

Contend, O Lord

Psalm 35

The victory David celebrates in Psalm 34 is a hot conflict in Psalm 35. His enemies want him dead, so he calls on God to fight for him. Over a tenth of the psalm are imprecatory, invoking God's judgment upon His enemies. Similar prayers occur elsewhere in the Old Testament and in the New, including by Jesus and the apostles. We're uncomfortable with these not because we are too kind, but too callous and complacent with evil.

Summary of the Text

Psalm 35 breaks down into three sections. The first consists of David's complaint and describe his conflict as a battle in which the Lord must intervene (vv. 1-10). In the second, false witnesses rise up and mob him, so he prays and vows to worship in the assembly (vv. 11-18). Last, in the third section David describes the victory his enemies grasp at while he looks to the Lord grant deliverance (vv. 19-28). Each section follows a pattern of complaint, prayer, and promise, ending with gratitude and hope.

Righteous Imprecation

David calls on God to contend with those who contend with him, to fight against those who fight against him (v. 1). He did not initiate the fight. The godly don't brawl for pleasure but for peace. His prayer is for God to take up weaponry and "stop those who pursue me. Say to my soul, 'I am your salvation'" (v. 3). To not ask God to end the reign of the violent is to allow their violence to continue, to say "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. Blessings and curses are part of being in covenant with God. He lines up Israel on Mount Gerazim and Mount Ebal to declare the blessings of loving Him and the curses of hating Him, of living faithfully in the land or going after idols (Deut. 27-28). To honor and follow God brings life, but to despise Him brings death—this is how blessing and cursing works. It's not like an incantation or casting a spell. Rather, this is how living in the world works. Jesus pronounces eight woes on the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 23). Paul anathematizes those who don't love Jesus and twice says anyone who preaches another gospel is accursed (1 Cor. 16:22; Gal. 1:8-9). This cursing does not negate the command to primarily bless our enemies rather than curse (Matt. 5:43-48; Rom. 12:14). We take all of Scripture together. Vengeance is the Lord's and the state His deacon who executes wrath on the one who does evil (Rom. 13:4; Ex. 21:23-27). So when David curses his enemies to God, he entrusts justice to Him rather than taking it into his own hands. Twice he could have taken Saul's life but would not.

Into Their Own Pit

David wants God to take up the shield and buckler, to draw the spear, stop those pursuing, and tell him, "I am your salvation" (vv. 2-3). Rather than their plots and lies succeeding, he wants them brought to confusion and chased by the angel of the Lord (vv. 4-5). May their path be dark and wet while they run from him (v. 6). They dug a hidden pit to kill David without just cause, so let them fall into it unexpectedly (vv. 7-8). There's no false neutrality, not two equal perspectives. Saul is driven by envy. David secured Saul's kingdom when he defeated Goliath, and stayed loyal and content even while mistreated. It's not that David is sinless, but he is blameless. One ditch we can fall into is to simplistically assign white hats and black hats, to perfect one side and demonize the other. But the other equal if not more common problem is to split the difference, assuming both sides in a conflict must be equally to blame. Two sides to every story, right—who are you going to believe, David or Saul? This pit was dug without cause, and poetic justice would see his enemy fall into it. The gallows that Haman built 75' high for Mordecai would be his place of execution, and the day of Jewish annihilation would be their vindication and celebration (Esth. 7:10). When this happens, David's soul will be

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joyful in Yahweh (v. 9). He might be nothing but bones by then, but his bones will praise the Lord who delivers the poor from the strong man and the needy from the plunderer (v. 10).

Verbal Assault

Lies are the Devil's materials by which he builds elaborate structures. David hadn't even heard of some of the things they made up about him (v. 11). This brought sorrow because he had done Saul and his people good, fasting and praying for them (vv. 12-14). David would play the harp for Saul when he was distressed, and it worked to relieve him (1 Sam. 16:14-23). Saul and his men repaid him with mocking, treachery, and attacks (vv. 15-16). How long would the Lord see this and allow it to continue before rescuing David from the lions (v. 17)? David has had enough, and his godly impatience vows to give thanks in the great assembly and praise God among the people (v. 18). He is overwhelmed but not consumed because praying to the Lord keeps everything in perspective. Had he gone to counsellors who told him to plot revenge, to lie about those who lie about him, to return evil for evil (cf. 2 Sam. 16:9-14), or to just give up, he would have fallen. Instead, he fights lies with prayer, finds comfort for the pain that others have caused, and finishes with his eye on the prize—praising the Lord among the people.

Do Not Be Silent

It is hard to be betrayed and attacked by ones you love. The obvious pain of this situation escapes no one. But consider the greater call to remain steadfast in the Lord when He allows such a circumstance to unfold. How many believers stop worshiping, walk away from Scripture, neglect their duties in marriage and family, seek comfort in sin, and so on in response to the sins of others? These are all versions of giving up and giving in. In contrast, David fights for truth, justice, vindication, and victory: "This You have seen, O LORD; do not keep silence! O Lord, do not be far from me" (v. 22). Not all battles are equal. The dignitaries fighting David would murder him and trouble all the normal, quiet people in the land (v. 20). They rejoice at David's fall, and that's the kind of limited joy they possess (v. 26). But those in favor of David's righteous cause are not ultimately for David, but for God: "And let them say continually, 'Let the Lord be magnified, who has pleasure in the prosperity of His servant'" (v. 27). David says his piece to the Lord and gives us this song to sing. The false accusations of others dissolve in our praise of God who contends for us.