

Faith in the Face of Great Evil

Psalm 52

This morning we saw the absolute authority of King Jesus over all the events and affairs of this world. In Revelation 10, we see Christ with one foot on the sea, the realm of evil and chaos, and one foot on the land, the realm of man's rebellion. Our Lord rules with absolute sovereignty. That is easy to believe when life is going well. But what about when tragedy strikes, or worse, when evil seems to be allowed free reign?

One of the greatest challenges to a believer is how to reconcile divine sovereignty with devastating acts of pure evil. Many people lost their faith in WWII because they simply couldn't reconcile the idea of a sovereign God with the reality of a madman like Hitler, who was murdering millions of innocent people.

Eli Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald said he lost his faith in God as he watched the smoke rise from the crematoriums of Auschwitz.

How does biblical faith act in such a context? How does it survive days of evil? What does it see that helps it endure? Jesus said that in the last days, many will fall away. How does Biblical faith hold on?

Psalm 52 is a psalm about this kind of faith in the face of great evil. The title links the Psalm with one of the most painful experiences of David's life. It was an experience of true and pure evil. It happened during that time when David was being hunted by King Saul. David had been a faithful, loyal servant of Saul for years. But Saul had become insanely jealous because the crowds loved David, and Saul realized that the Lord's blessing was on him. And so Saul sought to kill him.

The event referred to in the title happened when David was fleeing for his life. He had gone to the city of Nob, where the tent of the Lord was. He asked Ahimelech the High Priest for supplies, and Ahimelech gave him some of the holy bread used in the service of the tabernacle. He also gave David a sword, the sword of Goliath, which David had given to Ahimelech years before for safe-keeping. David knew that he was placing Ahimelech the priest in some danger by doing this, and so he purposefully did not reveal that Saul was seeking to take his life.

But there was a man there who saw David – Doeg, the Edomite. He was the chief herdsman of King Saul. He was responsible for all the king's sheep. It was a mid-level bureaucratic

position, and Doeg wanted more. Doeg wanted wealth and power and position. He knew this information would come in handy. And he was right. Shortly thereafter, Doeg was in the presence of the King. Saul was in a paranoid rage because no one was helping him find David.

1 Sam. 22:8 *None of you is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as at this day.*

Of course, Jonathan hadn't stirred up David and David wasn't against Saul. It was all a lie – but it was a lie that served Saul's murderous purpose.

And that's when Doeg stepped up: "I saw David at Nob and Ahimelech the High Priest gave him bread and a sword."

Let's pick up the story in verse 11:

1 Sam. 22:11-19 *Then the king sent to summon Ahimelech the priest, the son of Ahitub, and all his father's house, the priests who were at Nob, and all of them came to the king. And Saul said, "Hear now, son of Ahitub." And he answered, "Here I am, my lord." And Saul said to him, "Why have you conspired against me, you and the son of Jesse, in that you have given him bread and a sword and have inquired of God for him, so that he has risen against me, to lie in wait, as at this day?" Then Ahimelech answered the king, "And who among all your servants is so faithful as David, who is the king's son-in-law, and captain over your bodyguard, and honored in your house? Is today the first time that I have inquired of God for him? No! Let not the king impute anything to his servant or to all the house of my father, for your servant has known nothing of all this, much or little." And the king said, "You shall surely die, Ahimelech, you and all your father's house." And the king said to the guard who stood about him, "Turn and kill the priests of the LORD, because their hand also is with David, and they knew that he fled and did not disclose it to me." But the servants of the king would not put out their hand to strike the priests of the LORD. Then the king said to Doeg, "You turn and strike the priests." And Doeg the Edomite turned and struck down the priests, and he killed on that day eighty-five persons who wore the linen ephod. And Nob, the city of the priests, he put to the sword; both man and woman, child and infant, ox, donkey and sheep, he put to the sword."*

One man escaped to tell David what had happened. That's the context of Psalm 52. An unbelievable act of pure evil. Perfectly innocent men, women, children, and infants slaughtered because of the demonic jealousy of Saul and the greed of Doeg. Psalm 52 is a psalm of faith in God in the presence of a great atrocity, an act of pure evil.

