

WHEN HATED WITHOUT A CAUSE

Psalm 35

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In our first go around of the psalms, in 1986, we covered the first 34 psalms. Now we're ready for another stretch. We're still in the first division of the psalms. The first division runs from Psalm 1 through Psalm 42. Tonight, Psalm 35—another psalm of David. I've called this psalm "When Hated Without a Cause." So when you face a situation in life when you're hated without a cause, this is a psalm you pull out. Remember what I've said on the psalms: There are different strokes for different folks. There are times when a teaching from the psalms will strike you as, "That is exactly where I am right at this moment." But if this psalm doesn't hit you where you are right this moment, just wait a while. There will be a time when this psalm will be appropriate to your life experience. The Psalter does that. It covers the totality of our life. That's why, for some of you, the psalms are a favorite portion of God's Word.

Psalm 35 has much in common with three psalms we've already looked at: Psalm 7, Psalm 22, and Psalm 31. In each of those three psalms, David is hard pressed by enemies. Here we see it again. I want to take some moments before we go through the psalm and look at the outline and what's happening. I just want to kind of put the mood of the psalm before you by underlining the phraseology which reflects the tremendous peril and animosity that David is experiencing.

In verse 1, "Those who contend with me. Those who fight against me." In verse 4, "Those who seek my life. Those who plot my ruin." In verse 7, "They hide their net for me without cause. And without cause dig a pit for me." Verse 11, "Ruthless witnesses come forward." Verse 12, "They repay me evil for good." Verse 15, "When I stumbled, they gathered in glee. Attackers gathered against me when I was unaware. They slandered me without ceasing. Like the ungodly,

WHEN HATED WITHOUT A CAUSE

Psalm 35

they maliciously mocked. They gnashed their teeth at me.” Verse 17, “Rescue my life from their ravages; my precious life from those lions.” Verse 19–21, “Let not those who gloat over me, who are my enemies without cause, let not those who hate me without reason maliciously wink the eye. They do not speak peaceably, but devise false accusations. They gape at me and say ‘Aha! Aha!’” Verse 25, “Do not let them think, ‘Aha, just what we wanted!’ Or say, ‘We have swallowed him up.’” Verse 26, “May all who gloat over my distress be put to shame. May all who exalt themselves over me be clothed with shame.”

All those phrases together paint quite a picture of opposition to me.

I want to say some things about interpreting this psalm. One is that I think reminiscing those phrases, recalling them to mind, makes us immediately realize that probably most of us have not had that kind of experience. Maybe we’ve had people who haven’t liked us. But has anyone here been continuously pursued by somebody who wanted to kill you? Not psychologically, but physically? Or ruin you?

When I look at this psalm, my initial reaction is: “I don’t identify too well with it, because there’s never been anybody in my life, that I know of, that sought to kill me.”

When I look at the comfort zones in my life and look at this, I say, “Who do I know that has an experience that can even identify with Psalm 35?” Then I realize that one of the reasons why David had this experience is that he was in politics, not in the pastorate. Anytime you’re in politics, you’ve got people who are out for you. When you’re holding a governmental office, such as David held, there are people who are out to get you.

But there are also contemporary people in our society who are in politics who know the trauma that this psalm especially is addressing. That is, the trauma of being a victim of someone else—a powerful victim. I think, therefore, of people who are victims of parental abuse. They’ve had

WHEN HATED WITHOUT A CAUSE

Psalm 35

someone in their life out to destroy them for no cause. I think of persons who are victims of spousal abuse and who are going through traumatic and vindictive divorces. Then I think of people who are victims of crime. Victims of racial discrimination. Victims of political and religious discrimination, of which there are many in the world. When it comes right down to it, Psalm 35 is really a psalm of the victim—those who are hated without cause.

When we look at this psalm and break it down, the right-brain side of me says, “This is poetry and does not flow into the logical progressive analytical mode that maybe an epistle of Paul does.” The emphasis is upon imagery rather than lock-step rational argumentation.

That’s the right-brain side of me. The left-brain side of me also wants to find the kind of direction of the psalm. What’s the movement of thought here? How can I use this in my own prayer life if I become victimized? How can I recommend it to someone who’s a victim, to use in their prayer life?

