

The exuberance of Psalm 34 is in sequence with the extremity of Psalm 35. The two psalms are companion psalms that share not only verbal affinities but an emphasis and intensity on the need for deliverance. Only these two psalms refer to “the angel of the Lord” (Ps 34:7; 35:5,6) and both psalms refer to the poor who are in need of rescue (Ps 34:6; 35:10). Both psalms speak of “bones” as a metaphor for the whole person: “He protects all his bones” (Ps 34:20), and “All my bones shall say, ‘O Lord, who is like you’” (Ps 35:10 ESV). Lions are also referenced in both psalms. Young lions grow weak and hungry in Psalm 34 and pose a grave danger to the godly in Psalm 35 (Ps 34:10; 35:17).

If the sequence of the psalms was reversed, the agony of oppression and injustice would come before the exuberant celebration of deliverance of Psalm 34. As it stands now, the order indicates that the struggle persists. Deliverance is followed by life-threatening dangers. There will be times of thanksgiving and teaching, because the Lord hears the cry of the righteous and “he delivers them from all their troubles” (Ps 34:17). But on this side of eternity the battle rages on and the need for deliverance remains. The realism of the psalms requires both the joys of deliverance and the pathos of pain. The sequence is true to life. We are in constant need of the Lord who is our refuge *everyday*. Exuberant joy and extreme angst run together in the cosmic battle of sin and death as we await the final judgment and the consummation of “so great a salvation” (Heb 2:3).

“The meaning of Psalm 35 is not difficult to discern,” writes Patrick Reardon, “because it is one of those psalms for which the New Testament explicitly provides the proper ‘voice’ and setting. The voice speaking in Psalm 35 is the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and the psalm’s theological context is the drama of His Passion and death.”¹ Most commentators seem determined to interpret the psalms in their original historical-grammatical setting before moving to their Christian interpretation. This hesitancy to put Christ first is unfortunate because Christians should read the Psalms as Jesus’ prayer book. Christ is our interpretative key to understanding the whole Word of God. Dale Bruner says it unequivocally, “Every Old and New Testament text must be brought to kneel before the Messiah, Scripture’s Center and Power, before it can be preached as Word of God.”²

When Jesus quoted a line from Psalm 35 in his conversation with his disciples, he prefaced the quote by saying, “But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: ‘They hated me without reason’” (John 15:25). Jesus said this as they walked the streets of Jerusalem. He and his disciples were about to cross the Kidron Valley on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane. The conversation that flowed from Psalm 35 began, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (John 15:18-19). Although Jesus only quoted a line from Psalm 35:19, the larger conversation about hate and rejection corresponds closely to the entire psalm.

¹ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 67.

² Bruner, *John*, 341.

Besieged

*Contend, Lord, with those who contend with me;
fight against those who fight against me.
Take up shield and armor;*

*arise and come to my aid.
Brandish spear and javelin
against those who pursue me.
Say to me,
“I am your salvation.”
May those who seek my life
be disgraced and put to shame;
may those who plot my ruin
be turned back in dismay.
May they be like chaff before the wind,
with the angel of the Lord driving them away;
may their path be dark and slippery,
with the angel of the Lord pursuing them.
Since they hid their net for me without cause
and without cause dug a pit for me,
may ruin overtake them by surprise –
may the net they hid entangle them,
may they fall into the pit, to their ruin.*

*Then my soul will rejoice in the Lord
and delight in his salvation.
My whole being will exclaim,
“Who is like you, Lord?
You rescue the poor from those too strong for them,
the poor and needy from those who rob them.”*

Psalm 35:1-10

The psalmist is embattled. War is being waged against him by an enemy who knows him well and hates him for it. The psalm may very well describe the time when David was on the run from King Saul and his army. The military language is consistent with the threat and David's plea for the Lord to "fight against those who fight against me" recalls David's willed passivity against the Lord's Anointed (1 Sam 24:5-6). David is a picture of the Christian who refuses to fight "the world, the flesh, and the devil" (1 John 5:5) with the weapons of the world (2 Cor 10:4). David's pacifist dependency on the Lord to contend for him, fight his fight, take up defensive and offensive weapons, and stand up for him, sets a precedent for the believer's dependency on the Lord. The get-even strategies that fight fire with fire are eliminated. Instead of the weapons of deception, slander, pride and hate, believers pick up the weapons of truth, prayer, compassion and kindness.

