

Salvation in the Midst of Injustice!

Main Idea: As we rest in God's justice, we are freed to love our enemies!

This morning we are going to be looking at Psalm 35. I would like to invite you to turn there in your Bibles. It can be found on page 441 of the pew Bibles.

The first thing we notice about the Psalm is that it was written by David. It is also important to note that Psalm 35 is an imprecatory psalm. You may remember Pastor Stan referring to this genre a couple of weeks ago when he was finishing up his series on Psalm 139. There was an insert in the bulletin that day that Pastor Dan put together and we have included it again today.

Let me just briefly say that imprecatory psalms contain prayers to God for the punishment of the writer's enemies. Often we experience a level of discomfort when reading these psalms and we struggle to reconcile their content with the teaching in Scripture regarding loving our enemies.

I would like to begin by reading through the Psalm. There are three sections that all come to a close with a segment of praise to the Lord. I will read the first portion of each section and then I would love to have you join me in reading each of the concluding segments of praise. As we read, pay attention to David's prayers for the punishment of his enemies. We will then attempt to reconcile the tension between this and Jesus' command to love our enemies.

Psalm 35

¹Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me;
fight against those who fight against me!

²Take hold of shield and buckler
and rise for my help!

³Draw the spear and javelin
against my pursuers!

Say to my soul,
"I am your salvation!"

⁴Let them be put to shame and dishonor
who seek after my life!

Let them be turned back and disappointed
who devise evil against me!

⁵Let them be like chaff before the wind,
with the angel of the Lord driving them away!

⁶Let their way be dark and slippery,
with the angel of the Lord pursuing them!

⁷For without cause they hid their net for me;
without cause they dug a pit for my life.

⁸ Let destruction come upon him when he does not know it!
And let the net that he hid ensnare him;
let him fall into it—to his destruction!

⁹ Then my soul will rejoice in the Lord,
exulting in his salvation.

¹⁰ All my bones shall say,
“O Lord, who is like you,
delivering the poor
from him who is too strong for him,
the poor and needy from him who robs him?”

¹¹ Malicious witnesses rise up;
they ask me of things that I do not know.

¹² They repay me evil for good;
my soul is bereft.

¹³ But I, when they were sick—
I wore sackcloth;
I afflicted myself with fasting;

I prayed with head bowed on my chest.

¹⁴ I went about as though I grieved for my friend or my brother;
as one who laments his mother,
I bowed down in mourning.

¹⁵ But at my stumbling they rejoiced and gathered;
they gathered together against me;
wretches whom I did not know
tore at me without ceasing;

¹⁶ like profane mockers at a feast,
they gnash at me with their teeth.

¹⁷ How long, O Lord, will you look on?
Rescue me from their destruction,
my precious life from the lions!

¹⁸ I will thank you in the great congregation;
in the mighty throng I will praise you.

¹⁹ Let not those rejoice over me
who are wrongfully my foes,
and let not those wink the eye
who hate me without cause.

²⁰ For they do not speak peace,

but against those who are quiet in the land
they devise words of deceit.

²¹They open wide their mouths against me;
they say, "Aha, Aha!
Our eyes have seen it!"

²²You have seen, O Lord; be not silent!
O Lord, be not far from me!

²³Awake and rouse yourself for my vindication,
for my cause, my God and my Lord!

²⁴Vindicate me, O Lord, my God,
according to your righteousness,
and let them not rejoice over me!

²⁵Let them not say in their hearts,
"Aha, our heart's desire!"
Let them not say, "We have swallowed him up."

²⁶Let them be put to shame and disappointed altogether
who rejoice at my calamity!

Let them be clothed with shame and dishonor
who magnify themselves against me!

²⁷Let those who delight in my righteousness
shout for joy and be glad
and say evermore,
"Great is the Lord,
who delights in the welfare of his servant!"

²⁸Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness
and of your praise all the day long.

