

Contend, O LORD!

Psalm 35

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Have you ever been falsely accused, ridiculed, or persecuted for no good reason? Some of us may have a friend betray us for reasons we don't understand. If you have never had this happen to you, I hope you never do. It is a very painful experience that marks you, leaving you wounded and making you less trusting of people. The fact is, facing false accusations from those we love is one of the most perplexing experiences of the Christian life. This experience is made worse when the betrayal lingers and is unresolved. It can feel like God has forgotten you.

If you have had this experience, then you understand how King David felt as he wrote Psalm 35. This Psalm is a raw and urgent cry from a believer under attack physically and spiritually. It is a Psalm in which David pleads for God to act as his defender against unjust enemies. The language is intense, even unsettling at times, especially to our modern ears. David calls for God to contend, to fight, to pursue, and to bring justice to those who seek to do him harm.

But before we get into Psalm 35, I need to lay some groundwork. There are some things we need to understand about this Psalm before we dig into the text.

First, Psalm 35 is an individual lament that also serves as a corporate prayer, enabling the congregation to support its members who are under attack by malicious people seeking to harm them. It teaches God's people how to pray for the vulnerable and powerless when evil people oppress them. Psalm 35 will help us answer the question: How should we pray for ourselves and for those we love when injustices occur?

Second, Psalm 35 is a lament, but it is primarily an imprecatory psalm. The word imprecation means to curse. We have at least four of these Psalms in the Psalter: Psalm 7, 35, 69, and 109.

In an imprecatory psalm or prayer, the psalmist asks God to bring judgment on his enemies. Ultimately, the psalmist wants God to bring justice against evil and evil people who seek to oppress him and God's people.

Let me give you a quick primer on reading and understanding imprecatory psalms because many people struggle with these psalms. After all, the language is raw and seems harsh to our modern ears.

Here's what I mean: Imprecatory Psalms seem to contradict Jesus' command to love your enemies and bless those who curse you. So, the question is: How do we hold the tension between loving our neighbors and imprecatory prayers together? Here are four principles.

First, the Bible doesn't contradict itself. When we have tensions like this, the problem is not with the Bible but with our understanding of it. This means we must be good students of the Bible so that we study it in context and learn how these tensions fit together.

Here's the mistake some theologians make to resolve this tension. They teach that the God of the Old Testament was a God of wrath, but in the New Testament, he is a God of grace. Friends, it would be wrong to look at imprecatory psalms and conclude that the God of the Old Testament was a God of judgment and wrath, but God in the New Testament is now a God of grace and mercy. This is not how you reconcile the tension.

Friends, God poured out His grace and mercy on people in the Old Testament just like He did in the New Testament. Granted, it was a bit different in the Old Testament because the grace and mercy in the Old Testament find their fulfillment in the New Testament. Nevertheless, the grace and mercy were there. For example, Deuteronomy 4:31 says:

For the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them.

Many Old Testament texts teach us that the LORD is gracious and slow to anger. His people would sin, then God gave them time to repent and return to Him. He gave them His commands and means of grace to seek forgiveness of their sins. This is all grace and mercy from God. The redemptive thread that began in Genesis 3 with the promise of a Messiah to save His people is woven throughout the Old Testament. That is grace and mercy for them and for us; it finds its fulfillment in Jesus.

Likewise, the New Testament teaches us about God's justice, wrath, and judgment. John the Baptist said that Jesus would burn up the chaff of the wicked with unquenchable fire. Also, Jesus said that those who did not receive Him as the Messiah would be thrown into outer darkness and spend eternity in Hell. Lastly, as the church was getting started, we were taught about church discipline. In church discipline, both God's mercy and justice are involved. It is a mercy because it calls for the sinner to repent of their sin. If the person is unwilling to repent, then the church is told to remove the unrepentant sinner for the destruction of the flesh so that they will again have another opportunity to turn from their sin and back to Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, don't make the mistake of believing that the God of the Old Testament was a God of wrath, and the God of the New Testament shows up in Jesus and is all of a sudden grace and mercy. That is a heretical doctrinal position.

Second, imprecatory psalms are prayers. They are prayers spoken to God, asking Him to act. They ask God to bring justice against evil. The word prayer is crucial because these prayers are not acts of vengeance. They are not commands to harm others. They are not expressions of personal retaliation carried out by human hands. They are words spoken to God.

So when David prays for judgment, he is not taking justice into his own hands—he is explicitly refusing to do so. He is, however, asking God to act. Instead of retaliating, David hands judgment over to God because he believed that justice belongs to God.

