

Our Hope for Justice

Psalm 58

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I don't know if you have ever had this experience. If you share the gospel enough, you will. You're talking to someone, and the conversation shifts to the gospel. Then it happens. Suddenly, objections start coming up. There is nothing wrong with that. But one of the most difficult objections to the gospel is the belief in a good God alongside the existence of evil.

I had this experience when I was in Texas last week. It was a good conversation, but then hostile objections arose about how God can be good and yet evil still exists. Objections like: How can God be good and the Holocaust occur? What about children who die of disease and starvation? Needless to say, the conversation caught me off guard, and I fumbled the ball in my reply. I kept working my way back to the gospel, but basically I didn't do a good job.

The gist of their objections was that there is evil in the world, and if your God is so good, what will He do about all the injustice and unrighteousness in the world? I get their objection because that concerns me too. After the conversation, I went back to my father-in-law's house where I was staying and sat down to study Psalm 58, and lo and behold, God reminded me how He feels about injustice and unrighteousness and how He will deal with it.

Psalm 58 is an imprecatory Psalm. We've covered a few imprecatory psalms in our series, but this is one of the more difficult ones to preach. It's not hard to preach because it is hard to understand. It is actually a very simple Psalm. Psalm 58 is hard to preach because it is easy to understand and hard to stomach.

Think about what David says. He prays that God would break the teeth of wicked men, tear out their fangs, and make them vanish like a snail dissolving in the sun, and it ends with the righteous bathing their feet in the blood of the wicked. You may have read a Psalm like this and quietly turned the page, because you're a little embarrassed that it is in the Bible. And if you don't understand imprecatory Psalms, I get it.

To understand the difficult message of Psalm 58, we must slow down and consider what David writes and why. We must put things in context, which always helps us interpret Scripture correctly.

In Psalm 58, David reflects on the injustice and unrighteousness in the world, especially the wickedness carried out by leaders. Then he asks God to judge them. Ultimately, Psalm 58 tells us that the wicked will be judged and repaid for their evil, and the righteous will be rewarded.¹

The superscription calls it a "*Mikdam of David*," set to the tune of "*Do Not Destroy*." David Baum did a fantastic job explaining the meaning behind "*Do Not Destroy*" last Sunday, so check out his sermon for that information. Here's what we need to know: Psalms 57, 58, and 59 are a set and meant to be read, sung, or prayed together.

David most likely wrote these Psalms while King Saul hunted him, and the men who were in power with Saul twisted justice and called it righteousness. It was a time when the courts of Israel were rigged. A man's life could be purchased by whoever held the king's ear. Sound familiar? Not much has changed in 3000 years.

Psalm 58 teaches us what to do with the holy anger that injustice produces. It doesn't let us bury it. It doesn't let us weaponize it. It teaches us to turn to Jesus and pray for justice.

Psalm 58 falls into three movements. In vv. 1-5, David identifies the *problem* of unjust judges and leaders. In vv. 6-9, he offers a desperate *prayer*. Finally, in vv. 10-11, he ends with a *promise* of hope.

I. The Problem: There are Wicked Leaders Who Pervert Justice (vv. 1-5)

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty*, 263.

Look at the two rhetorical questions David opens with in v. 1:

Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods?

Do you judge the children of man uprightly?

Verse 1 may throw you off a bit, but just to be clear, he is not addressing actual “gods.” The word for “gods” in v. 1 is best understood as human judges, rulers, and leaders. These men were appointed to stand in God’s place and speak God’s justice over the disputes of ordinary people in Israel. They held positions of authority and were expected to reflect divine justice, yet they utterly failed.

So, David said, “*Do you indeed decree what is right?*” The answer is resounding: “No.” In their hearts, these leaders schemed injustice, and with their hands they administered violence.

