



Psalm 58 - Prayer for Vengeance

To the leader: Do Not Destroy. Of David. A Miktam.

Introduction

God's people should sing this song when they are confronted with injustice among their own rulers; it is thus a community lament. In the time of David, of course, the focus was on those who ruled Israel, a theocracy, which was thus, at least in name, supposed to be governed by the principles of the Pentateuch; and yet Christians may pray this way since the rulers of God's people, indeed all people, everywhere and at all times, ought to embody the highest human ideals of justice.

Singing this in worship helps the faithful to pray more earnestly for godly leadership, and forms in the leaders of the community a true moral compass for their own leadership. It also celebrates the prospect that one day, sooner or later, God will vindicate his justice in the world, and those who trust him will rejoice exceedingly.

Derek Kidner says of 'Do not Destroy': "This may well be a tune-indication: confirmed in Isaiah 65:8, where the phrase is identified as a popular saying (perhaps a snatch of vintage song), and borrowed to become a reassuring word from God. Yet notice also David's instructions about Saul, 'Destroy him not' (1 Samuel 26:9)." Charles Spurgeon noted, "There are four of these 'Destroy not' Psalms, namely, the 57th, 58th, 59th, and 75th. In all them there is a distinct declaration of the destruction of the wicked and the preservation of the righteous."

Psalm 58:1-2 - The Challenge to the Tyrants

The song opens by addressing the tyrants directly. Verse 1 asks questions about whether there is justice in their rule, and v.2 answers the questions with a clear no. In context, the wrongs and violence are the kind a ruler too often condones, especially the exploitation of the weaker members of society.

- 1 Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods?
Do you judge people fairly?
- 2 No, in your hearts you devise wrongs;
your hands deal out violence on earth.

Psalm 58:1-2

Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods? There is some question about the best way to translate the original here given as you gods. Taking the text as it is, David challenged those leaders of high esteem, at least in their own eyes, who should have defended David or other innocents but instead stayed silent or took no action to put the situation right.

You gods. This translation is obtained by a change in vowels from the received Hebrew text, which may have been mistakenly altered through a copyist's error. The received vowels, Hebrew *'elem*, yield 'in silence,' which does not make much sense, while a slight adjustment of the vowels yields 'gods' or 'mighty lords', Hebrew *'elim*, which can refer to human rulers who wield their might by God's appointment. It is used in Exodus 15:15 as 'leaders'; in Job 41:25 as 'mighty' in the NIV and 'gods' in the NRSVA; and in Ezekiel 17:13 and 32:21 as 'chiefs'. This fits well as a word for those who should decree what is right and judge people fairly.

There are several references to people as 'you gods', including: <<*I say, 'You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you'*>> (Psalm 82:6), <<*Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that we may be afraid and terrified*>> (Isaiah 41:23), and: <<*Jesus answered, 'Is it not written in your law, "I said, you are gods"?'>> (John 10:34). These, in general, refer to the people of God who are expected to show leadership with compassion.*

David is seen as a fugitive, perhaps at Adullam cave. He hears from a messenger that some assembled court of leaders close to King Saul has met and judicially condemned him as a traitor worthy of death. David is outraged at the injustice of it and proclaims this psalm. David was outraged against corruption, perhaps because he now felt the sting of it. It is human nature to not care much about government and legal corruption until it hurts personally.

Do you judge people fairly? David directed this psalm against those who were in rulers or judges in some sense. Some think they were leaders aligned with Saul who passed judgement on the fugitive David, condemning him to a death sentence as a traitor. David challenged these rulers and the uprightness of their decisions.

No, in your hearts you devise wrongs. After questioning the words and justice of his enemies, David examined their intentions and their actions. Their intention was to work wickedness and in their actions they dispensed violence on earth.

