

PSALM 34

✠ This psalm is written in the form of a Lament.

✧ See the note about “lament” in the introduction to Psalm 3.

✠ This psalm is read fully the Third Royal Hour on Great and Holy Friday. It is used (verses 1, 12) as the Second Prokeimenon of Great and Holy Friday Vespers.

✠ Saint Athanasius recommends that we sing at times when we are surrounded by enemies who have evil intent against us. Thus, we turn for protection and vindication to the Lord, the Righteous Judge. Saint Athanasius also recommends that we sing Psalms 25 and 42 at such times.

✠ *The Orthodox Study Bible* indicates that this psalm is a prophecy which prepares us for the Suffering, Death [and Resurrection] of Christ in the Week of the Passion.

✠ This psalm may be taken as a christological foreshadowing, and there are many such references. However, it is important to take the psalm in its original context, especially when assessing the words conveying a desire for retribution – a characteristic not attributed to the Christ. For us, who read the psalm, and associate the words with ourselves, the desire to be protected by the Lord is correct. It is also correct to call for help to the Lord, but to leave all judgement and associated actions, to the Lord, who alone knows the hearts of His creatures. See Matthew 5:38-40 ; John 15 (especially verses 18-27).

✠ Bishop Theodore of Mopsuestia informs us that one can see in the writings of the Prophet Jeremiah many links with the words of this psalm which may be taken to refer to him. He refers us to Jeremiah 18:20, 20:10, and 23:12, as examples of the accuracy of the prophetic words.

“Prayer of Christ in His Passion”

“Christ’s Passion seen in the psalmist’s struggle”

“The Lord be magnified”

1 By David.

✠ About the Inscription : in the Masoretic (Hebrew) text, the Inscription is : “Of David”.

✠ Bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus emphasises the authorship of the Prophet David, who uttered it when he was pursued by King Saul, and the dark activities of Doëg, Ahimelech, and the Ziphites.

✠ Hesychius, Priest of Jerusalem, perceives that this psalm is written by the Prophet David with the Messiah, Christ, the Servant, in mind. He does not pray about His own suffering, but rather about those who suffer tribulations.

[Δικασον, Κύριε Judica, Domine]

O LORD, give judgement to those wronging me ;/ make war on those making war against me.

V 1 About this verse : Cassiodorus opines that, since the Lord commands us to pray for our enemies, the words refer to the dark and evil spirits ("*those making war against me*"). He emphasises that when the Prophet later refers to people, he prays that they repent.

✠ About "*Lord*" : see the note about "*Lord*" on Psalm 1:2.

✠ About "*judgement*" : see the note about "*judgements*" on Psalm 9:17. See also the note about "*fair-judgement*" on Psalm 1:5.

✠ See Psalm 145:7 ; Isaiah 49:25.

2 Lay hold of weapon and shield, and arise to my help.

V 2 About this verse : the Fathers point out that the "*weapon and shield*" are metaphors, that refer not to any physical weapon, but the the Lord's Love and Grace.

✠ See Acts 7:56

3 Unsheathe the sword, and shut away the opposing ones who are closely pursuing me./ Say to my soul : "I AM your Salvation".

V 3 About "*sword*" : this is a metaphor for the Grace of the Holy Spirit, and the utterances of the Lord (see Ephesians 6:17).

✠ About "*soul*" : see verses 4, 7, 9, 12, 13, 17, 25 ; see the note about "*soul*" on Psalm 3:3.

✠ About “*I AM*” : Saint Gregory the Theologian comments that “God always was, and always is, and always will be. Or rather, God always Is. For Was and Will be are fragments of our time, and of changeable nature, but He is Eternal Being. And this is the Name that He gives to Himself when giving the Oracle to Moses in the Mount. For in Himself He sums up and contains all Being, having neither beginning in the past nor end in the future; like some great Sea of Being, limitless and unbounded, transcending all conception of time and nature, only adumbrated [intimated] by the mind, and that very dimly and scantily”.

