

“The God Who Judges” (An Exposition of Psalm 58)¹

Introduction

Psalm 58 is part of a grouping of Psalms (Psalms 52-64) in which David cries out to God concerning the wickedness of his enemies. Here in this Psalm he has *unjust judges or rulers* in view. That being the case, it is not all that difficult to identify with much of David’s prayer in this Psalm. It isn’t difficult to understand the misery that having wicked men in power can cause. Proverbs 29:2 says that **“when the wicked rule, the people groan.”**

This Psalm of David breaks down clearly into three sections, so our outline will simply reflect the divisions found in the Psalm itself: **1.)** David's Description of the Wicked (v.1-5), **2.)** David's Imprecation Against the Wicked (v.6-9), and **3.)** God's Judgment Upon the Wicked (v.10-11).

David’s Description of the Wicked (v.1-5)

The first thing that David does here is *describe the wickedness of his enemies*. In v.1-5 he writes,

**“Do you indeed *decree* what is right, you gods?
Do you *judge* the children of man uprightly?
No, in your hearts you devise wrongs;
your hands deal out violence on earth.
The wicked are estranged from the womb;
they go astray from birth, speaking lies.
They have venom like the venom of a serpent,
like the deaf adder that stops its ear,
so that it does not hear the voice of charmers
or of the cunning enchanter.”** (Italics added)

Here David inquires of these unjust judges (**“gods”**), asking them if they truly decree what is right (or righteous), and whether or not they judge the children of man uprightly (v.1). That this is a rhetorical question is demonstrated throughout the rest of the Psalm. But David answers his own question, doesn’t he? For in v.2 he says, **“No, in your hearts you devise wrongs; your hands deal out violence on earth.”**

Now here we might need to stop and consider this a bit. We might think of unjust judges or rulers and wonder how it is that it could rightly be said that their hands **“deal out violence on earth.”** After all, they make decisions, judgments, maybe even legislation, but *violence*?

But this should not surprise us, should it? How much ruin and misery, even bloodshed and death, often comes through the unrighteous decisions of unjust judges and rulers?

How often do they cause others to fight unjust wars? How many have unleashed the power of the State against their own citizens, resulting in untold bloodshed?

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

One only has to consider the outcome of the action taken by the U.S. Supreme Court back in 1973 (within many of our lifetimes!), merely 45 years ago (only about one generation's time), in which they ruled laws limiting or criminalizing the practice of abortion to be unconstitutional.

What has been the outcome of this wicked decision? The death - the *murder* – of approximately *60 million babies in the womb. 60 million.* By comparison, Adolph Hitler's Third Reich in Nazi Germany was responsible for the murder of some 6 million Jews. Our nation has sanctioned the murder of 10 times as many babies as Hitler murdered Jews during World War II.

And somehow in just over 40 years we have come to think of this as normal, acceptable, just the way things are, as if things have *always* been this way? And yet it has only been so for 45 years.

How many have seen to it that the innocent are wrongly convicted of crimes – even capital crimes, the sentence of which is death? Even our Lord Jesus Himself was persecuted and His death plotted by the Sanhedrin, the high court in Israel! (See Mark 3:6; 8:31; 10:33; 14:1; 53-65, etc.)

In fact, you could say that David's experience of persecution at the hands of Saul and his counselors was a foreshadowing of what our Lord Jesus endured at the hands of wicked men. For just as Isaiah 53:8 had foretold hundreds of years before it came to pass, the Messiah was **“taken away”** by means of **“oppression and judgment.”**

The Lord Jesus Christ endured the most unjust of judgments at the hands of wicked judges and rulers, so that *we* might be saved from the just judgment and wrath of God that our sins rightly deserved!

These wicked judges or rulers, David says, are **“estranged from the womb”** and **“go astray from birth, speaking lies”** (v.3). It is *in their very natures* to be liars and perverters of justice. And in saying this, David also speaks of the depravity of *all of mankind* outside of Christ. Outside of Christ we are all dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1) and **“by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind”** (Ephesians 2:3).

Not only that, but the deadly nature of their abuse of power and authority is described as having **“venom like the venom of a serpent”** (v.4). And they are intractable in their wickedness as well. David further describes them as being like a deaf adder that cannot be influenced by the sound of the snake charmer (v.5). Nothing on earth can influence them away from their wicked intent.

It was not without reason that both John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Himself referred to the Pharisees & Sadducees as a **“brood of vipers”** (Matthew 3:7; 23:33).

David's Imprecation Against the Wicked (v.6-9)

The *second* thing that we see in this Psalm is *David's prayer of imprecation against the wicked*. What does David do when faced with the wickedness of unjust judges or rulers? What is left for the godly and the righteous to do? David shows us in that *he prayed*. And his prayer was a prayer of imprecation. That is, *he prayed to God that He might judge the wicked and put an end to their evil devices!*

This is not the first such prayer in the Psalms. In fact, in Psalm 3 David prays for God to rescue him and to **“break the teeth of the wicked”** (v.7). Likewise in Psalm 7 David calls upon the LORD to *arise in His anger and lift Himself up against the fury of his enemies* (v.6).

Such prayers in the Psalms might make us a bit uncomfortable, but surely these Psalms are found in the Scriptures for our edification and instruction. While we must love our enemies and seek to do them good (Luke 6:27), yet God is still **“the Judge of all the earth”** (Genesis 18:25), and He is glorified in His just judgment of the wicked as much as He is in showing mercy in the salvation of sinners. (See verses 10-11, Revelation 19:1-5.) *We must leave vengeance to God, and part of that is to pray for it rather than taking it into our own hands.* We must trust in God who judges justly!

