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A Prayer for Vindication

Psalm 35

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“Love your enemies. Do good to those who persecute you.” Obviously, because those are the words of Jesus, we need to take them seriously. But what does that mean? What does that look like lived out in everyday life?

If someone is attacking me—not necessarily physically, but verbally they’re malicious, they’re spreading gossip, they’re assassinating my character, they’re saying things about me that aren’t true, they’ve made it their mission to destroy me—how do I respond to that? Does love mean that I passively sit by and just let it happen?

I love my children. But if they are doing evil, does love mean that I sit passively by and watch it happen?

So what does it mean to love your enemy, to do good to those who persecute you? Let’s make it personal. Let’s imagine that someone has made it their mission to tear you down, to spread malicious gossip that isn’t true, to destroy your reputation, and to somehow bring you down. What are you supposed to feel? If you find yourself praying that they would be shamed, that they would be humiliated, that they would be ruined, is that unloving?

Well, that’s the situation in which David finds himself. People are spreading all kinds of stories about David that aren’t true. They are bent on destroying him. They want his character assassinated. They want to tear him down. And out of that experience he writes the words of Psalm 35, which is a prayer to God. In looking through that psalm and understanding what David is saying, I think we can learn how we should respond in similar circumstances.

Nobody knows for sure what the background of Psalm 35 was, although most think it was when David was fleeing from King Saul. King Saul wanted to take his life, and that is most likely the situation. If that isn’t the case, it was a circumstance very similar to that.

As with other psalms, this one is filled with imagery and word pictures. In this psalm we see word pictures that either represent the courtroom or the battlefield, and the imagery goes back and forth between the two.

Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me. (Psalm 35:1, *NASB)

The word *contend* is a legal term which means to oppose or to prosecute. What David is praying is, “God, these enemies are trying to prosecute me.” So his prayer is, “God, You prosecute them!”

Any time we are interpreting Hebrew poetry, one of the things we look for is what is called parallelism. Basically it means there are two lines, and those two lines run parallel. There are different kinds of parallelism. In this case, it’s what we call synonymous parallelism, which means the second line has the same meaning as the first one. In the first line he says, “Contend.” Then he is really repeating himself, maybe more clearly, in the second line when he says, “Fight.” “Fight against those who fight against me”—that is what he is asking for.

In verse 2 he moves to military images:

Take hold of buckler and shield...

A buckler was a large shield that was the size of a person's body and often was carried by a shield bearer. A shield was what we typically think of as a smaller shield a soldier would carry. He says, "God, You have to be my buckler; You have to be my shield."

And rise up for my help. Draw also the spear and the battle-axe [we might call it a javelin] to meet those who pursue me. Say to my soul, "I am your salvation." (vs. 2b-3)

David is saying, "God, You have to be my salvation; You have to be my rescuer." If you read through the psalm, it's evident that David believes that. He believes that God will rescue him. But he is human enough to say, "God, I need to hear it; I need to hear You say You're going to rescue me, You're going to be my salvation, You're going to vindicate me. God, You have to be my shield, You have to be my buckler, You have to be my spear and javelin. God, You're my weapon against this attack!"

He then goes on and prays for his enemies, and it's very interesting what he prays for:

Let those be ashamed and dishonored who seek my life; let those be turned back and humiliated who devise evil against me. Let them be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the LORD driving them on. (vs. 4-5)

He says, "God, I want them to be shamed; I want them to be humiliated; I want them to be turned away. I want them to be like chaff." Chaff is the leftover after the wheat is sifted; we might think of grass clippings. They were worthless, and typically the wind would come along and blow them away. What he is asking for here is that the angel of the LORD would come along like the wind and blow them away.

The angel of the LORD (capital L-O-R-D) is a common phrase in the Old Testament. Almost all commentators believe it is a reference to the preincarnate Christ. In other words, it's Jesus in the Old Testament. It is very common in the Old Testament. However, the phrase "angel of the LORD" only shows up two times in the Psalms—one in Psalm 34 and here in Psalm 35. David's prayer is that God would be the wind that blows the chaff away.