✧ Saint John Chrysostom explains that the expression “*I AM*” in fact means “Being” : constant Being, beginningless Being, true and absolute Being.

✧ Saint John of Kronstadt reminds us of the words of the Apostle : “He is before all things, and in Him all things consist” (Colossians 1:17). He shows us that these words go far in clarifying the meaning of “*I AM*”. In brief, it means “Him who exists before all things, and by whom all things exist”. They show the Lord’s ineffable omnipotence and Grace and immeasurable wisdom. He then cites Psalm 146:5 : “Great is our Lord and great is His strength ; of His understanding there is no measure”.

✧ Saint Theophylact of Ochrid explains that when our Saviour uses the words “*I AM*”, He does so with divine authority. [Christ bears witness to Himself (not depending on a human witness) by using this phrase which brings to any hearer a strong connection with the same phrase used in Septuagint Greek throughout the Old Covenant with regard to the Lord God. It emphasises the infallible authority of His witness. Therefore, in icons of Christ, the nimbus continues this witness by the words “He Who Is”, in imitation of God’s words to Moses in 2 Moses (Exodus) 3:14, when He says, effectively, “*I AM Being*”, or “*I Am Existence*” (in fact, an untranslatable and incomprehensible statement).]

✧ “*I AM*” translates the Greek ἐγώ εἰμι, *ego eimi*, which refers to the Name of God Himself. In Hebrew, it is a single word, which is forbidden to be pronounced. It is the term that God uses in addressing Moses at the Burning Bush, and it is the term our Saviour uses on some occasions to refer to Himself (see 2 Moses 3:14). This usage reveals that He is the Son of God, One of the Holy Trinity. Therefore the Jewish authorities, who were uncomprehending and scandalised by this usage, reacted very hotly.

✧ See the occasions on which our Saviour uses this phrase personally : Matthew 14:27 ; John 8:18, 58 ; 18:5-6, 8. See also John 6:48, 51 ; 8:12 ; 9:5 ; 10:7, 9, 11 ; 11:25 ; 14:6 ; 15:5. See Old Covenant antecedents : 5 Moses 32:39 (Matins Canticle 2) ; Psalms 45:11 ; 80:11 ; 89:2 ; 92:2 ; Isaiah 46:4.

✠ About “*salvation*” : Saint Augustine of Hippo reminds us that it is only the Lord who can be our salvation, and that it is only He that can help us through any human or other means, since everyone and everything is subject to Him. He cautions us always to be aware of this. He exhorts us to avoid falling into forgetfulness, and to avoid listening to the enemy of our souls.

✧ See verse 9 ; see the note about *salvation* on Psalm 3:9.

4 Let them be put to shame and be disgraced –/ those seeking my soul./
Let them be turned back, and be put to shame –/ those calculating bad
things for me.

V 4 See the similar wording in Psalm 69:3, and see the whole psalm for context.

✠ About “*put to shame*” : see the note about “*put to shame*” on Psalm 6:11.

✠ About “*seeking*” : see the note about “*seek*” on Psalm 4:3.

✠ About “*soul*” : see the note on verse 3.

✠ About “*bad things*” : see the note about “*bad things*” on Psalm 26:5.

✠ See similarities in Psalms 6:11 ; 39:15, 16 ; 69:3, 4 ; 70:13.

5 Let them become just as dust in the face of the wind,/ an angel of the
LORD squeezing them out.

V 5 About “*dust*” : some translate this as “*chaff*”, that is, what is left of grain after thrashing, which can be as fine as dust.

✠ About “*angel of the Lord*” : see verse 6 ; see the notes about “*angels*” on Psalm 8:6.

✠ About “*Lord*” : see the note about “*Lord*” on Psalm 1:2.

✠ See Job 21:18 ; Psalm 1:4 ; Isaiah 29:5 ; Hosea 13:3 ; Solomon 11:20.

