

OKOTOKS EVANGELICAL FREE CHURCH

HOPE AND REJOICING IN HOPELESS SITUATIONS
MARCH 29-APRIL 4, 2015



MAIN POINT

I can experience hope and joy in the midst of any circumstance because I am loved by God.

THINKING THINGS THROUGH

Connect the sermon to the study.

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word “love”? How does our culture conceive of love? How do you think most Canadians would define love?
2. How did you think about and define love as a teenager? How has your conception or understanding of love changed since then?

Leader: We live in culture that constantly promotes the idea that love is primarily a feeling. This can be seen in countless romantic movies, books, and TV shows in which people “fall in love” and feel very passionately about each other. This, however, is not the primary way Scripture describes love. Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). Furthermore Paul says in Romans 5:8 that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” In other words the Bible conceives of love not merely in terms of feelings but in terms of commitment, action, faithfulness, mercy, and self-sacrifice (1 Cor. 13). While our feelings constantly change, God has committed to loving us for all eternity. He has demonstrated His commitment to love us by giving His Son up to death on the cross to redeem us and secure our eternal future. Christ’s death and resurrection is the single greatest act of love in the history of the universe. Because Christ died for us while we were still sinners and rose to give us new life, we can have hope and joy in the midst of any circumstance. We know that God loved us, continues to love us, and will love us into eternity.

3. Have you ever been tempted to doubt that God loves you? What situations in life contributed to those doubts?

DIGGING DEEPER

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ PSALM 34:1-10.

Leader: David wrote Psalm 34 when he was on the run from King Saul and was hiding in the territory of the Philistines, with whom Israel was at war. When David was caught and brought before the king of the Philistines, he pretended to be insane in an attempt to get the king to let him live. Miraculously, David’s plan worked and he wrote Psalm 34 to recognize the love God had shown him in delivering him.

4. What was David's life like at the time he wrote Psalm 34 (vv. 2,4,6,17; see also 1 Samuel 21:10-15)? How had God shown love to David in the midst of his trials (vv. 4-10)?

5. Despite the current state of his life and recent trials, David said, "I will boast in the LORD" (v. 2). Why do you think David is able to praise the Lord so freely and joyfully in the midst of trying circumstances?

Leader: David spent much of his life running from Saul who was bent on killing him. He feared for his life and had to take drastic measures to avoid certain death from Abimelech, the king of the Philistines. First Samuel 21:10-15 refers to the Philistine king David referenced as "Achich"—many scholars believe that "Abimelech" was a traditional name for various kings in the Philistine dynasty.

No matter the exact historical context, it is clear from the context of the psalm that David's life is far from our modern standards of "the good life" and yet he is able to say, "those who look to [the Lord] are radiant; their faces will never be covered with shame" (v. 5). David was able to praise God in the midst of difficulty because he knew and had personally experienced God's love. When David sought the Lord, God answered him and delivered him from all his fears. When we know that God loves us, we can have hope and joy in the midst of any circumstance.

6. David not only boasts in the Lord in the midst of his afflictions, he also challenges us to "taste and see that the LORD is good" (v. 8). How might the trials and difficulties in our lives help us see and experience the goodness of God more deeply?

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 1 PETER 1:3-9 AND 2:1-3.

Leader: Peter, in his first epistle, quotes Psalm 34 eight times—it was likely that he had the psalm open and was meditating on it as he wrote this letter. Peter helps us see how Jesus demonstrates God's love for us and makes us able to taste and see that the Lord is good.

7. According to verses 3-5, what has God done for us? How do you see God's love for us on display in these verses?

Leader: Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God has given all who believe a "new birth into a living hope." This new birth has secured for us an eternal inheritance that will never perish. Peter says that God did this "in His mercy" (v. 2). "Mercy" refers to God's compassion in withholding the punishment that we deserve for our sins. In other words, God has given us new birth, sealed us for eternal redemption, and secured our salvation because He loves us. God's love for us is rooted in His perfect character and not in our spiritual performance. Therefore, we need not worry about whether God loves us; He has demonstrated His love fully and finally in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

8. How do the spiritual truths found in verses 3-5 enable you to rejoice while suffering or facing difficult circumstances (v. 6)?

9. Peter indicates in verse 7 that God has a plan for the trials He lets believers face. What is that plan? How might trials result in "incredible and glorious joy" (v. 8) for those who love Christ?