Let their way be dark and slippery, with the angel of the LORD pursuing them. (v. 6)

In the Old Testament when somebody is following God, it is usually referred to as "walking in the light"—meaning that the pathway is straight or that the footing is good. The opposite of that would be to travel in the darkness and the footing is slippery. Here is the image of the angel of the LORD pursuing them and they're trying to get away. But it's dark and slippery, and the angel of the LORD is overtaking them.

For without cause they hid their net for me; without cause they dug a pit for my soul. (v. 7)

Verse 7 is very important. David is saying, "I'm innocent! I don't deserve any of this. This is all without cause." He doesn't have this coming to him.

Let destruction come upon him unawares, and let the net which he hid catch himself; into that very destruction let him fall. (v. 8)

One interesting point is that in verses 1-7 the enemy is referred to by the plural pronoun *they*. But in verse 8, it shifts to a singular. If it's Saul, he is referring to Saul himself. And he is saying, "Let Saul fall in his own trap; let him fall in his own pit that he has dug. He has that coming."

And my soul shall rejoice in the LORD; it shall exult in His salvation. All my bones will say, “LORD, who is like You, who delivers the afflicted from him who is too strong for him, and the afflicted and the needy from him who robs him?” (vs. 9-10)

Notice that the verbs are future tense. David isn't saying, "I'm rejoicing now." Instead, he's using the future tense: "I *will* rejoice. God, when You come through as my salvation, when You vindicate me, when You set the record straight, then we'll celebrate that. We'll make it known"

And then, and perhaps what is the most important statement in the entire psalm, he says, "God, who is like You? Nobody is like You! You're the only one who can rescue the afflicted from those who are too strong. You're the only one that can deliver the poor and the afflicted from those who want to take advantage and rob him." In other words, what David is saying is, "God, You're the only one that can deliver me. I can't save myself." There is no other way for David to be vindicated—for the record to be set straight, for the truth to be known. But God can do it. So he says, "God, there is nobody like You. You have to do it. And when You do it, we'll all celebrate because You have been faithful!"

He then moves back into the courtroom imagery again in verse 11:

Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me of things that I do not know.

It's a picture of David on the witness stand. They are making accusations against him, and he is saying, "I don't even know what you're talking about. You're making all this stuff up."

They repay me evil for good, to the bereavement of my soul. But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting, and my prayer kept returning to my bosom. I went about as though it were my friend or brother; I bowed down mourning, as one who sorrows for a mother. But at my stumbling they rejoiced and gathered themselves together; the smiters whom I did not know gathered together against me, they slandered me without ceasing. Like godless jesters at a feast, they gnashed at me with their teeth. (vs. 12-16)

David says, "You know, these people were once my friends, and now they're bent on destroying me." And he says, "It hurts me down to my soul. These are people I was good to; these are people I was kind to. When they were suffering, I prayed for them; I fasted for them. I treated them like they were my friend or my brother." He said, "I treated them like they were my own mother! And now they want to see me destroyed. Their desire is that my life be ruined. They're like jesters at the party; I've become the brunt of their jokes. They just want to see me destroyed."

I think we all would say it's hard when people persecute us. It's hard when people say things about us that aren't true and try to destroy our reputation. But it's harder still when those people were once our friends. He says, "These are people that we were good to; these are people we cared about." David says, "Some of these people, they don't even know me, but they want to destroy me."

Is David frustrated with God? Yes, he is very frustrated with God.

Lord, how long will You look on? Rescue my soul from their ravages, my only life from the lions. I will give [future tense] You thanks in the great congregation; I will praise You among a mighty throng. Do not let those who are wrongfully my enemies rejoice over me; nor let those who hate me without cause wink maliciously. For they do not speak peace, but they devise deceitful words against those who are quiet in the

land. They opened their mouth wide against me; they said, “Aha, aha, our eyes have seen it!” (vs. 17-21)

Again he says, “God, how long do I have to wait? When You rescue me, we’ll celebrate! We’ll worship! We’ll declare it among the people!” But what he is really saying here is, “God, don’t let them win. Don’t let them triumph. Don’t let them wink at each other, as if somehow evil prospers. You have to make sure that good triumphs over evil. These are evil people. They go about and destroy those who are trying to live quiet, decent lives.”

