

Responding to Attack

Psalm 35

Rev. Tobias Riggs

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Well, good morning. For those of you who don't know, my name is Tobias. I'm the Associate Pastor here at Christ the King, and I'm delighted to get to open up God's Word for us this morning as we continue with our summer series in the Psalms. And if you were with us last week, you'll remember that Penny preached on Psalm 50. And there's a striking difference, I think, between that Psalm and the one we're going to be looking at this morning, Psalm 35. You see, in Psalm 50, it's primarily God and not the psalmist who speaks. And more than anything else, we hear him give testimony against the wicked. But in our Psalm this morning, it's David we hear speaking, and he's asking the Lord to give testimony not so much against the wicked, but on his behalf.

In fact, what he's really doing throughout the Psalm is praying for deliverance. And what I hope we'll see as we look at this Psalm is that in it, through the servant of the Lord, David, the Lord has given us a model for how we, as followers of Jesus, can respond if and when we're similarly attacked. And so I invite you to open your copy of God's Word to Psalm 35 if you haven't, and we'll read all 28 verses there.

“A Psalm of David, for the memorial offering.

O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath!

For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me.

There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin.

For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me.

My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness,

I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning.

For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh.

I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart.

O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you.

My heart throbs; my strength fails me, and the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me.

My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off.

Those who seek my life lay their snares; those who seek my hurt speak of ruin and meditate treachery all day long.

But I am like a deaf man; I do not hear, like a mute man who does not open his mouth.

I have become like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no rebukes.

But for you, O LORD, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.

For I said, “Only let them not rejoice over me, who boast against me when my foot slips!”

For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever before me.

I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin.

But my foes are vigorous, they are mighty, and many are those who hate me wrongfully.

Those who render me evil for good accuse me because I follow after good.

Do not forsake me, O LORD! O my God, be not far from me!
Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!" (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Oh, Heavenly Father, we thank you. We bow before you today, and we say with David, Who is like you? Indeed, no one, nothing, no God. You alone are the one true and living God. And we thank you, Lord, that you have called us together this morning. We thank you that you have called us to yourself. And we ask, Lord, that by your spirit you will open our ears and eyes, help us to apprehend the truths that you make so plain in your word. Help us to learn more about who you are, what you have done, and what you call us to as your people. Pierce our hearts this morning, Lord, by your word. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Well, as we begin this morning, I'd like to invite you to reflect for a moment on a time when you felt like you were the object of an unjust attack. Perhaps it was a time when you were bullied at school, a time when, through no fault of your own, perhaps because you didn't look a certain way, or you lacked skill, or you had quirky interests, or maybe it was because of your belief in Jesus, you were openly ridiculed and picked on by your peers, and maybe even a teacher. It's happened. Perhaps it was a time when something you said or did was deliberately misinterpreted and turned into a scandal, perhaps even by those you trusted, and lies about you were spread throughout the community or across social media. Or perhaps it was a time when you suffered demotion or firing at work, and the reason wasn't your poor performance. It was just office politics, pure and simple. But even if you can't think of the time when you personally experienced an unjust attack, well, first of all, I'd say count yourself blessed. But even if that's the case, I'm sure you're still able to recognize injustice. I mean, we all seem to have pretty well attuned justice meters, don't we? Particularly our children.

They're the first to say, not fair. And because of this, I think we all can at least imagine the deep and lasting pain that such attacks can cause. They can carry in their wake feelings of anger and resentment, shame and despair, and what's more, they often leave us confused about how to respond, both to the unpleasant feelings we're experiencing and to our attackers. So how should we, as followers of Jesus, respond when we're attacked unjustly? Well, in our psalm this morning, it's clear that David was suffering an unjust attack. It could have been at the hand of Saul. Maybe it was the hand of Ahithophel. David doesn't tell us, and we can't know. But what I think really matters is not so much the details, the specific details, but how David responds to the attack, because I think it's deeply instructive for us. And so as we walk through this psalm this morning, the first thing I'd like us to do is I'd like to point out just what this psalm actually does reveal about the things David was experiencing at this moment in his life. And then I'd like to highlight some of the more significant things that make his response a model for us that we can learn from and embrace as we encounter similar circumstances.

