



Daily Devotions in the Psalms

Psalm 35-39

Monday 18th May - Psalm 35

Contend, Lord, with those who contend with me;
fight against those who fight against me.

2 Take up shield and armour;
arise and come to my aid.

3 Brandish spear and javelin
against those who pursue me.

Say to me,
"I am your salvation."

4 May those who seek my life
be disgraced and put to shame;
may those who plot my ruin
be turned back in dismay.

5 May they be like chaff before the wind,
with the angel of the Lord driving them away;

6 may their path be dark and slippery,
with the angel of the Lord pursuing them.

7 Since they hid their net for me without cause
and without cause dug a pit for me,

8 may ruin overtake them by surprise—
may the net they hid entangle them,
may they fall into the pit, to their ruin.

9 Then my soul will rejoice in the Lord
and delight in his salvation.

10 My whole being will exclaim,
"Who is like you, Lord?"

You rescue the poor from those too strong for
them,
the poor and needy from those who rob them."

11 Ruthless witnesses come forward;
they question me on things I know nothing
about.

12 They repay me evil for good
and leave me like one bereaved.

13 Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth
and humbled myself with fasting.

When my prayers returned to me unanswered,

14 I went about mourning
as though for my friend or brother.

I bowed my head in grief
as though weeping for my mother.

15 But when I stumbled, they gathered in glee;
assailants gathered against me without my
knowledge.

They slandered me without ceasing.

16 Like the ungodly they maliciously mocked;
they gnashed their teeth at me.

17 How long, Lord, will you look on?
Rescue me from their ravages,
my precious life from these lions.

18 I will give you thanks in the great assembly;
among the throngs I will praise you.

19 Do not let those gloat over me
who are my enemies without cause;
do not let those who hate me without reason
maliciously wink the eye.

20 They do not speak peaceably,
but devise false accusations
against those who live quietly in the land.

21 They sneer at me and say, "Aha! Aha!
With our own eyes we have seen it."

22 Lord, you have seen this; do not be silent.
Do not be far from me, Lord.

23 Awake, and rise to my defence!
Contend for me, my God and Lord.

24 Vindicate me in your righteousness, Lord my
God;
do not let them gloat over me.

25 Do not let them think, "Aha, just what we
wanted!"

or say, "We have swallowed him up."

26 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.

27 May those who delight in my vindication
shout for joy and gladness;
may they always say, "The Lord be exalted,
who delights in the well-being of his servant."

28 My tongue will proclaim your righteousness,
your praises all day long.

I must confess that I find it difficult to understand how David felt as he wrote this Psalm. And as I read Psalm 35 and others like it, that call out for justice, I'm reminded how ungrateful I am.

I can't think of anyone in my life who I could describe as my enemy. I've not had anyone seek to take my life (that I know of...) nor have I ever been slandered publicly and maliciously so that my reputation is questioned by a whole nation. My life has been so good; abnormally good in historical terms. But if I had experienced that kind of thing, I think these words would be an astounding help and comfort.

Psalm 35 has a clear pattern of complaint, petition and praise which is repeated three times in the Psalm (v. 1-10; 11-18; 19-28). This means that God not only invites us to call out to him with our complaints about injustice, he gives us words to use.

But notice, it shouldn't stop there. Our complaint should turn to petition, and eventually, praise. And if we haven't suffered as much as David, we have certainly experienced greater blessings in Christ to prompt us to praise.

So as I read this Psalm, there is a temptation to feel uncomfortable about praying for the downfall of others. But it is right to pray for justice and the downfall of oppressors. We can do so whilst praying for their salvation. Nor do I feel as confident about my righteousness as David did; I know often when people confront me about my mistakes or sin they are most often right. Yet, living this side of the cross, we can thank and praise God that the greatest enemy is defeated, even as we still experience life in a broken and unjust world.

And maybe, if we find it hard to resonate with this Psalm, we should be humbled and thankful. If you've never felt like you need to pray these words, you can at least thank God that you're not surrounded by enemies. Perhaps David's cry can be a reminder to you to be far more grateful and humble than you normally are.

