

Prayer

Briefly, offer to God in prayer the events of this day and the people you will meet.

.....

Gracious Lord, I offer all these things and all these people to You, without reserve. Bless them all I pray, and may all things work together for good. Thank You Lord; AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Personal Relationships

Pray today for people you meet regularly who you find difficult. This is difficult to do, for how we approach this task says much about us as well as the people and situations which create difficulty for us. Nevertheless, as you do this, do your best to leave these difficult people and issues in the Lord's hands, and accept that He will guide you for He knows best.

Meditation

Take my home and make it Yours,
Lord Jesus Christ, of no abode.

Take my work and use it all for good,
Lord Jesus Christ, carpenter.

Take my dearest family and draw us close,
Lord Jesus Christ, born of Mary.

Take my friends and guide us in truth,
Lord Jesus Christ, Rabbi, Teacher, Preacher.

Take my possessions for use in Your Kingdom,
Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of all

Take all I have, Lord Jesus Christ,
and show me the real value of life.

Bible Study - Psalm 35:1-10

Of David

¹ *Content, O LORD, those who contend with me;*

and fight those who fight me.

² *Take up defense and shield;*

Rise up and come to my aid.

³ *Draw out spear and javelin against those who pursue me.*

Say to my soul,

'I am your salvation.'

⁴ *Those who seek my life shall be shamed and disgraced;*

Those who plot my downfall, shall be turned back in dismay.

⁵ *May they be like chaff before the wind, blown along by the angel of the LORD;*

⁶ *May their path be dark and slippery,*

pursued by the angel of the LORD.

⁷ *For they set a snare for me without reason;*

and dug a pit for me, unprovoked.

⁸ *May ruin come on them unexpectedly may the trap they set entangle them, may they fall into the pit, to their ruin.*

⁹ *Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD and delight in His salvation.*

¹⁰ *All my bones will say, 'Who is like you, O LORD?*

You rescue the weak from those too strong for them, the poor and needy from those who rob them.'

Review

Psalm 35 has a long history of being ignored! After the wonderfully expressive praise of psalms 33 and 34 which tell us so much about God and can easily be transported into Christian

worship, Psalm 35 is something of a shock. Our passage today contains much war-like language, as the writer calls on the Lord for help in the midst of a personal conflict. The things that people find most difficult are the passages which talk about the defeat and ruin of people other than the author. Simply put, the psalm says 'fight on my side, O God, and get rid of my enemy!' It is possible that this psalm had its origins in David's personal flight from Saul at a time when he was indeed being unjustly pursued (1 Sam 21f.), but it is hard for us to empathise with sentiments which wish harm on others when we have the clear teaching of Jesus to 'love your enemies' (Mat 5:44).

For this reason, Psalm 35 does not appear in many compilations of the Psalms written for Christian use either privately or in public worship. Few people feel it has value, and indeed, one commentary I read dismissed the Psalm by saying that it was simply pre-Christian. However, I have always found it odd that serious Christian scholars can express that kind of attitude towards Scripture. Certainly there are many passages of the Bible which we do not understand very well, but the challenge is for us to understand them rather than dismiss them. If we feel inclined to reject parts of the Old Testament on the grounds that they reflect war-like or aggressive sentiments, then we are on difficult ground, for the harder you look, the more you will find passages in the New Testament which contain equally difficult stories and ideas, for example the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, or Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats in which the goats are 'cast into eternal punishment' (Matt 25:46).

If we are to find the value of Psalm 35, then it will come by reading it not as a literal description of one man and his enemy, but as a spiritual allegory from which we can learn God's truth about spiritual warfare against His enemies. When we become Christians and begin our walk with the Lord, it is a great day for the Kingdom of God, but not for Satan, the enemy of Jesus who is the 'ruler of the world' (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11). Many Christians know exactly what it is like to be pursued by Satan's temptations and troubles, particularly after significant or great spiritual experiences; and read in this light, Psalm 35 is a psalm of encouragement. The central verses of our passage today (35:4-8) are a call to the believer to have faith that the Lord will deal with Satan and all evil and protect us along the path of life.

