



Psalm 35 - Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies

Of David.

Introduction

This psalm shows how the faithful should pray when they know that malicious people are seeking to harm them. The prayer recounts the evil schemes of the persecutors and asks God to fight on behalf of his faithful ones.

Psalm 35:1-3 - Cry for Help against Pursuers.

In the imagery of combat, the psalm opens by asking God to take up the cause of the singer.

- 1 Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me;
fight against those who fight against me!
- 2 Take hold of shield and buckler,
and rise up to help me!
- 3 Draw the spear and javelin
against my pursuers;
say to my soul,
'I am your salvation.'

Psalm 35:1-3

Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me. Many adversaries fought against David, and many were the times he prayed fight against those who fight against me. David said something similar in his ongoing conflict with King Saul:

<<May the Lord therefore be judge, and give sentence between me and you. May he see to it, and plead my cause, and vindicate me against you>> (1 Samuel 24:15). He could rightly pray this prayer because he generally lived in God's will, and those who fought against him were also opposed to God.

Take hold of shield and buckler, and rise up to help me! With vivid images David called upon God to put on his armour and fight on David's behalf. One does not often think of God having armour, but he does. Isaiah says of the Lord: **<<He put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle>>** (Isaiah 59:17). Paul, of course, calls on Christians to put on the armour of God: **<<Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil>>** (Ephesians 6:11).

Draw the spear and javelin against my pursuers. A **shield** and a **buckler** are primarily defensive weapons, but David also called upon God to go on the offensive for him: **<<The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still>>** (Exodus 14:14). As David found protection behind God's shield and buckler, he also asked God to keep his enemies at a distance with a spear and javelin.

Say to my soul, 'I am your salvation.' David needed to hear it again and again in his soul, that God was his salvation, and no one else. David was not his own salvation; God reminded David's soul **I am your salvation:** **<<The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?>>** (Psalm 27:1). This statement suggests many aspects of David's assurance:

- David had his doubts.
- David was not content when he had his doubts.
- David knew where to obtain full assurance.
- David's assurance had a divine source.
- David's assurance was deep and personal.
- David's assurance was present, not future.

Psalm 35:4-8 - Let Them Be Ashamed.

The faithful pray that the schemes of the pursuers would fail, and that the pursuers themselves would suffer disappointment, humiliation, and finally destruction. There are many reasons that such a prayer is proper for God's people to pray. First of all, it is realistic; God's protection of the faithful means that he must thwart the schemes of those who would harm them. Secondly, it is just, since the pursuers devise evil (v.4), and set hidden traps for their intended victim (v.7). Observe the repetition of 'without cause,' in v.7 and v.19. Thirdly, it takes God at his word. Finally, from all of this it is plain that the prayer is not a vindictive response to personal injury but an appeal based on faith.

- 4 Let them be put to shame and dishonour
who seek after my life.
Let them be turned back and confounded
who devise evil against me.
- 5 Let them be like chaff before the wind,
with the angel of the Lord driving them on.
- 6 Let their way be dark and slippery,
with the angel of the Lord pursuing them.
- 7 For without cause they hid their net for me;
without cause they dug a pit for my life.
- 8 Let ruin come on them unawares.
And let the net that they hid ensnare them;
let them fall in it – to their ruin.

Psalm 35:4-8

Let them be put to shame and dishonour who seek after my life. David asked God to not only protect him, but also to vindicate him. He wanted it to be seen and known that he really did serve and obey God, and that those who opposed him were subsequently made like chaff before the wind.

With the angel of the Lord driving them on. For emphasis, twice David prayed for the intervention of God's special messenger, the angel of the Lord. David believed that: <<*The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them*>> (Psalm 34:7).

For without cause they hid their net for me, without cause they dug a pit for my life. For emphasis, twice David asked God to note that his enemies came against him without cause. It is easy to be too confident in one's own blamelessness, and many have repeated the sense of David's prayer without being blameless. Nevertheless David could rightly pray that those who came against him did so without cause.

The example of Job shows that Christians must be wary of crying out to God that they are blameless in their situation. Although Job was a righteous man

he, and everyone else, must learn not to contend with God in any given situation but note the way that God chastises Job for his attitude under testing (Job Chapters 38-39). God finally challenges Job to respond: <<*And the Lord said to Job: 'Shall a fault-finder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond.'* Then Job answered the Lord: 'See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further'>> (Job 40:1-5).