Lord, help me to call out to you in complaint, petition and praise as I experience injustice, false accusation and distress. Thank you that Christ bore all of my sin in full on the cross. Please bring justice to those who are oppressed and suffering. Help me to grow in increasing gratefulness. Amen.

James

Tuesday 19th May - Psalm 36

1 I have a message from God in my heart
concerning the sinfulness of the wicked:
There is no fear of God
before their eyes.
2 In their own eyes they flatter themselves
too much to detect or hate their sin.
3 The words of their mouths are wicked and
deceitful;
they fail to act wisely or do good.
4 Even on their beds they plot evil;
they commit themselves to a sinful course
and do not reject what is wrong.
5 Your love, Lord, reaches to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the skies.
6 Your righteousness is like the highest mountains,

your justice like the great deep.
You, Lord, preserve both people and animals.
7 How priceless is your unfailing love, O God!
People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
8 They feast on the abundance of your house;
you give them drink from your river of delights.
9 For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.
10 Continue your love to those who know you,
your righteousness to the upright in heart.
11 May the foot of the proud not come against
me,
nor the hand of the wicked drive me away.
12 See how the evildoers lie fallen—
thrown down, not able to rise!

David begins by focusing on the common struggle of foolishness - the way of life that, as David Wells said, "makes sin look normal and righteousness seem strange." Psalm 36 says the issue of evil isn't primarily in things like lack of education, inequality, injustice, technology, or progress. The problem is in the human heart. Sin speaks to us deep inside and we listen.

To live with no concern for God, not so much whether he exists or not, but failing to believe that he matters - puts us out of touch with reality. This leaves us without wisdom as the more you know God the more you come to see and admit who you are.

Yet according to verses 5-9, the kind of unfailing, ever-present, love that is so uncommon among people on earth is abundantly available from heaven. God's love and goodness is described so poetically with spacious images like the soaring heavens, majestic mountains, and deep oceans (v5-6). Instead of the self-absorbed world of sin, God invites us into a land of endless delight described in verse 8-9 like a new Eden of joy, light and truth.

After describing God's inexhaustible, unfathomable love, David affirms that all people can find security in the refuge of God's wings. God gave us his love most perfectly in sending Jesus who sacrifices himself to save us.

Father God, we confess the foolishness of our thought life, struggling to give our attention to what is most praiseworthy - especially you. Incline our hearts towards you. We're so often stuck in the world of our own self-pity. Help us experience your priceless love that we would be filled with joyful awe before your magnificence, blown away by the privilege of knowing, serving, and pleasing you. Amen.

Martin

Wednesday 20th May - Psalm 37

Do not fret because of those who are evil
or be envious of those who do wrong;
2 for like the grass they will soon wither,
like green plants they will soon die away.
3 Trust in the Lord and do good;
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
4 Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
5 Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him and he will do this:
6 He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn,
your vindication like the noonday sun.
7 Be still before the Lord
and wait patiently for him;
do not fret when people succeed in their ways,
when they carry out their wicked schemes.
8 Refrain from anger and turn from wrath;
do not fret—it leads only to evil.
9 For those who are evil will be destroyed,
but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.
10 A little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look for them, they will not be found.
11 But the meek will inherit the land
and enjoy peace and prosperity.
12 The wicked plot against the righteous
and gnash their teeth at them;
13 but the Lord laughs at the wicked,
for he knows their day is coming.
14 The wicked draw the sword
and bend the bow
to bring down the poor and needy,
to slay those whose ways are upright.
15 But their swords will pierce their own hearts,
and their bows will be broken.
16 Better the little that the righteous have
than the wealth of many wicked;
17 for the power of the wicked will be broken,
but the Lord upholds the righteous.
18 The blameless spend their days under the Lord's
care,
and their inheritance will endure forever.
19 In times of disaster they will not wither;
in days of famine they will enjoy plenty.
20 But the wicked will perish:
Though the Lord's enemies are like the flowers of the field,
they will be consumed, they will go up in smoke.