Third, David was the king and prayed as a king. So, while he prayed as an individual, we also need to remember that David was the king. He was not writing as a private citizen but as the king and judge of the nation of Israel. The judgment he calls for is a righteous judgment upon those who, by opposing him, oppose God.

Think about it this way: It is one thing to forgive a wrong done against us personally. To do so is commendable. But it is quite another thing to be the Judge of a nation and overlook a wrong done by an evil person to another person.

The King and his judges were chiefly responsible for administering law or justice in those circumstances. Listen, a policeman, judge, governor, or president must deal with violent people differently from how you or I might deal with them on a personal level. We may forgive personally, but leaders must enforce the rule of law.

Fourth, the Bible does not call us to choose between love and justice. It calls us to practice love while trusting God with justice. This means we do not take revenge or nurture hatred. Yet, we do not pretend that evil doesn't matter. We can love our enemy and also pray for justice to be done. This means we pray for justice, love our enemies, and leave the judgment to God. You can count on this: Justice will be done. It will be done in this life or at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Let me wrap up this little primer by saying that there is much more that can be said about how to understand imprecatory psalms. I hope this is enough to help you understand Psalm 35 as we work through it, because ultimately, this Psalm will take us to the cross, where justice and mercy meet in Jesus Christ.

So, let's come back to the question that Psalm 35 helps us answer: How should we pray when injustices happen to us or to those we love? Here are three ways to pray that we learn from Psalm 35.

I. Ask the LORD to come to your defense (vv. 1-10)

I want us to focus on vv. 1-3 for this first prayer. Verses 1-3 function not only as an introduction to our first prayer but also to the whole Psalm. Look at vv. 1-3:

Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me! ² Take hold of shield and buckler and rise for my help! ³ Draw

the spear and javelin against my pursuers! Say to my soul, "I am your salvation!"

David begins this Psalm with striking language in v. 1: "Contend" and "fight." These two Hebrew words produce two images that help us pray. Contend is legal language. It is the image of an attorney standing in court making his plea for his client.

The second image is found in the word fight. This is battlefield language. It is the language of war. David's enemies were waging war against him, and he wanted God to "fight" for him. He wanted God to be his Champion, so he asked God to contend for him and fight his battle.

Look at what David prays in v. 2 and at the beginning of v. 3. He asks God to come to his aid and take up the shield, buckler, spear, and javelin against his enemies. While these are the weapons of war, David knows that God is Spirit and doesn't pick up weapons of war in the same way that a man does. David asks God for physical deliverance, but he knows this is a spiritual battle. Look at what he says at the end of v. 3.

Say to my soul, "I am your salvation!"

When David says, "Say to my soul," he wants God to speak to him and give him help in the deepest part of his being – his heart of hearts. He wants God to reassure him that He is his salvation. Listen again to what he says:

Say to [the deepest part of] my soul, "I am your salvation!"

Friends, it is in the moment when we are under attack by the enemy, or even when we have sinned grievously and are accused by the enemy, that we are wretched sinners and not worthy to be saved. We need God to assure us that we belong to Him. We will need assurance of our salvation.

The words David gives us here are for us when we have no words and do not know what to pray. We can pray these words back to the LORD when we need assurance. We can pray:

Please, LORD, say to my soul and to the deepest part of my heart and mind that
You are my salvation! Assure me that You love me!

Friends, the last part of v. 3 is deeply personal. David does not merely want deliverance; he wants assurance. He wants God's presence and God's voice to quiet his fears. This is a son running to the arms of his Father for protection and assurance.

In this prayer, David assumes something foundational. Here it is: He assumes and believes God is just, and God defends the righteous.

But here's the tension—David is not perfectly righteous. Like all of us, he is a sinner. So how can he appeal to God's justice? This is where the Psalm begins to point beyond itself.

Jesus Christ is the true and perfect righteous sufferer. Where David was relatively innocent because of God's mercy and grace given to him, Christ was absolutely innocent.

Jesus was falsely accused, surrounded by enemies, mocked, slandered, and condemned, and yet, unlike David, Jesus did not call down judgment on His enemies. Instead, Jesus prayed in Luke 23:34,
"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Why would He pray this prayer? Because He was taking the judgment we deserve. Psalm 35 shows us what justice demands—but the gospel shows us how justice is satisfied in Christ.