The bulk of what David prays about in these verse is that *the violence and evil intentions of the wicked be put to a stop*. To break their teeth (v.6) is to render them harmless. Likewise to blunt the arrows of the wicked when they take their aim (v.7) is to remove the danger of those arrows to their intended targets. For God to sweep them away before the pots can begin to feel the heat from the thorns (that were most likely heaped into the kindling to start the fire to cook the food in the pot) is to *prevent their evil designs from coming to pass*.

Now David did not pray these things in a spirit of self-righteousness or of revenge, and so neither should we. Matthew Henry says that in these verses we have:

“David's prayers against his enemies, and all the enemies of God's church and people; for it is as such that he looks upon them, so that he was actuated by a public spirit in praying against them, and not by any private revenge.”²

Surely David's concern and aim was the glory of His God and the relief of the godly, and so those same concerns should both guide and guard us in our prayers, even in prayers of imprecation such as we see in this Psalm.

David's Praise for God's Judgment Upon the Wicked (v.10-11)

The third and last thing we see here in this Psalm in v.10-11 is David looking ahead by faith to the just judgments of God upon the wicked judges and rulers. *Here we see David's Praise for God's judgment upon the wicked.*

David speaks of two (2) groups of people who will witness the just judgments of God upon this earth. and tells us of their responses to seeing those judgments. Matthew Henry divides these groups up into *saints and sinners*. *The saints are to be encouraged and comforted by God's judgments, while the sinners are to be convicted and converted by them.*³

The first group is the *saints*, or the **“righteous.”** In v.10 David tells us,

**“The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance;
he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.”**

The response of the righteous will be to rejoice when he sees God take **“vengeance”** upon the wicked. he even goes so far as to say that **“he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.”** The **“he”** that David refers to there is most likely the **“righteous”** that he speaks of in the first half of the verse. That is quite a striking picture, isn't it?

² Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol.III, p.454

³ Ibid.

Now the Scriptures elsewhere tell us *not to rejoice when your enemy falls* (Proverbs 24:17), and that *God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked* (Ezekiel 18:23; 33:11). Does David in this Psalm contradict these verses? Certainly not. And as we have already seen in David's imprecation (in v.6-9), the main goal is to put a stop to the violence of the wicked and to deliver the righteous from harm.

And so the righteous will rejoice at God's just judgments. And bathing one's feet in the blood of the wicked when the Lord brings judgment reminds one of the words of the hymn, "Battle Hymn of the Republic." The first stanza says,

"Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
he is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
he hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword;
his truth is marching on."

That language is found in Scripture. Revelation 14:19-20 says,

"So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia."

The same kind of imagery is also found in Revelation 19:15, which speaks of **"the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty."**

God's people will rejoice and praise God for the glory of His justice as much as we will rejoice and praise Him for His glorious grace. We will *in no way* be embarrassed at God just judgment. *Charles Spurgeon*, commenting on Psalm 58:10, writes,

"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."⁴

Not only will the *righteous* rejoice, but **"mankind"** (sinners) will see God's just judgments and say,

**"Surely there is a reward for the righteous;
surely there is a God who judges on earth."** (v.11)

Many will, by the grace of God, see the just judgments of God in this life and conclude that there is indeed **"a reward for the righteous"** and that **"there is a God who judges on earth."** The unjust judges in this life may indeed act wickedly, pervert justice, and **"deal out violence on earth"** (v.2), but God will not be mocked; He will show Himself to be the God who judges.

God is *still* the God who judges. He judges the wicked *in this life* in many ways and at various times according to the counsel of His will and His infinite wisdom and justice. And in doing so He reveals to all who have the eyes to see and the ears to hear that He indeed rewards the righteous, and also just as surely judges (and rules) on the earth.

4 *The Treasury of David*, Vol.2, p.4

If you are in Christ by faith you no longer need fear the judgment and vengeance of God for your sins, for Christ Jesus has borne the just judgment and wrath of God in your place on the cross. And for those who are in Christ by faith, our God the Judge is pleased to reward us for our good works and acts of obedience prompted by faith working through love.

Even as *Belgic Confession* article 24 puts it,

“Therefore we do good works, but not to merit by them (for what can we merit?); nay, we are indebted to God for the good works we do, and not He to us, since it is He who worketh in us both to will and to work, for his good pleasure. Let us therefore attend to what is written: When ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do. *In the meantime we do not deny that God rewards good works, but it is through His grace that He crowns His gifts.*” (Italics added)

What a wonder of the grace of God that He is pleased to crown His own gifts and graces in His redeemed people!

Conclusion

If you are *not* yet in Christ by faith, but are still in your sins and abiding under the wrath of God, we plead with you to **“be reconciled to God”** (2 Corinthians 5:20) while there is time. Turn from your sins, and turn back to God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved from the wrath to come!

Let the judgments of God upon this earth throughout history and even in our very own day as well teach you that *there is indeed a God who judges on the earth*, and one day that God, even the Lord Jesus Christ, will come again *to judge the living and the dead*.

As Hebrews 9:27–28 says,

“And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.”

If you are in Christ by faith, and so have peace with God, having all of your sins forgiven because of Christ's death in your place when He offered Himself once on the cross “to bear the sins of many,” you can be among **“those who are eagerly waiting for him.”**

What an amazing thing for the Scriptures to say! In Christ we are so saved and reconciled to the God who judges that we can eagerly await the return of Christ when He comes in glory to judge the living and the dead!

Do *you* have such confidence? Such unspeakable peace and joy? *You can* if you turn to Jesus Christ by faith. - *Amen*