

LESSON 10

PSALMS 35—38

PSALM 35: EVIL RETURNED FOR GOOD

A lament prayer, this psalm expresses tremendous feeling and an impassioned plea for immediate help. Although it has been interpreted as a national psalm that asks God to deliver the nation from its foes, the text is best understood as being written by a godly man who was ruthlessly mistreated by people around him, even people who had been the recipients of his kindness.

The psalm provides the language and emotions with which anyone who has been betrayed, mocked, plotted against, maligned, or threatened by friends and enemies can identify. The writer is experiencing what happens when one's goodness has been ignored and those benefiting from it have turned against him and are heartlessly seeking to harm him.

It is composed of three natural divisions, each of which contains a complaint and ends with an expression of praise (vv. 1–10, 11–18, 19–28). The three parts could be describing three different groups of enemies—those who seek his life, those who are false witnesses, and those who have no reason for hating him but would delight in his downfall. They could also be depicting one set of enemies in three different ways. The latter must be the case.

1. Describe the writer's situation.
2. What is said in this psalm about "the angel of the LORD"?
3. How has the writer treated those who have become his enemies?
4. How should we pray for our enemies?
5. What is an imprecatory prayer?

**PSALM 36:
GOOD OR EVIL: WHICH?**

Uniquely, this psalm contains three types of literature—the lament, the wisdom, and the hymnic genres. Each section is so different that it has been argued that three pieces have been brought together to compose the psalm. Such an inference is not necessary if we see the psalm as a blending of three styles in order to accomplish the writer’s special purpose.

We will regard the psalm as primarily a wisdom psalm. As a unit of thought, it draws a contrast between wickedness and godliness, resulting in a clear choice—the way of godliness. Life’s choices can be narrowed to two options: God or evil. Wisdom suggests that one should weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the options so that an intelligent decision can be made—one that will not be regretted.

The psalmist presents characteristics of the alternatives and then announces his commitment in a prayer.

6. What does evil say in the heart of the ungodly man?
7. How does the psalm describe the lovingkindness and righteousness of God?
8. Describe the progression of sin.

PSALM 37: DO NOT FRET ABOUT THE WICKED

The writer of this psalm arranged through the Spirit what he wanted to say in the acrostic format, a pattern that we have seen in Psalms 9, 10, 25, and 34. He has made every other verse (or every fourth line in the Hebrew text) begin with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. For example, verse 1 begins with the first letter, verse 3 (since there are two lines per verse) begins with the second, and so on.

This composition is one of the four psalms in the Book of Psalms that discuss in detail the disturbing problem of the power, greed, and prosperity of the wicked. The other three are Psalms 10, 49, and 73. The body of the psalm is a lesson addressed to the godly man. It is not a prayer to God, as is the case with many of the psalms. The writer assumes the role of a teacher, instructing the reader on the reaction he should give to the success of the wicked. It contains a clear affirmation that God will keep His promises to sustain the righteous in all types of trying circumstances, and He will keep His prediction to remove the wicked from the land.

The core truth of the psalm is the safety and blessing of those who trust in God and the eventual judgment of the ungodly. The reader is asked to look at the big picture, the working out of God's plan over time. The writer wrote this piece late in his life (see v. 25). Some of his sayings are deductions that he has drawn from observation. For example, he argues that we should not "fret" when an evil man succeeds, but we should maintain a righteous attitude toward his prosperity.

9. What does the word "fret" mean?

10. What will God do for those who delight in Him?

11. How is the word "wait" used?

12. Explain the statement "I have not seen the righteous forsaken."

13. How has this writer seen the wicked man?

PSALM 38: "GRACE GREATER THAN MY SIN"

In this individual lament, regarded as one of the seven penitential psalms (6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143), the writer brings before God a stricken conscience and a broken body, as he asks for forgiveness and healing. The psalm contains one of the most graphic descriptions of human distress brought on by iniquity.

The writer was experiencing four types of pain. To begin with, a bodily illness was wracking his frame with deterioration and suffering (vv. 3–10). Furthermore, he was enduring alienation, for his friends were deserting him (v. 11). Still further, persecution from his enemies added to his grief and created for him an even more agonizing circumstance (vv. 12, 16, 19). Finally, weighing heavily upon his mind was the guilt of sin, his sorrow for breaking God's law (v. 18). He believed that much of what he was experiencing was chastisement from God because of his sins. He did not reveal to us what sin or sins he has committed.

The body of the psalm is a description of his humiliated condition, with only a brief proposed resolution of his difficulties in the final verses. Even though he was overwhelmed, he knew that God was his true hope. Therefore, he was clinging tenaciously to Him (vv. 1, 9, 15, 21, 22).

14. What is a penitential psalm?

15. How does the writer describe himself?

16. How have his friends treated him?

17. How is he deaf?

18. How does an unbeliever come to God? How does a wayward Christian come back to God?