So, how do we pray when injustices happen to us or those we love? When you are attacked, misunderstood, or treated unjustly, we can cry out to God with honest, raw prayers like David's. We can ask Him to defend us and contend for us. We can ask God to fight for us, but we must entrust justice to Him rather than taking justice into our own hands. We can ask Him to assure us of His love for us in the middle of the struggle.

Romans 12:19 echoes this:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God.

Friends, the person and work of Christ in the gospel frees us from the burden of trying to defend ourselves and fight our own battles because Christ has already fought the battle and won. We can rest in His victory.

Because Christ defended us on the cross and, by His resurrection, won the battle, by faith even while the battle rages in our lives, we can sing vv. 9-10 with King David:

Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD, exulting in his salvation. ¹⁰ All my bones shall say, "O LORD, who is like you, delivering the poor from him who is too strong for him, the poor and needy from him who robs him?"

David received the assurance he longed for, and we will too when we ask the LORD to defend us and contend for us in the heat of the battle.

II. Take your grief to the LORD in prayer (vv. 11-18)

The second way we can pray when injustices hit our lives or the lives of those we love is to take our grief over these injustices to the LORD in prayer.

In vv. 11-18, David describes the nature of his suffering. First, listen to vv. 11-12:

Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me of things that I do not know. ¹² They repay me evil for good; my soul is bereft.

What David is describing in these two verses is legal injustice. The false witnesses are testifying against him. The phrase "they repay me evil for good" highlights the depth of the betrayal.

However, in vv. 13-14, David recounts how he treated these very people with kindness:

But I, when they were sick— I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting; I prayed with head bowed on my chest. ¹⁴ I went about as though I grieved for my friend or my brother; as one who laments his mother, I bowed down in mourning.

David contrasts how they treated him with how he treated them. He loved his neighbors and mourned for them as if they were family members. Yet now, they rejoice in his downfall. Their behavior toward him was not just opposition—it was treachery. As a result, his heart was broken.

We need to keep in mind that these malicious witnesses had once been David's friends, or at the very least had been in a good relationship with him. Verse 7 tells us that they had no cause to want his downfall. Then v. 19 says these people "are wrongfully my foes." Yet, now they are enemies, and this broke his heart.

David's grief was real. He was confused by their attacks and wondered, "Why were they doing this?" He felt isolated and all alone as they gathered around him and mocked him. This was the pain of this relational betrayal, and it was a massive hurt to him.

Have you ever been where King David has been? Have you ever experienced this? Perhaps you were the one who inflicted the pain, and now you feel grief over betraying another. What do you do with this kind of pain? How do you process it?

Friends, when this kind of betrayal and pain comes into our lives, we can take this to Jesus. Verses 11-18 find their fulfillment in Christ, who is the true Righteous Sufferer. Jesus was betrayed by a close friend (Judas). He was accused by false witnesses and was repaid evil for good. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, and preached truth—yet was crucified. Psalm 35 helps us see that Jesus' suffering was not random—it was the culmination of the pattern of the righteous sufferer seen throughout Scripture.

Here's the deal: Many people experience the pain of betrayal. Perhaps a friend turns against you. Perhaps a coworker undermines you. Perhaps a family member betrays your trust. Friends, Psalm 35 gives us language to

help us pray through our pain. We can pray and take the grief of our betrayal or another's betrayal to the Lord Jesus, who has been where we are. The gospel gives us something more than a distant Savior. The gospel gives us a Savior who is like us in every respect except without sin. Hebrews 4:15 reminds us:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Jesus knows what it is like to be falsely accused. He knows what it is like to be abandoned. And because of that, you and I can bring our wounds and grief over injustices to Him. We can pour out our grieving hearts to Him because He not only understands, but He has been where we have been. Jesus' betrayal that led to His death on the cross was a sacrifice that not only paid for our sins but also purchased healing grace.

III. Ask the LORD for vindication (vv. 19-28)

The third and final prayer we can pray when injustices hit our lives or the lives of those we love is a prayer of vindication. Look at what David writes in vv. 19-22:

Let not those rejoice over me who are wrongfully my foes, and let not those wink the eye who hate me without cause.²⁰ For they do not speak peace, but against those who are quiet in the land they devise words of deceit.²¹ They open wide their mouths against me; they say, "Aha, Aha! Our eyes have seen it!"

Look back at the phrase "without cause" in v. 19. This is the key phrase as he recounts all the evil they have committed against him. He emphasizes that the hostility directed against him was unjustified because it was "without cause." There was no good reason for them to treat him as they did.