Psalm 58:3-5 - The Charge against the Tyrants

Now the song describes these unjust rulers, calling them wicked; this term, when applied to an Israelite, denotes someone who does not honour God, i.e. does not fear him. They are Israelites who do not embrace the covenantal grace from their hearts; and thus, rather than devote themselves to serving the well-being of the community, they instead use their position to squeeze the life out of their fellow Israelites employing lies (v.3), as well as violence (v.2). In so doing they destroy the community, every bit as much as the venom of a dangerous serpent, such as the deaf adder; perhaps a kind of cobra, if the reference to the charmers in v.5 is any indication, destroys the one it bites.

- ³ The wicked go astray from the womb;
they err from their birth, speaking lies.
- 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.

Psalm 58:3-5

The wicked go astray from the womb. David diagnosed the problem of the judges; they were wicked at the root, in their nature, from birth. David understood this of all humanity including himself: <<**Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me**>> (Psalm 51:5).

They err from their birth, speaking lies. Their corrupt nature was evident early in life, especially in their words. No one has to teach a child how to lie; with some poetic hyperbole it can be said that they are born speaking lies: <<**You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies**>> (John 8:44).

They have venom like the venom of a serpent. The lies are not harmless, they are like poison. The words of judges and rulers have special power to oppress others and their poison is more deadly: <<**but no one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison**>> (James 3:8). The words of these judges were as dangerous as a deadly, unpredictable cobra.

The cunning enchanter links back to the time of original sin: <<*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden”?’>> (Genesis 3:1).*

Psalm 58:6-9 - The Curse upon the Tyrants

The congregation prays that such rulers may fail in their vicious purposes. <<*The teeth in their mouths*>> (v.6) looks back to the serpents’ teeth of v.4, as well as to the fangs of the young lions in v.6. The verse is a prayer that these evildoers may no longer have their present power to do harm. Verses 7-9 continue this prayer, that they should vanish (v.7) and dissolve (v.8), that God will sweep them away as with a whirlwind (v.9). As is generally the case with such prayers, this prayer assumes that the wicked will not repent and seek justice (which would be better by far. Refer also to the comment made on Psalm 5:10.

- 6 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;
like grass let them be trodden down and wither.
- 8 Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime;
like the untimely birth that never sees the sun.
- 9 Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns,
whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away!

Psalm 58:6-9

O God, break the teeth in their mouths. David prayed that God would take vengeance on these dangerous judges. The power of serpents and lions was in their fangs; David asked God to take away their deadly bite.

Let them vanish like water that runs away. David asked for their rapid and complete dispersion of these men and their power - like the snail that dissolves into slime.

Like the untimely birth that never sees the sun. With a severe and startling image of a premature, still-born baby, David prayed for the death of his enemies, or rather that they had never been born to see the light of day. This was the lament that Job had wished for himself following his severe trials: <<*Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child, like an infant that never sees the light?*>> (Job 3:16).

Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns. The Hebrew of these verses is apparently difficult but the thought may be that David considered how quickly a bunch of dry thorns burn in a fire under cooking pots. David prayed that God's judgement would come upon his enemies like a flash of fire.

Psalm 58:10-11 - The Celebration When God Judges the Tyrants

The faithful remember who their God is: the creator who loves to see his creation functioning properly, which is why he loves justice: <<*He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord*>> (Psalm 33:5), and: <<*For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them*>> (Isaiah 61:8). Believers, i.e. the righteous in v.10, may suffer here and now, but they can know that one day God will vindicate his justice in the world. The reward for the righteous is the enjoyment of God and of a renewed community and world that God promises they will receive: <<*So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up*>> (Galatians 6:9).

¹⁰ The righteous will rejoice when they see vengeance done;
they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.

¹¹ People will say, 'Surely there is a reward for the righteous;
surely there is a God who judges on earth.'

Psalm 58:10-11

The righteous will rejoice when they see vengeance done. David thought of the happiness coming to the righteous at God's judgement on these unjust and oppressive rulers, as if the righteous walked the victorious field of battle with God, i.e. they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.

Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth. David desired the world to see there was a moral order under God where righteousness is rewarded and wickedness is judged. He longed for the justice that these wicked rulers denied: <<*After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great'*>> (Genesis 15:1), <<*You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you*>> (Psalm 128:2), and: <<*Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets*>> (Luke 6:23).