

Psalm 58

“Praying for the Judgment of God”

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Pentecost Season

Listen now to God’s word from Psalm 58, which is printed on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to read along.

Psalm 58

To the choirmaster: according to Do Not Destroy. A Miktam of David.

- 1 *Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods?
Do you judge the children of man uprightly?*
- 2 *No, in your hearts you devise wrongs;
your hands deal out violence on earth.*
- 3 *The wicked are estranged from the womb;
they go astray from birth, speaking lies.*
- 4 *They have venom like the venom of a serpent,
like the deaf adder that stops its ear,*
- 5 *so that it does not hear the voice of charmers
or of the cunning enchanter.*
- 6 *O God, break the teeth in their mouths;
tear out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD!*
- 7 *Let them vanish like water that runs away;
when he aims his arrows, let them be blunted.*
- 8 *Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime,
like the stillborn child who never sees the sun.*
- 9 *Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns,
whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away!*

10 *The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance;
he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.*

11 *Mankind will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous;
surely there is a God who judges on earth."*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you.

Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

For six years now, we've been moving consecutively through the psalms for three months each summer. And of course, when you move consecutively through the psalter, you end up preaching on psalms that you probably wouldn't choose to read or preach or study if you were just picking your favorites. And Psalm 58 is probably one of those psalms that we wouldn't pick on our own.

Psalm 58 is one of the most explicitly bold and even, in a certain sense, violent, of all the psalms in its petitions to God.

For modern people like ourselves, it may feel a bit unsettling to pray for God to break the teeth of the wicked, to tear out their fangs, to make them like snails that dissolve into slime, to anticipate the joy of the righteous at the promised vengeance of God.

But the Scriptures not only give us license to pray this way, they actually instruct us to pray like this.

This is an important distinction - the Psalms are not just there to show us all the ways we might pray if we desired to - the psalms are given to us to train us *how* to pray, to teach us what it is that we *ought* to pray for, as we embrace our union with Jesus are conformed more and more to his image by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And clearly, praying for God to judge the wicked is something that God *wants* us to pray for.

This, beloved, is a fundamental part of what it means to be pious and holy - to pray for God's judgment, and to earnestly desire for it to come soon.

This theme of asking for God to come in judgment is not present only here in Psalm 58, of course - it's all over the psalter, in fact, asking for God's justice one of the most dominant themes of the psalms.

And it's not just in the psalms - in Revelation we find that the souls of the redeemed - after their perfection in holiness, after they have entered heaven, still cry out for the justice of God.

John tells us: 9 When [the Lamb] opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. 10 They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" 11 Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

Beloved, the reality is that none of us know how to pray left to our own wisdom and instincts. We must *learn* to pray.

In fact, throughout the span of our whole lives, however many years the Lord gives us, this is one of the most fundamental spiritual callings we have - to learn to pray not according to our own wisdom and desires, but according to the wisdom and desires of God.

And make no mistake - there is a deep connection between desire and prayer. We pray most for those things we want most. And as the Lord, by his Scriptures, teaches us to pray - we learn to desire in new and better ways - our desires change and mature and become more like his.

And one of the fundamental things the psalms, and indeed, the Scriptures as a whole teach us to desire and pray for is the justice and in-breaking judgment of God.

Consider how our psalm this morning begins.

Interestingly, this psalm begins not with an address of God, but with a direct confrontation of the wicked themselves.

In verses 1-2, the psalmist writes:

1 Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods?

Do you judge the children of man uprightly?

2 No, in your hearts you devise wrongs;

your hands deal out violence on earth.

By “gods” the psalmist is not speaking to false gods like Baal. No, he is addressing human rulers here. The Hebrew word is “Elim,” and it is probably better translated as the ESV has it in a footnote: “You mighty lords.”

Rightly understanding who the psalmist is talking to in the first part of the psalm is crucial for seeing its overall argument.

The “wicked” in Psalm 58 aren’t just the generic wicked - they’re those wicked who are in positions of power and authority, and have used that power and authority to set themselves against God and use violence to abuse and oppress the weak.