Here’s the big problem: It’s not merely external action. It’s actually internal corruption, and David doesn’t mean the internal corruption of the political system. He means the heart. Look at what he says in v. 2:

*No, in your hearts you devise wrongs;
your hands deal out violence on earth.*

The heart is the factory of wrongdoing, or as John Calvin famously said, “*The heart is an idol factory.*”

Friends, authority is a gift from God (Romans 13:1). It’s meant to restrain evil and promote good. When rulers and judges pervert justice, they assault the very character of God and rebel against the common grace of His ordained order.

So, let’s make this personal because David’s experience reflects the broader human story. Think about it: From the judges who condemned the prophets, to the Sanhedrin that handed Jesus over to Pilate, to every corrupt system of justice that crushes the vulnerable, the heart of the problem has always been the problem of the human (spiritual) heart.

You can write this down: Some leaders are wicked to the core. This means some of them are going to be on the ballot on November 3. So, be informed, pray, and vote wisely.

David keeps driving his point home in v. 2. Look at the Hebrew word “*devise*.” The tense of this verb means these leaders didn’t just sometimes commit injustice and wickedness; they planned evil meticulously and habitually in their hearts. I love how the *Amplified Bible* says vv. 1-2:

DO YOU indeed in silence² speak righteousness, O you mighty ones? [Or is the righteousness, rightness, and justice you should speak quite dumb?] Do you judge fairly and uprightly, O you sons of men? ² No, in your heart you devise wickedness; you deal out in the land the violence of your hands.

David identifies the anatomy of injustice in vv. 1-2. It begins in the heart: “*in your hearts you continually devise wrongs.*” In other words, their wickedness works outward from their hearts and through their hands. Here’s my paraphrase:

“Your hands meticulously carry out the violence you planned in your hearts.”

Here’s where it gets harder. Injustice is never just a policy failure. *It is a worship failure.* Men placed in God’s position have begun to love something more than God. They love money, power, reputation, and the approval of the man who signs the checks, so that their judgments twist toward their god.

Let’s make it personal again. So, before we take aim at Washington, D.C., the state capital, or the county courthouse, let’s bring this closer to home. Most everyone in this room holds some measure of authority over someone else. An elder board. A manager. A parent. A teacher. A discipler. A spouse. A supervisor, manager, or shift leader. The question in v. 1 is this: *Do you indeed speak what is right? Do you judge your children, your*

² The Amplified Bible picks up on the implication of the verse by saying that these wicked leaders are silent on righteousness, injustice and leaders' wickedness. Even in private they don’t consider how to judge in righteousness and when they did the called good evil and evil good.

employees, your brothers and sisters uprightly, or does your verdict bend toward whoever or whatever can do you the most good?

Listen, here's the deal: David's identification of the problem of injustice and the wickedness of leaders brings us back to the gospel, where we find three fingers pointing at ourselves. So, before we judge others, we must inspect our own hearts.

We, ourselves, stand under the same indictment as the unjust leaders. Without grace, our hearts also devise wrongs. Even with us, the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart.

The True and Greater David, Jesus Christ, addressed the problem of our hard, wicked, dead hearts. Through Christ sacrifice, we see how God took the evil planned against Jesus and used it for our good. Jesus was the only perfect Judge who ever walked the earth, and was Himself subjected to the most unjust trial in history. False witnesses, political expediency, and religious hypocrisy converged to condemn the Innocent Son of God. Even the pagan Roman leader, Pilate, knew Jesus was without fault, yet he delivered Him over.

Friends, the cross stands as the ultimate exposure of human injustice—and the place where God's justice was fully satisfied. Christ did not merely suffer under unjust judges; He absorbed God's righteous judgment and wrath against our sin so that we who believe might be declared righteous and be born again with new hearts that love God, love His word, and desire to obey Him from the heart.

Knowing what God has done for us through His sovereign grace, we can pray for all leaders, no matter who they are, and ask God to take their sin and use it for our good, the good of the church, and for the spread of the gospel, and He will do it.

Verses 3-5, build on the depth of the depravity of these leaders. Look at v. 3:

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

Verse 3 unpacks the indictment of vv. 1-2. Verse 3 says their sin is not only from the heart, but that they have done this all their lives.

