

The ability of Christians to discern good and evil is essential. Yet such discernment appears to be at an all-time low. Like the Israelites in Isaiah's day Christians are inclined to "call evil good and good evil" (Isa 5:20). When an arrogant, deceitful, and deceptive person – the kind of person described in Psalm 52 – receives widespread popular support from Christians you know something is terribly wrong. Discernment has little to do with the politics of the left or right but a great deal to do with biblical wisdom. When Christians fail to discern right from wrong and persist in honoring someone who is "a disgrace in the eyes of God" (Ps 52:1), the consequences are tragic. Confusion runs deep when the people of God cannot tell the difference between a Daniel and a Nebuchadnezzar or when they mix-up Jesus and Pilate. If it were not for the pernicious nature of evil, it might be impossible to explain how believers could willingly embrace a person who consistently lies and practices deceit as a way of life. For Christians to honor such a person disparages the name of Christ, weakens the Body of Christ, and damages the mission of the Church.

The reason this psalm is in the Psalter is to help prevent the people of God from falling for the deceiver – a person whose popularity is built on falsehood, worldly power, and propaganda. The great hero perpetrates fake news, defames the righteous, and does whatever he can to cling to power. He proudly boasts that he will solve people's problems and make them great again. His mouth lays claim to heaven and his tongue takes possession of the earth (Ps 73:9). You would think that of all people the followers of the humble King would be appalled at the great hero's selfish and narcissistic ways. But astonishingly, many professing Christians are staunch supporters of a person who boasts in "in his great wealth" and loves evil rather than good (Ps 52:3, 7).

Psalm 52 challenges believers to do the hard work of discernment. We must not turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to the great hero's duplicity and deception. The psalmist calls us into worship for the expressed purpose of discerning the manipulative ways of evil. The psalmist paints a vivid evil-in-person portrait, followed by a picture of human flourishing rooted in God's wisdom and beauty. Psalm 52 corresponds to Jesus' call to seek first Christ's kingdom and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33) and relates directly to the apostle Paul's prayer for the saints at Philippi, that their *love* would "abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that [they] may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God" (Phil 1:9-11).

Evil-in-Person

*Why do you boast of evil, you mighty hero?
 Why do you boast all day long,
 you who are a disgrace in the eyes of God?
 You who practice deceit,
 your tongue plots destruction;*

*it is like a sharpened razor.
You love evil rather than good,
falsehood rather than speaking the truth.
You love every harmful word,
you deceitful tongue!*

*Surely God will bring you down to everlasting ruin:
He will snatch you up and pluck you from your tent;
he will uproot you from the land of the living.
The righteous will see and fear;
they will laugh at you, saying,
“Here now is the man
who did not make God his stronghold
but trusted in his great wealth
and grew strong by destroying others!”*
Psalm 52:1-7

Evil in the abstract is nonthreatening, but evil-in-person is life-threatening. Simone Weil said it well, “Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvelous, intoxicating.”¹ From a distance, the evil person can be a charismatic personality, a dashing figure, one who beguiles the masses. But up close and personal, the burden of evil is as welcome as a malignancy. The psalmist wants us to weigh the impact of evil up close and personal.

The back story for Psalm 52 sets the scene: David fled the royal court when he learned that King Saul was intending to kill him. He ran to Ahimelek the priest at Nob for food. A frightened and inquisitive Ahimelek asked David, the commander of Saul’s elite troops, why he was traveling alone. David lied and Ahimelek believed him. He told Ahimelek that he was on a secret mission for the king and that he had left in such haste that he didn’t have time to get food and his sword. David’s deception might have worked if Doeg the Edomite, one of Saul’s officials had not been there and overheard the conversation.

Later, when Doeg reported the incident to King Saul, he implied that Ahimelek had knowingly aided and abetted David in his escape. By fueling the king’s paranoia with blatant misinformation Doeg deceptively proved his loyalty to Saul. Arguably, David’s deception of Ahimelek was as much for the priest’s safety as it was to expedite his escape. Yes, he lied, but he did so in order to preserve Ahimelek’s neutrality. Whereas, Doeg’s partial truth, edited selectively and selfishly, served to promote himself and indict Ahimelek. In spite of Ahimelek’s honest defense, Saul ordered eighty-five priests to be put to death. When the king’s officials were unwilling to kill the priests of the Lord, Doeg the Edomite “turned and struck them down” (1 Sam 21-22).

Doeg fits the Psalm 52 profile. He is trained in deception and intent on evil. He knows how to cut

¹ Simone Weil

out the essence of truth to leave a lie and he is proud to be a disgrace in the eyes of God. Underneath a respectable facade, he is malicious and treacherous, a person who loves evil more than good.² Such a person will not last long. The psalmist speaks directly to the type of person who takes after Doeg and promises them “everlasting ruin.” God will “break you down,” “sweep you away,” “throw you out,” and “pull you up.”³ God will get rid of “you” every which way he can, and the righteous “will watch and worship. They’ll laugh in relief” (Ps 52:6 MSG). The laughter of the righteous recalls the description of the “One enthroned in heaven” laughing at the kings and rulers of the earth who band together against the Lord’s Anointed (Psalm 2:2-4). The laughter “is joy at the ultimate breaking through of justice long hidden.”⁴ The righteous can count on the end of evil. The great hero’s trust in wealth and his capacity to destroy others will be judged once and for all. He “made his passion for destroying people the measure of his strength and security” and in the end God takes him out.⁵

God’s Unfailing Love

*But I am like an olive tree
flourishing in the house of God;
I trust in God’s unfailing love
for ever and ever.
For what you have done I will always praise you
in the presence of your faithful people.
And I will hope in your name,
for your name is good.*

Psalm 52:8-9

“But as for me,” sets up a stark contrast between the uprooted and thrown out Evil-in-Person and the firmly rooted faithful person who trusts in God’s unfailing love. The psalmist turns personal: “But I am like an olive tree.” The well chosen image taps into the olive tree’s reputation for endurance and longevity and for the multiple benefits of its fruit for food, energy and medicine. In Gethsemane’s olive grove on the Mount of Olives Jesus may have reflected on Psalm 52. Who better than Jesus to know the contrast between the great hero and the Savior bound for the cross. The image of a flourishing olive tree and the significance of the house of God converge in the lives of those who trust in God’s unfailing love. The psalmist envisions optimal pleasure when ordinary humanity is devoted to the praise of God in the company of God’s people. There is no higher calling than to say with the psalmist, “I will hope in your name, for your name is good” (Ps 52:9).

² Ross, Psalms, 206.

³ See Ross, Psalms, 208. Ps 52:5 MSG.

⁴ Delitzsch, Psalms, II:146.

⁵ Ross, Psalms, 209.