Leader: Trials and difficulties can be a blessing because they often force us to cut ties with the things of the world and run to Christ. When we face trying times, God challenges us to consider where we have been turning for hope and joy. In these moments, believers will remember God's love for them in Christ and will turn to Him to strengthen their faith and deepen their joy. Peter says that trials show "genuine" character of your faith. He compares trials to purifying gold in a furnace. To make higher quality gold, a craftsman would heat the gold in a very hot furnace so that the impurities would rise to the surface so the gold could be made more precious and valuable. In other words, God allows us to go through trials in order to draw us closer to Himself—so that Christ would be more precious to us. While many people often wonder whether God loves them when they face trials, Peter says trials are actually evidence of God's love for us. God sovereignly and deliberately allows us to face trials so that our faith might be strengthened and purified such that we lean less on the things of this world and more on His perfect love.

10. Look at 1 Peter 2:1-3. What does Peter say we will do if we have experienced God's love? How does Jesus make us able to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:8; 1 Peter 2:3)?

Leader: If we have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, we will turn away from using our mouths to deceive and slander others. Peter says instead, we will "crave pure spiritual milk." In other words, we will find nourishment from the Lord—He will be the one we look to for direction, guidance, and joy. Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves; He bore our sin on the cross so that we would know that God loves us. It is only through Jesus that we can taste and see that God is good.

DOING LIFE TOGETHER

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

11. Time and time again through our study through the book of Romans, Paul has reminded us that our salvation and His love for us is wholly and completely rooted in God's grace. Why is it important to remind ourselves that God's love is not contingent on how good we have been? How might our walk with Christ suffer if we lose sight of this reality?

12. What difficult situation are you, your family, or your friends currently facing? How might remembering God's love for you in Christ change your perspective on this trial? Why is it equally important to remember God's love for us in times of blessing?

13. What is one step you could take this week to live with a greater awareness of God's love for you? How might we as a group help each other acknowledge and celebrate God's love?

PRAYER

Pray that your group embraces trials and difficulties as opportunities to grow to treasure Christ more. Thank God for letting us taste and see that He is good through the gift of His Son. Ask God to help us know that He loves us even if our circumstances are less than good. Pray that in so doing, we might point others to Christ.

FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following:

- Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:
 - **Have you been more accepting of your circumstances this week? Have you stopped to consider how God might be using them to grow your faith?**
 - **Have you been more mindful of God's love this week? How so?**
- A note of encouragement, following up on any specific prayer requests mentioned during your group gathering.
- The challenge to memorize Psalm 34:8.

SPOTLIGHT ON THE PASSAGE

PSALM 34:1-10

The incident mentioned in the title of the Psalm is found in 1 Samuel 21:10-15. It relates David's deliverance from King Achish of Gath. Although an unusual account of deliverance, this psalm praises Yahweh for rescuing the psalmist. The content of the psalm is not tied to the specific event, so it could be used in a general way by God's people.

34:2 "Boast in the Lord" is best defined in Jeremiah 9:23-24 where it means to "understand and know" Yahweh, which is further explained as knowing that Yahweh shows "faithful love, justice, and righteousness on the earth." In other words, it is knowing who God is and what He does, having a personal knowledge and experience of Him through trusting in Him.

34:5 "Look to" is another way of expressing trust in time of need (145:15) and is equivalent to "seek" in some contexts (Isa. 31:1).

34:6 A person who is in need and prays to Yahweh often identifies himself with the oppressed. The term can also designate someone who is humble or, in the more negative sense, humiliated. The word for "afflicted" ('ani) is closely related and is often in parallel with the poor. There is not a strong distinction between these since it is assumed that the poor were the weakest and most helpless in society and were often the objects of oppression by stronger and more influential persons. Therefore, the term "oppressed" in the psalms should not be limited to economic hardship alone.

34:7 "The Lord's angel" can also be translated as "messenger of Yahweh." In most contexts there is a distinction between God and this angel. For example, in the story of Gideon, the angel of the Lord vanished (Judg. 6:21), but Gideon continued to speak to Yahweh (Judg. 6:22-24). This seems to indicate that they were different. However, in other contexts the angel of the Lord spoke as if he were God Himself (Gen. 22:11-12; Ex. 3:2). In this sense the angel could be a theophany (an appearance of Yahweh). Christian tradition has often identified such angels with the preincarnate appearances of Jesus Christ, but as noted above, this does not work in every instance. It is best to treat each context on its own merit and not impose the same meaning in every text. The connection between the "Lord's angel" and military imagery (note the word camps) appears elsewhere to show that Yahweh fights for His people (2 Kings 19:35). The "commander of the Lord's army" in Josh. 5:13-15 may also be related to this angel.

34:8 "Taste" can mean "judge" in the sense of determine for oneself (Prov. 31:18). "See" most likely carries the same sense in order to reinforce the concept.

34:9-10 God cares for His people more than the rest of His creation (8:5-8). Other texts use the argument that if God cares for His creation, He will care for mankind (104:14-15) and especially for His own people (Matt. 6:28-30). "Lack nothing" also appears in the context of Yahweh's role as a Shepherd in 23:1.

