

Psalm 58

Tyrants on Trial

Intro: As we were reading Psalm 58, some of you may have been a bit startled or surprised by the language. This is very different than the Psalms that precede it. Psalm 56 and 57 are prayers for mercy and expressions of faith and confidence in God. But Psalm 58 has a very different feel. It doesn't begin with a prayer but with strong rebukes and challenges for wicked men. When David does address God, beginning in verse 6, he prays for God to do strong, even violent things against his enemies.

- Break their teeth, tear out their fangs

He wants God to destroy them.

- Let them vanish like water that runs away
- Let them be like a snail that dissolves into slime.

Can Christians talk like that? Whom does David wish these harsh realities upon? What's this all about?

Well it's about politicians. Does that help? This is a psalm written out of David's anger and righteous disgust with the ruling class of Israel – the judges, governors, and priests. This Psalm focuses not on personal pain or trial but looks out on this wicked world and grieves the injustice and oppression practiced by the ruling class. In Psalm 56 and 57 David was asking God to do a work in his heart – in Psalm 58 he's asking God to do a work in the world.

We aren't told when this Psalm was written. It seems most likely that it was written as David was being hunted and hounded by King Saul. As David experienced, firsthand, the power of wicked men and the harsh reality of gross injustice, he not only prayed for God's mercy (Ps 56-57) but the experience made David sensitive, in a new way, to all those who were suffering the injustice and oppression of wicked men (Ps 58).

Isn't it true that when you are suffering, you suddenly find a new awareness of and compassion for those who are suffering similar things? If you have been through the ordeal of cancer, you have a new-found awareness of and fellowship with those who are still fighting the battle. If you've recently lost a loved one or have wandering children – you are suddenly more aware of others who are going through similar trials.

When life is going well, we tend to overlook those who are in pain. But one of God's purposes in suffering is to awaken us to the reality of those who suffer all around us.

Psalm 58, then, is an important psalm in that it reminds us that while our personal trials matter, they are not the only thing that matter. There is a whole world out there, a world in which millions are groaning under the weight of the corruption and oppression of those who have been placed over them. This is a Psalm that invites us to step out of our own personal crisis for a moment and notice the crisis of the world.

I. The Rebuke (1-2)

¹ Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods?
Do you judge the children of man uprightly?

The Psalm begins with a question intended to reveal wrong. The use of the words “gods” here could also be translated “you mighty lords”. Either way, it is a reference to the those who are in high positions of authority and honor.

David acknowledges that God has ordained positions and structures of authority in this world. David was very careful to obey that structure. It’s why he refused to kill King Saul when he had the chance. He understood that rulers are placed over us by God, even the wicked ones. But David is free, as a child of God, to call those over him to obey the God who was over them – and to rebuke them when they failed.

Psalm 58 is a rebuke of Israel’s leaders. He isn’t talking to the pagan rulers but to those who have been uniquely called by God to govern and judge God’s own people. The unique status of Israel, as God’s own possession, made the crimes of its leaders all the more perverse. It’s one thing for a pagan Philistine ruler to oppress his people – it is another thing entirely for one of God’s rulers to oppress **God’s** people!

This is why, in verse 1 there is a note of incredulity.

“Do you indeed decree what is right”?

The tone of the question is: Are you serious? Can this possibly be?

“Do you judge the children of man uprightly?” And the answer is immediately given. ² “No, in your hearts you devise wrongs; your hands deal out violence on earth.”

Notice, as David describes the evil of these men he begins with the heart and moves to the hands. That’s how sin works. It begins in the heart and moves to the hands. In their heart they devise wrong – and their hands deal out violence on earth. Violence against God’s people, violence against justice and truth, violence against God himself. Sin is always violence. And Israel was suffering under the violence of its wicked leaders.

Accepting bribes and doing favors for wealthy friends at the expense of the poor and needy were the rule of the day. This was business as usual. Everyone did it. It's the way the world worked. But it's not the way it was supposed to work. Not anywhere in the world and certainly not in Israel.

Cornelius Plantinga: *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be, A Breviary of Sin*

David's anger is a brisk reminder to all of us. The world is not supposed to be like this.

Kidner: "With its passion for justice, the Psalter does not allow us to get used to the scandal of evil in high places."

We can get jaded to corruption. When you hear of a politician caught taking a bribe or a Hollywood star is caught cheating the system or a judge making an awful ruling based on popularity instead of the law – we can just shrug our shoulders. That's just the way it is. But Psalm 58 reminds us that it's not the way it's supposed to be! Though we do not live in a theocratic state – our rulers are still responsible to God to rule and to judge with justice and equity. And when they don't it is treason against God and a travesty for those over whom they rule. We should not get used to the scandal of evil in high places.

But the nearly universal corruption of the powerful poses a question – why does power corrupt so easily and often. Why is the world this way? The answer is both profound and simple – it's because men are born in bondage to sin.

II. The Reason

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

This is simply true. The wicked are estranged from God from the womb. We call this the doctrine of original sin. Children are not actually born innocent and then corrupted later on in life so that they begin to do things they shouldn't do. The corruption is inherent and native. Children are born with a sin nature and consequently, "they go astray from birth, speaking lies." Isn't it amazing how quickly children learn to lie? Who taught them that? No one – they knew it by virtue of their wicked little heart.

