

## SESSION 4

# Redirecting Anger



### QUESTION 1:

*When you were a kid, what would make you really angry?*

## THE POINT

Take your anger to God and leave matters in His hands.

## THE PASSAGES

Psalm 35:1-3,13-18

## THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Small children can get mad about the silliest things—and if they catch us giggling, they only get madder. Parents report their children have gotten mad because ...

- ▶ ... the moon was in the sky during the day.
- ▶ ... her picture wasn't in their wedding album.
- ▶ ... his ice cream was too cold.
- ▶ ... they wouldn't let him wipe his nose with a piece of bread.

Unfortunately, we also can get angry as adults—and for equally silly reasons.

- ▶ Someone chews his food too loudly.
- ▶ Someone in front of you is walking (or driving) too slowly.
- ▶ Someone asks a question that was just answered moments ago.
- ▶ Someone puts you on hold for longer than a minute.

Admit it. You've become angry over something petty—just like I have. At other times, more serious matters push the anger button: slander, threats, and unjust actions. Do we give in to the anger, or is there a better way? In Psalm 35, David had good reasons to be angry, but he took a different route. It's a route we should consider when anger starts to well up inside us.

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## Psalm 35:1-3

**1 Plead my cause, O LORD, with them that strive with me: fight against them that fight against me.**

**2 Take hold of shield and buckler, and stand up for mine help.**

**3 Draw out also the spear, and stop the way against them that persecute me: say unto my soul, I am thy salvation.**

Many of us have played the game of one-upmanship. We play it when we try to look better than the next person. “We’re taking a trip to Europe this summer.” We also play a negative version of the game. “You think you had it bad? Let me tell you how sick I was!”

You wouldn’t want to play that game against King David. When it comes to opposition and roadblocks in life, David’s list most likely would be far longer and greater than yours or mine. Opposition comes in many forms. We view anything that keeps us from what we want or think we deserve as opposition—and these things can stir up anger in us. Ever gotten riled up because you can’t find the TV remote? My point is it doesn’t take much to see something as opposition.

But David faced real—and serious—opposition. David likely penned Psalm 35 during the period of his life when King Saul was pursuing him. After David’s victory over Goliath, he quickly rose in popularity with the people. He served in Saul’s court, and he was successful in everything he did. David never sought to usurp King Saul, but that was not how Saul viewed David. It didn’t help that the popular song of the day was “Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (1 Sam. 18:7).

God’s hand obviously was on David. The prophet Samuel already had informed Saul, “thy kingdom shall not continue: the LORD hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the LORD hath commanded him to be captain over his people” (13:14). Even before

David's "name was much set by" (18:30) after he killed Goliath (17:45-52) and became successful in Saul's army, Samuel anointed him and declared that he was the one God had chosen to be the next king (16:12-13).

Even though David remained loyal to Saul and served him faithfully, he eventually had to run for his life. From then until Saul's death, David lived in the wilderness. To have David out of his court and the public eye was not enough for Saul. He relentlessly chased after David with the single-minded intent of killing him. (Read the full account of Saul's animosity in 1 Sam. 18–26.)

It's in this context that David cried out, "Plead my cause, O LORD, with them that strive with me: fight against them that fight against me." This psalm is called an imprecatory psalm, one in which the writer calls on God to bring harm and disaster on his enemy. Many people are uncomfortable with these psalms because they seem diametrically opposed to Jesus' command to love our enemies (Matt. 5:44).

Lest we think David is mean-spirited with no love in his heart, two things in David's life are worth noting:

**1. David had an easy opportunity to kill his enemy—twice.**

On one occasion, Saul went to relieve himself in the very cave where David and his men were hiding. David crept up and cut off the corner of Saul's robe to prove that he could have harmed Saul—but he would never lift his hand against the one God had anointed (1 Sam. 24:1-11). Another time, David crept into Saul's camp while he was sleeping and took the javelin and water jug that were inches from Saul (26:7-12). From a distance, David then called out to Saul: "The LORD render to every man his righteousness and his faithfulness: for the LORD delivered thee into my hand to day, but I would not stretch forth mine hand against the LORD's anointed. And, behold, as thy life was much set by this day in mine eyes, so let my life be much set by in the eyes of the LORD, and let him deliver me out of all tribulation" (vv. 23-24).

2. **David took the matter to God.** David didn't seek vengeance; He sought God. Read this psalm through verse 8 and you see a cry for David's opponents to be disgraced, humiliated, ashamed, and ruined. David expressed his anger and frustration to God, but he left the matter there. David surely knew what God said in the law: "To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence ... For the Lord shall judge his people" (Deut. 32:35-36).

To whom do we turn when we face opposition and anger rises up? We may turn inward and fume about it. We may take our anger to others, recruiting them to join us in our anger. David models a better approach: take the matter to God. Even though David offered suggestions to God on what He should do, he prayed and trusted Him, and looked for His assurance: "I am thy salvation."

#### QUESTION 2:

*What's your first reaction to these verses?*

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### Psalm 35:13-16

**13 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.**

**14 I behaved myself as though he had been my friend or brother: I bowed down heavily, as one that mourneth for his mother.**

**15 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:**

**16 With hypocritical mockers in feasts, they gnashed upon me with their teeth.**

It's wonderful to watch two people find each other and fall in love. But it is a shock to hear that, just a few years later, one spouse turns to the other and says, "I don't love you anymore." That's a story many people know by heart. Unfaithfulness and divorce rip families apart, and those once loved and supported become enemies. It doesn't happen just between married couples. Good friends—even best friends—turn their backs and begin to work against those they used to support through thick and thin.