6 Let their way become darkness and slipperiness,/ an angel of the LORD
closely pursuing them ;

V 6 About this verse : Saint Augustine of Hippo reflects that “*darkness and slipperiness*” together are generally feared dangers by human beings, because of the danger of falling and injury. He expands on

them to suggest that the darkness can imply ignorance, and the slipperiness sensuality. In this context, he understands that God's concern is righteousness, and that He acts for the sake or correcting the erring.

✧ About "*way*" : see the note about "*the way*" on Psalm 1:6.

✧ About "*angel of the Lord*" : see the note on verse 5.

✧ See Jeremiah 13:16 ; 23:12 ; Proverbs 4:19.

7 for without cause have they hidden from me destruction of their snare ;/
 without reason have they reproached my soul.

V 7 About "*without cause*" : see verse 19 ; see Luke 23:4 ; John 15:25.

✧ About "*hidden*" : see verse 8 ; see the note about "*hid*" on Psalm 9:16.

✧ About "*destruction*" : see the notes about "*corruption*" on Psalms 9:16 ; 15:10.

✧ About "*their snare*" : the sense here is the destroying quality of *their snare*, not that the snare would be destroyed.

✧ See Jeremiah 18:22.

✧ About "*reproached*" : see the note about "*reproach*" on Psalm 14:3.

✧ About "*soul*" : see the note on verse 3.

✧ See Job 18:8 ; Psalms 9:15 ; 118:85.

8 Let a snare which he does not know about come upon him,/ and let the
 trap which he has hidden catch him ;/ in that very snare shall he fall.

V 8 About this verse : Saint Augustine reminds us that anyone who does evil brings it first of all on oneself.

✧ Evagrius of Pontus considers that these words anticipates the Holy Cross on which the devil himself unwittingly falls.

✧ About "*a snare which he does not know*" : see the note about *dug ... made* on Psalm 7:16.

✧ About "*hidden*" : see the note on verse 7.

9 But my soul shall exult in the LORD ;/ it shall delight in His salvation.

V 9 About this verse : Saint Augustine asks rhetorically, “What more could we ask for, or what more could be given to us than God Himself ?” It is in His love for us that we rejoice.

✧ About “*soul*” : see the note on verse 3.

✧ About “*exult*” : see verse 27 ; see the note about “*exult*” on Psalm 2:11.

✧ About “*Lord*” : see the note about “*Lord*” on Psalm 1:2.

✧ About “*delight in*” (verb) : this word translates the Greek word τέρω, *terpō*, which means “to delight” ; “to cheer” ; “to be delighted”.

✧ See also the note about “*delighting in*” on Psalm 5:5.

✧ About “*salvation*” : see the note on verse 3.

✧ See 1 Kingdoms 2: 1 ; Isaiah 61:10 ; Psalms 9:14 ; 12:6 ; 20:2 ; 32:21 ; Habakkuk 3:18 ; Luke 1:46 ;

10 All my bones shall say : “O LORD, who is like You ?/ You are rescuing the poor one from the hand of those stronger than he,/ and the poor one and the needy one from those plundering him”.

V 10 About this verse : The question, and its extension, point out that it is only the Lord God Almighty who loves the poor and the needy. This is in contrast to the various idols, that is, demons, who demand sacrifices based on fear, but who do not exhibit love. By contrast, the Lord God Almighty is love itself.

✧ About “*bones*” : Metropolitan Bartholomew (Anania) points out that “*bones*” in the sense of “being”: all my being.

✧ Cassiodorus suggests that we may regard “*bones*” in a spiritual manner, and regard them as spiritual strength and stability of the mind. They refer to firmness, and courage, which support and unite our being in a similar manner to the fleshly bones which support and unite our body.

✧ About “*Lord*” : see the note about “*Lord*” on Psalm 1:2.

✧ About “*stronger*” : see the note about “*strong*” on Psalm 7:12.

- ✠ About “*rescuing ... plundering him*” : see Job 36:15.
 - ✠ About “*poor one*” : see the notes about “*the poor one*” on Psalms 9:19 ; 33:7.
 - ✠ About “*needy one*” : see the note about “*the needy*” on Psalm 9:10.
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11 Unrighteous witnesses, in arising against me,/ were asking me about things I was not knowing.

