

Vindication

Psalm 35:19–28, Acts 16:35–40

The title of our sermon this morning is “Vindication.” In our Old Testament text the Psalmist prays, “Vindicate me, O Lord my God, according to Your righteousness” (Ps. 35:24).¹ In the original the word for “vindicate” is literally *judge*. “Judge” (שָׁפַט) can mean *decide, settle* [a dispute or case]; *act as judge*.² “Judge” has two senses: *vindicate* and *condemn*. One is positive, the other is negative. The meaning is made clear by the context. Biblical Hebrew—personally chosen by our Father in heaven to be the primary language of revelation—allows this ambiguity. This forces the serious Bible student to study and meditate and reflect carefully and prayerfully upon the text to determine its meaning. The old King James Version has “Judge me, O LORD my God.” The Psalmist is not asking the Lord to *condemn* him (that is, to send him to hell) but to *vindicate* him (that is, to clear him of guilt). So the NKJV correctly translates this as “Vindicate me, O LORD my God.” Notice with me several things about this remarkable expression. First of all, the Psalmist is claiming Yahweh, the God of the Bible, as *his* God. If God is our God, then that means that we acknowledge him to be the supreme being, the Creator and ruler of the universe and source of all moral authority. Furthermore, if he is our God, then we are committing ourselves to be his worshipers. We recognize and accept that we are to have no other gods before him, that he is to have first place in our life, that unless we are providentially hindered we are morally obligated to gather before him with his people on his day and worship him. Nothing else is more important than that. If we claim the God of the Bible as our God, then he must be God: as the apostle Paul succinctly puts it, “Let God be true, but every man a liar”—let God be true, let God be God, and render to him his due. If something else is more important than God’s worship, then we ought to be honest and admit that that thing—whatever it is—is our God; the God of heaven is not really our God. Basic honesty demands that. Let God be our God.

But how can a sinful being ask the God of heaven to vindicate him? God takes no pleasure in the wicked; he is angry with the wicked every day. How can a guilty sinner pray an infinitely perfect being to vindicate him? It is impossible! The rest of the prayer gives the answer: “Vindicate me, O LORD my God, *according to Your righteousness*.” The Psalmist prays, “Vindicate me, O LORD my God” not on the basis of his own righteousness—after all, he is a guilty sinner—but on the righteousness of God himself. Here is the gospel, the only truly good news. If vindication by God was based upon the sinner’s merit there would be no possibility

¹ שָׁפַטְנִי כְּצִדְקַת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי “Judge me according to thy righteousness, Yahweh, my God.”

² Halladay, שָׁפַט

of salvation. If we were to pray, “Vindicate me, O God, let me into heaven on the basis of my own righteousness,” then we would be rightly excluded from his holy presence. No one will ever be vindicated—cleared of moral guilt, accepted into the blessed presence of God—on the basis of his own righteousness, for the Bible says, “There is none righteous, no, not one.” All sons and daughters of Adam, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned with him, and fell with him, in his first transgression. The guilt of that original sin is passed down through the father to all succeeding generations. There is no hope for guilty sinners save through the righteousness of Christ, the Savior. Since vindication—clearing of guilt—depends on the righteousness of God himself, the Psalmist’s prayer can be answered. Yes, God will vindicate his child who comes to him in sincere faith. So the Christian prays, “Vindicate me, O LORD my God”: clear me of guilt, clear me of suspicion. In essence, the prayer “Vindicate me” means, Clear my reputation, help me to have a good reputation.

In our New Testament text the missionaries Paul and Silas have been arrested, beaten, abused, publicly humiliated, jailed and thrown into solitary confinement, their legs and feet forced into rough wooden stocks. In the middle of the night they prayed aloud and sang hymns,³ and the prisoners heard them. Their witness was amplified and used by the Holy Spirit of God to bring about the conversion of their jailer, a Roman army officer, a pagan, a man heretofore ignorant of the holy Scriptures or the way of salvation. The Philippian jailer, along with Paul’s traveling companion Luke, Lydia, and the servant girl delivered from demon possession, would form the core of what would become a thriving church—the first on the continent of Europe. The Philippian church would be graced with gifted officers. In his letter to them Paul would write, “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons”—*elders* and *deacons*, what every church needs to earnestly pray for! Moreover, it would become a generous church; Paul would later write that “no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only” (Phil. 4:15). Let us consider three points, first,

1. A good reputation

In our text today we are going to consider the vindication of Paul and Silas. These two men—faithful missionaries of the gospel—had been stripped naked, beaten on their bare backs, publicly humiliated, abused, and treated like evildoers, criminals, disturbers of the peace, men to be shamed and scorned, excluded from polite society. The people of Philippi, a Roman colony in northeastern Greece, governed under Roman law, would naturally assume that men so treated were evil men. You can imagine the dinner-table conversation that night: “Did you hear what happened downtown today? Those vagabonds—ne’er-do-wells, foreigners who

³ ὑμνέω (*hymneō*), to sing a hymn

have been preaching out on the public square about a man called Jesus—finally got what was coming to them. They were arrested by the authorities, beaten and thrown into jail where they belong. I saw it myself. Good riddance!” Perhaps the others around the table might have giggled.

