

April 19 Lesson 8

Divine Intervention?

Focal Passages: Psalm 35:1-14, 22-28

Background Text: Psalm 35

Purpose Statement: To gain a broader understanding of what it means for God to defend and vindicate us.

Psalm 35:1-14

1Lord, argue with those who argue with me; fight with those who fight against me!2Grab a shield and armor; stand up and help me!3Use your spear and axe against those who are out to get me! Say to me: "I'm your salvation!" 4Let those who want me dead be humiliated and put to shame. Let those who intend to hurt me be thoroughly frustrated and disgraced. 5Let them be like dust on the wind— and let the Lord's messenger be the one who does the blowing! 6Let their path be dark and slippery— and let the Lord's messenger be the one who does the chasing! 7Because they hid their net for me for no reason, they dug a pit for me for no reason. 8Let disaster come to them when they don't suspect it. Let the net they hid catch them instead! Let them fall into it—to their disaster! 9But I will rejoice in the Lord; I will celebrate his salvation. 10All my bones will say, "Lord, who could compare to you? You rescue the weak from those who overpower them; you rescue the weak and the needy from those who plunder them." 11Violent witnesses stand up. They question me about things I know nothing about. 12They pay me back evil for good, leaving me stricken with grief. 13But when they were sick, I wore clothes for grieving, and I kept a strict fast. When my prayer came back unanswered, 14I would wander around like I was grieving a friend or a brother. I was weighed down, sad, like I was a mother in mourning.

...22But you've seen it too, Lord. Don't keep quiet about it. Please don't be far from me, my Lord. 23Wake up! Get up and do justice for me; argue my case, my Lord and my God! 24Establish justice for me according to your righteousness, Lord, my God. Don't let them celebrate over me. 25Don't let them say to themselves, Yes! Exactly what we wanted! Don't let them say, "We ate him up!" 26Let all those who celebrate my misfortune be disgraced and put to shame! Let those who exalt themselves over me be dressed up in shame and dishonor! 27But let those who want things to be set right for me shout for joy and celebrate! Let them constantly say, "The Lord is great—God wants his servant to be at peace." 28Then my tongue will talk all about your righteousness; it will talk about your praise all day long.

Key Verse: "Establish justice for me according to your righteousness, Lord, my God. Don't let them celebrate over me" (Psalm 35:24).

Playwrights in ancient Greece employed a technique that has stood the test of time. They put their main character into an ultimately impossible situation. Then, at the last possible moment, a god entered the scene and saved the day. The deity descended from a crane-like device that lowered him onto the stage. This technique became known as *deus ex machina*, or “god from a machine.”

This has remained popular for millennia. You may remember the classic movie from the '70s, *Oh, God!* Toward the end, the main character, played by John Denver, was being humiliated in the courtroom. Suddenly God, played by George Burns, walked through the doors and said, “I’ll take it from here.” Things changed abruptly.

Whenever the final scene in our latest movie—at home, hospital, or office—becomes too overwhelming, we pray for divine intervention. We yearn to hear, “I’ll take it from here.” This is why we can relate so well to the writer of today’s psalm. He passionately and relentlessly prayed for a dramatic turning of the tables against evil persons.

As we study Psalm 35, we will initially join him in his request. We, too, want good to vanquish evil in dramatic ways. The more the punishment, the more the satisfaction. Upon reflection, though, a *deus ex machina* intervention raises some questions from a Christian perspective. What is justice in God’s kingdom? What does it mean for God to deliver us? How should we relate to our enemies? How should we pray in difficult times?

We may want God to wrap things up for us before the ending credits roll. What we need, though, is the Lord working with us throughout our movie. That shapes our character. It also helps us stand in God’s name with those oppressed and hurting as well.

A Courtroom and a Battlefield

A strict rule in Poetry 101 is to never mix metaphors. The psalmist broke that mandate in the first two verses. “Argue with those who argue with me” (verse 1) refers to a courtroom setting, reminiscent of Job wanting vindication (Job 9:32-35). Accordingly, “witnesses stand up” and slander him (verse 11). His greatest desire is a verdict on his behalf. As soon as he established a courtroom setting, though, he switched to a battleground. His enemies violently attack him, and he needs the Lord to “grab a shield and armor” (verse 2) on his behalf.

The writer seems in such turmoil and danger that he dispensed with poetic convention. There is nothing orderly or logical when peril threatens. We see this disorder in the remainder of the psalm. He repeats himself often, as if hoping that by doing so, it will summon God to the courtroom or battlefield.