The main thrust of the opening (35:1-3) and closing (35:9,10) verses makes the spiritual allegory clear. Psalm 35 is about the Lord who fights to protect His own against all evil, safeguarding the salvation that has been won for them through Jesus Christ. It is powerfully reassuring that the Lord does not simply sit back and allow good and evil to have their sway within the affairs of the world all around us. He is battling for good, and for us. The strength of this great conviction is found in verse 10; 'Who is like You, O Lord?' He is actively and aggressively working for truth, justice and salvation; all the time, and to protect us.

Going Deeper

In the further study, I will outline some of the ways that people have come to terms with Psalm 35. Then, to conclude with I will say some more about the principles of spiritual warfare which are evident within this passage and which are scarcely mentioned in commentaries or other writing about Psalm 35.

Ways of interpreting Psalm 35

Some have suggested that Psalm 35 is largely picture language about war and battles, which is used to help describe the experience of people who had been unjustly treated. The stories of Old Testament characters such as David (see above) and Job are other examples of the same. Both of these great servants of God had to deal with harsh difficulties in life because of injustice and evil which came upon them through no fault of their own. David attempted to serve the King (Saul) but was hounded by his mentally unstable master (1 Sam 18:10, 19:9) into exile, and Job found himself stricken by the most complete disasters anyone could experience (Job 1,2). Each could say, together with a large number of other Old Testament characters 'they set a snare for me without reason; and dug a pit for me, unprovoked.' (35:7) and sought the Lord's protection. Some found the Lord's salvation whilst they still lived; David eventually became the second King of all Israel and Job had everything restored to him, for example. Some, like Jeremiah, who suffered greatly at the hands of evil men, ended his days in Egypt, ignominiously rejected by the people of God he served; yet his hope in the Lord remained firm (Jer 52).

Unless we choose to live extraordinarily sheltered lives, because we have the means to do this, we all face real enemies and real evil which require us to engage in very real struggles. The battles we face at work or at church do not require 'defence and shield' (35:2) or 'spear and javelin' (35:3), and we must always face the searching question about whether what we fight for is indeed the Lord's will or merely our opinion of it, but there is only a thin veneer of difference between this and more physical battles of the Old Testament which accompanied the acquisition of the Promised Land, for example.

The beginning of the Psalm is very similar to a 'call to arms', a battle cry to summons the people of Israel to gather to protect their land at a time of imminent invasion (see a similar use in Isaiah 49:25). It is not hard to imagine the first three verses being sent around the cities and villages of Israel and called out in the market places. Remember, 'I am' in verse 3 is an enigmatic reminder of the Lord, the God of Israel, who did indeed protect His people, but needed to work through the armies of Israel to ensure that no enemy invaded the Promised Land. Research has shown that some of the words in verses 4,5 and 6 were used in ancient legal covenants (agreements) between nations which outlined threats that would come upon people if they did not observe agreed national boundaries! (There are many documents from those times which are not in the Bible, but show this to be the case).

For this reason, most scholars interpret Psalm 35 as a liturgy of prayer used by a king of Israel or Judah when their international agreements had been breached, and the nation was threatened with war. From the point of view of Israel, this was not the fault of the king (see verses 7 and 8), but the king would have to lead his people in battle to save the nation. He sought God's blessing from the priests in the Temple before he went to battle. This interpretation explains all the military and legal language, and also the call on the Lord to fight for His people (vv1,2). It also explains the anticipation of victory (35:9,10), including the call 'Who is like You, O Lord', which, together with verse 1, is regarded as an ancient battle cry!

God's favouritism, the poor and needy

But this line of thinking, albeit interesting, does not led us far as we wish to see the broader spiritual implications of the passage. There is one verse that does not talk of war or victory, or of calls on the Lord to justify the king, the psalm writer, or the people. It is the very last verse (35:10), which explains the deliverance that the Lord will bring.

The second half of verse 10 reads 'You rescue the weak from those too strong for them, the poor and the needy from those who rob them'. This sentence could be said to fit the military theme outlined above, but I suggest that it points us towards the Lord's plan of Salvation which is far greater ancient battles or even the turbulent problems we have in our everyday lives today. This is emphasised by the words that come before it, 'all my bones will say, "O Lord, who is like You?"'. The reference to bones sounds strange to us, but 'bones' were symbolic to the ancient Israelites of longevity and eternity, so this phrase was an affirmation of the saving work of God for all eternity!