That's why David's situation was so hard. Those who sought to kill him were the very ones he cared for most. We've already noted the relationship between Saul and David. David served Saul faithfully. He had been a military leader for Saul, and he had served alongside many of the soldiers who were now pursuing him (1 Sam. 18:5).

### QUESTION 3:

***How can we respond well when we are treated unjustly by others?***

For those who think David was being unusually harsh in this psalm, note that David sincerely prayed *for* these men. David wasn't guilty of the casual prayer in passing. He didn't say—"I'll pray for you"—and then promptly forget. For their sake, he changed his clothes. I imagine it's rather hard to forget to pray when your clothes of sackcloth are so itchy! He fasted. He mourned for them. He "bowed down heavily." His prayer was genuine.

In an ideal setting, those David had previously prayed for and cared about would do the same for him when he stumbled. They would've come alongside David, praying, fasting, and seeking the best for him. But instead, "they rejoiced, and gathered themselves ... against me." Others joined David's former friends in this feeding frenzy: "Abjects ... did tear me, and ceased not."

When friends or family turn on us, it can be tempting to respond in kind. When Jesus spoke of loving our enemies, He said, "For if

ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others?" (Matt. 5:46-47). Even when our friends and loved ones turn on us, we don't change our tune: we are to continue loving.

Jesus exemplified this for us.

- ▶ "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth" (Isa. 53:7).
- ▶ "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

Loving those who anger us or seek our harm is the best way to "get back" at them. "If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:20-21).

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## Psalm 35:17-18

**17 LORD, how long wilt thou look on? rescue my soul from their destructions, my darling from the lions.**

**18 I will give thee thanks in the great congregation: I will praise thee among much people.**

Saul took his hatred of David to the battlefield; he responded as a warrior, chasing the one he perceived to be his enemy to kill him. David was well-known as a mighty warrior, but he appealed to God to be the warrior on his behalf. He was also appealing to God as his advocate and judge. He needed to be rescued "from their destructions." Without God's intervention, David's life was truly in danger, David asked God to "rescue my soul ... from the lions."

The heart of David's prayer and appeal to God was for rescue, not retaliation:

- ▶ "Plead my cause, ... with them that strive with me ..." (Ps. 35:1).
- ▶ "Let them ... be confounded and put to shame ..." (v. 4).
- ▶ "Let their way be dark and slippery ..." (v. 6).
- ▶ "Let destruction come upon him at unawares ..." (v. 8).

Their demise was not his goal; his rescue was. David's attitude and heart toward his enemy was evident at Saul's' death. When Saul died in battle (1 Sam. 31:1-6), David did not rejoice, saying: "Yes! My prayer has been answered!" Instead, David grieved for Saul as well as for Israel (2 Sam. 1:11-12). We feel no retaliation or sense of vengeance when we grieve over the defeat of those who seek our downfall.

David's other psalms reflect an unwavering trust in God (as we will see in the next session's study of Psalm 23), so we can assume David's closing words in Psalm 35 reflect that same trust. David had faith that God would rescue him; he just didn't know when. "LORD, how long wilt thou look on?" David knew God would rescue him, but he was ready to be rescued right then.

#### QUESTION 4:

***What makes leaving matters in God's hands so challenging?***

We also see David's trust in his praise of God. Things did not look favorable for David at this moment—he had not yet experienced the rescue he sought from God—but he approached life with a renewed determination. "I *will* give thee thanks ... I *will* praise thee" (emphasis added). David had expressed similar praise in verse 9, but here David would offer his praise and worship "in the great congregation ... among much people." To offer public praise in the thick of frustrating, anger-provoking circumstances is a great testimony of our trust in God.

In my early 20s, I worked in a pharmaceutical warehouse. As the operations manager, I delivered a order that came in late to the floor supervisor who proceeded to tell me what she thought of this order—and what she thought of me. I just listened and then returned to my office. As I walked away, one man said, “I want to know what makes you different. I would’ve blown up if she talked to me that way.”

When we feel the tug of anger in our hearts, we can let it loose and deal with the consequences later. Or we can give the urge over to God and leave matters in His hands.

**QUESTION 5:**

*Why is it important to take our anger and anguish to God?*

**ENGAGE**

*Choose one of the images that illustrates a common anger or frustration you have. Then write a prayer on a separate sheet of paper, taking that anger or frustration to God.*



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## LIVE IT OUT

When anger begins to brew, how will you respond?

- ▶ **Vent—to God.** Before talking to others about what has upset you, talk to God. Be honest with God about why you're angry. Ask Him for the strength to refrain from anger and the will to trust Him with the situation.
- ▶ **Seek resolution—not retaliation.** If possible, find a way to resolve the relationship or situation that has angered you. At the very least, pray for the well-being of the other person. As you genuinely pray for another person, God will also work on your heart.
- ▶ **Love—no matter what.** Find specific, concrete ways you can show the love of Christ to those who've hurt you or made you angry. Don't take any action to look self-righteous and better than the other person. Show love to honor the One who loves you.

