

Prayer

You have spoken to me many times, Lord Jesus; in good times and in bad, when I have been with others and when I have been alone. Forgive me for not always remembering what You have said, but enable me to take hold of the eternal value of all You seek to tell me and do for me. Lord Jesus, thank You for Your saving love; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Personal Relationships

Pray today for those people who are closest to you; your husband or wife, or a true friend who stands by you through life. We often take for granted the value of such close relationships, and it is important that we should remember them before the Lord. These people need our support, and our conscious, prayerful, concern. We can help them as no others can.

Meditation

'Love the Lord Your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength' (Mark12:30)

What love can I offer of my heart, O God?

Except complete determination to do Your will.

What can I offer of my soul, O God?

Except my gifts and graces in the work of Your Kingdom.

What can I offer of my mind, O God?

Except exclusive attention to whatever You ask of me.

What can I offer of my strength, O God?

Except my passionate resolve to complete Your work.

Guide my every step, Lord God; Holy One, to whom all praise belongs.

Bible Study - Psalm 35:19-28

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| <p>¹⁹ Do not let my deceitful enemies gloat over me.
Or hatefully draw attention to me without reason.</p> <p>²⁰ They are not concerned about peace, but devise false accusations against those who live quietly in the land.</p> <p>²¹ They bawl at me saying,
'Aha! Aha! We saw it with our own eyes!'</p> <p>²² You have seen this O LORD; be not silent.
Do not be far from me, O Lord.</p> <p>²³ Awake! Rise up to my defence!
Stand on my side, my God and Lord.</p> <p>²⁴ Vindicate me by Your righteousness, O LORD my God;
do not let them rejoice over me.</p> | <p>²⁵ Do not let them think,
'Aha, just what we wanted!'
Let them not say, 'We have overcome him!'</p> <p>²⁶ All who rejoice at my distress will be put to shame and confusion; may all who try to benefit at my expense be clothed with shame and disgrace.</p> <p>²⁷ Those who delight in my vindication will shout for joy and be glad; They will continue to declare,
'Great is the LORD who delights in the wellbeing of His servant.'</p> <p>²⁸ Then, my tongue will speak of your righteousness
and of your praises, all day long.</p> |
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Review

Up to this point, Psalm 35 has proved to be an extraordinary psalm which has defied most attempts to tie it down, or find a definitive interpretation. Scholarly commentaries consistently offer the view that the poem was a form of prayer used by kings when the boundaries of Israel were threatened by upstart neighbours. However, I continue to suggest that it is an example of a psalm which could well have arisen as a poem by someone such as David who poured his

heart out to the Lord in the midst of very difficult personal circumstances (perhaps when he was pursued by Saul). It could equally describe other godly characters in the Old Testament such as Job or Jeremiah, or who were falsely accused of wrongdoing and were unjustly pursued and harangued. We do not know for certain who wrote the psalm, but this is consistent with its themes far better than purely military or kingly explanations.

Also, if we ask the question, 'who would use a psalm such as this, and why was it included in the book of Psalms?' then whatever its origins, it surely has its place as a prayer to God for help spoken by someone who truly believes themselves to be innocent of wrongdoing, but is being opposed and badly treated by other people. Because Jesus consistently taught that all those who followed Him would be persecuted (see Matt 5:10f., John 15:20 etc), Psalm 35 is surely a prayer that a Christian can use when persecuted. Many are pursued by those who are evil and resist the church across the world. It is also a prayer that all manner of poor people can use, for they are always the people who are most disadvantaged by society and are subject to the most unjust discrimination. Jesus knew this and consistently taught his followers to have their eyes open to the needs of the poor (see Matt 11:5, Mark 12:42, Luke 14:13 etc.)

These last verses of Psalm 35 are quite extraordinary because of the frank and explicit language used to describe the activities of evil people. It is hard to translate because some of the words are unique in Scripture, but it is clear that there is a fair amount of coarse language in the text! At the beginning of verse 21, the Hebrew says 'they opened their mouths wide at me ...' which was clearly a colloquial description of rude and aggressive shouting, for example. There are other examples in verse 25 which we will look at later in the study.

