

# Adult Teaching Resources

September 22, 2024



## Some Things Never Change

September 1, 2024—Psalm 15—Who Gets Close to God?

September 8, 2024—Psalm 125—Presuppositions and Prayer

September 15, 2024—Psalm 116 (RCL 16:1-9)—When the Answer Is Yes

**September 22, 2024—Psalm 54—Same Old Same Old?**

September 29, 2024—Esther 7:1-10, 9:20-22—Celebrating Vengeance?

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# Same Old Same Old?

*Psalm 54*

## FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

### Key Verse

*But surely, God is my helper;  
the LORD is the upholder of my life. (Ps. 54:4)*

### Opening

After everyone arrives, form small groups of 3-4. Once everyone is settled, ask these questions for small group conversation and discussion.

When you have trouble with your family, who (or where) do you turn for help?

When you have trouble with work, who (or where) do you turn for help?

When you have trouble with your health, who (or where) do you turn for help?

When you have trouble with something not working right where you live, who (or where) do you turn for help?

Give each group time to talk about where they turn for help, then follow up with these questions.

When do you know the current situation is more trouble than you can handle, or know how to handle, and it's time to seek outside help?

When have you sought help, but gone to the wrong source and the situation ended up worse?

When have you sought help, and gone to exactly the right source and everything worked out great?

Spend time in conversation and discussion, then open the floor for volunteers to share some of their responses before moving to the Bible.

### Reading the Bible

How does the psalmist want to be saved? (By God's name and by God's might)

What does the psalmist want? (For God to hear the prayer, to give ear to the words of his mouth)

What have the insolent done? (Risen against him)

What have the ruthless done? (They seek his life)

How do they live? (They do not set God before them)

How does the psalmist describe God? (God is my helper and the upholder of my life)

What will God do? (God will repay my enemies for their evil)

What does the psalmist hope God will do? (Put an end to them)

What does the psalmist do? (With freewill offering, he will sacrifice to God and give thanks to God's name)

What has God done? (God has delivered the psalmist from every trouble)

## Making Connections

Our psalm today “is an individual prayer of lament from someone who believed his or her life was threatened and only God could help.” Have you ever felt like your life was threatened? What can you share about that experience? Where did you turn for help? What happened? Have you ever felt like your livelihood was threatened? What can you share about that experience? Where did you turn for help? What happened?

Have you ever been in a situation where you believed that God was your only hope? What was the situation? Why was no one else able or capable of assisting you?

Our Lesson Writer says, “The psalmist believed access to God could be both direct and certain, for he was confident that God was always both present and listening.” Do you share the belief that access to God can be both direct and certain? Are you confident God is both present and listening? Why do you say that?

What name do you ascribe to God? Why have you chosen that name? What do you think your choice of name says about the way you understand God and your relationship with God?

Did you fear for your life when you were a child? Why do you think that it was that way? What were your prayers like back then? Do you fear for your life now? Why do you think that is? What are your prayer like now?

In verse 3 our psalmist calls out those he fears—the insolent and ruthless. Who do you fear? Do you ever call them out? Do you ever mention them or talk about them in your prayers? What do you pray?

What are you confident about God? Where did you learn that truth? How does that truth influence your life and your faith journey?

How has God saved you? What has God saved you from? What difference has that salvation made in your life?

What is your favorite phrase or song of praise? What does that phrase or song mean to you? How often do you say or sing it?

What promises of God are you confident in? Why do you have that confidence? How do those promises impact your life?

Our Lesson Writer tells us, “Human nature prompts us to want things our way, and we learn to manipulate others to make that happen, some more skillfully than others. It is not surprising, then, that we would sometimes pray in similar fashion, attempting to motivate divine action by appealing to God’s vanity or desire to be praised.” What can we do to avoid manipulating God with our prayers and instead focus more on seeking God’s will or Jesus’ way? What would a prayer like that sound like?

## So What?

Ask everyone to gather back in their small groups from the beginning of the lesson. Give each group a piece of paper and a pen. Using this psalm as a model, ask each group to write their own psalm of lament while focusing on God’s will and Christ’s way.

What is the challenge or threatening situation?

Who, or what, is against you?

What do you know to be true about God?

What do you want God to do?

What is your praise?

Give each group time to create, then ask each group to share their psalms with the larger group. After all the groups have shared, discuss the similarities and differences in each of the psalms. What parts of each psalm would your group take to create a large group psalm of lament?

## The Challenge

This week, when you pray, pray for God’s help with whatever troubles you. Instead of praying for what you think is the answer, pray for God’s will and Jesus’ way.

## Prayer

Loving God, thank you for being a constant presence in our lives and for always being available for us. Lord, we all face challenges and struggles. Some of them are pretty simple to overcome while others seem insurmountable and feel life-threatening. We pray that you will continue to be with us and guide us in your way, which is bigger and stronger than our own. Help us to give in to you so that we will give you the chance to be the Lord of our life. Amen.

## Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**To seek his life**—The editorial superscription imagines that David wrote the psalm at a time in which King Saul had turned against his loyal lieutenant, forcing David to flee. David retreated to southern Judah, where a consortium of other disaffected people gathered around him, making up a de facto private army that swelled to 600 men. At one point, David and his men rescued the people of Keilah from a raiding party of Philistines and then apparently took up residence there (1 Sam. 23:1-5). Soon, though, David learned through an oracle that the very people he had delivered were about to betray his location to Saul, requiring a further retreat into the Wilderness of Ziph, south of Hebron (1 Sam. 23:6-14).

The later editor remembered the phrase “seek his life,” but mistakenly identified the people of Keilah as Ziphites – a reminder that the superscription was written many years after the original psalm. It might be informative to imagine David praying in the manner of the psalmist, but it is hard to imagine such a carefully composed psalm emerging from a precarious desert setting. We may think of David as the archetype for someone with deadly enemies, but there is likely no historical connection between them.

**Vindication**—The word routinely translated as “vindicate me” (NRSV, NET2, NIV11, NASB20, ESV) is from the verbal root *dyn*, which means “to judge.” The psalmist believed he was in the right, trusting that God would judge in his favor, thus vindicating him.

**Insolent?**—Translators take different approaches with the first descriptor of the psalmist’s enemies. The word in the Masoretic text is *zārîm*, which typically refers to foreigners or strangers, as in NET2 (“For foreigners attack me”) or in the KJV, NASB20, and ESV (“For strangers are risen up / have risen against me”).

Perhaps because the scribes took the superscription at face value and knew that Saul and his men were not strangers to David, or possibly because the Hebrew *dalet* and *resh* are very similar in appearance and were copied incorrectly, some medieval manuscripts have *zādîm* instead of *zārîm*. The word *zādîm* means something like “proud ones.” Preferring this reading, the NRSV has “For the insolent have risen against me” and NIV11 has “Arrogant foes are attacking me.”

The parallel word for “ruthless ones” (*ārîsîm*) can be found paired with both *zārîm* (Isa. 25:5, 29:5; Ezek. 28:7, 31:12) and *zādîm* (Ps. 86:14, Isa. 13:11), so the reading remains uncertain.

## Digging Deeper *continued*

# The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

The Hardest Question is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

## Should Psalm 54 be read as a conditional vow?

I have argued in other contexts that psalms showing a radical shift from complaint to trust and praise can often be understood as vows. In the Hebrew Bible, vows are always conditional. In narrative texts, such as Gen. 28:10-22, Num. 21:1-3, Judg. 11:30-40, 1 Sam. 1:1-11, and 2 Sam. 15:1-8, the vow begins with a protasis in which the worshiper addresses God and makes a request, beginning with the word *'im* (if), followed by a request for God to do something. After the request, we find an apodosis in which the petitioner promises to do something for God in return.

For example, prior to a battle with the king of Arad, the people of Israel reportedly prayed “If you will surely give this people into my hand, then I will put their cities under the ban” (Num. 21:2, my translation).

Hannah’s vow is more familiar. In a culmination of grief after years of childlessness, she wept before the sanctuary in Shiloh, “and she vowed a vow, and she said “Yahweh of Hosts! If you will truly look upon the affliction of your maidservant, and remember me, and will not forget your maidservant, and will give to your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to Yahweh all of his days, and a razor will not come upon his head” (1 Sam. 1:11, my translation).

Psalms of lament and entreaty are by definition prayers that ask God for something, and when they close with a promise, it is legitimate to assume that the whole could be understood as a vow: the poet prays for a desired outcome, and promises to give something in return, usually the “sacrifice” of public praise and testimony for what God has done. A number of psalms could be read this way, including Psalms 6, 13, 22, 28, 31, 54, 56, 59, 61, 69, 71, 94, and 109.

In Psalm 54, we may regard vv. 1-2 as the protasis of a vow: “Save me, O God, by your name, and vindicate me by your might. Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth.” The final two verses can then be understood as the apodosis, or promissory part of the vow: “I will sacrifice to you a freewill offering to you, I will give thanks to your name, O Yahweh, when he has delivered me, and my eye has looked (in triumph) over my enemies” (my translation).

The word translated as “for” (*ki*) can legitimately be translated as “when,” and often has that sense in the psalms.

Thus, while it is possible to read the psalm as many have, assuming that the final verses are either an expression of certain trust that the prayer will be answered or a later addition after the prayer was answered, it is also possible to read it as a Hebrew vow, a conditional promise

## The Hardest Question *continued*

in which the poet asks for deliverance and promises to make a sacrifice accompanied by praise if God should answer the prayer.

For more detail, see my “Conditional Vows in the Psalms of Lament: A New Approach to an Old Problem,” in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Psalms and Wisdom in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm.* (JSOT Press, 1987), 77-94; and a similar discussion of vows in the psalms in my monograph *Vows in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 150-161.