

Plotting and Perjury against the Lord's Anointed*Psalm 35*

In our Gospel lesson, we heard that Jesus was specifically sent unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. They were given the oracles of God, the revelation of the prophets, in the Old Testament writings, where God revealed Himself to them as a Father, and a God of grace and mercy. They were a people whom God had set apart from the nations. Through them, our Lord Jesus was born. He was one of them, of their blood, of their nation. Yet His bond to Israel was deeper than any kind of patriotism which you or I might have. The whole nation was founded upon the worship of the true God under Abraham, and under Moses. All of that nation was one great fellowship, in which all its citizens knew the Word of the Lord, and professed a faith in Him, at least with their mouths. From the call of Abraham, and on into His life in the world as a Man, our Lord Jesus, the Son of God, worked intimately with the nation of Israel, sending them His Word through the prophets, and guiding their affairs. The Jews were like dear children to Jesus, and His bond with them was deeper than we can know. Remember how he looked out over Jerusalem, and how greatly He grieved over them when He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent unto you, how often I desired to gather you together like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you refused!" Later, when He entered the city of Jerusalem for the last time (Luke 19:42), and looked out on her, He wept again, and lamented, "If you knew, yes you, especially in this your day, the things which belong to your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes."

You expect your enemies to betray you. But then, if you knew they were your enemies to begin with, then you could not be betrayed by them. Only friend or family can betray. And truly, if Jesus counted all of Jerusalem as His dear children, how could He be anything but greatly grieved when their leaders plotted against Him in secret to take His life. And then, when their prey was in their grasp, they hid no longer, but came out openly. They brought forward false witnesses to tell lies, and drag the holy name of Jesus through the mud.

In our Psalm today, Jesus expresses His grief as His own dear countrymen turn against Him, and lay to His charge outrageous crimes which He did not commit. In this Psalm, Jesus speaks as the Son of Man, who trusts completely in His heavenly Father. As God, He knows all things, even the secret thoughts of the hearts of men, but in His humiliation, He refrained from fully using

His divine power. When He humbled Himself unto death, he limited even His knowledge, so that as a man, He could indeed be plotted against, betrayed, falsely accused, and put to death.

How wretched it is when an innocent man is falsely accused, judged by false judges, and punished for crimes that he did not commit. Whereas our own justice system is one of the fairest in the world, many countries are not so fortunate. If you become a thorn in the side of the government; for instance, if you preach the Gospel in a Muslim nation, you may be arrested and have false charges filed against you. False witnesses may rise up to accuse you, and you will soon find yourself pronounced guilty and executed. This sort of thing happens today all the time, yet in our own nation, we seldom see such injustice. Imagine if it were *your* government, that had arrested you on false charges. Imagine if false witnesses came forward and began to invent outrageous stories of crimes that you had never committed, deeds that you could hardly imagine. You would be devastated. To whom could you turn for relief when the very people who were supposed to uphold justice have turned against you? What if it was not for any doing wrong, but because your good behavior that you were so treated? Could you imagine your anguish when you discovered that for months your enemies, who were supposed to be just, and your friends, were meeting together secretly, trying to find some way to lay a trap for your fall?

Thus it was with our Lord Jesus. Against this background He begins the words of this Psalm. He cries out to the Father for relief, for though all men are false, and there is no help or strength in man, the Father in heaven remains His delight, and His trust. He can only speak words such as these, because He has willingly humbled Himself. At all times He had the power to avenge Himself, to stop all His enemies wicked plans. Yet He willingly limits Himself to doing only that which we ourselves could do in such circumstances. He cries out to the Father, and declares the anguish of His heart to God. (Verses 1 through 6) He asks the Father to be His salvation, His deliverer.

"They have laid a net for me without cause." In other words, I did nothing wrong, but they set a trap for me hoping that I would fall in. Therefore Jesus asks the Father to do His great work, and turn the wicked deeds of His enemies against them. Let them be caught in their own trap, and so be destroyed by their own hatred. The Father had the power to do this, and indeed He would do so. The Lord Jesus, though persecuted, yet rejoices in the salvation of His God, His Deliverer, for He alone is the Deliverer of the poor and needy, such as are like Jesus in His lowly estate.

