

Psalms 38:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

They also that render evil for good are mine adversaries;
because I follow the thing that good is.

Analysis

They also that render evil for good are mine adversaries; because I follow the thing that good is. David laments the injustice of receiving evil in return for good. The Hebrew verb "render" (shalam, שָׁלַם) means to repay, recompense, or requite—indicating deliberate, unjust reciprocation. Instead of gratitude for David's kindness, his enemies responded with hostility and opposition.

"Mine adversaries" (satan, שָׂטָן) is the same word later used for Satan the accuser, denoting hostile opponents who actively oppose and accuse. The root meaning is "to oppose" or "to be an adversary." David's enemies weren't merely indifferent but actively antagonistic despite his good treatment of them.

"Because I follow the thing that good is" (radaphi-tov, רָדַף־טוֹב) literally means "my pursuing of good." David's commitment to righteousness became the very reason for opposition—a pattern seen throughout Scripture where godliness provokes persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). This verse prophetically points to Christ, who perfectly rendered only good yet received ultimate evil (the cross) in return. Jesus quoted Psalm 35:19 (a parallel passage) in John 15:25, identifying with David's unjust suffering. Believers following Christ must expect similar treatment, returning good for evil as Christ did (Romans 12:17-21, 1 Peter 2:21-23).

Historical Context

Psalms 38 is one of seven penitential psalms, composed during a period of severe physical affliction and social isolation. The superscription "to bring to remembrance" suggests liturgical use for confession and remembrance of sin. David likely wrote this during Absalom's rebellion (2 Samuel 15-18) or another time when physical suffering coincided with betrayal by those he had befriended.

The historical pattern of receiving evil for good marked David's relationships. He spared Saul's life repeatedly, yet Saul pursued him relentlessly. He showed kindness to Mephibosheth (Jonathan's son), yet faced accusation from him. He treated Absalom with paternal mercy, yet Absalom rebelled and sought his death. These experiences of betrayal were preparation for the Messianic King who would perfectly fulfill this pattern.

The early church recognized this psalm as prophetic of Christ's passion. Jesus, who went about doing good and healing all oppressed by the devil (Acts 10:38), was rewarded with crucifixion. The religious leaders He came to save became His chief adversaries. This historical-prophetic pattern warns believers: following Christ in doing good guarantees opposition from those who hate the light (John 3:19-20).

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. When have you experienced the pain of receiving evil for good, and how did you respond?
2. How does Christ's example of suffering unjustly while doing good provide both comfort and a pattern for your response to betrayal?
3. What does it reveal about human nature that pursuing good often provokes adversaries rather than allies?

4. How can you guard against bitterness when those you've helped turn against you?
5. In what ways should this verse shape your expectations in ministry and relationships with unbelievers?

Interlinear Text

וּמִשְׁלֵמִי י	תַּחַת כָּעֵה	טוֹב:	! שָׂטָן וְנִי	תַּחַת
They also that render	evil	for good	are mine adversaries	
H7999	H7451	H2896	H7853	H8478
כְּדוֹפִי	טוֹב:			
because I follow	for good			
H7291	H2896			

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 35:12 (Evil): They rewarded me evil for good to the spoiling of my soul.

1 John 3:12 (Evil): Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.

Jeremiah 18:20 (Evil): Shall evil be recompensed for good? for they have digged a pit for my soul. Remember that I stood before thee to speak good for them, and to turn away thy wrath from them.