So go ahead and look at the psalm. And as you look over it, I want you to notice that it divides pretty neatly into three sections, each including varying descriptions of the attack and David's pleas for deliverance. The sections are verses 1-10, 11-18, and 19-28. And we can see that this is the way he structures his response, because at the end of each of these sections, David promises in turn that he'll rejoice in the Lord, that he'll thank him in the midst of the congregation, and that he'll testify to the Lord's righteousness. In other words, at the end of

each of these sections, David vows to praise him for his deliverance. Now on the one hand, this isn't something particularly remarkable. In fact, this is something we've come to expect as we've gone through the psalms. I mean, how many times have we heard the psalmist praise the Lord for his deliverance, right? And yet what's striking to me is that here, these three vows are oriented toward the future. David says that he will, or he shall, praise the Lord, but he's not doing it yet. And this is very different than what we hear him doing in the preceding psalm, in Psalm 34. You see, there we hear him say, "my soul makes its boast in the Lord," and he urges the congregation to magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together.

In other words, in that psalm, David's offering his praise and calling on his companions to join him in the present. And that's because in Psalm 34, David had already experienced the Lord's salvation. In fact, the entire psalm gives testimony to it as a psalm of praise. But that's not the case in Psalm 35. It's not a psalm of praise. Instead, it's really a prayer for deliverance. And that's because David was in the midst of turmoil and attack as he wrote this psalm. He hadn't yet experienced the Lord's salvation. Instead, he was calling out for it. And this is clear right from the beginning. In verse one, he says, "contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me. Fight against those who fight against me."

In verses 2 and 3, he calls on the Lord to take up his weapons and to help him. In verse 3, we hear David in desperation plead with the Lord to speak to him words of consolation. "I am your salvation." And what's more, later on, we hear him calling the Lord. And in verses 22 through 24, not to be silent, not to be far from him, to awake and arouse himself for David's sake and to vindicate him. And again, there's a striking difference in what David communicates here and what he'd said in the previous psalm, especially since both psalms draw on the same imagery of the Lord's physical senses in his presence.

For example, in Psalm 34, David praises the Lord because he'd already answered and delivered him, because he'd heard him and he'd saved him, because the Lord's eyes and ears were toward him and he'd heard his cry, and because the Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. But here, in this psalm, in the midst of the attack, David feels the distance of the Lord, not his comforting presence. He knows that the Lord who sees all surely sees his suffering, but he hasn't acted. He's remained silent. And so the Lord's omniscience isn't a comforting thought. It only adds to his confusion. And so we hear him cry out in desperation in verse 17, "how long, O Lord, will you look on, rescue me from their destruction, my precious life from the lions." So what, so what was going on? How was David suffering? Well, there are several things that David's prayer makes clear for us. For example, we know that he felt his life was being threatened and that he was powerless to do anything about it. And we know that the attack was a sneaky one. After all, David says in verses 7 and 8 that they hid a net and dug a pit for him. Now that said, I don't think his assailants had actually done those things, hid a net and dug a pit.

I think this was just David's metaphorical description of their attack. And that's because as he goes on in the second and third sections, he makes it pretty clear that their attack was a verbal one, not physical. Notice what he says in verse 11. He calls them malicious witnesses. And in verses 15 and 16, he calls them profane mockers who rejoiced at his stumbling, gnashing their teeth at him, which was a common image for verbal threats and attacks. And you might remember that this is exactly what the Jewish leadership does at Stephen right before they stone him. And in verses 20 and 21, David calls them out as those who don't speak words of peace, which is the exact opposite of what they should have been doing, as David makes clear in Psalm 34:14, pursue peace. Instead, he says they devise words of deceit and open wide

their mouths against him saying, aha, aha, our eyes have seen it. In other words, what David was suffering was a vicious attack of false accusations. Wicked and unscrupulous men were bearing false witness against him. And friends, we need to remember that bearing false witness was and is a serious offense. It's one of the Ten Commandments. And in the Old Testament community, it was punishable as a capital crime. And yet this didn't stop them. In their pride, they scorned the Lord's law. And their attack apparently had such force behind it that it was threatening David's life. And we can be sure that their allegations were false and that the attack was unjust because David himself tells us plainly that they were. Notice what he says in verse 7. He says, "for without cause, they hid their net from me. Without cause, they dug a pit for my life." And likewise, he says in verse 19, "let not those rejoice over me who are wrongfully my foes. And let not those wink the eye who hate me without cause."