He rejoices in God, His Deliverer, yet the deliverance of the Lord does not come in the way that we might expect. Even as Jesus trusts in the Lord, matters only get worse. The plotting progresses, and Jesus is now in the hand of His enemies, standing before His accusers. "False witnesses did rise up; they laid to my charge things that I knew not. [*Literally, "things in which I had no part"*] They rewarded me evil for good to the spoiling of my soul." Now that they had Him in their hands, did Jesus give them any cause to hate Him? Did He defy His accusers? Not at all. "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom. I behaved myself as though he had been my friend or brother: I bowed down heavily, as one that mourneth for his mother." He answered Judas' betrayal with but a question, "You betray Me now with a kiss?" He even healed the ear of one of the soldiers who arrested Him. He remained the lowest of the lowly, even humbling Himself before their unrighteous judgment.

Were His enemies ashamed at themselves in the presence of such divine humility? Not at all. They grew even more bold and fierce. They treated Him spitefully. They whipped Him. They beat Him. They spit on Him. If anything, His humility drove them to be more cruel. "But in mine adversity they rejoiced, and gathered themselves together: yea, the abjects gathered themselves together against me, and I knew it not; they did tear me, and ceased not: With hypocritical mockers in feasts, they gnashed upon me with their teeth." Jesus was like the prey in the jaws of lions, being torn apart in a great feasting.

Again, Jesus cries out to the Father at this treachery, "Lord, how long wilt thou look on? rescue my soul from their destructions, my darling from the lions. I will give thee thanks in the great congregation: I will praise thee among much people. Let not them that are mine enemies wrongfully rejoice over me: neither let them wink with the eye that hate me without a cause." They think that they will triumph over our Lord. They shamelessly rejoice over His demise. They are sure of themselves, certain that they have succeeded in silencing their enemy. Even the devil was sure, when Christ was thus taken, as we sing in Walther's Easter hymn: "The foe was triumphant when on calvary, the Lord of creation was nailed to the tree." [TLH 187] Yet, this was the trap into which all His foes, including Satan, fell. The Jews were certain that by taking Christ, charging Him before an unruly mass of people, and crucifying Him, they would succeed in preserving their power, and keep peace with Rome. Satan was sure that by crucifying Christ, he would forever reign as the lord of this world and would

have triumphed over God himself. But the trap they laid for Jesus became their own demise. Jerusalem, who could have had peace, instead she would know destruction. Jesus would finally be vindicated. Their plotting, even to the very death of the Son of God, would gain for them the very destruction which they thought to avoid. "Let them not say in their hearts, Ah, so would we have it: let them not say, We have swallowed him up. Let them be ashamed and brought to confusion together that rejoice at mine hurt: let them be clothed with shame and dishonour that magnify themselves against me." So likewise was Satan crushed when He bruised the heel of the Son of God, and by plotting against Christ, assured His own overthrow. Even the devil, in all His craftiness, became the unwitting tool of the almighty God in bringing about our salvation through the suffering of Christ.

And thus again, with hope, we see our Lord go onward, even in the face of His accusers. He has faced the dread of the cup of suffering. He has survived the betrayal of Judas. He has heard the false witness of His accusers. He will see much more as the day goes on, and yet His hope is in the Lord. He declares now to us, who receive the benefits of His great suffering, "Let them shout for joy, and be glad, that favour my righteous cause: yea, let them say continually, 'Let the LORD be magnified, which hath pleasure in the prosperity of his servant.' And my tongue shall speak of thy righteousness and of thy praise all the day long."

And indeed we have great reason to rejoice. We do not learn of Christ's passion to pity Him, but to fix more firmly in our minds what He, in His great compassion for us sinners, has accomplished. That is why we, who rightly cringe in our spirits at the immeasurable sufferings of Christ, can also heartily declare, "In the cross of Christ, I glory!" And indeed we should shout for joy and be glad, who favor Christ's righteous cause, for His cause is our own righteousness. Ever after it shall be our work in this world to speak of that righteousness all the day long, and indeed that is what we do when we preach Christ, and declare the forgiveness of sins to poor sinners. Every word of absolution gives glory to God and praise to the Righteousness of His Son.

Let us then continually say, "Let the Lord God be magnified, who has such pleasure in the glory of His Son Jesus Christ," for in His humility, the glory of God is revealed among men, and in His resurrection, the prosperity of Christ, who does all things well, is revealed to the world. Amen.