

Psalm 33: My Helper and Shield-Bearer

Expository Lessons from the Psalms

I. Introduction to Psalm 33 (designated Psalm 32 in the Septuagint)

- a. I thought I had the month off from preaching due to health issues (which turned out not to be the case). Therefore, rather than spending time working on expository teaching for the group on Sunday, my focus over the past week was on personal devotional needs and interests from the Psalms.
- b. I decided to stray slightly from my well-worn favorite psalm, **Psalm 33/34**, and checked out the one *before that*. I liked it so much that I kept reading and thinking about it every day. I felt I was getting so much out of it that I wanted to share a short, personally applicable lesson with the small house church group.
- c. I was encouraged by how David understood God and how that impacted his life in helping him through the many trials he faced in his life.
 - i. This encouraged me in the face of some trials I have been undergoing recently in my life.
- d. After going through the psalm many times on my own, I was curious if the early Christian writers had any particular insights. I was quite surprised that many of them commented on one particular verse that I had overlooked.
 - i. They all saw something I had missed. This opened my eyes to a better understanding of one of the most famous passages in the New Testament.
 - ii. It also reminded me of something Origen had said about the Scriptures, providing a great illustration.
- a. Origen's consistent principle of interpretation was: explain the Bible by the Bible – that is, obscure or difficult passages should be explained by other passages, from anywhere else in the Bible in which the same word or phrase or idea or situation occurs.
 - i. In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, Origen related an intriguing comparison that he had heard from his Hebrew language teacher:
 1. "...the Scriptures were like one great house that has many, many rooms. All the rooms are locked. At each door there is a key, but not the key to that door. The scholar's task is to match the keys to their doors; and this is a great labor."

II. First Half of the Psalm – Seeing the God Who Created the Universe

- a. Read **Psalm 33:1-11**.
- b. Praise and give thanks to the Lord.
 - i. With instruments and shouts (with passion).
 - ii. Recall that his wife Michal despised David for his passionate display in worshiping and praising the Lord as he brought the ark into Jerusalem (**2 Samuel 6:16-23**).
 - iii. We are not supposed to make a public display when we worship God. However, it says that when Jesus prayed, He did so with great passion.
 1. Recall that in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed earnestly, in agony, with His sweat as drops of blood falling to the ground (**Luke 22:41-44**).
 2. “...who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, *with vehement cries and tears* to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear....” (**Hebrews 5:7**, NKJV)
 3. Also, consider what James said: “The effective, *fervent prayer* of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, *and he prayed earnestly* that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months.” (**James 5:16-17**, NKJV)
- c. The earth is full of the Lord’s mercy.
 - i. David saw all around him, in the midst of opposition and wicked people, evidence of God’s mercy.
 - ii. Similar to the picture in **Hebrews 6:7-8** of God sending down rain everywhere, on the land that bears useful crops as well as on the land that bears thorns and briers.
 - iii. Look around and see the signs of God’s mercy on a world that has a great deal of wickedness in it.
 - iv. Origen made the point that just as God’s mercy fills the earth, we Christians are called to extend that same mercy to everyone. (See Origen, *Against Celsus*, book 4, chapter 28; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, pp. 508-509.)
- d. God created everything in the heavens and the earth, from nothing.
 - i. That included all the hosts of heaven (the angels).

- ii. The oceans, with all their depth, are as nothing to Him.
- iii. In view of the fact that God created everything, “Let all the earth fear the Lord.”
 - 1. As the Israelites at Mount Sinai trembled at their encounter with the Lord, David says “Let ALL the EARTH fear the Lord and be shaken”.
- e. God’s wisdom is timeless, lasting from age to age.
 - i. He rejects the reasoning of the nations.
 - ii. If we want timeless wisdom, let us seek it in the Scriptures given by God.

III. Second Half of the Psalm (My Favorite Part)

- a. Read **Psalm 33:12-22**.
- b. The “nation whose God is the Lord” is *not* the United States of America. Today, this refers to *the church*.
 - i. The job of the Christians is to be a holy nation within (among) the kingdoms of this world. It is not to try to make the U.S. into a more spiritual nation.
 - ii. “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.” (**1 Peter 2:9-10**, NKJV)
 - iii. “Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.” (**Philippians 2:14-15**, NKJV)
- c. God looks down from heaven upon all people. What does He see?
 - i. In some places, such as in this passage, it speaks of the Lord having human features (arm, eyes, ear, shoulder, etc). These of course are to be understood figuratively.
 - ii. He alone fashioned our hearts and understands all our works (our actions).
 - iii. All the things people rely on and that the world draws confidence from are nothing.

