

Prayer

Lord Jesus, let me see beyond my own interests, and appreciate the views of other people. May I observe things from different perspectives, find new ways of dealing with situations and people, and respond to the circumstances of my life with the freshness and vigour of Your Spirit. Make me new today, I pray; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Personal Relationships

Pray for people who have few personal relationships. In many Western countries, it is possible to live a quite isolated life in which immediate needs are met, and there is little contact with others. Increasing numbers of people are very lonely, particularly in old age. Pray for any you know who are lonely, or any who you suspect to be very lonely, even though they go to church.

Meditation

Why be worried, my soul?

Out of the commonplace things which happen each day,
Something will jump out at me and fill me with concern;
Often because it is about someone for whom I care, or who I love.

Will he get there in time?

Will she manage to get the work done?

Will the train run on time so that all my plans work out?

Will things be OK at work, or there be another disaster?

Why be worried my soul?

For everything that happens each day
Is of great importance for the Lord's eternal purposes;
And because they are so, He is watching, and caring.

Be still my soul; the Lord Has His hand on it all.

Bible Study - Psalm 35:11-18

¹¹ *Hateful witnesses come forward;
they question me about things of
which I know nothing.*

¹² *They give me back evil for good,
so my soul is bereft.*

¹³ *As for me, when they were ill I wore
sackcloth
and afflicted myself with fasting;
I prayed with head bowed down.*

¹⁴ *I continued as though for my friend or
brother
bowed down in mourning
as though grieving for my mother.*

¹⁵ *But when I stumbled, they assembled in
delight;*

*they gathered against me -
Wretches whom I did not know
tore into me without stopping.*

¹⁶ *Irreligious buffoons mocked me;
they snarled and bared their teeth at
me.*

¹⁷ *O Lord, how long will you look on?
Rescue my life from their ravages,
my precious life from these lions.*

¹⁸ *I will give You thanks in the great
assembly;
I will praise You in the midst of the
great crowd.*

Review

Psalm 35 continues to describe the personal experience of someone who has felt undermined and compromised by evil happening all around. The first ten verses, which we read yesterday, called on the Lord for assistance against enemies who acted against the psalmist and also

worked against the purposes of God. To the person who wrote the psalm, they were real enemies of course, but the details of what had happened are not mentioned and we are left to take one of two courses of action. Firstly, we can try and imagine the national circumstances under which a king of Israel might say the words of this psalm when calling on the Lord for national deliverance at a time of military invasion, or consider whether the psalm reflects the personal experience of someone such as a David or a Job who did indeed face very real spiritual enemies. Secondly, we can generalise the psalm completely and read it as a description of spiritual warfare conducted by Satan against either those who follow the Lord, or the poor who the Lord is seeking to save (as mentioned specifically in 35:10).

As we read on in the second part of this psalm, the same options apply, and it describes in great detail the hurtful and false accusations brought by those who are evil. The words of our passage reflect very deep human emotions, however, for most of us know very well the situation which is described. It is deeply hurtful to discover that one has been falsely accused of something you know nothing about; indeed it is a true nightmare; 'hateful witnesses come forward, the question me about things of which I know nothing ...' (35:11) But the situation is worse than this, for the psalmist had previously held those who accused him to be his brothers before God, and the following two verses describe how he previously acted with honour and respect towards those who were now accusing him of wrongdoing. You may find that this general description creates some picture within you of a nightmarish situation which is beyond your control. Personally, I imagine being placed in jail for something I did not do, with the police and legal system of my own country, something I have previously upheld in highest honour, now bent against me with accusations I know to be false, but cannot prove.

Whichever line of interpretation you feel is best for the psalm as a whole, it is hard not to find in the following passage a reflection of spiritual warfare. This is surely what lies behind words such as this; 'when I stumbled ... they gathered against me ... wretches ... tore into me ... irreligious buffoons mocked me ...' which all speak of activity that is demonic and handed over to evil. No wonder the psalmist calls out again 'rescue my life from their ravages!' (35:17) and then seeks to stand above the godlessness of the attack by offering praise to God; 'I will give You thanks in the great assembly; I will praise You in the midst of the great crowd.' (35:18).

