically in the moment when shame or humiliation tempts you to withdraw. (Will/Behavior)

The historical occasion of this psalm is David feigning madness — a moment of degradation, not dignity. The psalm's promise that "those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed" (v. 5) is spoken from inside humiliation, not after it ends. The application is behavioral and urgent: in the precise moment when embarrassment, failure, or disgrace makes you want to hide from God as well as from people — that is the moment to seek the LORD. Shame says "withdraw." The psalm says "look to him." These are opposite movements. Choose the right one.

3. Stop treating God's goodness as a proposition and start treating it as something to be tasted. (Affections/Worship)

Verse 8's invitation — "taste and see that the LORD is good" — uses a sensory, experiential metaphor because the psalm is addressing people who know the right doctrinal answers but have not moved from intellectual assent into relational trust. The application is one of affectional engagement: bring your actual need, your actual cry, your actual hunger to God — not a sanitized version of it. The psalm's model figure is the "poor man" who "cried" (v. 6), not the composed man who submitted a formal request. God is inviting you to taste, not

to study the menu. Come to him with the full weight of what you actually need and let him be good to you.

4. Understand that brokenhearted is a location, not a liability. (Mind/Belief)

The dominant assumption in most people's theology — functional if not stated — is that brokenness is a deficit that must be repaired before God can really work. Psalm 34:18 inverts this entirely: "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." Brokenhearted and crushed are not obstacles to his nearness; they are *addresses* — specific locations to which he draws close. The application is a fundamental theological reframe: stop treating your brokenness as something that disqualifies you from his attention. It is the precise condition he moves toward. The question is not whether you are broken enough to need him — you are. The question is whether you will let him be near.

5. Pursue peace actively as the behavioral expression of trusting that God is in control of the outcomes. (Will/Behavior)

Verses 13–14 instruct the one who fears the LORD to "turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." The verb "pursue" (*radaf* in Hebrew) is the same word used elsewhere for aggressive pursuit in conflict — it is an active, energetic word, not a passive disposition. The practical application cuts against the anxiety-driven, self-protective behavior patterns that govern most people in conflict: gossip, positioning, retaliation, self-justification. The one who fears the LORD actively pursues peace because he trusts that vindication and justice belong to the LORD (vv. 15–16, 21–22). You can pursue peace aggressively precisely because you are not the one responsible for securing the final verdict.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 34 makes a comprehensive claim about the character of God toward the afflicted: he is attentive, near, hearing, and delivering. This is not presented as an occasional or conditional mercy but as a defining pattern of God's engagement with those who fear him and cry to him. The psalm's theological architecture is covenantal: God is not a vending machine triggered by the right sequence of actions but a personal LORD who sees (v. 15), hears (vv. 6, 17), and acts (v. 18). The fear of the LORD — introduced not as an obligation but as a wisdom benefit (vv. 9, 11) — is the relational posture that opens the person to God's attentiveness. Crucially, the theological weight of the psalm falls not on human performance but on divine initiative: it is the LORD who hears, the LORD who saves, the LORD who is near, the LORD who redeems (v. 22).

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 34 displays with unusual clarity the inseparability of grace and the fear of the LORD that is characteristic of Reformed covenant theology. The psalm does not present the fear of the LORD as a condition that earns God's deliverance — it presents it as the relational orientation of those who have already begun to taste God's goodness (v. 8). The invitation precedes the instruction; the tasting precedes the teaching. This is the order of grace. Moreover, the canonical anchor in John 19:36 — where the protection of the righteous one's bones is applied to Christ — establishes that the psalm's fullest meaning is Christological. Every believer's deliverance from condemnation (v. 22) is grounded not in their own righteousness but in the righteousness and redemption of the one whose bones were kept even through death and who was delivered through resurrection. The final verse — “the LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned” — anticipates Paul's “no condemnation” of Romans 8:1, and both rest on the same foundation: Christ's accomplished work, not the believer's consistent performance.

Main Takeaway

The LORD does not wait for you to have your life together before he draws near — he draws near specifically to the brokenhearted and saves specifically the crushed in spirit. Your fear, your humiliation, your emptiness is not a barrier to his presence; it is the address to which he moves. So stop living as though your circumstances are the final word on your situation. The one who encamps around those who fear him, who hears the poor man's cry, who redeems his servants from condemnation — he is near. Taste that. Trust him. Fear him, and nothing else will have to be feared.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching Psalm 34 as a prosperity text.** The promise that those who fear the LORD “lack no good thing” (v. 10) is regularly lifted from context to suggest that faithful believers will experience material comfort and circumstantial ease. The psalm itself immediately and explicitly forecloses this reading in verse 19: “Many are the afflictions of the righteous.” The psalm's target audience is the brokenhearted, the poor man, the crushed in spirit — not the comfortable. Preachers must name this tension honestly and let verse 19 control the interpretation of verses 9–10, not the reverse.
- **Flattening “fear of the LORD” into merely reverential affection.** The wisdom instruction in verses 11–14 gives behavioral content to the fear of the LORD — specific, concrete, ethically demanding content. Reducing “fear of the LORD” to a warm feeling of awe guts the psalm's wisdom section of its force and produces a

truncated application. The fear of the LORD is a comprehensive orientation of the whole person, not an emotional state.

- **Making David's deliverance the sermon's center rather than God's character.** David's testimony is instrumentally valuable — it recruits and grounds. But the psalm quickly moves from "I sought" to "those who fear him" because the point is not David but the pattern of God's engagement. Sermons that spend the bulk of their time on the 1 Samuel 21 backstory risk substituting biographical interest for theological weight. The story serves the claim; do not let it replace it.
- **Preaching verse 18 as comfort without its accompanying summons.** "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted" is one of Scripture's most comforting lines — and it is frequently preached as a pastoral word of reassurance to people who already know their need. But the context of the psalm is a summons to draw near: "taste and see," "seek the LORD," "come, O children, listen." God's nearness to the brokenhearted is not passive — it is the ground for the brokenhearted to actively move toward him. Preaching verse 18 in isolation produces a quietism the psalm does not intend.
- **Ignoring the Christological anchor of verse 20.** Preachers working through Psalm 34 pastorally often stop at the immediate application without following John's canonical lead in 19:36. The promise that "not one of his bones will be broken" finds its fullest fulfillment in Christ — meaning the psalm's protection promise is ultimately guaranteed not by the believer's faithfulness but by Christ's accomplished redemption. Missing this anchor produces an implicitly works-based reading of the psalm's promises.
- **Treating the acrostic form as merely aesthetic.** The Hebrew acrostic structure (one verse for each letter of the alphabet) signals comprehensiveness — the psalm is making a claim about the whole of life under the fear of the LORD, from beginning to end. Preachers who treat this as a curiosity miss the form's rhetorical force: God's attentiveness and goodness cover the full range of human experience. This need not dominate the sermon but should not be ignored where it reinforces the claim.