And let the net that they hid ensnare them. David prayed that the guilty one would truly be caught by the trap set by his adversary, and the guilty one was his adversary. David prayed that ruin would come upon his adversary unawares: <<*But evil shall come upon you, which you cannot charm away; disaster shall fall upon you, which you will not be able to ward off; and ruin shall come on you suddenly, of which you know nothing*>> (Isaiah 47:11), and: <<*When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!*>> (1 Thessalonians 5:3).

Christians can pray on the same principle against their spiritual adversaries, the principalities and powers that battle against them in the spiritual realm. The devil has snares: <<*Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil*>> (1 Timothy 3:7), and: <<*God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth, and that they may escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will*>> (2 Timothy 2:25b-26), as well as strategies: <<*And we do this so that we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs*>> (2 Corinthians 2:11), set against them. They may rightly pray that he is caught in and by his own snares and strategies.

Psalm 35:9-10 - Then I Shall Rejoice.

The song looks forward to joy and gratitude when its request is answered.

- ⁹ Then my soul shall rejoice in the Lord,
exulting in his deliverance.
- ¹⁰ All my bones shall say,
'O Lord, who is like you?
You deliver the weak
from those too strong for them,
the weak and needy from those who despoil them.'

Psalm 35:9-10

Then my soul shall rejoice in the Lord. After pleading to God for deliverance and protection, David promised that his soul would be appropriately happy in the Lord, something expressed by the young virgin Mary: <<*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant*>> (Luke 1:46b-48a).

All my bones shall say, 'O Lord, who is like you?' David promised that his entire being would give honour to God, who delivers the weak from those too strong for them: <<*"Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan, I will now arise," says the Lord. "I will protect them from those who malign them"*>> (Psalm 12:5 NIV).

Psalm 35:11-16 - They Repay Me Evil for Good.

The song returns to say more about the schemes of the pursuers: they rise as malicious witnesses, and they repay evil for good, especially in gloating over the misfortunes of those who have shown them kindness.

- 11 Malicious witnesses rise up;
they ask me about things I do not know.
- 12 They repay me evil for good;
my soul is forlorn.
- 13 But as for me, when they were sick,
I wore sackcloth;
I afflicted myself with fasting.
I prayed with head bowed on my bosom,
- 14 as though I grieved for a friend or a brother;
I went about as one who laments for a mother,
bowed down and in mourning.

Psalm 35:11-14

Malicious witnesses rise up. The very nature of their behaviour was contrary to God's law and must be punished: <<*If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, then you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other. So you shall purge the evil from your midst*>> (Deuteronomy 19:18b-19). Therefore, David is right to bring this to God's attention and ask him to act when the human justice system fails to.

There were plenty of false witnesses willing to speak against Jesus in order to please the ruling Sanhedrin: *<<Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward>>* (Matthew 26:59-60a).

They repay me evil for good. David remembered the dishonour of his enemies, who gave him evil when he gave them good, all to the sorrow of his soul, i.e. my soul is forlorn. The prophet suffered a similar fate: *<<Is evil a recompense for good? Yet they have dug a pit for my life. Remember how I stood before you to speak good for them, to turn away your wrath from them>>* (Jeremiah 18:20).

My soul is forlorn. To be misunderstood or be made the deliberate target of false accusation is great sorrow. Several reasons why God might allow such a sorrowful trial are:

- To humble his people.
- To cause them to seek him in urgent prayer.
- To prevent them from pursuing the very thing falsely accused of.
- To test whether his people will rely upon him in all things.
- To teach them how to behave towards others when they are falsely accused.
- To warn them against making false accusations against others.

But as for me, when they were sick, I wore sackcloth. David described some of the good that he did for his enemies. He showed remarkable love and concern for them when they were sick, making their problem his own and caring for them as though I grieved for a friend or a brother. This is in line with the teaching of Jesus: *<<But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you>>* (Luke 6:27-28).

Sackcloth was typically worn either as a sign of repentance before God or during a time of mourning. For example: *<<Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, 'Tear your clothes, and put on sackcloth, and mourn over Abner.' And King David followed the bier>>* (2 Samuel 3:31), *<<His servants said to him, 'Look, we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful kings; let us put sackcloth around our waists and ropes on our heads, and go out to the king of Israel; perhaps he will spare your life>>* (1 Kings 20:31), *<<When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes>>* (Jonah 3:6), and: *<<Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes>>* (Luke 10:13).

I went about as one who laments for a mother. This could refer to one grieving the loss of a mother or lamenting over a mother's plight, as Jeremiah did following the fall of Jerusalem: <<*We have become orphans, fatherless; our mothers are like widows*>> (Lamentations 5:3).