And friends, on top of all of this, we know that David wasn't just the victim of an unjust attack. He was the victim of hard-hearted betrayal. And this made his suffering all the more unbearable. You see, David tells us in verses 13 and 14 that when his assailants were sick, he donned sackcloth and fasted. He prayed for them with his head bowed low. He entered into their pain with his own grief, and he mourned for them as if they were his very own family. In other words, David had been a true friend to them in their time of need. But unlike David, when his attackers saw him stumble, whatever this stumbling he mentions was in verse 15, perhaps it was sickness or moral failure, we don't know. But once they saw him stumble, they didn't offer help. Instead, they seized upon it as an opportunity to attack, repaying him evil for good and leaving his soul bereft. Friends, can you imagine what David was suffering? His pain and sadness and anger must have been overwhelming. Perhaps you've experienced something similar in your own life, or maybe you're experiencing something like this even now, and you're uncertain about how to respond.

You're unsure of what to do with the feelings of resentment and anger, or how to deal with feeling like you're alone in the struggle, perhaps even abandoned by God. Friends, I want to speak into this pain and confusion, and I want us to see together as a community that this Psalm of David gives us a trustworthy and beautiful model for how we as followers of Jesus can respond faithfully in these situations. So how does it do this? Well, there are many, many things we could reflect on with such a rich and vivid Psalm, but there are three things in particular that I'd like to highlight that I think are especially instructive. But before we get to these, let me just point out a more general, no less significant, but a more general thing this Psalm models for us, and that's this. This Psalm urges us to pray in these situations. It urges us to pray. Remember what I said earlier, this isn't a psalm of praise. It's really a prayer for deliverance, and that's what David did. In the midst of his struggle, he didn't fall back on his own defenses, and he didn't attempt a counterattack, and he didn't fall into despair either.

None of these things are hinted at in this Psalm. Instead, he turned to the Lord in prayer, and you know, in this way, he did the very thing our Lord would do a thousand years later. When facing his darkest hour on the cross, he turned to his Father in prayer with the words of Psalm 22, and despite that Psalm's bleak opening, "my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" It's actually a Psalm that's full of hope in the Lord's deliverance, and having prayed, he committed his spirit into his Father's hands. And so, in these situations, brothers and sisters, like David and like Jesus, let us be ready and eager to turn to the Lord in prayer. Well, that's the general thing this Psalm models for us. It urges us to pray, but what about the particulars? Well, as I said, there are three things I'd like to highlight in the time we have remaining, and I think these are particularly helpful, and the first is this.

This Psalm encourages us in the midst of our suffering to reflect on the character of the Lord and to remember his past deeds of deliverance as we pray. Notice what David says in verses five and six. He says, let them be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the Lord driving them away. Let their way be dark and slippery, with the angel of the Lord pursuing them. Now, it might not be immediately obvious, but David's reference to the Lord, to the angel of the Lord here, is significant. You see, after the Lord had redeemed his people from the hand of Pharaoh, he promised that he would continue to protect them, saying in Exodus 23-20, behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. And so what I think David is doing, I think that what this tells us is that in the midst of his suffering, he was recalling the Lord's past deeds of deliverance, particularly his faithfulness to his people in the Exodus. And his promise of his protecting angel. And he was finding reassurance in them.

And I think it's even more certain that this is what David was doing when we consider his rhetorical question, oh 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. When we consider this and notice how similar this is to what Moses said in the song he sang after the Exodus in Exodus 15-11, who is like you, oh Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? And you know, the apostle Paul understood the power of remembering the Lord's past deliverances. This is why we hear him, like David, reflecting on them in his own struggles when he says in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10, for we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly beyond, burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death, but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such deadly peril, and he will deliver us.

On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. Friends, did you catch that? He says he delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You see, friends, the Lord's past deeds of deliverance are a testimony both to his power to save and to his faithfulness to his people, and their recollection ought to animate our prayers in time of need. Well, the second thing I think David's prayer here models for us is this. It encourages us to pray boldly for the Lord's justice when we're attacked. We hear David praying for this when he calls out to the Lord for vindication, saying in verses 23 through 24, awake and rouse yourself for my vindication, for my cause, my God, and my Lord. Vindicate me, O Lord my God, according to your righteousness, and let them not rejoice over me. And when we hear David praying this way, we're giving it our amen, aren't we? And that's because we're rooting for David.

