

Psalm 35

What to Do When You are Attacked

1. Background

The title of the Psalm ("Of David") tells us to look at David's life for a setting. The presence of (a) enemies who pursue David's life, (b) a man whose serious illness had caused David personal grief, but who returned evil intent for David's good disposition, and (c) a cohort of treacherous men who plotted against David, suggests the time when David fled from the court of Saul and for a time lived as an outlaw in the land over which God had promised he would be king. It is appropriate then that this Psalm follows Ps. 34 whose setting is the time when David fled from Saul's court to that of Achish.

2. Structure

The structure of the Psalm is simple. It is in three sections (vv. 1-10, 11-18, 19-28) each of which concludes with an affirmation that David will praise God – especially, that he will praise God for the salvation God will provide.

As well as the concluding affirmation, each section also contains (a) a prayer in which David commits his cause to God and (b) an indictment of David's enemies in which David imprecates them. If we label the prayers "A", the indictments "B" and the affirmations "C", then (for what it is worth – and I put this forward very tentatively) an additional pattern emerges:

A (vv. 1-3)	C (v. 18)
B (vv. 4-8)	B (vv. 19-21)
C (vv. 9-10)	A (vv. 22-25)
B (vv. 11-16)	B (v. 26)
A (v. 17)	C (vv. 27-28)

If this additional pattern is significant, it takes the emphasis in the Psalm off the indictment-imprecation sections (the "B" sections) and places it on the prayers (the "A" sections) and the affirmations of confidence (the "C" sections).

3. The imprecations

Undoubtedly the imprecations (calling down of curses) in the psalm are troubling. How, we ask, can we, who are commanded "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44) use such passages as Ps. 35:4-8? Michael Wilcock provides some useful guidance, which I summarise here.

(a) Begin by recognizing that it will not do to excise the imprecations from the psalms. The fact is that both the OT and the NT command us to love our neighbour as ourselves; both contain stern warnings against vindictiveness and gloating; both enunciate chilling condemnation of the ungodly. So the question is not whether the psalms would make more sense if we took the imprecations out, but rather, to see the sense they do make when we leave them in.

(b) Then recognize who is cursing and who is being cursed. David is speaking and he is speaking against Saul. David and Saul were not private people – Saul was king of Israel, and David was king-elect. The conflict that lies behind the psalm therefore goes to the heart of the stability and security of the people of God. To be sure, God had chosen Saul to be king; but Saul had proven to be disobedient and had forfeited the kingdom (1 Sam. 13:14; 15:26). In his place God chose David, knowing that David would obey (1 Sam. 16:1; Acts 13:22). Saul knew this – and it inflamed his opposition to David (1 Sam. 20:31). So behind the psalm lies a conflict about who rules God's kingdom; and David's desire for Saul's downfall was not personal (1 Sam. 24:12; 26:24; 2 Sam. 1:19-27) but pastoral – it was necessary for the good of the nation.

Does that sound familiar? It ought to. In his capacity as the suffering king-elect, David is a picture of Jesus in his state of humiliation. Indeed, Jesus quotes v. 19 in John 15:25. The King's desire for the destruction of his enemies is not the result of vindictiveness, but a pastoral concern for the welfare of his people.

(c) Wilcock suggests six practical points about the use of Scripture's imprecations:

- David did not seek revenge on Saul, but committed his cause to God (Deut. 32:25; Rom. 12:19).
- Moral outrage against evil is right and proper (Eph. 4:26; Ps. 4:4; Rom. 12:9; Amos 5:15).
- David's outrage against injustice is consistent with the attitude of (to name but three) Moses, Isaiah, and Paul. Jesus above all pronounced woes on those who rejected him (Matt. 23:1-39; Luke 6:24-26).
- When we pray "Your kingdom come" we are praying "that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed... that Christ would rule in our hearts... and that he would be please so to exercise the kingdom of his power in all the world" (Larger Catechism, Q&A 191).
- Retribution is integral to the rule of God (Ezek. 33:1-20; Rev. 20:11-15).
- When Jesus quoted Ps. 35:19 he warned us that we may expect the same treatment from the world (John 15:18-25). Ps. 35 is part of our experience.