As you study the psalm closely, you’ll see that it breaks down into three clearly discernable categories or three divisions. There should be a division between verses 18 and 19.

The three parts are verses 1–10, 11–18, and 19–28.

At the end of each section, David comes to a moment of resolution of the problem. He’s giving thanks to God and that particular segment ends very upbeat. The rest of the segment he’s kind of moaning, asking God for help and recounting how perilous the situation is. Then there comes the moment of resolution. You get the resolution and then you go back to the next segment that’s coming up.

I. The first division, verses 1–10, has three parts to it.

A. The first is simply a request for help from the Lord. No fancy language. David’s soul is being vexed. His life is in danger. He doesn’t have time to come to God with a lot of courtesy, so he

WHEN HATED WITHOUT A CAUSE

Psalm 35

simply says, “Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me [‘God, take up my cause!]. Take up shield and buckler” (Psalm 35:1–2, NIV). A buckler was a large shield, generally carried by someone other than the person who is engaged in conflict. David feels that he needs not only a normal shield, but he needs something that’s much larger than normal. The buckler is thoroughly protective. “Arise and come to my aid. Brandish spear and javelin” (verses 2–3, NIV). The spear is that which was used for more infighting; the javelin—that which is thrown a distance. “Get them, Lord, if they’re near me or if they’re still out there, always protect me from those who pursue me.” “Say to my soul, ‘I am your salvation’” (verse 3, NIV). David not only wants the sense that God is protecting him in this situation. But he wants psychological and spiritual nourishment, where he senses God is saying to him, “I am your salvation.”

Right away, we see this pattern which has been seen, again and again, in the prayers and the psalms. We are not told that God picks up the spear and the javelin. We’re not told that, at that moment, he’s picked up the spear and buckler and actually gone out and destroyed the enemy. In fact, as you read the psalm, the reverse appears to be the case. That God initially has simply done nothing other than heard the prayer. But the way David begins to move to a resolution of the problem, before the circumstances are changed, is, he’s already had a change in attitude. His case is not hopeless. He’s going to recount some of the dire peril that he’s in, but he’s right away beginning to think, as he’s coming in prayer, “Lord, ‘I’m your deliverance’—say that to me.” He’s got a window of hope in the midst of a difficult situation.

If we can see just a glimmer of hope somewhere—the times I get in the most trouble spiritually, when I’m wrestling with problems, is when there doesn’t appear to be any resolution or any solution to the conflict. It just is ongoing and never-ending. When you get into a mode like that,

WHEN HATED WITHOUT A CAUSE

Psalm 35

it's hard to pray. The very reason for prayer is reflected here in verse 3. The minute we start to pray and get serious with God, God's already saying, "I'm your salvation." Not a thing has changed in our external circumstances, except God's beginning to say, "It's going to be all right."

B. Then there is this marvelous request for the ruin of his enemies. "May those who seek my life be disgraced and put to shame" (Psalm 35:4, NIV). Somebody ought to be ashamed for trying to take somebody's life. Those who come along with drugs ought to be ashamed for what they're doing. There is a conduct which is shameful. David has good reason for wanting somebody to be put to shame here.

Now he starts using agricultural and hunting imagery. "May they be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the LORD driving them away; may their path be dark and slippery, with the angel of the LORD pursuing them. Since they hid their net for me [now we're into hunting] without cause and without cause dug a pit for me, may ruin overtake them by surprise—may the net they hid entangle them, may they fall into the pit, to their ruin" (Psalm 35:5–8, NIV). David is saying that the person who sets out to make another person their victim will wind up being trapped by the very thing with which they meant to hurt another. David is saying a very sound, psychological and spiritual principle. And it's being historically tested, if this is what has happened to his enemies.

C. In the third part of this first section of this psalm, he promises to praise the Lord; in essence he is saying, "Lord, if you get me out of this, I'll praise You." "My whole being will exclaim, 'Who is like You, O LORD? You rescue the poor from those too strong for them, the poor and the needy from those who rob them'" (verse 10, NIV).

II. In verse 11, we get into the second part of the psalm.

WHEN HATED WITHOUT A CAUSE

Psalm 35

Verses 11–12 restate the problem. “Ruthless witnesses come forward; they question me on things I know nothing about. They repay me evil for good and leave my soul forlorn” (NIV). That hurts—when you’ve done good to people and they don’t repay it with good.