V 11 About this verse : Bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus draws a reference to the slanders against Prophet David to King Saul by the Zyphtes, and Doëg the Edomite. Others refer forward to the slanders against and the betrayal of Jesus Christ.

- ✠ About “*unrighteous witnesses*” : see the note about “*unrighteous witnesses*” on Psalm 26:12.
 - ✠ About “*unrighteous*” : see the note about “*unrighteous*” on Psalm 17:49.
 - ✠ See 1 Kingdoms 25:10 ; Psalm 26:12 ; Matthew 26:59-60; Mark 14:56-57; Acts 6:13.
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12 They were requiting me with evil for good,/ and with barrenness to my soul.

V 12 About this verse : Evagrius of Pontus attributes the “*barrenness*” to the persons who attack, persons who produce nothing good.

- ✠ About “*evil*” (noun) : see the the notes about “*evil*” on Psalms 5:5 ; 7:10.
 - ✠ About “*soul*” : see the note on verse 3.
 - ✠ See Psalms 37:21 ; 50:6 ; 108:4, 5 ; Proverbs 17:13 ; Luke 23:23.
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13 But as for me, when they annoyed me,/ I was putting on sack-cloth,/ and humbling my soul with fasting ;/ and my prayer shall turn back to my bosom.

V 13 About this verse : Bishop Diodorus of Tarsus makes a summary, and effectively says, that the Prophet did everything with the intention to be obedient to the Lord. He did so, even though his prayer might be returned to him as unacceptable, since he understood his own unworthiness (yet the greatness of the Lord's love).

✠ About "*humbling my soul*" : Metropolitan Bartholomew (Anania) cites Saint Hesychius of Jerusalem, who tells us that true humility is acquired in this manner : every day, we bring to mind the virtues of our neighbour's natural qualities, and compare them with our own virtues and qualities. When the mind sees its own unworthiness and notes how far is the perfection of others, then we will see that we are nothing but dust and ashes and, at best, we are lower than all rational beings on earth.

✧ See verse 14 ("*humbling myself*"). See the note about the verb "*humble*" on Psalm 9:31.

✠ About "*soul*" : see the note on verse 3.

✠ About "*prayer*" : see the note about "*prayer*" on Psalm 4:2.

14 As to a neighbour, as to our brother, so was I well-pleasing ;/ as one mourning, and with a sad countenance, so was I humbling myself.

V 14

✠ About "*neighbour*" : see the note about "*neighbour*" on Psalm 11:3.

✠ About "*sad countenance*" : see Psalms 37:7 ; 41:10 ; 42:2.

✠ About "*humbling myself*" : see the note on verse 13 (*humbling my soul*).

15 They were glad over me, and they gathered together :/ scourges were gathered together against me, and I knew it not. / They were cloven apart, and they felt no compunction.

V 15

✠ About "*glad over me*" : see Judges 16:25 ; Psalm 68:13 ; Job 30:9.

✠ About "*scourges*" : see the verb *scourge* on Psalm 72:5 ; Matthew 27:26 ; Mark 15:15 ; John 19:1.

✠ About "*gathered together*" : see the note about "*gathered together*" on Psalm 2:2.

✠ See Psalm 21:17 ; 37:17 ; 56:4 ; 68 :12, 13 ; Job 30:1 ; Proverbs 17:15 ; Jeremiah 20:10.

16 They put me to the test ; they sneered at me with sneering ;/ they gnashed their teeth against me.

V 16 About this verse : Cassiodorus explains that when people are defeated by truth and by reason, they express their exasperation (motivated by their pride) by "*gnashing their teeth*". He encourages us to recall what the Lord Jesus Christ suffered, and not to lose heart.

✠ About "*gnashed their teeth*" : see Psalms 36:12 ; 111:10 ; Job 16:9 ; Lamentations 2:16 ; Matthew 8:12 ; 13:42, 50 ; 22:13 ; 24:51 ; 25:30 ; Luke 13:28 ; Acts 7:54.