21 The wicked borrow and do not repay,
but the righteous give generously;
22 those the Lord blesses will inherit the land,
but those he curses will be destroyed.
23 The Lord makes firm the steps
of the one who delights in him;
24 though he may stumble, he will not fall,
for the Lord upholds him with his hand.
25 I was young and now I am old,
yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread.
26 They are always generous and lend freely;
their children will be a blessing.
27 Turn from evil and do good;
then you will dwell in the land forever.
28 For the Lord loves the just
and will not forsake his faithful ones.
Wrongdoers will be completely destroyed[c];
the offspring of the wicked will perish.
29 The righteous will inherit the land
and dwell in it forever.
30 The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom,
and their tongues speak what is just.
31 The law of their God is in their hearts;
their feet do not slip.
32 The wicked lie in wait for the righteous,
intent on putting them to death;
33 but the Lord will not leave them in the power of the wicked
or let them be condemned when brought to trial.
34 Hope in the Lord
and keep his way.
He will exalt you to inherit the land;
when the wicked are destroyed, you will see it.
35 I have seen a wicked and ruthless man
flourishing like a luxuriant native tree,
36 but he soon passed away and was no more;
though I looked for him, he could not be found.
37 Consider the blameless, observe the upright;
a future awaits those who seek peace.
38 But all sinners will be destroyed;
there will be no future[e] for the wicked.
39 The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord;
he is their stronghold in time of trouble.
40 The Lord helps them and delivers them;
he delivers them from the wicked and saves them,
because they take refuge in him.

Back in the 1980's, when my faith and bones were young, we used to sing out of three different coloured books: the brown, blue and yellow 'Scripture in Song'. At youth group the numbers would be called out like a bingo game and we would sing. In this psalm the verses became songs that were sung back in those days. Songs etched into an old memory. A song that teaches us how to live.

The focus of the psalm is how to be wise. Just like Psalm 1 and 32, it calls us to view life in two ways: the righteous and the wicked. It focuses our attention by calling us to trust in God's provision and so his grace rather than follow the ways of the wicked which will ultimately fail. The psalmist directs our attention to grace being the answer to our anxiety. It is so helpful to be reminded of this and to sing in our current times. So then, let's read this call from God to be wise in the way we live, being careful not to be trapped within the way of the wicked.

Last week was international Nude Gardening Day (first Saturday in May); what a dangerous and ridiculous thing to celebrate! But this is how the wicked are in this psalm as their lives are exposed to the heat of their foolishness. Think through how their foolishness is expressed.

It is sobering to remember that we were once on the wicked side of the ledger. There is a section in the middle of the psalm which speaks about generosity. This is described in terms of generations. As the father, so the son. This generosity we experience comes from Jesus as our righteous one, and so means that we have moved from one side to the other. We are called to be righteous and this is shown in our generosity.

As we see the generosity of the Son, King Jesus, so we are invited to replicate that generosity to others. He is the source of all we have. Even when those who are against us are great, it is the Lord who delivers us through the generosity of Jesus. For us to not be generous would be wicked indeed.

So it is good to sing a song of praise for all that we have in our Lord Jesus.

Phil

Thursday 21st May - Psalm 38

A psalm of David. A petition.

Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.

