

Psalm 35

Office of Readings Friday Week 1

This is an intense and insistent plea for YHWH to intervene on the side of the psalmist against his enemies who are bringing false accusations against him. Especially tragic is that his enemies are people whom he has supported when they were in trouble. There are three movements (Parts One to Three) each of which ends in a call to praise God. In describing his painful situation, he uses images taken from war and from the hunt. The title reads: 'Of David'.

Praying this psalm as a Christian we might note the following statement from Peter's First Letter: 'For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God'(1Peter 3:18).

Part One

¹YHWH*, contend with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me!

²Take hold of shield and buckler. Rise up in my defence!

³Take up the spear and block the way against my pursuers; say to me*, 'I am your deliverance*.'

⁴Let those who seek after my life be put to shame and dishonour. Let those who devise evil against me be turned back and confounded.

⁵Let them be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of YHWH scattering them.

⁶Let their way be dark and slippery, with the angel of YHWH pursuing them.

The psalm opens with an urgent plea to the warrior God to fight against the psalmist's aggressors.

'Me' translates the Hebrew *nepesh*. He wants God's words to reach right down to the depths of his longing. See the article 'Being' in the Introduction. On 'deliverance, see also the article 'Saving help'.

The expression 'the angel of YHWH' occurred in the previous psalm (Psalm 34:7). As noted there it is a way of acknowledging God's action in history while carefully preserving God's transcendence. We might read the story of Balaam in Numbers 22, or the following:

That very night the angel of YHWH set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians.

– 2Kings 19:35

Matthew speaks of 'the Angel of the Lord' in his prologue (Matthew 1:20, 24; 2:13, 19), and at the resurrection (Matthew 28:2). He is speaking of a revelation from God, as is Luke in his account of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:9), and in Acts 5:19, 8:26, 12:7, 23.

Though he has done nothing to deserve it, they seek to trap him. He prays that they may be caught in their own trap. John alludes to this psalm when he has Jesus say:

It was to fulfil the word that is written in their law,
‘They hated me without a cause.’

– John 15:25

‘My whole being’ in verse nine translates the Hebrew *nepeš*. See the article ‘Being’ in the Introduction. His ‘bones’ – strong enough to survive the hurts inflicted on him by his enemies – acknowledge that there is no one like YHWH who can be relied on to hear the cry of the poor.

Who is like you, YHWH, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendour, doing wonders?

– Exodus 15:11

YHWH, God of hosts, who is like you?
Your power, YHWH, and your faithfulness surround you.

– Psalm 89:8

You deliver the poor from those too strong for them,
the poor and needy from those who despoil them

– Psalm 35:10

Part Two

Ungrateful enemies are using the justice system to work injustice. See the article on ‘Legal System’ in the Introduction. The psalmist speaks of the good he has done for these people who have turned against him. It is clear that he cared for them deeply, and now they have turned against him.

‘Me’ in verse twelve, as in verse three and later in verse seventeen, and ‘my whole being’ in verse nine, translates the Hebrew *nepeš*. See also verse twenty-five where it is translated ‘what our whole being has wanted’. In each case the author is speaking about his own or another person’s deepest longing.

7For without cause they hid their net to catch me; for nothing they dug a pit to take my life.

8Let ruin come on them unawares. And let the net that they hid ensnare them; let them fall into the pit, to their own ruin.

9Then my whole being* shall rejoice in YHWH, exulting in his deliverance*.

10All my bones shall say, ‘O Lord, who is like you? You deliver the poor* from those too strong for them, the poor* and needy* from those who despoil them.’

11Malicious witnesses rise up; they accuse me of things about which I know nothing.

12They repay me evil for good; they leave me* defenceless.

13But as for me, when they were sick, I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting. I prayed with my head bowed on my bosom

14as though I grieved for a friend or a brother.

I went about as one who laments for a mother, bowed down and in mourning.

Pleading for God's help

¹⁵But when I faltered they gathered in glee,
they gathered together against me;
ruffians whom I did not know tore at me without ceasing;
¹⁶lacking piety, they mocked more and more, gnashing their teeth at me.

His enemies are repaying good with evil. We think of Jesus being scourged and mocked during his trial.

¹⁷How long, O Lord, will you look on?
Rescue me* from their ravages, my life from the lions!

¹⁸Then I will thank you in the great congregation;
in the mighty throng I will praise you.

'Congregation' is ekklēsia in the Greek – the New Testament word for 'church'.

Part Three

¹⁹Do not let my treacherous enemies rejoice over me,
or those who hate me without cause enjoy themselves at my expense.

²⁰For they do not speak peace.

They conceive deceitful words against those who are quiet in the land.

²¹They open wide their mouths against me;
they say, 'Aha, Aha, we saw you do it.'

²²YHWH, you have seen; do not be silent!
O Lord, do not be far from me!

²³Wake up! Bestir yourself for my defence,
for my cause, my God and my Lord!

²⁴Vindicate me, YHWH, my God, according to your justice*,
and do not let them rejoice over me.

²⁵Do not let them say in their hearts*,
'Aha, we have what we have always been wanting*.'
Do not let them say, 'We have devoured you.'

²⁶Let all those who rejoice at my calamity be put to shame and confusion;
let those who exalt themselves against me
be clothed with shame and dishonour.

²⁷Let those who desire justice* for me shout for joy and be glad,
and say evermore, 'Great is YHWH,
who delights in the welfare of his servant.'

²⁸Then my tongue shall tell of your justice*
and praise you all day long.