

Silence in the face of sin is inexcusable. If psalms like Psalm 58 were not in the Psalter our spirituality would be distorted.¹ To wish for evil to go unnoticed and unchecked, free of consequence, is to be guilty of complicity. If we do not express our horror at the violence and injustice, we are unwitting accomplices. Psalm 58 is a necessary perspective on human depravity, its cruel nature, its just judgment, and its ultimate defeat. It is not because we are sinless that we condemn sin; it is because we are forgiven sinners saved by grace that we raise an outcry against evil and injustice.

It is true to say, “Whenever we confront a wrongdoer, no matter how evil, we are looking in a mirror,”² but that is not the best thing to say to a survivor of genocide or a rape victim or an abused wife or a parent who just lost a child in a drive-by-shooting. The psalmist’s moral outrage is predicated on his own repentance and restoration (Psalm 51), for which “he has only God to thank.”³ However, the psalmist’s personal salvation and righteousness is not the pressing issue here. His outrage is caused by evil that cannot be ignored. It is good that the psalmist makes the case against evil and calls down curses on the wicked. In prayer, David looks to God to vindicate the righteous, “Break the teeth in their mouths, O God” (Psalm 58:6).

“*You snakes!*”

*Do you rulers indeed speak justly?
Do you judge people with equity?
No, in your heart you devise injustice,
and your hands mete out violence on the earth.
Even from birth the wicked go astray;
from the womb they are wayward, spreading lies.
Their venom is like the venom of a snake,
like that of a cobra that has stopped its ears,
that will not heed the tune of the charmer,
however skillful the enchanter may be.*

Psalm 58:1-5

The psalmist asks God to neutralize the unnamed perpetrators of injustice, the mighty ones who should be making just decisions, but are not. David’s outrage is kept impersonal on purpose. He doesn’t need to name names or spell it out. God knows who’s who. Nor does he take matters into his own hands. He does not act; he prays. Only God is in a position to execute judgment and bring about justice. The “rulers” or “top dogs” may be officials, politicians, leaders, educators, administrators, lawyers, judges, officers, pastors, supervisors, bosses, managers, executives, parents, grandparents, etc. Anyone who is entrusted with the responsibility of setting things right,

¹ Wilcock, *Psalms 1-72*, 209. Wilcock reports that the 1980 Service Book excused Anglicans from ever having to use Psalm 58 in worship.

² Keller, *The Songs of Jesus*, 123.

³ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 209

whose task it is to bring about justice, whose role is to protect the innocent and defend the vulnerable, and whose calling is to pursue justice and judge the wicked.

There is a striking contrast between the heart that is steadfast in Psalm 57:7 and the heart that is deceptive in Psalm 58:2. The psalmist freely traces the roots of evil and injustice to the heart of those who hide behind their institutional responsibilities and professional loyalties. They turn a blind eye to injustice: the school principal who does little to prevent bullying; the hospital administrator who overlooks billing irregularities that penalize the patient; the doctor who lets the system overcharge her patient; the pastor who shows favoritism to the wealthy parishioner; the manufacturer who refuses to acknowledge that his product is hazardous. These “rulers” who devise injustice in their hearts and use evil to enhance their power may never see their victims faces. They may never meet, but they are as guilty of violence as if they had personally assaulted their victims. Their wilful acts of evil are hidden under “standing operating procedure” and “how they’ve always done it.”

On Jesus’ last visit to the temple before his crucifixion he delivered a scathing rebuke of the religious leaders. He called them hypocrites and in the tradition of Isaiah, pronounced seven woes against them (Matthew 23:13-36; see Isaiah 5:8-6:5). He accused them of being blind guides and turning people away from God. He railed against them, “You hypocrites . . . full of greed and self-indulgence.” He even may have echoed Psalm 58 when he called them snakes. He let it rip, “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matthew 23:33; Psalm 58:4). Like the perpetrators of injustice described in Psalm 58, Jesus claimed the Pharisees were steeped in sin “from birth.” They were of their father the devil. They stopped listening to God long ago (John 8:43-44). Like a cobra that no longer responded to the vibrations of the enchanter’s flute, the Pharisees were unable to hear what Jesus said.⁴

Seven Curses

*Break the teeth in their mouths, O God;
Lord, tear out the fangs of those lions!
Let them vanish like the water that flows away;
when they draw the bow, let their arrows fall short.
May they be like a slug that melts away as it moves along,
like a stillborn child that never sees the sun.
Before your pots can feel the heat of the thorns –
whether they be green or dry – the wicked will be swept away.
The righteous will be glad when they are avenged,
when they dip their feet in the blood of the wicked.*

