

Youth 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

YOUTH Teaching Guide

by Tyler Johnson

This youth 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.

Gathering

As your group comes together, ask students how they are doing and what their week looks like. Reflect on the previous week's challenge.

Opening Activity

What are some small everyday things that annoy you? (Unclean clothes, homework, group projects) What are some things that you ask people to help you with? (Tutoring for a test, practicing a sport, a good friend to listen to you) What are some things that can only be left up to you and God to solve? (Why am I here? What is my purpose? Why does it feel like everyone is against me? Why am I sad all the time?) Some of these things can go into different categories, but for today we will look at a passage of the psalmist begging to be delivered from internal existential crisis.

Listening to the Scripture

Read aloud Psalm 54.

- What is the significance of the use of God's name in Psalm 54? Why do you think the name of God matters as much as the actions of God? (Polytheistic culture brings clarity to the importance of the name of the one doing these mighty things.)
- What is the promise of the psalmist if he is delivered from these afflictions and outside threats? (destroy the threats and vindicate the psalmist)
- Is the psalmist's plea for help controversial to your understanding of prayer and help from God today? (Some may say it feels transactional.)
- How does the psalmist experience compare to your modern day fears and challenges?

If you would like to continue the discussion, consider *Digging Deeper*.

- How do you define vindication? How might your understanding of vindication and the psalmist understanding differ? Or maybe even how are they similar?

If the group is up for a challenge, discuss what Tony poses as *The Hardest Question*: Is this Psalm a conditional vow?

- We see a lot of "If this...then that," which seems to indicate conditions. Encourage students to be bold about life and ask God to be a part of that journey, the good and the bad. That is the

Listening to the Scripture *continued*

beauty of our autonomy is that God is with us unconditionally. While it is God's prerogative to act, this psalm shows the deep relationship between creator and creation.

Application

In your prayers and reflections this week, ask God for what you want to see in your life and see where God acts or does not act. We understand God better in those moments of action and inaction. May those things shape how you see God more clearly this week.

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.

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

The Hardest Question *continued*

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.