He compares his conduct with theirs and, of course, he says, “Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting. When my prayers returned to me unanswered, I went about mourning as though for my friend or brother” (Psalm 35:13–14, NIV). That’s a frank admission that some of his prayers went unanswered. Maybe in a theological sense there is no such thing as an unanswered prayer. “But when I stumbled, they gathered in glee; attackers gathered against me when I was unaware. They slandered me without ceasing. Like the ungodly they maliciously mocked; they gnashed their teeth at me. O Lord, how long will you look on? Rescue my life from their ravages, my precious life from these lions” (Psalm 35:15–17, NIV). Then the close to that section. “I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among throngs of people I will praise you” (verse 18, NIV). “Lord, You’re going to get me through this and I’m going to go to church or the temple at a festive time, when people are offering sacrifices of thanksgiving or peace offerings. I’m going to join the happy throng and I’m going to ultimately have a resolution on this.” What a contrast!

III. We fall back to verse 19, to the third part of the psalm.

Have you realized how often there are mood swings in our prayers? One moment, we’re just sure that God has given us the victory. The next, we’re back on the slippery slope. It’s frustrating. I think it’s probably one of the most difficult things that a new Christian begins to learn—that there are peaks and valleys in the Christian experience.

Some have suggested that Psalm 35 is made up of three prayers that David prayed at different times over the same problem. The first prayer (verses 1–10), he prayed about and he finally got

WHEN HATED WITHOUT A CAUSE

Psalm 35

the victory. So he says in verse 10, “My whole being will exclaim, who is like you, O LORD?”

He got the victory. He’s confident. But a few days later, word comes that things haven’t been solved, the situation is getting worse. It hasn’t improved. He goes back to pray. He has to pray through the whole thing again. Finally, he comes to the resolution: “I’ll give thanks Lord.” We’re going to go to the temple and thank you for this. I’ll go to church and give a testimony on Wednesday night! He goes away. A few days later—a few weeks later—the whole thing breaks out again. He’s got to work through it again. It’s very possible that Psalm 35 reflects three distinct moments of praying about this victimization he had gone through.

If that’s not it, maybe just one day he spent an awfully long time in prayer. He’s again unsure that God’s going to give him the victory. “Let not those gloat over me who are my enemies without cause; let not those who hate me without reason maliciously wink the eye. They do not speak peaceably, but devise false accusations against those who live quietly in the land” (Psalm 35:19–20, NIV). He’s got to remind God again of all the things he’s already said about these people.

“They gape at me and say, ‘Aha! Aha! With our own eyes we have seen it’” (Psalm 35:21, NIV).

Then he asks again for God’s help. “O LORD, you have seen this; be not silent. Do not be far from me, O Lord. Awake, and rise to my defense! Contend for me, my God and Lord” (Psalm 35:22–23, NIV). The same thing he prayed in verse 1. “Vindicate me in your righteousness, O LORD my God; do not let them gloat over me. Do not let them think, ‘Aha, just what we wanted!’ or say, ‘We have swallowed him up.’ May all who gloat over my distress be put to shame and confusion; may all who exalt themselves over me be clothed with shame and disgrace. May those who delight in my vindication shout for joy and gladness; may they always say, ‘The LORD be

WHEN HATED WITHOUT A CAUSE

Psalm 35

exalted, who delights in the well-being of his servant.’ [And then] My tongue will speak of your righteousness and of your praises all day long” (Psalm 35:24–28, NIV).

I think it’s vital to note in this psalm that in the midst of any difficulty our fear is that it will end on the down side. And we will not get a successful resolution to our problem. And that God, in this situation, will be as stumped as we are.

So this psalm is saying, “No, just keep praying.” This could be a psalm in the spiritual sense as well. We have an irrational enemy, a supernatural enemy, who is out to make us victims, who hates us without cause from the day we were born. From the day we were conceived, there has been one who is out to rob, kill and destroy. It is against the devil, as well, that this prayer can be prayed, I think, with certitude. Knowing that God will bring us through to a place of triumph.

The New Testament brings a very special application of this psalm to bear on the Lord’s life. It’s evident, in the last week of Jesus’ life, that He was thinking through a number of the psalms.