John Calvin says that while God's common grace restrains much sin, the depth of these leaders' sin has turned them into "*monsters of iniquity*." In other words, their hearts were diamond hard from birth.

Next, vv. 4-5 tell us why. In these two verses, David uses a very dark, ancient image of the spiritual war that is being waged. Look at vv. 4-5:

*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.*

It is no accident that the word serpent is used in v. 3. It takes us all the way back to Genesis 3 and the Garden of Eden. Eden is where the first lie was spoken. In Eden, the lie came from the serpent's mouth, and ever since that day, the serpent's seed has been lying to people. It is the family's spiritual DNA.

Think of this spiritual war this way: God promised in Genesis 3:15 that history would be a war between two seeds, the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, so every page of the Old Testament is a chapter in that war. Psalm 58 describes that war, and we know which side the corrupt judges and leaders are on.

Now, let's take this war to its ordained end. When Jesus faced the corrupt judges of his own day, he used David's words. In John 8:44, Jesus said to the religious leaders:

*You are of your father the devil... when he lies, he speaks out of his own
character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*

Then in Matthew 23:33, Jesus told them who they were,

*You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to
hell?*

This is the Bible's own category for entrenched lying and violent wickedness: It is the serpent's seed doing the serpent's work.

I don't want to stop here. Let's go deeper into vv. 4-5 and make some more application. I want to lean in here on these two verses. Look at how they describe the serpent. He is a *deaf adder*. Now, look at what this deaf adder does. He *"stops its ear, so that it does not hear the voice of charmers or of the cunning enchanter."*

Friends, don't miss this. The most dangerous serpent in the world is not the one that cannot be charmed. It is the one that refuses to be.

I want you to get the poetic imagery here, so picture this. The charmer's voice is the word of God, the Spirit of God, the pleadings of conscience, the faithful wound of a friend, the sermon, the worship songs we sing, and/or the Scripture read in our devotions; any word that points people to Jesus.

Here's how this imagery plays out in life. Friends, the wicked man hears with his ears but not his heart. Listen, at its root, sin is not ignorance. It is refusal to obey. It is rebellion. Paul says in Romans 1 that men *"suppress the truth"* in unrighteousness. They hear, but they will not submit.

Now, stay with me here. Pay attention because before we go any further, we have to be honest about *who* vv. 3-5 describe. We read them, and our minds run straight to our enemies. But Paul gathers all these serpent verses in Romans chapter 3 for a reason.

Do you remember what he said? Cause here's where it gets real. He said, *"The venom of asps is under their lips,"* and his conclusion is not about some people or leader – IT IS ABOUT ALL PEOPLE. This is where Paul hammers us. Here's the nail in our self-righteous coffin in Romans 3:

"There is none righteous, no, not one... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Friends, the indictment and problem in Psalm 58 is the human condition. It is mine. It is yours. If we read this Psalm only as a description of those who wronged us, our enemies, or these wicked leaders, we're not reading it correctly.

So, where does this leave us? Listen to what I am about to say and let it sink in. Some people in the church can read, sing, and pray the words of the gospel for years, and their hearts remain diamond-hard. It is also why some people can sit under faithful preaching for decades, and their hearts grow harder, not softer.

This kind of person is like the deaf adder. He is deaf because every time the charmer played, he pressed hard on his ears until pressing became a habit and the heart became hard. Friend, if the word of God has been washing over you for years without breaking you, vv. 1-5 are waving a red flag over you. Do not harden your heart!

For the unbeliever, these verses call you to diagnose your problem: you have a dead heart. You need to repent of your sin and cry out to Jesus for salvation.

For the believer, this diagnosis should produce humility. We were once living in darkness and dead in our sins. Our salvation is pure sovereign grace. It is a gift from God, not of works, so no one may boast.