As we read in verse 1, the wicked in this psalm are those who fail to “judge” the children of man rightly - they have the power of judgment, but they abuse that power - indeed, as verse 2 says, they deliberately plan evil in their hearts, and with their hands they deal out violence to those who are under their thumbs.

The person in mind here is anyone who uses their authority to abuse and oppress - it might be a dictator or a president or a warlord, it might be a teacher or a boss or a pastor or a police officer or a parent.

If you’ve suffered under the power of someone else - and I know that many of you have been in this situation before — you know how terrible it can be.

If that’s been your experience, beloved, it’s important for you to see here that the Scriptures take your suffering, your experiences incredibly seriously. They matter. They are not unseen by God.

And one of the Bible’s most fundamental claims is that those who abuse their authority, those who use violence and power to oppress those under their rule will be held to account.

In verses 3-5, the psalmist further describes these wicked oppressors.

*3 The wicked are estranged from the womb;
they go astray from birth, speaking lies.*

*4 They have venom like the venom of a serpent,
like the deaf adder that stops its ear,*

*5 so that it does not hear the voice of charmers
or of the cunning enchanter.*

The image of the wicked oppressor here is that he is like an uncontrollable venomous snake — that he has intentionally made himself deaf to the instructions of God, his master, and he strikes out like a cobra at those under his rule.

The wicked oppressor is “like the deaf adder that stops its ear,” a connection that should remind us of Acts 7, where Luke tells us that the Jewish authorities “stopped up their ears” as they rushed at Stephen to kill him.

This hardening of the heart is a crucial piece of the portrait to understand who the wicked person the psalmist is describing here - this is not just a flawed, imperfect human being, but someone who refuses to repent, refuses to listen, and continues in their way of violence, abuse and oppression.

The image of a serpent here is meaningful, of course.

A person who has shut his ears to God and uses his power to harm or destroy those under his rule for his own selfish ends has become like Satan himself - the original oppressor and abuser.

But what is to be done about the wicked, those who have become like Satan in their abuse of power?

Are we able to control wickedness in our own strength? Can we, in our own might, solve the problem of human evil?

The problem of human wickedness, of the violence and evil of those with power is an ancient one. It has haunted humanity’s experience since Cain struck Abel down in the field.

And in verses 6-9, the Psalmist begins to teach us what it is that we need to be delivered from the oppressive rule of evil. What we need is the intervention, the judgement of God - and the psalmist here gives us language to cry out to God to deliver us from evil.

*6 O God, break the teeth in their mouths;
tear out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD!
7 Let them vanish like water that runs away;
when he aims his arrows, let them be blunted.
8 Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime,
like the stillborn child who never sees the sun.
9 Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns,
whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away!*

One of the most profound things about the Scriptures is their realism. The Scriptures do not minimize or ignore innocent suffering at the hands of wicked men.

And the intensity of the language in these petitions matches the intensity of our problem.

These verses teach us is that real human evil exists in this world, and they teach us also that those who use violence and deceit to destroy those under their power don't need a little medication, a little pat on the shoulder, a little rehabilitation - no, the solution for human suffering at the hands of evil men is for those who are evil to be judged by God, and their power to be absolutely destroyed.

O God - break the teeth of the serpent, tear out the fangs of the lion, the psalmist says! Blunt his arrows, take away his power, let him be like a snail in the sun, like a child who is never born!

For those who have innocently suffered abuse and harm, for those who have lost loved ones to violence, for those whose homes and lives have been destroyed by the plans of wicked men, this kind of language is not embarrassing or overwrought.

No, for those who have truly suffered at the hands of evil, powerful men, the language in verses 6-9 is empowering in the deepest sense possible - because it accurately describes how God must respond to human evil if God is to truly be righteous and holy.

If God is righteous, then God must be the judge of mankind. There is no other answer for the problem of suffering and evil than the righteous judgment of a holy God.