Psalm 58:6-10

⁴ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 209. Kidner quotes G. S. Cansdale, who writes, “It is now agreed that all snakes are deaf, . . . and the charmer holds their attention by the movement of his pipe, not its music” (G. S. Cansdale, *Animals of Bible Lands* (Paternoster, 1970), 206. Astrid Riecken writes, “Scientists have long struggled to understand how snakes, which lack external ears, sense sounds. Now, a new study shows that sound waves cause vibrations in a snake’s skull that are then “heard” by the inner ear.” Astrid Riecken, *The Washington Post* https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/how-snakes-hear-without-ears/2011/12/29/gIQAuseoWP_story.html?utm_term=.ae5272243dc0.

Seven graphic images capture the psalmist's prayer to bring the wicked to justice and to end their reign. Drawing on his creative skill, the poet paints a foreboding picture of evil. For all their bravado and clout, the wicked end up like a defanged lion, run-off waste water, a stray arrow, snail slime, an early miscarriage, tumble weed blowing in the wind, and a bloody pool of battlefield remains. The impact of this seven-image description reduces evil to a pile of burnt garbage. What was once a grave threat has been reduced to nothing. Evil's agents are no longer to be feared.

If we "modern Christians living in reasonable comfort do not like the violence of the way the Scriptures talk about these matters"⁵ it may be because we do not sufficiently identify with our brothers and sisters around the world who suffer injustice and oppression. Patrick Reardon writes, "This psalm is chock full of hatred – hatred of evil, arrogance, injustice, and hardness of heart."⁶ The evocative nature of the psalm shares God's passion against evil. The apostle echoes the sentiment of the psalm, "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (Romans 12:9).

Vindication

*Then people will say,
"Surely the righteous still are rewarded;
surely there is a God who judges the earth."
Psalm 58:11*

God's administration of justice brings joy to the people of God and in the end everyone will recognize that God is just and righteous and rewards those who do his will. Calvin insisted that this rejoicing was "under the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit" and was perfectly consistent with the mercy of God. Vindication has nothing to do with the "cruel satisfaction which too many feel when they see their enemies destroyed." It has nothing to do with the "unholy passions of hatred, anger, or impatience, inducing an inordinate desire of revenge."⁷

Commenting on Psalm 58, Spurgeon emphasized that the righteous "will have no hand in meting out, neither will he rejoice in the spirit of revenge, but his righteous soul shall acquiesce in the judgments of God, and he shall rejoice to see justice triumphant." Spurgeon added, "There is nothing in Scripture of that sympathy with God's enemies which modern traitors are so fond of parading as the finest species of benevolence. We shall at the last say, 'Amen,' to the condemnation of the wicked, and feel no disposition to question the ways of God with the impenitent. . . .The damnation of sinners shall not mar the happiness of saints."⁸

It is hard to imagine a world where there will be no more corruption or oppression and where God's rule and reign will establish the righteous order of the new heaven and the new earth.

⁵ Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2:209.

⁶ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 114.

⁷ Calvin, *Psalms*, 377-378.

⁸ Spurgeon, "Psalm 58," *Treasury of David*.

Psalm 58 anticipates the end of evil and human injustice.⁹ But the end of evil is only part of the story. God's provision of redemption and reconciliation precedes God's judgment of sin and death. Salvation takes precedence over judgment, because God "is not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God in his grace entered into our world of injustice and evil and took upon himself the judgment we deserve. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole'" (Deuteronomy 21:23). The truth is clear, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," but it is also true, "all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23-24).

The psalmist is right to pray down judgment on the wicked. He wants to render the wicked powerless. To repeat: he pictures a defanged lion, run-off waste water, a stray arrow, a slimy snail, a tragic miscarriage, desert scrub brush blowing in the wind, and a bloody pool of battlefield remains. But when we pray Psalm 58, we know that Jesus Christ suffered crucifixion, the most despicable and most dehumanizing capital punishment humans have devised. But even beyond that, he was completely forsaken and totally abandoned by the Father because of us. Instead of being honored, he was condemned; instead of being praised, he was accused. "Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him" (Isaiah 53:10). Jesus' cry from the cross comprehends all the lamentations of all God's people throughout all of time. All other cries of anguish, all the "Gethsemanes," all the "Golgothas" look to this moment for resolution. It is as if Jesus literally gathered up all the lamentations of God's people and shouted them from the cross in a loud voice.¹⁰ We cannot pray Psalm 58 without remembering the full story of salvation and judgment.

⁹ Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 222-224.

¹⁰ Webster, *The God Who Prays*, 149.