What caused his suffering? It’s not spelled out. It could have been a severe illness, a common theme in the Psalms. It may have also been a loss of wealth because of unjust practices (verses 25-26). Regardless, what accelerated his pain was the way his enemies verbally attacked him. They lied, insulted, humiliated, and ridiculed. Such attacks would have isolated him from the community. He would have been viewed as a sinner, someone to be avoided. He would not have been invited to social or religious gatherings.

There appears to have been a group of people who supported him (verse 27). What is surprising is that this is the only place they're mentioned. It is as if they were very small and powerless compared to his enemies. Stripped of any other support, the psalmist could only turn to God for help.

What was the cruelest thing someone ever did to you? How did you feel and react? What resources did you call upon?

What Enemies Do to Us

In verses 13-14, the psalmist painstakingly described how he cared for friends when they were ill. He had prayed and fasted for several days on their behalf. The wording in The Message expresses the intensity of his actions: "My prayers were like lead in my gut, like I'd lost my best friend, my brother. I paced, distraught as a motherless child, hunched and heavyhearted."

These friends, though, did not reciprocate when the psalmist was in distress. Verses 15-16 portray them as enemies who "gathered together against me." This would have magnified his anguish. People with whom he had a shared history turning on him would have only increased his sense of isolation. Not even a friend could be trusted.

It may be possible that such betrayal did something else, however. Throughout the psalm we get the impression that he is an innocent victim. He repeated that he was being persecuted for "no reason" and "without cause" (verses 7, 19). Now, having given an example of his goodness being betrayed, that sense of victimhood is reinforced. He never stated that he prayed, reflected, or repented over anything. It is as if he had viewed himself as righteous. Accordingly, he never gave his enemies any benefit of the doubt. They were cast as being purely evil. This is similar to how we describe a hurtful situation; it is natural to depict ourselves as blameless targets for malicious foes.

It may be that the psalmist's suffering drove him to seeing the world in stark, black-and-white terms. It affected how he viewed himself and his enemies. It would also color his sense of justice.

How difficult is it to see things clearly when you are in pain? Do you view yourself or others differently?

Justice According to Us

Underlying the psalmist's words is a specific understanding of justice. He prayed that two things would happen to his enemies.

First, he wanted them to be humiliated, shamed, and disgraced (verses 4, 26). Their lies and actions should be exposed to the whole community. This would result in their being shunned by that community and being ridiculed and insulted as well.

Second, he wanted them to be persecuted until calamity struck (verses 5-8). While the disaster is not spelled out, it is described as their becoming "like dust on the wind." The "Lord's messenger" refers to an angel, a mighty being who can carry out God's orders to punish. The psalmist may be hoping his enemies will suffer and die at this messenger's hands. The dispensing of such justice expresses the wish that what

the psalmist was experiencing would be experienced by his enemies. Their feeling what he felt would be the ultimate vindication, leading to their downfall and his exaltation. It expresses a sense of justice that lay behind the legal system of ancient Hebrew society. "If someone injures a fellow citizen, they will suffer the same injury they inflicted: broken bone for broken bone, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" (Leviticus 24:19-20a).

Such exoneration would enable the psalmist to praise God. Psalm 35 is divided into three sections, with each one ending with a vow to glorify the Lord (verses 9, 18, 28). This vow is not conditional, as if the psalmist is bargaining with God. Instead, it is an expression of joy that the Lord will be attentive to his situation and come to his aid. That will result in him being proven righteous and innocent while his foes would be revealed as sinful and guilty.

As the psalmist praises God for being vindicated, he will take pleasure watching his enemies suffer. Just as they celebrated over him (verses 15, 19, 24-26), now he looks forward to when he can return the favor (verse 27). He will be happy when God inflicts overwhelming pain.

Such justice seems satisfying to us at first. We want the scales to be balanced, and we want divine messengers to do the balancing. But it also raises the question of how appropriate such a response is. As we've seen repeatedly in military responses, such as in Gaza, force versus force does not ultimately solve anything; it simply serves to increase innocent suffering while laying the foundation for future violence and retaliation.

The psalmist's honest expression of his feelings toward his enemies invites us to look deeper. When we ask God to intervene, are we asking for divine payback? Or are we asking for an intervention where this cycle of retribution can be broken once and for all? For this to happen, we need to understand justice from a larger perspective.