John Goldingay comments, "Christians are rather inclined to ask God to remove fear and rage from their hearts, but the psalm invites the inference that this would be inappropriate (or at least a second best). The fear and rage can be deep and proper responses to ways other people are behaving. The fear and rage are designed to do something with, not to be evaded. They are not designed to drive the people under attack to action, but they are designed to drive them to prayer. Perhaps if that happens, the anxiety and rage will calm; but this is the route to such calming, not some supernatural act that takes away these proper feelings before they have done their work.

"Being ourselves not under attack, we are urged by the psalm to put ourselves into the position of people who are thus under attack. The psalm implies that if we are not incensed by persecution and oppression and do not want to urge God to put down the attackers, there is something wrong with us."

(Physical attack)

- ¹ Of David.
Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me;
fight against those who fight against me.
- ² Grip small shield and body shield;
and rise up for my help.
- ³ Draw out spear and javelin to meet those who
pursue me;
say to my soul, "I am your salvation."
- ⁴ Let those who seek my soul be ashamed and
disgraced;
let those who plan my ruin turn back and bear
reproach.
- ⁵ Let them be like chaff before the wind,
and the Angel of the LORD pushing *them*.
- ⁶ Let their way be dark and slippery,
and the Angel of the LORD pursuing them.
- ⁷ For without cause they have hidden a pit *for* their
net for me;
without cause they have dug *it* for my soul.
- ⁸ May devastation come to him when he does not
know it;
and may his net, which he hid, seize him;
in devastation may he fall into it.
- ⁹ Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD;
it will exult in his salvation.
- ¹⁰ All my bones will say, "O LORD, who is like you –
One who delivers the poor from one stronger
than he;
the poor and needy man from the one who robs
him?"

(Undeserved attack)

- ¹¹ Violent witnesses rise up;
of that which I know not they question me.
- ¹² They repay me evil for good –
it's like bereavement of my soul.
- ¹³ But I – when they were ill – my garment was
sackcloth;
I afflicted my soul with fasting;
and my prayer turned back into my bosom.
- ¹⁴ I walked about as though he were my friend or
brother;
I bowed myself down like one who laments in
mourning for a mother.
- ¹⁵ But at my stumbling they were glad and they
gathered together;
they gathered together against me – wretched
men whom I did not know –
they tore and they did not desist;
- ¹⁶ with profane men mocking over bread,
grinding their teeth upon me.
- ¹⁷ Lord how long will you look?
Restore my soul from their devastations;
bring back my "only one" from young lions.
- ¹⁸ I will acknowledge you in the great congregation;
among the numerous people I will praise you.

(Treacherous attack)

- ¹⁹ Let not my false enemies be glad over me;
those who hate me for no reason wink the eye.
- ²⁰ For it is not peace they speak,
but against the quiet ones of the earth they plan
deeds of treachery.
- ²¹ They open wide their mouth against me;
they say, "Aha! Aha! Our eyes have seen *it!*"
- ²² O LORD, you have seen *it* – do not remain silent!
O Lord, do not remain far from me!
- ²³ Stir yourself and awaken for my just cause –
my God and my Lord, for my lawsuit.
- ²⁴ Judge me according to your righteousness, O
LORD, my God;
and do not let them be glad over me.
- ²⁵ Do not let them say in their heart, "Aha! Our
desire!"
Do not let them say, "We have swallowed him!"
- ²⁶ Let those who are glad in my harm be ashamed
and bear reproach all at once!
let them be clothed in shame and disgrace who
magnify themselves over me.
- ²⁷ Let those who delight in my righteousness shout
aloud and be glad;
and let them say continually, "The LORD be
magnified, who delights in the peace of his
servant!"
- ²⁸ Then my tongue will utter your righteousness –
all day long your praise.

When you're attacked by the world because you trust and obey the Lord Jesus: (a) don't be surprised – the people of God should expect to be hated by the world; (b) don't try and work on your own exit strategy – commit you cause to God; (c) don't be indifferent to the working of wickedness in the world – rather desire the destruction of evil; and (d) and don't get fretful and annoyed – instead wait patiently for God to vindicate you.