Finally, for the church's mission, this diagnosis should produce urgency and dependence. We preach; we plead with the gospel's beauty, but only God can unstop deaf ears and soften hard hearts. This means we pray for the Spirit's regenerating power to raise dead hearts.

II. The Prayer: God – Defeat the Wicked Leaders (vv. 6-9)

Remember, at the beginning of the sermon, when I said: *"Psalm 58 is hard to preach because it is easy to understand and hard to stomach."* Well, vv. 6-9 are an imprecatory prayer that may make you cringe just a little. Let me read vv. 6-9:

*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!*

The imagery in these four verses is violent. These four verses contain six images, and all of them call on God to act. Before you overreact, notice what they call on God to do.

And this is the surprising part: These verses are not about torturing the wicked but asking God to remove their ability to abuse others. They are asking God to remove their power. They want God to defang the wicked so they can't devour the flock. They want God to blunt the arrows of the wicked so that they are ineffective against God's people. David is asking God to disarm the wicked and make them unable to harm anyone ever again. Christopher Ash, quoting Charles Spurgeon, says:

The Anointed King prays, and teaches us to pray that even if "they have no capacity for good, at least deprive them of their ability for evil."³

Spurgeon gets it right. He places these verses in their proper context.

As I have said in previous sermons on imprecatory prayers, praying imprecatory prayers is praying for God's Kingdom to come. When we ask for God's Kingdom to come, we are releasing our desire for revenge and agreeing with the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:19 when he said,

Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

Likewise, we are praying with the martyrs in heaven in Revelation 6:10. Listen to what the souls under the altar of God who are now perfected and safe cry out:

O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?

When we pray Kingdom prayers like this, we are trusting God to judge on His timetable, in His way, and for His glory.

Now, let's look at v. 9. Verse 9 is encouraging, so don't just blow past it because the poetic imagery is unfamiliar. Listen to it again:

*Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns,
 whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away!*

Here's what it means. Thorns were cheap fuel for fires in David's day. They burned fast and hot, but they soon flamed out and were useless. David prayed the same for the wicked. He wanted them to flame out. Brothers and sisters, our persecutors are perishing. They may roar loudly and seem hot, but like thorns in a fire, they will not last. They will flame out.

Let me pull vv. 6-9 together like this. While we can believe God will judge our persecutors, and that they are perishing, the fact remains they can still inflict tremendous pain on us. So, here is what we need to do. We need to zoom out and remember the grand story of redemption.

Here's where Psalm 58 must find its hope in the person and work of Christ. Listen, we cannot live in vv. 6-9 forever without the hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Here's what I mean: The enemy's fangs had to go somewhere. They had to be dealt with. Genesis 3:15 promised that the woman's seed would crush the serpent's head, and that the serpent would strike his heel. How did this crushing of the serpent's head happen? It happened on the cross. God answered the prayer of Psalm 58 in a way David could not have imagined.

Think about the imagery in Psalm 58 this way. The young lions circled the cross. The adders hissed from the crowd. And the teeth of God's judgment broke, not on David's enemies, but on David's greater Son. The venom that our lies and our violence deserved was poured out on Jesus Christ, God's willing Substitute. The fangs

³ Christopher Ash, *The Psalm: A Christ-Centered Commentary*, Vol. 3, *Psalms 51-100*, 92.

of the wicked were torn out at Calvary's cross because they sank into the Shepherd's heel. Then on the third day the Shepherd rose from the dead, and the serpent's head lay crushed beneath his bruised, risen foot.

If you remember one thing, remember this. When injustice seems to triumph, when the powerful crush the weak, when the church suffers under hostile systems, remember that Jesus Christ has already defeated the enemy. He has already taken the worst of it.

Therefore, we are permitted—indeed, commanded—to cry out for God's justice. So, while the storm rages around us, the enemy's rain and wind blow hard, and the floodwater rises, we can pray with confidence, knowing the worst thing has already happened, and it was not the end. Jesus took the worst of it, so we have hope in this life because there is a new creation coming where all things will be made new and all will be right.