Then in vv. 22-26 he asks God to vindicate him:

You have seen, O LORD; be not silent! O Lord, be not far from me!²³ Awake and rouse yourself for my vindication, for my cause, my God and my Lord!²⁴ Vindicate me, O LORD, my God, according to your righteousness, and let them not rejoice over me!²⁵ Let them not say in their hearts, "Aha, our heart's desire!" Let them not say, "We have swallowed him up."²⁶ Let them be put to shame and disappointed altogether who rejoice at my calamity! Let them be clothed with shame and dishonor who magnify themselves against me!

In these verses, David goes to the LORD and asks Him to vindicate him publicly and silence his enemies. This would restore justice.

Lastly, David ends Psalm 35 with these words in v. 28:

Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness and of your praise all the day long.

Imprecatory psalms are similar to psalms of lament in that they express complaint, pain, and grief, and both end with the same confession of faith and desire to praise God. They both desire to trust God in their painful circumstances and see Him glorified. David's ultimate goal was not just personal relief but also public praise of God.

So, now we see the prayers Psalm 35 teaches us to pray, let me close by pulling together these tensions we find in Psalm 35. The prayers help us understand much of the tension of imprecatory prayers, but we need to keep digging deeper.

Friends, the difficulty of imprecatory psalms is that they call for judgment, yet Jesus commands us to love our enemies. The question I want to answer is: How does the gospel teach us to reconcile this tension? I touched on it earlier, but I want to drive home this point as I conclude.

So, when injustices occur against us or those we love, we can appeal to God's justice by pressing into the gospel because at the cross, two things happened simultaneously – God's justice was satisfied, and God's mercy met in Christ.

First, in Jesus' death on the cross, God's justice was upheld as sin was punished when God's wrath was poured out on Him. Jesus is the Substitute who received God's wrath for the sins of His people. He died in our place and thus paid the penalty for our sin. So, for those who have come to Jesus by faith and repentance of their sins – we only receive mercy because Jesus received our judgment. Knowing that we have been set free from the penalty of our sin gives us the grace and opportunity to set others free from their sins against us. How can we withhold forgiveness when God has forgiven us of our sins?

Second, God's mercy is extended in Christ's death on the cross. Sinners find forgiveness when they come to Jesus in repentance and faith in His completed work on the cross. The bottom line is: Jesus absorbed the judgment that Psalm 35 calls for.

What this means is that when those who have betrayed us and sinned against us repent of those sins, they are free because Christ has paid for their sins too. However, if they do not repent and die in that state of unrepentance, then God's justice will be satisfied as they spend eternity in Hell paying for their sins not just against you but against a holy, holy, holy God.

Just a quick footnote here. When someone sins against you, it will not merit eternity in hell paying for that sin. However, when someone sins against an infinitely holy God who is pure goodness, mercy, righteousness, and grace – that sin merits eternity in Hell. This may be difficult for you and me to conceive, but it is because you and I tend to have a low view of the holiness of God and what it means to sin against this kind of holiness.

So, when we are attacked and injustices come into our lives, we run to God in prayer. We can pray for justice to be done and rest in knowing that God's justice is satisfied in Christ, and yet His mercy extends even to our enemies if they repent of their sins.

Third, when we are attacked and treated unjustly, we must remember that Jesus has walked this path before us. Instead of trying to control the circumstances, we turn to the One who has walked this path. We must remember we are not alone, for He walks with us through the valley of the Shadow of Death.

Fourth, when we want justice, we must look to the cross of Christ and remember that Jesus took our injustice toward Him. The cross assures us that sin will be punished and justice will be done. This doesn't mean we ignore the wrongs done to us, but we remember that Jesus has forgiven us for the injustices we committed against Him. Remembering this helps us put injustices done to us in perspective.

Fifth, when we are vindicated, we must give glory to God. David ends Psalm 35 in a strong expression of faith in God. Listen, we don't know when David was vindicated, but by faith, he praised God, believing he would be. And if vindication didn't occur in his lifetime, it did occur at the cross of Christ, where the True King of Israel died to pay for our injustices and sins. Where David cried for deliverance, Jesus accomplished it. Where David called for justice, Jesus satisfied it.

Friends, the person and work of Jesus in the gospel make it possible to pray Psalm 35 from the heart. In Christ, we can lay down our desire for revenge and look to the One to whom the ultimate injustice occurred. Jesus is the only truly righteous man who was condemned. And, yet, through that injustice, God accomplished the greatest act of justice and mercy the world has ever known—the salvation of sinners.