It is only with enormous courage that any of us can stand for God and for what is right under sustained attack against our personal integrity such as that described in this passage. In our own times, people have succumbed and fallen away from faith and from the church when they feel so oppressed, but the reason psalm 35 is in scripture is to help us understand that this does happen, and the godly soul does have victory in the Lord.

Going Deeper

Going on from here, I will again explain more about the text and how it has been interpreted by scholars over the years. However, I will indicate what I believe to be the important issues of spiritual guidance which arise from the text. Ultimately, they build on the 'viewpoint of the poor' which I outlined yesterday when discussing the first ten verses of the psalm.

Standard approaches to the text

If you were to read a standard scholarly commentary on this part of Psalm 35 you would discover that all of them spend most of their time discussing the obscurity of the language in verses 13 to 16. It is true that the Hebrew text of these verses is strange and very difficult, and this is reflected in the different translations available. For example, the last phrase of verse 13 is variously translated as 'When my prayers returned to me unanswered' (NIV); 'I prayed with head bowed on my bosom' (New Revised Standard); 'And my prayer would return to my own heart' (New King James). Most translations offer footnotes at the bottom of the page explaining that the text is obscure, and offers alternative translations for us to consider. Other difficulties arise in verse 15 with 'they they gathered against me, wretches whom I did not know ...', for which the NIV reads 'attackers gathered against me when I was unaware', quite incomprehensibly. Then in verse 16, the Hebrew text includes a reference to 'cakes' which is so obscure that no-one knows what the word means. I have translated it 'buffoon' in order to fit the rhythm and style of the poetry and have to hope that in ancient Hebrew, one sort of cake

made in those days was a source of irreverent fun. There is no simple way round the problems of the text if the translator is to provide for the reader, and there is quite simply no good way of being certain about what it means.

All of this occupies the scholarly mind very well, but does not help the ordinary reader in the quest for the meaning of God's Word. Occasionally, a new manuscript or ancient fragment of scripture is discovered in the sands of the Middle East which helps to resolve some of Scripture's puzzles, but until or unless God allows such a revelation for this test, I tend to suggest that we look broadly at the meaning of God's Word at places such as this, and allow the general trend of what is being said to be our guide (hence my translation).

In these verses there is some evidence of military and legal language ('witness' and 'questioning' in verse 11) which allow us to think that all this might refer to a king of Israel who has been unjustly accused of a treaty violation (see yesterday's analysis of 35:1-10). Although the king has kept to his side of the agreement, as signified by verse 13, the accusing nation persists in not responding to the king, and takes advantage of his troubles (v15). In response to this, the king praises God and looks to the people for support (vv17,18). It is a reasonably good guess at how the psalm may have been used, but as with our reading yesterday, these military connections are by no means clear. It is equally easy to see how these verses might describe the trials of one like Job, unjustly accused by his friends and yet refusing to accept the taunts of those who claimed his friendship but eventually turned against him and become his accusers (you will have to read extensively through the book of Job to gain this overall impression!)

Unchained love

However, I would ask you to consider, as yesterday, that one route to understanding this is to see the verses from the point of view of the poor and disadvantaged, how God longs to save. He wants to bring Salvation to all who are spiritually poor and He wants to help those who are weak in the eyes of the world. That is His nature. This can be difficult, but we will discover some spiritual treasures on the way.

Verses 11 and 12 describe very well the plight of the poor and disadvantaged. Think of those at the bottom of the social 'pile' who have to claim benefits or who are immigrants and face suspicion and mistreatment because they neither fit in the country they have come to, not know the law of the land. The law of the land (in England) says 'ignorance of the law is no excuse' and yet tax, benefit and immigration laws are so incredibly complex you have to hire specialist lawyers and accountants to handle any of these issues. The rich benefit, of course, for they can afford to fight and pay for their justice, but the underprivileged cannot, and the so-called 'legal aid' (again in England) so often fails to assist those who really need help.