III. The Promise: The Righteous will Rejoice (vv. 10-11)

Psalm 58 ends where every biblical prayer for justice ends:

*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."*

I love this imagery in v. 10. It is imagery of a battlefield. It pictures a soldier walking through the aftermath of a battle that he didn't have to fight because God fought it.

I want to show you how this imagery in Psalm 58 connects the Old Testament and the New. In Isaiah 63, Isaiah saw the day when God alone treads the winepress of His wrath. Then in Revelation 19:15, the Holy Spirit showed John the rider on the white horse, his robe already dipped in blood, treading "*the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty*." This is a picture of the Son of God who was crucified and risen from the dead, carrying out the vengeance of God on the wicked.

Let me say this plainly: While the people of God rejoice at God's vengeance, it is not a picture of Christians gloating over their enemies. There are two things in v. 11 that keep us from reading it that way. First, *joy is the vindication of our faith in Jesus*. Look at v. 11a,

Mankind will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous."

Think about it like this: Every time you did the honest thing, and you perhaps lost the account or some credibility or even your job for simply being obedient to God, every time you were slandered and kept your mouth shut because you trusted God with your reputation, every time you watched a liar get promoted, or a predator get away with some wickedness, and something in you whispered, "*Maybe the wicked are right, and integrity is overrated*," friends, you can take this to the bank, Verse 11a promises a day when all mankind says the opposite out loud:

"Surely there is a reward for the righteous."

Your quiet faithfulness is not wasted. It earns interest in the bank of Heaven, where no thief can touch it, and no moth or rust can destroy it.

As a final observation on v. 11a: If there is a reward for the righteous, it implies that those who trust in Christ have life after death. Here's what I mean. When you read the Old Testament, you don't always see clear promises of eternal life or the resurrection. Yet when we see verses that promise reward, we have to ask, "*How will that reward be given if I am dead?*" The answer is: You won't be dead. If you have faith in Jesus, there is life after death. These are promises of a resurrected life in the Old Testament. So, you have to read carefully and think, "*How can this reward be given?*"

Second, the joy is God-centered, not self-centered. The outcome of the judgment is not "*look what happened to my enemies*." The outcome is worship! Look at what God's people say:

"Mankind will say, surely there is a God who judges on earth."

When the last judgment falls, heaven does not snicker; it sings and what it sings is found in Revelation 19:1-2:

"Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just."

Psalm 58 ends with a God who judges on the earth, and here is the staggering claim of the gospel: That Judge has already come once, and when He came, He did not come to judge. He came to be judged. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says,

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Galatians 3:13 says,

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

At the cross, the deaf adders hissed, the young lions circled, the mockers wagged their heads, and the full vengeance of v. 10 fell on the only truly Righteous Man who ever lived, because he had willingly taken the place of the wicked. This means Psalm 58 has two endings, and everyone in this room will live one of them.

Ending number one: The vengeance of v. 10 will fall on you if you spent your life like the adder, palms pressed over your ears, and refusing the Spirit's voice until you had nothing left to hear.

So, are you listening this morning? The adders stop their ears and refuse to submit to Christ. This is why the writer of Hebrews said in chapter 3, v. 15: *"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."* If you have never come to Christ, come now, while He is calling.

Ending number two: the vengeance of v. 10 has already fallen on Christ on the cross. Jesus has done what you couldn't do and wouldn't do. He lived the life you should have lived and died the death you should have died. On the cross, He took the punishment for your sin by receiving God's wrath for your sin.

Brother and sister in Christ, you belong to him; so let Psalm 58 do its two works in you. Let it warn you if you hold any power over anyone. It calls us to speak righteousness and judge uprightly, because we stand in God's place. And let it comfort you if you have been wronged. You don't have to get even, because God has promised justice. Bring your case to Jesus, who was judged in your place for your sin. Pray David's prayer with open and empty hands, and wait for God to work in His time and in His way.