1. For example, in war and fighting in earlier times, they were not saved by:
 - a. The size of a king's army (consider the account of Gideon in **Judges 6-7**, the Israelites fleeing Egypt in **Exodus 13-14**, and the defeat of Jericho in **Joshua 6**).
 - b. The immense physical strength of a giant (consider David vs. Goliath in **1 Samuel 17**).
 - c. Powerful horses, yet another false hope of salvation (consider how the Lord warned not to go back to Egypt for horses, in **Deuteronomy 17:16**).
2. Consider some of the things many people put their confidence in today:
 - a. Wealth, savings, income, job, career, size of one's bank account.
 - b. Worldly talents and skills.
 - c. Physical condition, or good health.
3. The protective gaze of the Lord is on *those who fear Him!*
 - a. They will be delivered from death and famine.
 - b. In **Matthew 10:28** Jesus told the apostles they should not fear people, even powerful rulers. Instead, they needed to fear the One who can cast them into hell fire!
 - c. Peter said: "Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king." (**1 Peter 2:17**, NKJV)
 - d. In the psalm that follows (**Psalm 34**, designated **Psalm 33** in the LXX), David explains more about the importance of fearing God.
 - i. The Angel (or angel) of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him. (**Psalm 34:8**).
 - ii. There is no lack for those who fear Him (**Psalm 34:10-11**).
 - iii. The ears of the Lord are open to their prayers (**Psalm 34:12-16**).
- d. He is our helper and protector.
 - i. It is very encouraging to see God this way.

- ii. David applied this to those who were devoted to living upright lives, who feared the Lord.
- iii. Here, the Greek word used in the LXX for 'Protector' literally *means the One who puts his shield over you*.
 - 1. This is the same Greek word used many places in the LXX, for example in **Genesis 15:1-2** (Lord tells Abraham "I am your shield, and will be your exceedingly great reward.")
 - 2. I think of the 'iron dome' missile defense system in Israel today that serves to shield them from enemy attack.
 - 3. This becomes important when we understand that we have an enemy, we are under attack, and we have arrows and missiles coming our way!

IV. The Part I Missed (The Key to Another Room)

- a. In this passage, early Christian writers Irenaeus, Theophilus, Tertullian, Origen, Hippolytus, Cyprian and Lactantius all saw something I had missed.
- b. Reread **Psalm 33:6**. "by *the Word of the Lord* the heavens were established...."
 - i. **Question:** Does hearing this passage remind you of anything in the New Testament?
 - ii. Note that there was no capitalization in the ancient texts. That was later added (*or not added*) by the translators.
 - iii. All the early Christian writers referred to above believed that in this passage David was referring to "the Word of God", the Son of God, who was involved in creating all things.
 - 1. Therefore, David had revealed this 1,000 years before John wrote about it in **John 1:1-3!**
 - 2. Examples from early Christian writers include the following.
 - a. From Irenaeus, writing c. 180 AD:
 - i. "The rule of truth which we hold, is, that there is one God Almighty, who made all things by His Word, and fashioned and formed, out of that which had no existence, all things which exist. Thus saith the Scripture, to that effect; 'By the Word of the Lord were the heavens established, and all the might of them, by the spirit of His mouth.' (**Psalm 33:6**) And again, 'All things

were made by Him, and without Him was nothing made.’ **(John 1:3)**”

- ii. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 1, chapter 22; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 347; see also ANF vol. 1, p. 421.)
- b. From Theophilus, writing c. 180 AD:
- i. “God by His own word and wisdom made all things; for ‘by His word were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth’ **(Psalm 33:6)**.”
 - ii. (Source: Theophilus of Antioch, *Theophilus to Autolycus*, ch. 7; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, p. 91.)
- c. From Tertullian, writing c. 213 AD:
- i. “...the Gospel itself... tells us that all things were made by God through the Word, without whom nothing was made. And if I am not mistaken, there is also another passage in which it is written: ‘By the Word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the hosts of them by His Spirit.’ **(Psalm 33:6)** Now this Word, the Power of God and the Wisdom of God, must be the very Son of God.”
 - ii. (Source: Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, ch. 19; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 614.)
- d. From Origen, writing c. 225 AD:
- i. “Having, then, briefly restated these points regarding the nature of the Trinity, it follows that we notice shortly this statement also, that ‘by the Son’ are said to be created ‘all things that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by Him, and for Him; and He is before all, and all things consist by Him, who is the Head.’ **(Colossians 1:16-18)** In conformity with which John also in his Gospel says: ‘All things were created by Him; and without Him was not anything made.’ **(John 1:3)** And David, intimating that the mystery of the entire Trinity

was (concerned) in the creation of all things, says: 'By the Word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the Spirit of His mouth' (**Psalm 33:6**)".

- ii. (Source: Origen, *De Principiis*, book 4, chapter 1.30; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, p. 377)
- iii. Note that in Greek, the word for "breath" is the same as the word that also can mean "Spirit (or spirit)", or "wind".
- iv. Just as the Old Testament has references to "Son of God" and "Christ / Anointed One", it also speaks of "the Word of God", who was involved in creating all things.
 1. Note that the famous Greek word "logos" has a rich meaning that encompasses "word" as well as "reason". For more on that topic, see an explanation by Lactantius (writing c. 310 AD) in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 7, pp. 106-107.
 2. See also Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs, ed. David Bercot, entry on 'Word of God (Christ)'.
- c. They all saw this connected to **John 1:1-3** and **1:14**. (Read those passages)
 - i. Other passages from the Old Testament that early Christian writers saw as speaking about "the Word of God" (referring to the Son of God): **Psalm 44/45:1**, **Psalm 106/107:20** and **Jeremiah 23:18**.