Christians are called to bless, not curse. They are called to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. Tens of thousands of Korean believers have been killed and imprisoned by the notorious dictator Kim Jong-un, and yet many throughout North Korea are praying for his salvation. The self-control required to bless one's accusers and slanderers is evidence of "a supernatural fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:23)." Karen Jobes continues, "For it is exactly when we are insulted and treated with malicious intent that we are most tempted to respond in kind by gossip, exaggerating the extent of the fault, or with outright slander. Those who are able not simply to clench their teeth and remain silent but to maintain an inner attitude that allows one to pray sincerely for the well-being of one's adversaries, are truly a witness to the life-changing power of a new identity in Christ."³

David does not bless his enemies. He curses them. He calls down judgment upon them. He prays that the disgrace and shame and ruin that his enemies plotted against him would boomerang back on themselves. He wants them to fall into the trap that they have set for him and when they are ruined his "soul will rejoice in the Lord" (Ps 35:9). This "unholy fire of personal passion" may seem incompatible with "the holy fire of his love to God," until we realize that David's "imprecatory words" come from "the pure spring of unself-seeking zeal for the honor of God."⁴ Nevertheless, Delitzsch goes on to argue that this "holy fire" is inconsistent with New Testament faith that "shrinks back from invoking upon any one a destruction that lasts."⁵

Although Delitzsch had trouble reconciling "the holy zeal of the New Testament" with "the holy fervor of the Old Testament," a strong case can be made for Christ's followers praying Psalm 35.⁶ The most important reason is that Jesus himself prayed this psalm in the face of extreme opposition. On the walk from the upper room to Gethsemane Jesus addressed the subject of hate by drawing on Psalm 35. Goldingay writes, "Strangely, Jesus was apparently not embarrassed by the psalm and gives no hint of seeing himself as having superseded it, suggesting that once again this is a problem about us as interpreters of the psalm."⁷

Jesus gave three reasons why the world hates his disciples and each reason relates to believers everywhere (John 15:18-16:4). First, the world hates believers because they don't belong to the world. Jesus has chosen them out of the world. Second, believers are hated because of the exclusive truth claim of Christ. The world is not willing to accept that Jesus was sent by the Father and is one with God. Third, the world hates believers because of the convicting power of the gospel of grace. Ironically, the goodness of the gospel provokes rejection and rebellion. These three reasons can be seen reflected in Psalm 35. Those who hate the psalmist are described as chaff that the wind blows away. His enemies walk in step with the wicked. They stand in the way of sinners and they sit in the company of mockers (Ps 1:1,4). Like his Lord, the psalmist has comforted the grieving and showed compassion to the suffering, but the only thanks he got was malicious mocking and hate. And like his Lord, he has been hated without reason.

³ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 218.

⁴ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 417.

⁵ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 418.

⁶ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 419.

⁷ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 503.

Jesus was determined to prepare his disciples for the world's reaction: "Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me" (John 15:20-21). Jesus is the precedent setting reason for the world's hate. "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first." He is our Master and we are his disciples. "A servant is not greater than his master." We share in his path to the cross. His narrative becomes our narrative. We lean into his cruciform strategy of submission and sacrifice.

A second significant reason for Christians today praying Psalm 35 is that we learn from David's example to vent our fear and hate through prayer. David acknowledge his need for salvation. He owned his weakness. He refused to take matters into his own hands and fight the evil confronting him with the weapons of the world. "Hate is our emotional link with the spirituality of evil," writes Eugene Peterson.⁸ The enemy is real. Hate must be acknowledged and dealt with in prayer, rather than denied or suppressed. David's willed passivity is prayed out in complete dependence upon the Lord in whom he has placed his honor and salvation. It is right and true for Christians to pray for the salvation of North Korea's dictator Kim Jong-un, but it is also right and true for Christians to pray for his judgment.

A third reason for Christians to pray Psalm 35 is that it is consistent with God's ultimate and final judgment against the wicked. The apostle Paul's poignant refrain running through Romans one that God gives people up to their "sinful desires" and "shameful lusts" and "depraved mind" underscores the psalmist's plea that his enemies to fall into the pit they dug for him. The wicked ways of the wicked are inherently self-incriminating and self-destructive.

The Bible has so much more to say on this subject than is often admitted. Jesus spoke of hell often. He repeatedly promised that on the day of judgment those who rejected the gospel would suffer a worse fate than Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 10:15; 11:21-24; Luke 10:12-15). Any generation that rejects the gospel is guilty of the blood of all the prophets (Luke 11:50-51). Jesus lashed out, "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matthew 23:33).

To be ashamed of Jesus and his gospel is to identify with an "adulterous and sinful generation" and to invite a reciprocal response: "the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels" (Mark 8:36-38; Luke 9:23-26). Jesus warned, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both the soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). Jesus described judgment in graphic and violent language. Hell is outer darkness, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28).

David concludes confidently with the firm expectation that he will be delivered and vindicated. Once again exuberant praise is anticipated for the salvation that only the Lord who defends the weak and rescues the poor can accomplish. David expects to worship the Lord with his whole

⁸ Peterson, *Answering God*, 98.

being, with his soul and every bone in his body laughing, singing, “Who is like you, Lord?” (see Ps 35:10 MSG).

Betrayed

*Ruthless witnesses come forward;
they question me on things I know nothing about.
They repay me evil for good
and leave me like one bereaved.
Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth
and humbled myself with fasting.
When my prayers returned to me unanswered,
I went about mourning as though for a friend or brother.
I bowed my head in grief
as though weeping for my mother.
But when I stumbled, they gathered in glee;
assailants gathered against me without my knowledge.
They slandered me without ceasing.
Like the ungodly they maliciously mocked;
they gnashed their teeth at me.*

*How long, Lord, will you look on?
Rescue me from their ravages,
my precious life from these lions,
I will give you thanks in the great assembly;
among the throngs I will praise you.*

Psalm 35:11-18

We might have expected David to feel endangered by Israel’s archenemies the Philistines, but instead, his most wearisome and depressing enemies were his fellow Israelites. In exchange for his compassionate care and sacrificial empathy, he was repaid with hostility and slander. He showed his people humility and mercy, but they turned on him in contempt and mockery. I imagine there are many in the church who feel like David. They were repaid evil for good. Their acts of mercy provoke malicious mocking. When they stumble, well-intentioned dragons pounce. Sadly, the psalmist’s experience is shared by many who have sought to serve the Lord.