I. The Evil Man

52:1 *Why do you boast of evil, O mighty man?*

David begins with scorn. "O mighty man" is a military term referring to men who have displayed great courage, valor, and honor on the battlefield. In the United States military such men are rewarded with the Medal of Honor. David had 30 such "mighty men" – men who had distinguished themselves by astounding acts of valor and skill on the battlefield. You can read about them in 2 Samuel 23. One man killed 800 enemy soldiers with his spear. Another singlehandedly held a piece of ground against enemy attack and his fingers were frozen to his sword. These are men through whom "the Lord worked a great victory." They were mighty men of God, valiant warriors for the cause of righteousness.

So, you can see that David's use of this term is dripping with sarcasm and scorn. Doeg the "mighty man" had proven his valor by murdering 85 innocent, unarmed priests, and then slaughtering all their family members. Doeg, the mighty man, is actually a pitiful, wretched, vile excuse of a man.

Why does Doeg boast of evil? It's because he is a man given to evil and delights in evil.

52:2-4 *Your tongue plots destruction,
like a sharp razor, you worker of deceit.
You love evil more than good,
and lying more than speaking what is right. Selah
You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue.*

It's interesting that David highlights not Doeg's sword, but his mouth. His tongue plots destruction. He loved lying more than speaking what is right. Futato points out that the repeated phrase, "you love, you love," implies choice as well as attraction.

Isn't that something? You know people like this. They lie as a normal way of doing life. They love lying more than speaking what is right. It isn't an accident, it's a choice.

I think we have become somewhat comfortable, as a society, with lies and people who lie. We expect it of our politicians. We expect our media outlets to twist the story to meet their own ends. We accept friends who shade or spin the truth. "It's just the way they are." Take it with a grain of salt. Just a minor character flaw.

But it's not a minor character flaw. Who told us that it was? A lying tongue is an abomination to the God of truth.

I remember telling the kids when they were young that I would be patient with many sins, but I would not tolerate, to the smallest degree, lies. Lies undermine and destroy everything.

It should be the same way in the body of Christ. If you, or someone you know, has a habit of shading or spinning the truth, you need to know that a lying tongue is simply and purely evil. It is the Devil himself at work. Lies bring death and destruction.

Of course, it's interesting to note that Doeg didn't specifically lie. We could say that he told the truth. He did see David at Nob. Ahimelech did help him. It was all true. So why does David charge him with lies?

People who gossip and slander will quickly say that they are just telling the truth. What could be wrong with telling the truth?

But truth used for the purpose of evil is deceit. Truth is a holy and precious thing, meant for God's glory and God's purposes and human flourishing. When the holy commodity of truth is used for evil purposes it is the essence of deception. This is why the Westminster Larger Catechism includes in the category of "bearing false witness" all "speaking the truth maliciously to a wrong end." That's precisely what Doeg did. He spoke truth maliciously to a wrong end – to exalt himself. And in so doing he spoke words that devour. Innocent people died because of his words.

It must have broken David's heart to hear of the slaughter of the priests and their families. It was, in some small way, because of him. How would you have responded? I would have been filled with bitterness and consumed with rage. But David shows us the way to joy and peace by placing this evil man and all his devastating evil deeds in the context of the Living God.

II. The Living God

*52:5 But God will break you down forever;
he will snatch and tear you from your tent;
he will uproot you from the land of the living. Selah*

The language is terse, vivid, and terrifying. It is an imprecation, a curse. "God will snatch and tear you from your tent." Doeg undoubtedly had a very nice tent. Saul had promised a great reward for whoever would help him. Doeg became wealthy, had a beautiful home. But David sees with the eyes of faith. His nice tent would offer no protection from the righteous indignation of the Living God. God will tear you down. He will tear you out and tear you up.