2 Your arrows have pierced me,
and your hand has come down on me.

3 Because of your wrath there is no health in my body;
there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin.

4 My guilt has overwhelmed me
like a burden too heavy to bear.

5 My wounds fester and are loathsome
because of my sinful folly.

6 I am bowed down and brought very low;
all day long I go about mourning.

7 My back is filled with searing pain;
there is no health in my body.

8 I am feeble and utterly crushed;
I groan in anguish of heart.

9 All my longings lie open before you, Lord;
my sighing is not hidden from you.

10 My heart pounds, my strength fails me;
even the light has gone from my eyes.

11 My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds;
my neighbours stay far away.

12 Those who want to kill me set their traps,
those who would harm me talk of my ruin;
all day long they scheme and lie.

13 I am like the deaf, who cannot hear,
like the mute, who cannot speak;

14 I have become like one who does not hear,
whose mouth can offer no reply.

15 Lord, I wait for you;
you will answer, Lord my God.

16 For I said, "Do not let them gloat
or exalt themselves over me when my feet slip."

17 For I am about to fall,
and my pain is ever with me.

18 I confess my iniquity;
I am troubled by my sin.

19 Many have become my enemies without cause[b];
those who hate me without reason are numerous.

20 Those who repay my good with evil
lodge accusations against me,
though I seek only to do what is good.

21 Lord, do not forsake me;
do not be far from me, my God.

22 Come quickly to help me,
my Lord and my Saviour.

Have you ever heard a description of sin as vivid and graphic as in v. 2-5?

I remember feeling uncomfortable when I saw an elderly man, oblivious to our presence, pacing a hospital corridor, crying out, "Why did I do it?" I think this psalm makes us feel uncomfortable. The writer agonises over his spiritual and moral failure. Do you agonise over your spiritual failure? There can be a tendency for us to think: I don't sin: I'm a victim, I'm misunderstood, I make mistakes.

BUT THAT'S NOT HOW THE PSALMIST SAW IT!

He makes no excuses and seeks no place to hide. He refuses to rob God of his glory, and instead takes full responsibility for his spiritual and moral failure. He knows that sin has a way of getting deep inside, and of penetrating even to the bone. The evidence of sin's effects is everywhere to be seen in v. 6-10.

And in addition to this enemies set traps and lie in wait, and his friends and neighbours shun him. Sometimes when I am praying for people I use these words: "Lord, you never fail to comfort and strengthen those who cry out to you."

The psalmist knows that there is only one safe place of refuge: 15 But it is for you, O Lord, that I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.

The turning point comes in verse 18 when he says: "I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin." The apostle John reflects on the achievement of the cross and says: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9

Thank you, Lord, for providing the perfect, final, once and for all sacrifice for sins and making a way for us to be cleansed and forgiven.

John

Friday 22nd May - Psalm 39

I said, "I will watch my ways
and keep my tongue from sin;
I will put a muzzle on my mouth
while in the presence of the wicked."
2 So I remained utterly silent,
not even saying anything good.
But my anguish increased;
3 my heart grew hot within me.
While I meditated, the fire burned;
then I spoke with my tongue:
4 "Show me, Lord, my life's end
and the number of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.
5 You have made my days a mere handbreadth;
the span of my years is as nothing before you.
Everyone is but a breath,
even those who seem secure.
6 "Surely everyone goes around like a mere
phantom;
in vain they rush about, heaping up wealth
without knowing whose it will finally be.

7 "But now, Lord, what do I look for?
My hope is in you.
8 Save me from all my transgressions;
do not make me the scorn of fools.
9 I was silent; I would not open my mouth,
for you are the one who has done this.
10 Remove your scourge from me;
I am overcome by the blow of your hand.
11 When you rebuke and discipline anyone for
their sin,
you consume their wealth like a moth—
surely everyone is but a breath.
12 "Hear my prayer, Lord,
listen to my cry for help;
do not be deaf to my weeping.
I dwell with you as a foreigner,
a stranger, as all my ancestors were.
13 Look away from me, that I may enjoy life again
before I depart and am no more."

In a day and age when most of us are being bombarded with information, it can be frustrating knowing the truth but having to listen to the latest crazy ideas. It can be hard to know when to speak up and when to hold our tongue. In a world where the godless seem to be in control it can be easy to want to give up.

This Psalm reminds us that yes, we are like a breath and sure, we may not be remembered in the history books, but the fact is that God has put us here for a purpose. What we do now affects the future generations in ways we can't always see now. Although we are only here for a short time, what we do in this life does matter. Whether it be parenting kids, looking after elderly parents, whatever it may be, we represent our Lord in this world.

Take heart, when our efforts seem hopeless, when it seems we are being drowned out by the noise of the world, we are God's instruments and He uses us how He sees fit.

Lord we pray for wisdom, to know when to speak and when to be silent, to accept Your discipline as from a loving Father and to reflect Your character in our current circumstances. Amen.

Danny