And that is just what we read about in verses 10-11, as the psalmist writes with what can only be called delight and anticipation.

*10 The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance;
he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.*

*11 Mankind will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous;
surely there is a God who judges on earth."*

Beloved, I hope that you aren't embarrassed by these last two verses, particularly verse 10. I hope that there's no part of you that wishes they weren't actually in the Bible, because they're tasteless or offensive.

No, beloved, this is what we need, if we are to love our enemies and not be tempted to use violence to tear them down ourselves.

The only way for us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us is by anticipating and longing for and hoping in the vengeance of God, the righteous and holy judgement that only God is righteous and holy enough to administer.

Make no mistake, if you know the evil of man, if you truly see it, if you don't shut your eyes to the wickedness that humankind is truly capable of when those who are in power use that power to abuse and rape and kill and steal and destroy - then you will have no problem saying with this psalm: *"The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked."*

I want to close this morning by reading you a section from the Belgic Confession, which was written in 1561, roughly a century before our own Westminster Confession.

Unlike Westminster, the Belgic Confession was written during a time when the Protestant reformation was very much still being violently opposed by those who were in religious authority, indeed, its primary author, Guido de Bres, a Dutch pastor and theologian was publicly executed by the Roman Catholic Church for his faith in 1567, just six years after the confession was published.

If you've never read the Belgic Confession, I'd commend it to you. It's a wonderful articulation of protestant convictions and belief, forged in a time of significant persecution.

For years, one of the portions of the Belgic Confession that has fascinated me is the last section of that work, which focuses on the last judgment. What I find most interesting is that the confession here doesn't just focus on what we believe will take place on the last day, but also on the joy and satisfaction that the last judgment will provide for those who belong to Christ.

"Finally, we believe...that our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, corporally and visibly, as He ascended, with great glory and majesty, to declare Himself Judge of the quick and the dead, burning this old world with fire and flame to cleanse it.

And then all men will personally appear before this great Judge, both men and women and children, that have been from the beginning of the world to the end thereof, being summoned by the voice of the archangel, and by the sound of the trumpet of God. Then the books (that is to say, the consciences) shall be opened, and the dead judged according to what they have done in this world, whether it be good or evil. Nay, all men shall give an account of every idle word they have spoken, which the world only counts amusement and jest, and then the secrets and hypocrisy of men shall be disclosed and laid open before all.

And, therefore, the consideration of this judgment is justly terrible and dreadful to the wicked and ungodly, but most desirable and comfortable to the righteous and the elect; because then their full deliverance shall be perfected, and there they shall receive the fruits of their labor and trouble which they have borne.

Their innocence shall be known to all, and they shall see the terrible vengeance which God shall execute on the wicked...[but] the faithful and elect shall be crowned with glory and honor; and the Son of God will confess their names before God His Father, and His elect angels; all tears shall be wiped from their eyes; and their cause, which is now condemned by many judges and magistrates as heretical and impious, will then be known to be the cause of the Son of God. And for a gracious reward, the Lord will cause them to possess such a glory as never entered into the heart of man to conceive.

Therefore we expect that great day with a most ardent desire, to the end that we may fully enjoy the promises of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

There is so much injustice in this world that has never been dealt with. If you think about the history of the human race, and all the abuse and harm and violence that has perpetrated by the wicked and powerful, how many of those injustice have been dealt with, even in a flawed manner? The percentage is small.

Injustice is our reality in this life.

But, beloved, whatever your suffering, and whatever the suffering of the world at the hands of evil men that you have witnessed, I promise you this.

The Judgement of God is coming. Even now, the Lord Jesus is at the door.

And he will not come as he did the first time - in weakness and humility.

No, he comes, he comes with a sword in his hand and clothed with a robe dipped in blood.

And every wrong will be settled. No act of wickedness, no matter how large or small, will be left unaccounted for.

And we who belong to this Jesus, this Jesus who comes in judgement, will rejoice to see the day of the vengeance of our God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.