What would have happened if every hurt you've received from others was addressed the way you wanted it to be? From your experience, what are the results of an "eye for an eye" justice?

A Broader View of Justice

We gain a broader view when we look at the context of Psalm 35. The psalmist who wrote the one that follows somewhat echoed the feelings of today's songwriter. He described the wicked as being "slick with talk," evil and dishonest (Psalm 36:2-3). He hoped that evildoers would be "unable to get up" (Psalm 36:12).

Psalm 37, however, introduces a different perspective. The writer there counseled, "Don't get upset over evildoers; don't be jealous of those who do wrong.... Be still before the Lord, and wait for him ... Let go of anger and leave rage behind! Don't get upset—it will only lead to evil" (Psalm 37:1, 7-8). Instead of passionately praying for God to be a witness in a courtroom or a commander on the frontlines, the one who suffers should simply "trust the Lord and do good; live in the land, and farm faithfully" (Psalm 37:3).

The sense is that the wicked will indeed be held accountable for their actions, but it will be based on God's methods and timetable. Justice must be left in God's hands, and our place is to trust.

This also leads to a broader understanding of holding evildoers accountable. Is it for their punishment or for their redemption? We saw in Lesson 4 where Jeremiah told the exiled Jews to live in Babylon and even pray for the nation's welfare (Jeremiah 29:4-7). Maybe the Babylonians would repent. Similarly, Jonah was sent by God to the brutal Assyrians, to urge them to repent and receive God's mercy. His desire that they be punished and not redeemed echoed the sentiment of today's psalmist.

The strongest statement of God's justice, of course, comes from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. He taught, "Love your enemies and pray for those who harass you, so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:44-45a). The Father loves all people, righteous as well as evil, and wants all to have fullness of life. God desires that we want good and not harm even for the people we view as Babylonians and Assyrians.

In Psalm 35:13-14, the songwriter recounted the good he had done for people before they turned on him. Being betrayed by them enraged him. But what would have happened had he continued to show kindness to them even after they became his enemies? Would it have resulted in positive changes? Could it have redeemed relationships? Regardless, the psalmist would have demonstrated that judgment and punishment ultimately lie with God. Behind such accountability also lies the hope of redemption.

Is it possible to desire payback for a wrong while also praying for the wrongdoer's well-being? What has been your experience?

Deliverance as Freedom to Love

Praying the Lord's Prayer against the backdrop of Psalm 35 points us to a broader understanding of God defending and delivering us. Jesus instructed us to want God's will to be done on earth. Would that mean trying to love enemies and not destroy them? When we ask not to be led into temptation, does that mean resisting the urge to wish pain on those who abuse us? And when we seek to be delivered from evil, could that mean being free to love others as unconditionally as God loves us?

We can only pray the Lord's Prayer in such a radical way when we trust God's care and presence with us. Just as the psalmist took comfort in the group of people who supported him and wanted him to be at peace, we take comfort in a community of believers who walk with us in non-peaceful times. That makes God's love tangible. Additionally, living within such a community points to ways we can be God's messengers to others—proclaiming redemptive justice instead of vengeance.

Our Key Verse reminds us that, ultimately, our deliverance is in seeking to live and love as Jesus taught. When the psalmist wanted God to vindicate him, he wanted such justice "according to your righteousness." Jesus shows us what such righteousness looks like. We respond to our enemies with the ultimate goal of reconciliation instead of retaliation.

In what ways can you do that? Write down the Key Verse on a strip of paper, then reflect on how you can embody that righteousness in concrete ways to those who offend or oppress you. Write those suggestions under the verse, then use the paper as a bookmark for your Bible. They may include such things from the Sermon on the Mount as praying for an enemy or initiating a conversation with them. They may also include standing in solidarity for those who could write Psalm 35 themselves.

True deliverance enables freedom for living into God's vision for humanity. It is one where the power of love unites us all. The priest and author Henri Nouwen described this when he reflected on what it really means to live in God's unconditional love. He wrote that compassionate people are empowered "to forgive generously when [others] have offended us, and always to respond to their hostility with love. By doing so we make visible a new way of being human and a new way of responding to our world problems."¹

How are you delivered from evil through loving enemies? What are the challenges you've faced in doing this? How does your church help?

Lord, you forgave your enemies even as they nailed you to the cross. As we bear our own crosses, deliver us from evil by showing us how to love like that. In Jesus' name. Amen.