17 O LORD, when will You look upon this ?/ Restore my soul from their malice :/ from the lions, my only-begotten one.

V 17 About "*Lord*" : see the note about "*Lord*" on Psalm 1:2.

✠ About "*when ... this*" : Saint Augustine of Hippo explains that this question refers to the perceived delay on the Lord's part in dealing with the situation. He reminds us that the Lord alone knows the reason for delay, and it may be as simple as lovingly teaching us how better to cling to Him.

✧ Bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus reminds us that this question does not imply an accusation ; but rather, it expresses a longing for help.

✧ Arnobius the Younger reminds us that this question is posed in the context of the Passion of Christ, which happened so that we may be strengthened. He further helps us to understand that the more we draw near to the Lord, the more the demons tempt, distract, mock, and try to frighten us. We call out to the Lord for relief, restoration, and rescue. When we are freed from the attackers, we confess the Lord before all by nurturing love and respect for the Lord in others.

✠ About "*generation*" : see the note about "*generation*" on Psalm 9:27.

✠ About "*look upon*" : see the note about "*You will look upon me*" on Psalm 5:4. See also the note about "*look attentively*" on Psalm 12:4.

✠ About "*restore ... only-begotten one*" : Saint Augustine of Hippo interprets this as referring to the Church, and the request is that the Church be saved from ruthless powers.

✠ About "*soul*" : see the note on verse 3.

✠ About “*only-begotten one*” : Saint Athanasius explains that *only-begotten* is another way to refer to one who is “greatly beloved” or “dearly beloved”. There is a custom to speak of the love for one who is greatly beloved as “the love for the only-begotten”. See also the note about “*only-begotten*” on Psalm 21:21.

✠ About “*lions*” : Saint Athanasius indicates that the *lions* are a metaphor for the evil and adversarial powers who roar against Christ.

✧ See Psalm 21:22.

18 I shall confess You in the great church ;/ amongst a numerous people
 shall I praise You.

V 18 About this verse : Saint Augustine of Hippo explains that *great church* refers to the Church throughout the world, and that the people are like both chaff and wheat. He continues by saying that the *confession* is given amongst this *numerous* (that is, a heavy, weighty) people, which the wind of temptation does not carry away. God is praised in and because of such weighty people, whereas because of the chaff He is always blasphemed [see Isaiah 52:5 ; Romans 2:24].

✠ About “*numerous*” : the Greek word βαρυς, *barys*, means *numerous* (of a crowd of people), but otherwise it means “grievous people”, “weighty”, “heavy-to-bear”. It is “weighty” which Saint Augustine of Hippo has chosen in his interpretation.

✠ About “*people*” : see the note about “*people*” on Psalm 2:1.

19 May they not rejoice over me – / those who are unjustly at enmity with
 me, / those hating me without cause and winking their eyes ;

V 19

✠ See Psalms 29:1 ; 68:5 ; Ezekiel 25:3 ; John 15:25.

20 for they were speaking peace to me,/ but with anger they reasoned
 deceits.

V 20 About this verse : Arnobius the Younger explains that it is the demons who seem to speak peace ; but they do so by presenting it as a sort of bait within which is a hook that brings death. It is crucial that we depend on the Grace of the Holy Spirit for discernment.

✠ About “*anger*” : see the note about “*be angry*” on Psalm 4:5.

✠ About “*deceits*” : see the note about “*deceit*” on Psalm 9:28.

21 They opened their mouth wide against me,/ and said : “Well done, well done, our eyes have seen”.

V 21 About “*well done ...seen*” : this expression, or a variant of it, occurs ten times in the Scriptures, and it expresses an insult of joy in the fall of another.

✠ See verse 25 ; see also Psalm 39:16 ; 69:4 ; Lamentations 2:16.

22 You have seen, O LORD ; do not pass by in silence ;/ O LORD, do not stand away from me.

V 22

✠ About “*Lord*” : see the note about “*Lord*” on Psalm 1:2.