Do you feel the tension? How can David, one described as a man after God's own heart, ask God to do such terrible things to his enemies? Could this Psalm really have been inspired by the Holy Spirit?

As we seek to reconcile this, I would like to point out some things that not only make this prayer acceptable but also very pleasing to the Lord.

First, as is characteristic of so many of David's prayers, this is an honest prayer! God is not impressed with empty words or pretenses. Deception is toxic for any relationship, but it is especially offensive to the God of truth who knows all things. Thus, He is honored by the decency David has to be honest in his communication with Him.

I love what D.A. Carson has said regarding passages like this. He says,

“There is no attempt in Scripture to whitewash the anguish of God’s people when they undergo suffering. They argue with God, they complain to God, they weep before God. There is not a faith that leads to dry-eyed stoicism, but to a faith so robust it wrestles with God” – D. A. Carson

That leads to the next thing I want to look at...

Not only is this an honest prayer, it is also a faith filled prayer! We see this right out of the gate as David begins by asking the Lord to fight for and defend him. At the end of verse 3, David makes a beautiful request that summarizes the Psalm. Speaking to the Lord he says,

“...Say to my soul,
“I am your salvation!”

In other words David says... “Lord, tell me; remind me; convince me; help me live in the reality that YOU, and you ALONE are my salvation!

Imagine how easy it would have been for David to look elsewhere for salvation. He was a MIGHTY warrior with an impressive resume! As a boy he killed lions and bears that tried to swipe the lambs in his care (1 Sam 17:34-35). He wasn’t much older when he defeated Goliath, with just a stone and a sling. He went on to incredible victories that caused even his enemies to recognize that the Lord’s blessing was on him. It would have been easy and natural for him to look to himself for salvation.

He also had a number of friends who were MIGHTY MEN; very capable warriors (2 Sam 23)... It would have been easy and natural for him to look to them.

This isn’t difficult for me to imagine because faith is not part of my natural make-up. My default mode is to look to myself, to money, to strong friends, to experts, etc... Even when I am in over my head, my natural response is to try to generate salvation on my own. Which leads to lots of stress and anxiety. It is only by faith that I look to God for salvation.

David’s prayer, “...Say to my soul, “I am your salvation!” is a prayer of faith and a prayer we would do well to frequently employ!

The third thing I would like to point out is that this is a prayer for justice rather than a spiteful prayer for revenge or personal vengeance! This becomes evident as we understand the context and the circumstances surrounding David at the time he wrote this Psalm.

While we aren’t told explicitly when this Psalm was written, the internal evidence suggests that it was authored while King Saul was hunting David.

The Psalm speaks of those who are pursuing David (v. 3) and seeking after his life (v. 4). When you think about it, there were very few people who pursued David. There were many that HE pursued, many that FACED HIM in battle, but few that could accurately be described as HIS PURSUERS.

I am only aware of two people that fit this description. The first is King Saul who pursued David out of jealousy, with the goal of taking his life. The second is Absalom, David’s son, who led a rebellion in Israel

and from whom David briefly fled. However, David's attitude when being pursued by Absalom, does not seem to fit the tone or attitude of Psalm 35. Remember when David commanded his men to "deal gently" with Absalom (2 Sam 18:5)? Remember the grief he expressed after Absalom's death (2 Sam 18:33)? That doesn't seem to match his requests in Psalm 35 for the destruction of his pursuers.

In light of the fact that this was most likely written when King Saul was hunting David, let's consider this passage in that context. Let's quickly look at what David's enemies were doing, what David had done, and what David was requesting, in the first two sections of this Psalm.

In the first section (v. 1-10), we see that David's enemies were attempting to take his life (v. 4) and were hunting him like a wild animal (v. 7). Yet David had done nothing to deserve it. He had a clear conscience and was convinced of his innocence (v. 7)! In response, David asks the Lord to let the ones who planned his destruction, be the recipients of their own evil schemes (v. 8)!