- 15 But at my stumbling they gathered in glee,
they gathered together against me;
ruffians whom I did not know
tore at me without ceasing;
- 16 they impiously mocked more and more,
gnashing at me with their teeth.

Psalm 35:15-16

But at my stumbling they gathered in glee. David treated these enemies well in their adversity, but they were happy in David's time of crisis. God sent a prophecy against Edom when they rejoiced at the fall of Judah: <<*But you should not have gloated over your brother on the day of his misfortune; you should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah on the day of their ruin; you should not have boasted on the day of distress*>> (Obadiah 12).

They gathered together against me; ruffians whom I did not know. The attacks from David's enemies were worse because they were hidden to David and came upon him as a surprise.

They impiously mocked more and more, gnashing at me with their teeth. David's adversaries became increasingly more hostile in their mocking as seen with others in Scripture, such as: <<*When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen*>> (Acts 7:54). This is even more poignant when the example of Jesus on the Cross is considered: <<*Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!' In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.'* Those who were crucified with him also taunted him>> (Mark 15:29-32).

Psalm 35:17-18 - How Long Will It Take?

The request is urgent, and waiting is hard.

- 17 How long, O Lord, will you look on?
Rescue me from their ravages,
my life from the lions!
- 18 Then I will thank you in the great congregation;
in the mighty throng I will praise you.

Psalm 35:17-18

How long, O Lord, will you look on? David spoke honestly before God, admitting that he felt God was passive and indifferent. He begged God for rescue in his distress, which was so bad that it felt as if lions were after him. The martyred saints will one day call out to God in similar fashion: <<When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, 'Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?' They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow-servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed>> (Revelation 6:9-11).

Then I will thank you in the great congregation; in the mighty throng I will praise you. David vowed that he would give God the glory for his deliverance, and do so publically. David believed that such pledges should be made in the company of others: <<From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him>> (Psalm 22:25), and: <<With my mouth I will give great thanks to the Lord; I will praise him in the midst of the throng>> (Psalm 109:30).

Psalm 35:19-21 - They Are Gloating Deceivers.

The song again tells more about the pursuers; they scheme, i.e. wink the eye, particularly against the hardworking pious, those who are quiet in the land. In John 15:25 Jesus uses Psalm 35:19 to portray himself as the quintessential innocent sufferer and to imply that his followers may expect the same treatment.

- 19 Do not let my treacherous enemies rejoice over me,
or those who hate me without cause wink the eye.
- 20 For they do not speak peace,
but they conceive deceitful words
against those who are quiet in the land.

21 They open wide their mouths against me;
they say, ‘Aha, Aha,
our eyes have seen it.’

Psalm 35:19-21

Do not let my treacherous enemies rejoice over me. David continued his prayer, asking God to vindicate him before his enemies: <<*Be gracious to me, O Lord. See what I suffer from those who hate me; you are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death*>> (Psalm 9:13).

Those who hate me without cause wink the eye. This phrase means they were mocking and insulting David, as seen in: <<*A scoundrel and a villain goes around with crooked speech, winking the eyes, shuffling the feet, pointing the fingers, with perverted mind devising evil, continually sowing discord*>> (Proverbs 6:12-14), <<*Whoever winks the eye causes trouble, but the one who rebukes boldly makes peace*>> (Proverbs 10:10), and: <<*One who winks the eyes plans perverse things; one who compresses the lips brings evil to pass*>> (Proverbs 16:30).

As stated in the section introduction, Jesus was also hated without cause and quoted David to make the point: <<*If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. It was to fulfil the word that is written in their law, “They hated me without a cause”*>> (John 15:22-25).

They conceive deceitful words against those who are quiet in the land. David prayed for vindication against his enemies because they plotted against God’s humble, simple people. Paul perhaps had this in mind when he wrote: <<*Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*>> (2 Timothy 3:12).

The German Lutheran Bible translated the phrase ‘those who are quiet in the land’ as ‘die Stillen im Lande’. It later became a phrase to describe believers in Germany, especially those from the Pietistic tradition. They emphasised living a quiet, devoted life of peace before God and man, and trusting in God to defend them. Their beliefs influenced Protestantism and inspired John Wesley to begin the Methodist movement and Alexander Mack to begin the Brethren movement.

Psalm 35:22-26 - Vindicate Me!

Now the song returns to pray for vindication and deliverance. Verses 22-23 use vivid imagery, asking God to be not silent, as if he were complacent toward evil, and to awake and rouse himself, as if he were asleep; this shows how urgent the

singer feels the situation to be. God's righteousness, as often in the OT, is here his faithfulness in keeping his promises.