1 PETER 1:3-9

1:3. Peter piled up expressions in verses 3-5 to talk about a believer's relationship with God through salvation. His opening words are those of worship and praise, reminding us that salvation did not come because of who we are or because of what we have accomplished. Salvation came as a gift of mercy. Salvation represents a new birth (see John 1:13), a changing of who we are. Salvation makes us dead to sin and alive to righteousness in Christ.

Peter linked our salvation relationship to what he termed a living hope. Amid present and difficult dangers we are justified in viewing the future with optimism because we are securely attached to the God who deals in futures. Furthermore, our hope is a living hope because it finds its focus in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Our living hope comes from a living, resurrected Christ.

1:4. Peter used the word inheritance to describe our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Inheritance emphasizes the believer's eternal home in heaven. Peter used a triple word picture to describe this inheritance. Our inheritance can never perish, spoil, or fade. These three verbal adjectives indicate that the inheritance is untouched by death, unstained by evil, and unimpaired by time. Our inheritance is death-proof, sin-proof, and time-proof. This inheritance is kept in heaven, for believers. Kept means "to guard or reserve." The tense of the verb emphasizes the state or condition and underlines the fact that the inheritance already exists and is being preserved. God Himself has reserved this inheritance in heaven for believers, and it continues to be there, still reserved for us. The difficulties we experience cannot undermine the certainty of our coming inheritance.

1:5. The salvation that is ready to be revealed is synonymous with the inheritance described in verse 4. Believers are cared for by God the Father. We are shielded by God's power. Shielded means "to guard" or "watch over." This military term describes how soldiers guard someone. The present tense emphasizes the continual nature of this shielding. It does not suggest that believers are shielded from pain, difficulty, or anguish. It means that God Himself guards and watches over our salvation, our inheritance. Our relationship with God now as we grow more like Christ is a foretaste of that salvation which will be revealed when Christ returns.

1:6. This kind of care from God the Father suggests a response of great rejoicing. Verse 8 repeats this emphasis on joy, calling it an inexpressible and glorious joy. Such joy springs from the contemplation of God and of the salvation that comes to us from God.

This joyous response occurs even in the midst of grief caused by suffering through all kinds of trials. Suffer grief forms a metaphor derived from a military expression for being harassed. It includes the inner mental distress or sadness that comes because of painful circumstances. All kinds of trials literally means "varied, multicolored, or diversified" trials. This takes on a depth of meaning against the background of the ghastly persecution led by the Roman emperor Nero. In that persecution, Christians were wrapped in freshly slaughtered animal skins and fed to dogs and wild animals. They were dipped in pitch or tar and set on fire as torches to light Nero's gardens at night. This persecution was the first of nine that took place under the Roman Empire during the next 250 years. Peter himself very likely died during this first persecution.

1:7. Why does God allow this suffering to occur? Faith is being proved genuine through the trials. One purpose of trials is to sift out what is genuine in a person's faith. Followers of God, in both the Old and New Testaments, know that God uses trying circumstances to test the hearts and lives of His people in order to mature them spiritually. Through difficulties God often tests whether our faith is genuine. Peter cemented his point with the illustration of a goldsmith. To form a useful object, raw gold must be cast into a mold. For that to occur, the solid ore must be melted, requiring a temperature of 1,900 degrees Fahrenheit. When the gold is melted, the impurities rise to the surface, where they are skimmed off or burned off. A goldsmith knows the gold is ready to cast when the liquid gold becomes mirror-like and he can see his face reflected in the surface.

The parallel in a believer's life is obvious. Through the refining heat of trials, we as followers of Jesus Christ grow spiritually and thus reflect more of Christ's character in our lives. The language of this illustration may also refer to the first-century process of making pottery. Potters baked clay pots to give them strength. The process sometimes cracked pots that had flaws, but the ones that survived the process were then marked with the same Greek word that Peter used here (dokimos) for "genuine."

1:8. How could these Christians face their suffering? They chose to love Christ and to believe in Him even though they had not actually seen Him in the past and had not encountered Him visibly in the present. Most of Peter's readers had no personal contact with Christ while He lived on earth. They were a generation removed from the time of His earthly ministry. This did not become an excuse. Instead, by accepting the testimony of those, like Peter, who had seen Christ, they entered into a personal relationship with Christ marked by love and belief.

1:9. Not only our joy, but also the assurance of salvation is not contingent upon our circumstances. We are marching, even though in pain, toward the final goal of our faith—our place in eternity and in heaven. One day believers will enjoy salvation to the full in the presence of Jesus Christ. Pain and suffering will be no more.