If, for a moment, we focus on the nature and character of God to defend the poor and downtrodden and bring them deliverance, then the whole Psalm begins to make sense. It does not matter whether we are talking about an individual who is asking God for help when they are unjustly accused, or the actions of a king of Israel in defending the people at a time when they are weak because of the breakdown of international agreements, the theme is the same. It is also true for us today, for we rejoice in 'His salvation' (35:9) because He fights on our behalf against our spiritual enemies in order to secure justice and salvation for the poor, the needy, and those who call on His name.

Make no mistake; the salvation of needy souls in this world is a spiritual battle. Salvation is profoundly spiritual, whatever physical form it takes; whether it is the discovery of Christ by someone who has just found faith, or the work of the church for justice and truth in the world which establishes a seed-bed for the Gospel and the growth of the Kingdom. There are plenty of people who are set against this and will do anything to stop it. Today, other religions actively wage war against Christians in different countries of the world; and in the secular West, Christians in many countries, especially in Europe, experience active discrimination against them in everything from charitable work to tax concessions and land rights. It certainly feels as

if those who seek to disgrace us do so with deceit; 'for they set a snare for me without reason ...' (35:7, and in terms of the spiritual battle involved, the spiritual pronouncements of verses 5 and 6 are highly appropriate. The fight against evil in this world is one that needs to be recognised nationally and globally, as well as individually.

Application

The trouble is that many of us who read this psalm in the West do so from the point of view of those who are relatively self sufficient and able to defend ourselves. From this point of view, the Psalm may seem churlish and personally arrogant. 'Well, to demand that God is on your side?' someone might say – that's going too far! However, if we read this Psalm from the point of view of the downtrodden, asking God to defend the poor when all other hope is lost and they have been repeatedly placed in an unjust position, then there is little for us to complain about in the words of this psalm. Indeed, it may be right and proper for the disadvantaged and poor of the world to call on the Angel of the Lord to turn the schemes of the devious rich back on their heads and make their way slippery; both may be inevitable and prophetic!

It may be that we have known a little of being poor and needy ourselves; but God's people should always seek to be aware of the vast need for Salvation within the world. In God's eyes the whole world is in need of His salvation, and there is an enemy to be fought to ensure that this salvation is won. We cannot compare the deliverance we need with that required by the millions of poor who cry out to God daily from their material and spiritual poverty in South America, parts of Africa and the rest of the world, for example. Indeed it is difficult to see that there can be a true deliverance of the poor of the world without substantial upheaval, which may well involve conflict. These things are hard to think about and it is difficult to get our heads around them, but we must do it if we are to think about the global consequences of the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Jesus Himself said 'there will be wars and rumours of wars ...' (Matt 24:6). In this light, Psalm 35 has plenty to say to us.

But the Lord is also concerned for us individually. We can approach Him and ask for justice, and this Psalm (as well as many others) helps us to do just this, and despite appearances, there are many safeguards against arrogance and complacency. In Psalm 35, the main safeguard is that the Lord is concerned for us in our weakness, for it is our weakness that He responds to. When we cry out to Him for deliverance, whether it be for salvation or for liberation from the injustices and pressures of the world which hold us down, He will respond.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. When you first read the first 10 verses of Psalm 35, did you see it primarily in a military or a personal sense?
2. Is it right of the Lord to show favour towards those who are poor and defenceless?
3. Do you see any other key features of this Psalm that are not covered by the discussion you have had or the study of the Psalm that has been presented?

Discipleship

Our own personal salvation is part of God's great global plan for the salvation and liberation of the world. The question for each disciple is this, what can we do, each day, to play our part in the Lord's plan? Sometimes we tend to think that when we have a house, a job, and a family, then our main work is to maintain this structure. It is certainly important and central to God's plans for us, but there are few people I meet for whom it would not be true to say that the Lord has so much more for them than this. It is the platform for great and wonderful things, if we place ourselves in the Lord's hands, and if we overcome the evil one who would like to keep us tied down to minimalistic Christian living.

Final Prayer

Lord God, you know the heart of the weak and the lonely, the starving and the oppressed, the bitter and the accused, the heartbroken and the shattered. In all You do, please show mercy and equality in Your dealings with people, and then one day, all will cry aloud, 'O Lord, who is like You'; to Your praise and glory! AMEN