You have seen it, O LORD, do not keep silent; O Lord, do not be far from me. Stir up Yourself, and awake to my right [*which means: “I’m in the right, God; I need You to walk up and stand by me. Defend me!”*] **And to my cause, my God and my Lord. Judge me, O LORD my God, according to Your righteousness.** (vs. 22-24)

David is so confident that he has done nothing to deserve this, he says, “God, you check me out. You judge me. I’ve done nothing wrong to deserve this!”

And do not let them rejoice over me. Do not let them say in their heart, “Aha, our desire!” Do not let them say, “We have swallowed him up!” Let those be ashamed and humiliated altogether who rejoice at my distress; let those be clothed with shame and dishonor who magnify themselves over me. Let them shout for joy and rejoice, who favor my vindication. (vs. 24b-27a)

“Vindication” here is actually the Hebrew word for righteousness. It is translated righteousness in verse 24 and verse 28, and probably should be in verse 27. What David is saying is, “Let them shout for joy and rejoice in favor of my righteousness.”

And let them say continually, “The LORD be magnified, who delights in the prosperity of His servant.” And my tongue shall declare Your righteousness and Your praise all day long. (vs. 27-28)

Again, this is future tense. But again he prays, “God, those who are doing evil, they need to be shamed; they need to be humiliated; they need to be defeated. And those who stand for righteousness, let them be prospered. Let them come together and celebrate Your goodness.”

So now we’re back to our question. Jesus said, “Love your enemies. Do good to those who persecute you.” Was David unloving here? You say, “Well, that was the New Testament. David lived in the Old Testament.” Actually Jesus was just restating something that was in the Law in the Old Testament. The Law says you are supposed to love your enemy and do good to those who persecute you. So it’s the same thing.

And what about us? How are we supposed to respond when people do that to us? One of the first things I notice in this psalm is the authenticity of David’s prayer. There are no Christian clichés in this prayer. He is just dumping his load. He’s frustrated with God; he’s angry. He has done the right thing and he is being treated unfairly.

I think sometimes we get it in our head there is a certain image we are supposed to maintain to be a “good Christian,” and we try not to admit when we are frustrated or angry. So we put on our good Christian face. Sometimes we take that face into our prayer closet and we fail to be honest with God. The fact is, sometimes we’re frustrated with God and sometimes we’re angry and we don’t understand why God is doing what He is doing. And God knows that. So don’t play “let’s pretend” with God. Just dump it on the table like David did. As a matter of fact, it’s common in the psalms.

God never refutes that. What David is doing is yielding his situation to God. You can't yield it until you own it and express it and say, "This is what it is." Sometimes the first step to healing is just owning what it is. That's what David does here.

The next thing I notice in this psalm is that David is the right person. Several times in this psalm he says, "God, this is without cause." He says, "God, I stand right. Check me out; judge me. I haven't done anything to deserve this." David has obviously already examined his own heart and believes that he is in the right here.

What is the first thing that you want to do when somebody maliciously attacks you? The first thing that I want to do is I just want to...bless them. No, the first thing I want to do is let them have it! I want to get even. Especially if I'm in the right, I want to set the record straight. But before we ever do anything, the first thing we should do is examine our own hearts. Oftentimes when people are maliciously accusing us of things, there is an element of truth in all of that, and sometimes we need to listen and at least acknowledge our own issues and acknowledge our own sin. Don't just dismiss it.

What David is asking for here is justice, and before we ask God for justice we better check out our own hearts, or we may get it. So the first thing we need to do whenever we're in a situation like this is stop and look at our own hearts, deal with our own sin issues, and make sure that we're clean before God. We need to make sure that we can say like David, "I'm right; I'm standing in righteousness." So we need to be the right person.

The next thing is we need to understand the right weapon. David says, "God, You are my weapon. You're my buckler; You're my shield; You're my spear; You're my javelin. There is no one like You. So God, You're going to have to be my weapon."