We see the injustice he's enduring, and we want his suffering to stop. And yet, we need to remember that the Lord's justice doesn't simply involve the vindication of the righteous. It also involves the condemnation of the wicked. And throughout this psalm, repeatedly, I'm sure you noticed, we hear David praying for this as well. In verses 1 through 3, he calls on the Lord to don the weapons like a divine warrior, and to fight them. And we know how that fight is going to end. In verses 5 through 6, he urges the Lord to blow them away like mere chaff, and to make their way of escape dark and slippery, almost like easy pickings. In verse 8, he prays for the Lord to turn their hidden snare and pit into obstacles of their own destruction. And to top it off, in verse 26, we hear David call on the Lord to put his assailants to public shame and dishonor. And you know, when we hear David pray this way, I think if we're honest with ourselves, it makes us a bit uncomfortable, doesn't it? Particularly as we're trying to see in this psalm a model for our own prayers. I mean, how do we as followers of Jesus square these types of prayers with Jesus's own command to love our enemies, and to

pray for those who persecute us? And friends, admittedly, I think this is a complicated issue, and we're not about to exhaust it this morning. But let me just make two framing comments, and then if you want to talk about it further, pull me aside after.

The first is this. Praying for the condemnation of the wicked isn't praying for personal vengeance. Praying for their condemnation is not praying for personal vengeance, and that's not what David was doing. Instead, it's a reflection of our belief that we're locked in a cosmic spiritual battle against real evil, a battle that led to our Lord's death. And it's a reflection of our desire for the Lord to powerfully intervene and to make things right for both his glory and his honor, and certainly not for our own. And secondly, in light of the finished work of Christ, praying for the condemnation of the wicked should, I think, always be tempered with sincere prayers for our enemies to turn away from their sin and to the Lord in repentance and faith. And with this in mind, I think we do well to remember that the only people the Apostle Paul cursed were those who persisted in their rejection of Jesus. Those who, as he says in 1 Corinthians 16:22, have no love for the Lord. Well, briefly, the last thing I think David's prayer here models for us is this.

This psalm urges us, when we're attacked, to pray with hope. It urges us to pray with hope. You'll remember that one of the differences I pointed out between this psalm and the previous one is that in Psalm 34, David had already experienced the salvation of the Lord, whereas here, he was calling out for it in the midst of his suffering. And what I think is deeply, deeply instructive for us is that David didn't despair, even though the Lord was tarrying. Instead, he vowed three times at the end of each section in verses 10 and 18 and 28 to praise the Lord for his deliverance.

You see, despite his painful circumstances, his hope remained unfailingly in the Lord. And perhaps more than any other reason, I think this is because he was convinced of the Lord's love for him. You see, one of my favorite phrases from this psalm is the phrase David uses in verse 17 in reference to himself as he questions the timing of the Lord's rescue. He says, "my precious life." And it's one of my favorites because it reveals a truth that David, sinner though he was, cherished. He knew that he was precious to the Lord. He knew that he was loved by the Lord. And because of that, and despite his circumstances, his trust in the Lord was absolutely unwavering. Friends, what about you? Is this a truth that you know and cherish? Is it a truth you cling to in the midst of your own suffering?

Listen to what Jesus said in John 16:27. He says this, "for the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God." Don't misunderstand me. If you've put your faith in the Lord, the Father's love for you doesn't mean you won't experience the pain of unjust attacks. In fact, we need to remember that Jesus who quoted this very psalm in John 15:25 saying they hated me without cause. He also said that the world would hate us. And so like David's own experience here in this psalm suggests David, who was precious to the Lord, I think we as followers of Jesus should anticipate unjust attacks. But friends, also like David, this shouldn't be cause for despair. It should cause us to pray, rejoicing in the hope of the Lord's deliverance, recalling his mighty deeds, and resting in his love. For Jesus himself gives us these precious words of assurance. "I have said these things to you that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take heart. I have overcome the world."

Let's pray.

Almighty God, once again we bow before you. We thank you that we have access to you through prayer. We thank you that we can know with certainty that you are with us even in the midst of our suffering. In fact, that as we pray it is you through the spirit that intercedes on our behalf. Oh Father, make us a praying people. Help us to turn to you when we are attacked. We pray too, Lord, for our brothers and sisters all over the world who are experiencing unjust attack day in and day out simply because of their faith in you. We ask, Lord, that you will bolster them up. We ask, Lord, that you will protect them. We ask, Lord, that you will give them peace and comfort, that they will pray and find rest in you. Father, may this be true of us as well. We pray all of this in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.