The problem with the world is that people are naturally and natively sinful. Wicked rulers are simply wicked infants all grown up. The fundamental problem with humanity is the problem of original sin. We are born with a desire for evil and a willingness to do wrong.

This doctrine of original sin means that every single man-made design to “fix” the world is bound to fail. Every utopian scheme can’t possibly work. Many people today want to tear America down to its core: break down all the laws, destroy the institutions, throw out the Constitution, so that they can then make America a place of equity and justice – usually along Marxist lines. But it can’t possibly work. Every totalitarian leader promises to introduce utopia and ends up bringing death and devastation. Why? Because “the wicked are estranged from the womb and go astray from birth, speaking lies”. And there is no human fix for it. Only Christ is sufficient for the depth of the human crisis.

Notice how David describes their sin.

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.

In those days it was believed that certain snakes were deaf – like the adder, which they believed explained why some snakes did not respond to the voice of a charmer. David uses the imagery to describe these wicked rulers.

They are like snakes: they have venom – their mouths are sources of great injury and harm and death as they make unjust rules and promote unjust practices.

And they are intentionally deaf, they have stopped their ears so that they cannot hear reproof or correction. They have deadened their ears to God’s truth and God’s law.

What is to be done with wicked rulers such as this?

III. The Request

David’s request is that God would render these wicked leaders powerless and these serpents venom-less. That’s the point of verse 6.

“Break the teeth in their mouths” doesn’t mean, “punch them in the mouth” but remove their ability to destroy. Remove their fangs! The image moves to the fangs of a young lion. Render the devilish lions of this world toothless and powerless.

Kidner, “This prayer is motivated by a sense of outrage that brutal men should roam and ravage in God’s world.”

Secondly – make them disappear! That’s the point of 7-9.

Vs 7 – Let them vanish like the water that runs away.

In verse 9 the image is of a fire kindled by thorns. Thorns would burn very hot but very fast. Sort of like burning dried evergreen leaves. David wants the Lord to remove these men more quickly than a fire of thorns.

Lord act! Your world is broken. Those who bear your image are shot through with sin. The rulers oppress those they are supposed to bless. Creation is groaning under the wickedness of men. Act Lord! That's the prayer.

IV. The Result

In verse 10 David says that "the righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance, he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked." What in the world is that about? It sounds like something more suited to the Koran. But it is an essential biblical theme.

The point is simply this: the evil in this world is part of the great cosmic conflict between God and the Devil. It's a contest between wickedness and righteousness. David doesn't complain about these wicked men because they are a personal inconvenience. He asks God to judge them because they are enemies of God and his people. They belong to the evil one and David longs for evil to be destroyed.

Don't you? Creation does! It is longing to be freed from corruption. And so should we! The Bible invites us to long for big things, for glorious things, for a day when evil will be destroyed completely, a world where there is no more death, no more crying, no more corruption, or sin or pain.

David is making two points:

1. Victory is coming. God will repay evil with judgement. This great contest will not last forever! It will end and the end is already determined. The righteous will participate in and experience the victory. They will celebrate the defeat of the Devil and all those who belonged to him.

2. God will be vindicated!

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

I love that! Surely there is a God who judges on earth! The wicked rulers of the earth do not believe that this is true. They don't believe that there is a God in heaven who sees or that there is a Heavenly Judge who will repay. They scoff and say "Where is this God?" But David looks forward with prophetic eyes and sees that the day is coming when God

will appear in all His power and glory to Judge the world. God will be vindicated as the Righteous Judge over all the earth - and in particular over the wicked rulers.

Isaiah 24:21 On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth.

This Psalm calls us to live with that eschatological hope and confidence. This world will not always be this way. God will make it right. King Jesus will make it new. The critical issue for us is to live with the conviction that this is true and with the unshakeable confidence that it will come to pass.

If you are unconverted, this news is a great warning to you. The day of judgement is fast approaching and you are in grave danger. There is a God who judges on earth. And you will not escape Him. Have you lived uprightly? No, you have not. And no amount of self-reformation will rescue you. You can't save yourself. But Jesus can.

Notice that on that great and final day – the righteous will be rewarded. Who are the righteous?

The righteous are righteous only by the gift of God's grace. The wicked rulers of Israel were wicked from birth. And, of course, so are we all. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The crisis of the world is the crisis of every individual. We are all born in sin. After his horrible fall into sin with Bathsheba, David acknowledges that he too was sinful from birth. What makes men differ is grace.

God has intervened in the world of sinful men in order to rescue us from our hopeless and helpless condition. The marvelous news of the gospel is that God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God. The gospel invitation is for every sinner to call on the name of the Lord – and the gospel promise is that those who do will most certainly be saved.

For those who have already come – this Psalm is calling us to live with our eyes fixed on what is yet to come. To live in this world with our hope set on the world to come. To live patiently in the city of man while we wait for the city of God. The day is coming. So what shall we do? Let me close with this excellent instruction from the Apostle Jude.

Jude 20–21 But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.