Now a good reputation depends on doing good. *Good* must be defined in accordance with the word of God. *God* is good. *Good* is that which is in accord with the perfect character of God. Paul and Silas were proclaiming the truth of God. The Bible says, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation.” Clearly, Paul and Silas were obeying God, clearly they were doing good. But now their reputations were destroyed. They were treated like common criminals.

All of us have a responsibility to maintain a good reputation. The ninth commandment says, “Thou shalt not bear false witness.” We confess that it requires “the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man, and of our own and our neighbor’s good name.”⁴ A person’s good name is his reputation—how he is regarded in the sight of his fellow man. A person builds a good reputation by living his life in an honest and godly way, moment by moment, day by day. A good reputation is built over time. It takes a long time to develop a good reputation, but a very short time to destroy it. A good reputation can be destroyed by a thoughtless word or action. For a long time thereafter people will remember your folly rather than your good. It takes a long time for a reputation to be repaired.

The Lord Jesus has a perfect reputation. He “went about doing good” (Acts 10:38). Though he spoke and taught extensively, he always spoke the truth. The Lord Jesus was the only one who ever received the unqualified commendation by the mouth of God the Father, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). The Father is well-pleased with his Son, Jesus. No one could ever have a better reputation. There is a beloved hymn that says, “At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, every tongue confess him King of glory now.” The text of the hymn is based on Philippians 2:11, “That at the *name* of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” The *name* of Jesus has two senses. It could refer to his given name, Jesus. His name is special because it was given at the command of God himself when the angel appeared to Joseph and said, “She shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins” (Matt.

⁴ Westminster Shorter Catechism 77, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

1:21). But there is another sense of *name*, and that is *reputation*. Jesus has a good reputation, and we—followers of Jesus—ought to have a good reputation.

But in one afternoon Paul and Silas lost their good reputation through no fault of their own, but through the plotting of their enemies. Currently there is a January 6 Committee show trial going on. The goal is not to uncover the truth—after all, there are hundreds of hours of security camera footage that have never been released and have not been seen by the public. No, the goal is to smear the political opposition, to paint a lawful protest as an armed insurrection, the greatest threat to America since Pearl Harbor, and to ensure that a former president cannot run again. The goal is to intimidate the opposition and destroy people’s reputations. But we, God’s people, ought to endeavor to have a good reputation. Second,

2. Lawful protest (appeal to authority)

Verses 35–36 relate that “when it was day, the magistrates sent the officers, saying, ‘Let those men go.’ So the keeper of the prison reported these words to Paul, saying, ‘The magistrates have sent to let you go. Now therefore depart, and go in peace.’”

The word for “officers” literally means *the men that carried the rods*, that is, the *fasces* that were the symbol of Roman authority. The fasces were actually a bundle of rods, among which was an ax with a projecting blade. These were carried before ancient Roman magistrates as a badge of authority. They plainly signified: *we can beat you into submission with rods, and if that doesn’t work, we will kill you*. The sight of the officers carrying the fasces was meant to subdue the spirit of the common people and keep them in subjection.

The “keeper of the prison” is plainly the Philippian jailer, a Roman officer—probably the first Roman to confess Christ. Here was the man who had first heard the gospel in the middle of the night, just hours before. He brings to Paul and Silas the news that they could walk free. Joyfully he tells them, “Now therefore depart, and go in peace.” The Christian faith was new to the jailer, but he used an expression that is common in the Old Testament and in the teachings of Jesus: “go in peace.” It is only in Christ that we can go in peace. Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27). “The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked” (Isa. 57:20–21). But in Christ we have peace. When the minister pronounces the benediction at the end of the service he is essentially saying, “Go in peace.” It is only in the gospel that we can go in peace.