This is a prayer for Justice! David is simply asking the Lord for the same just response that King Darius had towards those who had schemed against Daniel. Remember, Daniel was innocent and yet in their jealousy, his enemies had plotted and devised a plan for his destruction. The plan backfired when God saved Daniel from the lions and King Darius justly flipped the situation around by sentencing Daniel's enemies to the same fate that they had arranged for him.

This is the same justice that a parent demonstrates when they let one child cut the slice of pie in half and the other choose their piece.

We applaud King Darius and the parent, because they judged justly! Justice is a good thing and that is what David is requesting of the Lord.

It is important to note that David is not taking things into his own hands. He is making this request to the Lord and looking to Him for justice. It is also impressive that in the next verse (v. 9), David declares that the reason his whole being will rejoice is because of the Lord's salvation, not the misery or destruction of his enemies!

In the second section (v. 11-18), we see that David's enemies are maliciously accusing him (v. 11), rejoicing at his stumbling (v. 15), and in summary, repaying evil for good (v. 12).

Remember what David had done? He had served King Saul faithfully and had only shown kindness! Early on, he served as a musician who played music to keep the evil spirits that afflicted King Saul at bay! He continued serving faithfully in this way even after Saul threw his spear at him and attempted to pin him to the wall! For a while he was Saul's armor bearer and later, he was one of Saul's most effective warriors and army leaders!

Even while Saul was pursuing him, David responded in kindness! Remember the opportunities David had to harm Saul? Remember David's men encouraging him to receive these opportunities as from the Lord? Remember how David felt guilt for simply cutting off a corner of Saul's robe?

Right after that incident, David followed Saul out of the cave and spoke to him. In 1 Samuel 24:17 we see part of Saul's humbled response...

“¹⁷ He said to David, “You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil.” – 1 Samuel 24:17

When sober, Saul himself was in agreement with David's words in Psalm 35:12... *“They repay me evil for good;”*

David goes on to say... *“...my soul is bereft.”* Why? Because they are repaying me evil for good...

¹³ But I, when they were sick—

I wore sackcloth;

I afflicted myself with fasting;

I prayed with head bowed on my chest.

¹⁴ I went about as though I grieved for my friend or my brother;

as one who laments his mother,

I bowed down in mourning.

I am guessing he is speaking of how he mourned when Saul himself was not well. When Saul was at a low point, David mourned. When David was at a low point, Saul attacks!

David goes on to describe, in vivid imagery, the evil Saul is inflicting in response to his kindness...

¹⁵ But at my stumbling they rejoiced and gathered;

they gathered together against me;

wretches whom I did not know

tore at me without ceasing;

The picture David is painting is that of vultures gathering around a wounded animal and tearing at its flesh. No doubt David had witnessed this and possibly even chased vultures from some of his injured lambs.

There is a stark contrast between what Saul was doing in hunting David and the kindness David faithfully demonstrated towards Saul. In response, David doesn't lift his hand against Saul; he doesn't even pursue justice on his own; instead, he looks to the Lord, HIS SHEPHERD, and says...

¹⁷ How long, O Lord, will you look on?

Rescue me from their destruction,

my precious life from the lions!

David is in a horrible situation! He is experiencing persecution, injustice, and betrayal that I can only imagine. Yet, he is looking to the Lord for salvation and justice!

This Psalm reminds me that God's justice is good! I regularly think about the benefits of God's mercy and grace, but rarely do I think of the benefits of His justice. However, without God's justice, we would be in

a world of hurt. There would be no salvation for the persecuted; no hope for those experiencing horrible injustices; no standard or way for things to be made right. Without God's justice, there would be complete chaos with no resolution in sight. While God's justice IS a fearful thing, it is also a wonderful thing for those who have received the mercy that is available in Christ! His justice actually guarantees that He will always honor Jesus' payment for sin (1 John 1:9)!