The next few verses deal with the inequality that occurs when those who are poor and disadvantaged act in good faith, but are not treated with the same respect, because they are poor. I could dwell on a number of examples, and I am ashamed to say that the church has too often failed to put its resources into work amongst the poor of the world because it sees them as an investment risk, using judgments based upon worldly economics, and certainly not the economy of God. History shows that some of the greatest spiritual revivals have happened amongst the poor the world; but this is frequently not recorded because only the rich record their path through history! The climax of the whole text is in the verses 17 and 18 where, in this interpretation, the poor call upon God for help. Because they do not have means of fighting back, their only call is to God, and He awaits their call. He is waiting to hear; He is looking (v17) and willing to act; and though He chooses His time and this does not always seem best to us from an earthly perspective, He will definitely respond to the call of the poor.

This is where we must look carefully at the spiritual principles of what is going on, because this is where we can find the 'Word of God' in this passage. Interestingly, this psalm does not teach the famous 'Lex Talionis'; the law of equal revenge 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. This is quoted from Leviticus 24:20 where it is designed to promote equality in justice between those who are God's people and prevent revenge getting out of hand (this law does have value and has been much maligned). The psalm is very similar to the teaching of Jesus, for it does not speak of active revenge, merely the 'right' action of placing evil trouble in the Lord's hands.

This is very close to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:38, where He says 'but I tell you do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also'. Look carefully at this, because both Jesus and Psalm 35 strongly imply that when we are faced with real evil, all the principles of justice in the world will not help. God alone can sort out the evil that comes from Satan, and we must trust Him for it. This may mean we have to do what the Lord tells us, which may be difficult, but He is the means of our overcoming of evil.

Whatever the legal system, when evil and injustice abound, God's way is a way that the poor who have no resources can use! Turn to Him! For the secular pacifist, it is a path of non-violence, but for those who have faith in God and know that there is a path of eternal salvation, it is a path of dependence upon God. The psalmist is so confident of this that he says 'I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among throngs of people I will praise you'. This is his response to the dire threats of the evil that have been directed at him, and it points directly to the teachings of Jesus.

Application

Spiritually, we should learn from this. When faced with evil, our inclination is to muster all our strength and all our facilities to counter the enemy. Even in the church, some people act as if there are 'macho' points to be scored by performing great feats of battle against evil powers. No, that is the way of the world, and the Lord has to remind us that we are 'the poor'. We are without resources when facing the enemy, apart from relying on Him. If we have known the trials of evil and the works of the enemy, then we know the real truth of this. We may have been shattered and abused, but that is the characteristic of evil, and if we try to respond, we end up being consumed by the very evil that we are fighting against, and that is not going to help anyone, least of all the Kingdom of God. He will not have us take on the devices and schemes of evil even to counter it. We are to turn to God.

When Jesus died for us on the Cross, He faced all the evil in the world, and submitted to the will of His father by allowing evil to do its worst. This is the divine paradox of the Cross, and through this, God was able to bring Jesus through the ultimate peril of death to new life. We are called to trust totally in this work of God; He will do the same for us. Maybe we have to be as poor as Jesus and as low as the poorest of the world before we can indeed accept this spiritual principle of new life and victory over evil.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Does it worry you when you find passages of scripture that we are not able to translate properly because no-one knows what they mean? Why?
2. Can you think of other places in the Old Testament where a non-violent approach to evil is taught?
3. Is the principle of 'an eye for an eye' useful in any context at all?

Discipleship

No-one takes on the realms of evil. They are there, and they are active. We are guided by the Lord concerning the path of life we tread which sometimes means we must face evil and offer it to the Lord. Jesus, as our divine Teacher, will show us how to deal with the evil we meet, and although there are Scriptural principles involved, the foremost one is what we have explored today; the battle is the Lord's not ours. Make sure you are able to live according to this great truth.

Final Prayer

Leave Your Spirit with me O God. I cannot know what this will mean, for I do not know Your mind. Guide me on the winds of Your Spirit to take the risks and bear the burdens of true discipleship. Free my life to do Your work O God. For this is what I am called to do. AMEN