But Paul and Silas are not ready to go—not yet! There has been an injustice. What the magistrates had ordered to be done to them the previous day was a great reproach. These faithful ministers of Christ had been “put to open shame, as if they

had been the most notorious malefactors living; when they were ‘uncondemned.’”⁵ Paul and Silas had not been charged. They were innocent. What was done to them was done in a Roman colony, and by Roman magistrates, and to persons who were Roman citizens. Paul says, “They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out.” Gill observes that should Paul and Silas go out of the prison in such a private manner, it might be taken for granted that they had been guilty of an offense, and thus had justly suffered the punishment of the law. By forcing the magistrates to come themselves and let them out, they might own the illegality of their proceedings and declare the innocence of the apostles.

Another author documents that according to laws that had been passed at various times from the founding of the Roman Republic, a Roman citizen could travel anywhere within Roman territory under the protection of Rome. When in difficulty, he could appeal to be tried by Rome, not by local authorities. Furthermore, Roman governors in the provinces were forbidden to kill, scourge, torture, condemn or put in bonds a Roman citizen.⁶ What the local magistrates had done to the two missionaries was clearly illegal, and the quick-thinking Paul would not go away quietly. He recognized the damage to the gospel that had been inflicted by the Roman magistrates, and he would use the power of the law to remedy it. Like protesters in a sit-in gathering conspicuously, refusing to move unless their demands are met, Paul and Silas would use lawful protest to appeal to authority.

To return to the words of Psalm 35, “Let them be ashamed and brought to mutual confusion who rejoice at my hurt; let them be clothed with shame and dishonor who exalt themselves against me. Let them shout for joy and be glad, who favor my righteous cause; and let them say continually, ‘Let the Lord be magnified, who has pleasure in the prosperity of His servant.’”

Paul took advantage of his rights as a Roman citizen. This was entirely appropriate, since law and order itself comes from God: “There is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (Rom. 13:1). God had put the Roman government in power. God himself had himself charged the Roman government to keep the peace, allowing for the unhindered proclamation of the gospel, so that his kingdom could thrive, and Jews and Gentiles brought in. Some well-meaning people believe that civil government is evil, and Christians should have nothing to do with it. This was not the apostle Paul’s view. He appealed to his Roman citizenship, and he was not hesitant to engage in lawful protest when

⁵ Gill

⁶ *Expositors Bible Commentary*, PocketBible

necessary. Lawful protest is akin to claiming exemptions to which one is entitled, when filing one's income tax. It is good and honorable to claim exemptions that are allowed by the law. It is not more righteous to pay more taxes than are owed. Paul appealed to his rights as a citizen, and so may we. We are all to pray "for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" (1 Tim. 2:2). Let us so pray, and let us so do!

When the magistrates came and personally pleaded with the missionaries and brought them out, they might have said, with the Psalmist in our text today, "my tongue shall speak of Your righteousness and of Your praise all the day long." Amen! Lastly, consider

3. Final judgment

We began with an examination of the words "Vindicate me, O LORD my God." This should be the Christian's prayer and expectation. But as we pray, we are painfully aware that "though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet. This is my Father's world, the battle is not done; Jesus who died shall be satisfied, and earth and heaven be one." It is at the final judgment that the battle shall be done. Our mighty Savior won a great victory on the cross of Calvary. At the cross the atonement was complete, the veil outside the holy of holies was torn in two from top to bottom, Satan fell like lightning from heaven and became a defeated foe. What we're experiencing now is a mop-up operation. Victory is assured. Your hope in Christ is real. But at the final judgment the saints' vindication will be complete.

Remember, *vindicate* means to clear a person's reputation from unjust allegations. At the final day all those believing in Christ will be vindicated. Though unjustly persecuted in this present life, they will be declared justified by faith. Just as "Abraham believed in the Lord, and it was counted unto him for righteousness," so all those who have put their trust in the Lord will be declared righteous before the judgment seat of Christ.

As Carl Trueman put it, currently "the institutions of cultural power are all dominated by those who despise us."⁷ They hate it that Christ stands for truth. Christians are called "anti-women" for objecting to the forceful killing of human life in the womb, and for teaching that the husband and father ought to be the head of the home, and "anti-gay" for teaching that same-sex attraction is a perversion of God's created order, and for objecting to the grooming of kindergarteners and preschoolers. The left considers Christians unenlightened and deplorable.

But the dramatic change of mind on the part of the city fathers of Philippi shows us that "the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he

⁷ <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2021/06/christians-beware-the-blame-game>

turneth it whithersoever he will” (Prov. 21:1). At the final day Christ and his church will be ultimately vindicated.

We read in the last verse of the chapter that Paul and Silas “went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia; and when they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.” The saints were encouraged by the courage of Paul and Silas and encouraged that God brought good out of evil. We should be as well. Dear saint of God, be true to him till your last, dying breath. Be faithful unto death, and you will receive the crown of life. Amen.