23 Awake, O LORD, and give heed to my fair-judgement :/ to my cause, O my God and my LORD.

V 23 About “*Awake ... my Lord*” : both Bishop Diodore of Tarsus and Cassiodorus mention that we often misunderstand the longsuffering and patience of the Lord as His inattention or somnolence. This is rash, and a dangerous malcomprehension, since the Lord is ever vigilant about all and everything, and He is never inattentive nor uninvolved.

✠ About “*Lord*” : see the note about “*Lord*” on Psalm 1:2.

✠ About “*fair-judgement*” : see the note about “*fair-judgement*” on Psalm 1:5.

✠ About “*God*” : see the note about “*God*” on Psalm 3:3.

✠ See Psalm 43:24 ; 43:27.

24 Judge me, O LORD, in accordance with Your righteousness, O LORD my God,/ and may they not rejoice over me.

V 24

✠ About “*judge*” (verb) : this verb comes from the Greek κρίνειν, “krinein”, which means to assess, to discern. This discernment is arrived at by comparing the righteousness of God with the behaviour and disposition of a person. Only the Lord can make this judgement, because He alone is the Knower of Hearts.

✠ About “*righteousness*” : see the note about “*the righteous*” on Psalm 1:5, and the note on Psalm 30:2.

✠ About “*Lord*” : see the note about “*Lord*” on Psalm 1:2.

✠ About “*God*” : see the note about “*God*” on Psalm 3:3.

25 May they not say in their hearts : “Well done, well done, to our soul “;/
nor may they say : “We have swallowed him up”.

V 25

✠ About “*hearts*” : see the note about *heart* on Psalm 4:3.

✠ About “*soul*” : see the note on verse 3.

✠ See the note on verse 21.

26 May they be put to shame, and be disgraced as well – / those rejoicing
over my bad things./ Let them put on shame and disgrace – / those
speaking boastfully against me.

V 26

✠ About “*put to shame*” : see the note about “*put to shame*” on Psalm 6:11.

- ✠ About “*shame*” : see Job 8:22 ; Psalm 6:11 ; 39:15 ; 131:18.
 - ✠ About “*bad things*” : see the note about “*bad things*” on Psalm 26:5.
 - ✠ About “*speaking ... against*” : see Psalms 43:17 ; 49:20 ; 100:5.
 - ✠ About “*boastfully*” : see the note about “*boastful*” on Psalm 11:4.
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27 But let them exult and be glad – / those wishing for my righteousness ;/
and let them continually say :/ “Let the LORD be magnified” – / those
wishing for the peace of His bond-servant.

V 27

- ✠ About “*exult*” : see the note on verse 9.
 - ✠ About “*righteousness*” : see the note about “*the righteous*” on Psalm 1:5, and the note on Psalm 30:2.
 - ✠ About “*Lord*” : see the note about “*Lord*” on Psalm 1:2.
 - ✠ About “*be magnified*” : see the note about “*magnify*” on Psalm 11:5.
 - ✠ About “*bond-servant*” : see the note about *bond-servant* on Psalm 18:12.
 - ✠ See Psalms 39:17 ; 69:5.
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28 My tongue shall ruminate on Your righteousness / and Your praise, the
whole day long.

V 28 For us, who suffer persecution and oppression, as we faithfully follow Christ, these are our words of hope, and consolation. As Christ, regardless of the difficulties, we also turn to the Lord for our help and for our protection.

- ✠ About “*ruminate on Your righteousness*” : see Psalms 36:30 ; 70:8.
 - ✠ About “*ruminate*” : see the note about “*ruminate*” on Psalm 1:2.
 - ✠ About “*righteousness*” : see the note about “*the righteous*” on Psalm 1:5, and the note on Psalm 30:2.
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O Protector and Saviour of our souls,

cover us with the helmet of hope [1 Thessalonians 5:8],
and the shield of invincible protection ;
that, being helped by You in our needs,
we may, with those who love You,
be flooded with joy and exultation. — Roman