It's always that way when evil men increase. Hitler's officers lived in beautiful homes and drank nothing but the finest wines, smoked the best cigars, enjoyed great art and

symphonies. The same for Stalin's officers and Mao and Idi Amin and Pol Pot – and every wicked despot in the history of the world. And then, God breaks them down forever. He tears these men from their beautiful homes and uproots from the land of the living – and they enter into eternal death. Every one of these “mighty men” face a truly Mighty God and are destroyed.

Godfrey: “This is fundamental to our faith. We live in a moral universe. Evil shall not triumph.”

And the righteous laugh.

52:6 *The righteous shall see and fear, and shall laugh at him...*

Now you may wonder, is that an appropriate response for a child of God? Should we laugh when wicked men perish?

This laughter is not the laughter of pride but a rejoicing in the righteous judgements of God upon evil. Doeg is an enemy of God; he murdered, with his own hand, God's priests. And David pronounces this imprecation, this curse, on him.

Godfrey: “Throughout the psalter and in Scripture, the context of imprecations is always, either implicitly or explicitly, following a call to repentance. Only those who persevere and hard-heartedly turn their back on the Lord and refuse to repent will face the curse of the Lord.”

We see this here in verse 7:

52:7 *See the man who **would not** make God his refuge, but trusted in the abundance of his riches and sought refuge in his own destruction!*

Doeg had ample opportunity to turn from evil. When Saul commanded his soldiers to strike down the priests of the Lord, they refused, at the risk of their own life, to do so. Why did they refuse? Because they feared the Living God more than they feared King Saul. They saw the pure evil of this command and feared the Lord. Their choice to obey God rather than man was a sermon in action – right in front of Doeg's eyes. And yet, in the face of their godliness, honor, valor, and obedience, Doeg **refused** to make God his refuge but sought refuge in his own destruction.

The glory of God is that he extends his mercy to wicked people. “Why will you die?”

Is. 55:6–7 *Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

But it is also the glory of God to give devastating justice to those who refuse to make God their refuge. The Living God shall not be mocked. That was a comfort to David.

III. The Believer's Confession

This psalm calls us to a confident faith in the face of great evil. Here in the last two verses we have the motto of the believer's life.

What is true of our status:

52:8 *But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God.*

Life: A green olive tree is a living tree, a tree that has the sap of life within it.

Acceptance: in the house of God.

What we will do: *I will trust, I will thank you forever, I will wait for your name.*

Trust

52:8b *I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever.*

This is the absolute foundation of a believer's life. Notice, this is how David began his psalm:

52:1 *Why do you boast, O mighty man?*

The steadfast love of God endures all the day.

The great, unchanging reality beneath and behind Doeg's crimes, was the steadfast love of God. Circumstances change – the steadfast love of God **never** changes.

Tessa Thompson has written a new book entitled *Laughing at the Days to Come*. The title is taken from Proverbs 31 where we read that the woman who fears the Lord "laughs at the days to come."

"As one commentator puts it, '...this woman has chosen her fears well. She does not fear the future (v. 21), but she has appropriately set her fear upon the living God (v. 30)! Thus, she is at peace with uncertainties.'...Rather than living her life with a fearful prospect of what *may be*—tomorrow, next week, five years from now—she has chosen to live a life that reflects *what is*; namely, the present, abiding reality of God...She knows that the circumstances of this life are constantly subject to change. Some may get worse, but some may also get better. However, her unwavering hope is in a God who does not change, who does not get better or worse."

Setting your mind on the steadfast love of the Lord will change your life. The reason is that the steadfast love of God has a name – his name is Jesus.

1 John 4:10 *This is love, not that we loved God but that **he loved us** and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

Rom. 5:8 *God shows his **love** for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Gratitude

52:9 *I will thank you forever, because you have done it.*

Patience

52:9 *I will wait for your name, for it is good,
in the presence of the godly.*

Troubles are real, but they are not ultimate, and they are not lasting.

Godfrey: "David shall not be forever in the cave. Christ shall not be forever in the grave. God's people shall not be forever in trouble and sorrow."

Redemption is drawing nigh. When the evil of this world seems overwhelming, remember Doeg. More importantly, remember Jesus – and laugh.