- 22 You have seen, O LORD; do not be silent!
O Lord, do not be far from me!
- 23 Wake up! Bestir yourself for my defence,
for my cause, my God and my Lord!
- 24 Vindicate me, O Lord, my God,
according to your righteousness,
and do not let them rejoice over me.
- 25 Do not let them say to themselves,
'Aha, we have our heart's desire.'
Do not let them say, 'We have swallowed you up.'
- 26 Let all those who rejoice at my calamity
be put to shame and confusion;
let those who exalt themselves against me
be clothed with shame and dishonour.

Psalm 35:22-26

You have seen, O LORD; do not be silent! O Lord, do not be far from me! David continued his plea to God, using two different names for God in the Hebrew text, two different names that are often translated in English by one word:

- LORD, with small capital letters, translates the Hebrew word *Yahweh*, the covenant name of God.
- Lord, with regular letters, translates the Hebrew word '*Adonai*', the ancient Hebrew word for lord. Sometimes *adonai* has the sense of 'Sir' and sometimes it has the sense of God.

David used the same combinations of words in Psalm 110 to differentiate between God and his Messiah: <<The LORD says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool'>> (Psalm 110:1). While in the temple, Jesus publicly raised a question that he has already discussed in private with his disciples: who is the Messiah of God? Is he essentially the son of David or the Lord of David? Jesus' point is not to deny that the Messiah is a descendant of David. The issue is that, in this passage from Psalm 110:1, there is no mention of the Messiah being the son of David. Rather the Messiah is here

the Lord of David. Jesus affirms the divine inspiration of the psalm through the Holy Spirit. The LORD, that is Yahweh, grants to David's Lord, i.e. 'Adonay, an exclusive place of honour at his right hand and helps David's Lord overcome his enemies. Jesus anticipated being exalted to the right hand of God and thus he far transcends any expectation of a merely political Davidic Messiah.

Wake up! Bestir yourself for my defence. David was confident that he was on God's side in his contention with his enemies, yet he longed for God to actively vindicate him. It seemed that God was too passive, so David cried out for him to bestir yourself and to awake on David's behalf: <<**Rise up, O Lord, in your anger; lift yourself up against the fury of my enemies; awake, O my God; you have appointed a judgement**>> (Psalm 7:6).

My God and my Lord! Here David used another word in the Hebrew vocabulary for God, the word *Elohim*. This is the plural for the generic word for God. It is also the cry of Thomas in John 20:28 when he saw the wounds of the risen Jesus, even if the words are reversed and the original language different, for David wrote in Hebrew, where as John's Gospel is written in Greek, although Thomas probably expressed his words in Aramaic.

Let all those who rejoice at my calamity be put to shame and confusion. David simply and powerfully asked God to be his defence before his enemies: <<***Then my enemy will see, and shame will cover her who said to me, 'Where is the Lord your God?' My eyes will see her downfall; now she will be trodden down like the mire of the streets***>> (Micah 7:10).

Let those who exalt themselves against me be clothed with shame and dishonour. He will shame them for shaming his people, bring them to confusion for making confusion, pull off their fine apparel and give them a beggarly suit of dishonour, and turn all their rejoicing into weeping and wailing, and gnashing of teeth. Truly, the saints can afford to wait.

Psalm 35:27-28 - Then I and Those Who Love Me Shall Rejoice.

The singer again looks forward to rejoicing, but this time not only his own but also that of all the faithful, those who delight in God's righteousness. The high point is the prospect of telling all the faithful of God's faithfulness.

²⁷ Let those who desire my vindication
shout for joy and be glad,
and say evermore,
'Great is the Lord,
who delights in the welfare of his servant.'

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

Psalm 35:27-28

Let those who desire my vindication shout for joy and be glad. Throughout the psalms in general it can be seen that David did not think of himself as perfect in a sinless sense. Yet in many of the disputes with his enemies he had no problem seeing that he was on God's side and they were not. In many of these conflicts there is no sense that David was troubled by self-doubt.

Great is the Lord. David spoke much of his own need and trouble in this psalm. Yet he ended with a strong focus on God and his praise for him: <<***May we shout for joy over your victory, and in the name of our God set up our banners. May the Lord fulfil all your petitions***>> (Psalm 20:5). He thought of the people of God enlarging the Lord in their heart and mind, and of his continual praise to God, i.e. my tongue shall tell of your righteousness and of your praise all day long.