Interspersed between the reports of these coarse outbursts, the language of the psalm returns to more polite, but urgent calls on the Lord to 'rise up' and deal with injustice (35:23). It concludes with a joyous poem of praise, not after vindication has been won, but in anticipation of what the Lord will do to resolve the problems. The psalmist talks as if he has a circle of friends who will join with him in a 'shout for joy' (35:27) when the Lord acts, and who will join him in a song of praise; 'Great is the Lord who delights in the wellbeing of His servant.' (35:27). These verses sound like personal promises or vows which people in Old Testament times offered as part of their devotion. It went like this; 'if You, O Lord, deliver me ... then I will offer ... in praise to You'. It would be wrong of us to think of such vows as some attempted 'bribery' of God, but more of an individual promise that when the Lord brought deliverance, it was right to perform an act of devotion to say 'thank You' for what the Lord had done.

Going Deeper

Whilst many people struggle with this psalm because they feel that it is barely Christian, I suggest that this type of act of spiritual devotion is now sorely missing from the regular life of God's people. The ancient Israelites can teach us about good devotional practice! Also, in these last few verses of the psalm there are further indications, almost hidden within the text, of the truth of our contention that this psalm is best understood as a spiritual battle which rages around the poor, who are defended by God. This is therefore the focus of our remaining comments about Psalm 35.

From the point of view of the poor

The last part of Psalm 35 which forms our reading for today could easily be a psalm in its own right, in which a complaint is brought to God about the deceitful activities of those who seek to disturb the peace of 'those who live quietly in the land' (35:20). This is a remarkable expression which is not found elsewhere in the Old Testament, although it reads easily and we might assume we have read it before. The phrase does occur in other Hebrew literature which is not found in the Bible, however, and it contains the great Hebrew word 'shalom', meaning 'wellbeing' or 'peace'. The idea of 'shalom' is that of a peace which affects every part of a person's life, including their relationships and their work, and as such, it is an active concept not a passive one. 'Shalom' is something that has to be worked for; it is not merely the idea of cessation of hostilities which we attach to the word 'peace' in English.

Those who 'live quietly (shalom) in the land' (35:20) are those people who lived in Israel but normally refused to be drawn into the affairs of state, such as wars and political intrigue. Much of what we read of the history of Israel and Judah in 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles is indeed a catalogue of critical events which happened in the life of God's people. There were

many troubles which led to the disasters of invasion firstly by Assyria (2 Kings 16-18) and then by Babylon (2 Kings 24,25); but through all of this, ordinary people attempted to live ordinary lives, peacefully attempting to feed their families and provide for them as has been true throughout history. The picture painted by this part of Psalm 35 is of unrest, intimidation and false accusation designed to draw the people of the land into the political intrigues of the day, taking sides in disputes that would lead to war and tumult; events that unquestionably benefited the rich who fostered them for personal gain and advantage. You may be able to point to periods of the history of your own country in which this has been true; it is certainly a common complaint, and was unfortunately true of the history of God's people.

The call to the Lord in verse 22 is 'be not silent. Do not be far from me. Awake; rise up to my defence!' It is the call of the 'quiet' people of the land, generally the relatively poor people who need to be saved from the ravages of the international politics of the day. It is not 'taking sides' for the sake of it; this is a true call on the Lord to stand for justice and truth, and the language of the psalm is also personal, adding a sense of urgency. Verse 25 is another of those verses of the Old Testament which is so complex that the translations offer quite different versions of the text, but it reflects the awful truth of being compromised by people who are powerful and who look at others as if to say; 'aha, just what we wanted'; and all that the poor can do is to cry to the Lord 'let them not say "we have overcome him"'. Personally, I recall being held in a political rally by drunken gun slinging militia under the control of Zimbabwe's President Mugabe. With all present, we feared for our lives as the drunken leaders did what they wanted with us, and I remember feelings very close to those in Psalm 35:25. And, yes, the Lord did save us.

It is difficult to convey this, but the final verses of the psalm are written with powerful verb structures which in my opinion reflect prophecy. For example, 'all who rejoice at my distress will be put to shame and confusion' (35:26) is not a mere wish or hopeful aspiration (which is what it appears to be in many translations of the Bible), it is a perception of truth on the part of those who have been compromised by the actions of those who are evil. In other words, evil people who foment discord will reap the same as they sow. This is a spiritual principle which remains true throughout time. The Psalm ends with a call for celebration (35:27,28); and again it is prophetic in nature, because it declares in advance a victory that has yet to happen. The Psalm can therefore be read as pointing prophetically to the saving work of Christ which overcomes all evil. Indeed, it is interesting that whilst modern scholarship debates the military and international implications of this Psalm, the Church has traditionally viewed it as one of the 'Psalms of Passion' which speaks of the work of Christ. If you read the whole psalm in this light, it brings into a new focus the work of Christ on the Cross.