When we're treated this way, the temptation is to return evil for evil. But when we do that, we become just like them and we will suffer their fate. We will be shamed. We will be humiliated. Rather than doing that, David understands, *God, You have to do what I cannot do. You have to vindicate me. You have to set the record straight. You have to make sure that good triumphs over evil. God, You're my weapon.* And if I really believe that, then I have the right strategy, and my strategy is to pray. My strategy is not to go out and try to control and manipulate the circumstances. If I really believe God is my weapon, then I believe that my strategy needs to be prayer.

It is very important, if we believe this, that we don't pray and then immediately go out and try and fix it. If God is the weapon, then God is the weapon! And God is going to do for us what we can't do for ourselves. There is no one like God.

So David was the right person. He had the right weapon. He had the right strategy.

Sometimes when we're in these circumstances we say, "All I can do is pray"—as if that is on the bottom of the list. Instead, it should be: "What I *can* do is pray. That's my prime strategy. That's my prime weapon. God is going to have to do for me what I can't do for myself."

And finally, we need to do it with the right motives. What is David's motive here? David prays, "God, I want these people shamed. I want them humiliated. I want them ruined. I want them brought to their knees." But it's not because he hates them and he wants them destroyed. It's because they are doing evil. He doesn't want them looking at each other and winking, as if they're pulling this off and somehow evil triumphs over good. That is why he continually says through the psalm, "God, when You step up and deliver me, and when You set the record straight, we're all

going to gather together and we're going to worship You, because then people will know that You are right and that goodness triumphs over evil and that Your righteousness triumphs over our righteousness." So David's concern is that evil doesn't prosper. He wants people to know that in the end only righteousness prevails.

If someone is doing evil against me, what is the most loving thing I could do? Just let it go on? The most loving thing I can do is pray that they will come to grips with their own evil. They need to feel the shame of what they are doing. They need to be humiliated by what they are doing. They need to be ruined by what they are doing. They need to be brought to their knees, that they might repent and change their ways. Sometimes the most loving thing I can do for my enemies is pray that they are confronted with the evil of their actions, that they might change, and the people around them will not get the idea that evil prevails. They must know that goodness prevails, that righteousness always wins out over unrighteousness. And I pray, "God, when that happens, we'll celebrate that and we'll let everybody know."

If this was indeed when David was fleeing from King Saul, it is worth noting that it took about sixteen years for this prayer to be answered. Is he frustrated in this psalm? He is very frustrated. That's why he says, "God, how long? All these people are watching and they're thinking that evil prospers. They're thinking that Saul and his people are going to win. When does righteousness prosper?" Well, for sixteen long years David waited, until God finally vindicated him and put him on the throne and the records were set straight. God eventually answered every one of these prayers. But that is a long time to wait.

How do we respond when people treat us this way—especially when they are people to whom we've been kind, people we've tried to help, people that were once our friends and now they seem bent on destroying us?

The first thing I need to do is examine my own heart and make sure I'm right. The second thing I need to do is recognize that God has to be my weapon. I can't return evil for evil. I can't go out there and fix it—it just doesn't work. So God is going to have to be my weapon. Therefore, my strategy is prayer, and I do it for the right reasons, for the right motives, because I want righteousness to triumph. I want goodness to prevail. I want people to know that ultimately God's ways are the right ways. And when I do that, I am loving my enemy and I am doing good to those who are persecuting me.

Our Father, we are thankful that You are a faithful God. Lord, it would be great if there was never a time when someone in our life was attacking us, spreading rumors, saying things about us that aren't true, seeming to be bent on destroying us. But Lord, I think we all recognize there are going to be those times in our lives when those enemies will emerge. Sometimes they were our friends; that grieves us to our soul. Lord, help us to respond by being the right person, first dealing with our own sin. We have to recognize that You are our shield and our spear and our javelin—that You are our weapon. You can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Lord, help us to understand that our chief strategy is to be on our knees to turn this over to You for the right reasons, that ultimately good would prevail over evil and righteousness would prevail over unrighteousness. Lord, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation.

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