David is a type or figure pointing forward to the future Son of David. His experience helps us to better understand the Lord’s experience: “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11). David’s lament is a cry for help, “How long, Lord, will you look on?” Ironically, “the shortness of the question corresponds inversely to the length of the oppression.”⁹ The apostle John describes the faithful saints who were slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They call out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Rev 6:10). The people of God on earth and in heaven are still asking that question and

⁹Goldingay, Psalms, 498.

they join with David to declare: “I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among the throngs I will praise you” (Ps 35:18).

Belittled

*Do not let those gloat over me
who are my enemies without cause;
do not let those who hate me without reason
maliciously wink the eye.
They do not speak peaceably,
but devise false accusations
against those who live quietly in the land.
They sneer at me and say, “Aha! Aha!
With our own eyes we have seen it.”*

*Lord, you have seen this; do not be silent.
Do not be far from me, Lord.
Awake, and rise to my defense!
Contend for me, my God and Lord.
Vindicate me in your righteousness, Lord my God;
do not let them gloat over me.
Do not let them think, “Aha, just what we wanted!”
or say, “We have swallowed him up.”*

*May all who gloat over my distress
be put to shame and confusion;
may all who exalt themselves over me
be clothed with shame and disgrace.
May those who delight in my vindication
shout for joy and gladness;
may they always say, “The Lord be exalted,
who delights in the well-being of his servant.”*

*My tongue will proclaim your righteousness,
your praises all day long.*

Psalm 35:19-28

The experience of being besieged by enemies without cause and betrayed by people who hate without reason is bound to take an emotional toll. In this third section, David conveys the personal trauma of being belittled by his enemies whose wink is malicious. He describes what it feels like to be falsely accused by those who ridicule him with a dismissive sneer. Their duplicity thinly veils their false testimony. Everything they do seems calculated to manipulate and deceive. Thankfully, the psalm does not write off the cynical sneer and the beguiling wink as something petty to be overlooked. While their off-handed comments appear to be casual, they are carefully designed to unnerve the innocent and overcome the righteous. We have all been in situations

where the haters and the mockers have sought to obscure their deception and duplicity by claiming they meant nothing by the wink and the gesture. Yet the faithful know manipulation and mockery when they see it. They can feel it.

Jesus identified with the psalmist's shock and pathos. Throughout his entire public ministry Jesus experienced the derisive looks and angry stares of the religious leaders. He suffered their bemused ridicule and gloating cynicism. Psalm 35 was a prayer guide for his daily experience of ridicule and mockery. It is scandalous to realize that the one who healed the sick, loved the outcast, and transformed the sinner should be intensely hated by the religious leaders of his people and despised by the political authorities. The one who was sentenced to die a hideously cruel death by Roman crucifixion bore "our suffering" and was "pierced for our transgression" and "crushed for our iniquities" (Isa 53:4-5). David had no idea how God himself would suffer to reverse the shame and depravity systemic to our human natures.

With Psalms 35 fixed in his praying imagination, Jesus knew the price that would be paid. This radical paradox crossed his mind as he walked with his disciples through the streets of Jerusalem on the way to Gethsemane. What kind of world sentences holy and compassionate men and women to die? Jesus braces his disciples for the guilt-driven backlash of a world antagonized by the gospel of grace. All who follow the path of the Suffering Servant can expect to be oppressed and afflicted in the same way that Jesus was.

"If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. As it is they have seen, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason'" (John 15:24-25).

Jesus sees the world's unbelief for what it is – hate. We want to say that God's love overrides human rejection and unbelief. But Jesus is not having any of it. He distills unbelief down to hate. By quoting a line from the Psalms, "They hated me without reason," Jesus leads the disciples in a prayerful response to hate. The place to go in the heat of opposition is to the Lord in prayer. When the world's rejection is especially painful and the reason for the hate passes all understanding the Christian prays. A prayed out lament is different from a vindictive venting! Psalms 35 and 69 instruct us in how to bring the world's painful rejection to the Lord. Through prayer we are reminded of God's great love and his sure salvation. We cry out, "Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink; deliver me from those who hate me, from the deep waters" (Ps 69:13-14).

Psalm 35 ends on high note of praise to Yahweh for his faithfulness. David calls the people of God to shout for joy and gladness. He knows he is not in this ordeal alone. There are many who rejoice in the vindication of the Lord's Anointed One. The faithful long to see the Lord exalted and his Servant honored. David points forward to the Son of David, Jesus Christ, the Suffering Servant, who will endure much more than Psalm 35 describes in order to say, "I am your salvation" (Ps 35:3).