As I think of the goodness of God's justice, I am reminded of my wife's relationship with her dad. He has many qualities that she appreciates but one that stands out is his sense of justice.

When Christine was two, she was visiting the beach with her parents, when a goose came up and bit her chubby little leg, leaving a beak-shaped welt. Frank, (Christine's Father) wasted no time in responding. He instantly came to Christine's rescue, by finding the offending goose, grabbing him by the neck, and then drop kicking him as far as he could!

There is safety and comfort in the care of a father who deals justly with our enemies, those who treat us unjustly!

While God's justice is wonderful, it is terrifying outside of His mercy! Because of Jesus, God is able to be absolutely just and yet also extend mercy. Romans 3:26 tells us that God is both "... just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." God did not lower the bar or water down His justice in order to extend mercy toward us who had rebelled against Him. Jesus came to earth, lived a life that met God's righteous standard, and then took the just punishment for our sins, on the cross. Thus it became possible for Him to be both just and the justifier of those who receive Jesus as their substitute.

Before we can take comfort in God's justice, we must receive His mercy.

We began by noting the tension we initially feel, when reading this Psalm in light of the command Jesus gives us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:43-45). I think it is apparent that David did love Saul, even when he was his enemy.

Keep in mind that the biblical definition of "love" is different than how we define it today. Today, we use "love" synonymously with "like". However, biblical love is an act of the will towards another's good.

We see this kind of love extended to Saul in the way David treated him, spoke to him, and even in his response to news of his death. However, David's love did not restrict him from speaking honestly with the Lord. It did not restrict him from asking the Lord for salvation. It didn't even restrict him from requesting justice. I believe David was actually freed to love Saul, BECAUSE he looked to the Lord to take care of justice! He rested in God's justice and trusted Him to make things right!

Main Idea: As we rest in God's justice, we are freed to love our enemies!

As we move to application, I think it would be helpful to note that the level of persecution that is described in Psalm 35 is foreign to most of us. David's boss, father-in-law, and best friend's dad, (Saul) had turned thousands of David's co-workers against him, had driven him from his home, and was hunting him like a wild animal.

This is a good reminder for those of us, who are generally very safe and comfortable, that extreme injustice exists. Many people are currently suffering at the hands of ISIS, human trafficking, abortion, etc...

This month our Kindergarten – 5th Grade Sunday school classes are learning about persecution that is happening in various parts of the world. They are learning about children in India, North Korea, China, Egypt, and Nigeria who are suffering for following Jesus.

We should care about those who are being persecuted. We should pray for them. We should look to the Lord for their salvation and justice!

We should also look to the Lord for the salvation of those inflicting injustices. They are in need of the exact same mercy we have received. Remember, In Christ justice and mercy are reconciled!

In closing I would like to come back and make application to the injustices we face personally. Most are probably relatively small, while I am sure some are pretty big. God's justice provides comfort for all of them!

We should speak honestly with the Lord about them. We should look to Him for justice instead of taking justice or vengeance into our own hands. By the way, looking to the Lord for justice doesn't exclude the role of human authorities in justice. It just means we are ultimately looking to Him and resting in Him instead of seeking vengeance.

I will end with the perfect example of Jesus that Peter gives in 1 Peter 2:23...

He did not retaliate when he was insulted,
nor threaten revenge when he suffered.
He left his case in the hands of God,
who always judges fairly. – **1 Peter 2:23**

Remember what He said on the cross regarding those who were cruelly executing Him? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34a)

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“SALVATION IN THE MIDST OF INJUSTICE”

Psalm 35

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Introduction

Genre: Imprecatory

Structure:

Resolving the Tension between Psalm 35 and Jesus’ Command to Love Our Enemies:

It is an Honest Prayer

It is a Faith Filled Prayer for Salvation

It is a Prayer for Justice

The Context

God’s Justice is Good!

God’s Mercy and Justice Reconcile in Jesus

Conclusion

Application