Such as Psalm 22, for example. Psalm 89, “The song of the pit.” Also Psalm 35. In His private conversation with the disciples, on the evening before his death, in the Upper Room, John gives us a window into the fact that Jesus, at that moment, was reminiscing about His ministry and thinking about His ministry through the lens of Psalm 35 (John 15). He is taking this psalm as a personal application to himself and to His disciples. So Jesus says in verses 24 and 25 of John 15, “Now they have seen these miracles and yet they have hated both me and my Father. But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law.” By the use of the word “Law,” Jesus was referring to the whole of the written Bible, not just the Pentateuch, because the verse that He quotes is out of Psalm 35. This is what is meant by what is written in their Law, “They hated Me without reason.” That is, there was no valid human reason to hate Jesus of Nazareth, whose words were

WHEN HATED WITHOUT A CAUSE

Psalm 35

good and whose deeds were righteous and helpful. But He says, “This is applied to Me personally.”

He tells the disciples, in verse 18, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.”

What He’s saying there is, “They will also hate you without a cause.”

What a contrast these words are with what the Lord will say about how God our Father is on our side. Because once Jesus is done talking about “how they hated Me without reason,” He says “the Father is going to send you the Comforter.” The devil is always trying to break down our resistance, psychologically and spiritually and emotionally. Sometimes, we can make the mistake, and think that God is against us as well. But John 15 puts the contrast so beautifully and says, “No, it’s the devil who’s trying to break us down and get us to give up and who hates us without reason. But when God gives us the Holy Spirit, He will encourage us and help us and comfort us.”

So great a deliverance from so great a threat brings lasting thanksgiving. So David closes this psalm, saying that he will sing God’s praises all day long. There will be a new chapter in his life, when God brings him through this, and he will be able to say that it was not his own ingenuity that brought him through, but it was God who delivered him.

I’m sure in this audience tonight there is at least one person who is involved in a situation that is over their head to solve. And there is no human way to resolve what you’re facing or going through. If God doesn’t help you, it really is going to be a bad end. This psalm is, therefore, so precious because it tells us, in the midst of our struggling with things like that, that God is ready to help. God is ready to contend for us, and God is ready to say to us, “I am your salvation.” If we’ll hold steady and let God do His work, we too will praise Him in the great assembly.

Closing Prayer

WHEN HATED WITHOUT A CAUSE

Psalm 35

Lord, we take some moments to lift up one another in prayer; recognizing that this psalm has been sent to some of us tonight in a more special way than to others, because our need might be just especially for this word of encouragement. We too have had our ups and downs, wrestling through things that threaten us, that make us feel very insecure and panicky. We try to pray through and feel Your assurance in our life, but then the old thoughts return. The old doubts come back. The old conflicts renew themselves. Once again, we're right in the middle—struggling, trying so hard to keep afloat. And we need to come back in prayer again, let our hearts be quiet before You, may they be calmed again by Your presence and by Your Word in our life. Lord, if we understand anything about Your working in the Bible and human history with Your saints, Your people, it is that You do not give up on us. You do not abandon us in our struggles. And You do bring things through to a good resolution. There are moments when we have Joseph-like experiences in life. Where our small life boats are swamped with things that seemingly do not go our way. We come to Your Word, in moments like this, and we hear You saying to us, "I'll not leave you in this moment of your life. I'll not let this situation overwhelm you. Be of good courage. Keep your faith in the roaring of the waters. Keep your faith in the swamping of events. Trust Me." Lord, in our better moments, as we wait upon You, we do relax in You. We do acknowledge that You are the Lord, our Savior, who has not saved us in order to see our own life wrecked on some rocky shore. But You have saved us in order to make us an instrument of praise toward You, and of service toward others. You will accomplish Your good purposes in our life, and no matter what we face here that is threatening our life, in You we will not fear. You're with us. You give us moments like this, which give us guidance and a surety that You're with us and You're anchoring us. Even in these moments of prayer, I sense that for others here that are facing the kinds of moments that David talked about, You're letting this

WHEN HATED WITHOUT A CAUSE

Psalm 35

moment be a moment in which faith is built and You're helping us look at our problems with You in them. Rather than the way we were facing them, with such hopelessness and fear. Thank You, Lord, for being with us. Thank You for the encouragement of Your Word. We praise You tonight. Thank You, Lord.