Jesus was himself poor and without resources, dependent upon others and upon God. He suffered constant false accusation, and though he healed others, he was ignored when he needed help on the cross; 'save yourself' they said (Matt 27:40). Jesus never gave in to the hatred and bitterness that was directed against him and showed only love to those who would receive anything from him. He lived a life that prophetically declared what He would do to save all humanity.

Are we dealing with sorcery and magic?

One last issue worth mentioning is this. As I read the different commentaries written about this Psalm, I found that nearly all of them, at some point, suspected that sorcery could lie behind some of the references to wrongdoing and evil. In order to understand this, we will have to look back at the whole psalm; but among the possibilities are the confusing words 'may their path be dark and slippery' in verses 5 and 6; the activities of malicious witnesses asking about 'things I do not know' (35:11); the connections between sickness, grief (and death?) and suffering amongst those who are close (35:3,14); the virtually untranslatable sections in the middle (verses 15-18 with strange references in the Hebrew to 'cakes', 'cripples', lions etc), and the treachery in the last section directed at the 'quiet of the land' (35:19f.).

It is extremely hard to unravel past occult practices of ancient times, but some of the words I have mentioned above do figure within ancient documents which describe the known religious occult practices of the nations that surrounded Israel and Judah in ancient times. You can read a little of this in the description of the deeds of Manasseh (2 Chronicles 33) which hint at the strange and dark religious practises of other nations and of their being brought into Jerusalem

by this evil king by force. It was what happened in the reign of Manasseh that was regarded as the 'last straw' of evil within Judah which brought down God's judgement on Jerusalem in the form of the Babylonian invasion (2 Chron. 36).

Whatever the cause, the cry of Psalm 35 is for the justice of the Lord. It is not a call for favouritism on the part of God, but it is a call for justice and truth to prevail over all evil. It is an unquestionably important subject, and not one to be skipped over lightly.

Application

In the last three days we have worked our way through Psalm 35 and discovered a great deal about how evil works. Some refuse to see this within the Psalm, and I fear that unless we identify the works of evil properly then we are left with a Psalm which makes little real sense. It tells us that evil is always directed against the weak and the poor who are vulnerable, and that is why Jesus began His ministry by speaking out for such people (Matt 5:1-10 – the Beatitudes; 'Blessed are the poor ...'). Psalm 35 also tells us that evil is directed against those who try to live a godly life and those who try to live peaceably. We should know this and be prepared with our defence against it. The only defence of course, is to place our confidence in God and trust Him, but it has to be an active and conscious trust, even though we do not see the results of His work and salvation before our eyes.

It would also be unwise for us to ignore the fact that a whole variety of occult semi-religious practices are common in our midst even today, even in the church. Where they exist, they stand directly against the Gospel and the saving work of Christ, especially when it is found within our churches and in our worship. I have come across people who have felt the need to 'touch wood' in church, have confessed to reading horoscopes concerning their involvement with church, used Tarot cards to guide their lives, and practice occult alternative forms of medicine even before praying for their health needs to Almighty God! The enemy has invaded the church with a whole host of other practices, regarded by those who use them as quite harmless and culturally acceptable; 'Its my life and I can do what I want with it' is said, even by people who call themselves Christians.

Yet even this is only touching the surface of what evil can do in our midst. If we place our trust in Him, He will help us fight against the enemy, for 'Great is the Lord who delights in the well being of His servant' (35:27). We have an active enemy in Satan, and he is in our midst and determined to stay to do his work of disrupting the work of God's people. Psalm 35 gives us guidance, if we are prepared to find it, about how to address the enemy and call upon the Lord for sure deliverance from the evil in our midst.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What themes unify Psalm 35 in your opinion? What can we learn from these themes about the praise and worship of God today?
2. What stands out as describing the work of Jesus Christ in this psalm?
3. What are the key features of evil that are described in this psalm? Many may not be clear, but focus on what the Lord shows you from a reading of the text.

Discipleship

Psalm 35 is worth reading again in the light of our discussion and study. I will not press any further points, but suggest that if you read carefully, then the Lord will lead you to find suggestions about how to handle the evil that we see around us. Firstly, we must recognise evil for what it is, and then we must stand 'above it' in Christ and in His name, have victory over its deviousness, its accusations and lies, and its perversions of justice and entrapment of the poor. He will lead you, for He has led me according to His will.

Final Prayer

King of Glory, Lord of All, Saviour of the Nations, Leader of peoples, Shepherd of the sheep, Great High Priest, Rock of Ages, Mighty Deliverer, Comforter Divine, Peaceful Warrior ... You are my Lord, and my God. It is You that I trust for my Salvation. AMEN