

## Trusting in the Steadfast Love of God

### Psalm 52

Dane Ortland, in his book, *Ministry in the New Realm*, says, *in the new realm that was inaugurated when Jesus ascended and the Spirit descended, life and ministry are flipped upside down such that God's strength interlocks not with human strength and sufficiency but with human weakness and pain. He goes on to say, the basic pattern for joy and growth in this new realm is paradoxical, as life comes through death, strength through weakness, comfort through affliction, and so on—as was the pattern of Christ himself.*<sup>1</sup>

So often we believe in pain, we serve in pain, and we pray in pain. We live with scars, but we always do so in good company, the Savior and his wounded people. The problem is the contradiction of it all. We are citizens of the Kingdom, we walk in divine light, we have new life, but we don't only live there. We also live in the old realm of sin, sorrow, pain, suffering, and death, but not for nothing. Rather the power, life, beauty, and victory of the new realm works through our weakness, pain, sorrow, and even death. Is our faith not strengthened by those who persevere in suffering? The Kingdom is here, but not fully, so we show the power of God in our weakness.

*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed... (2Cor 4:7-9).*

Jesus said, *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness (2Cor. 12:9).* This is life for us now.

How do we cope? The Psalms help. Psalm 52 is one such psalm. The psalm confronts the cause of our pain and calls it out and points out the irrational, perilous, and hopeless nature of its position.

The superscription of the psalm gives us the historical event that serves as the inspiration for the psalm. Such a superscription does not mean that every detail of the psalm fits the story that inspired it. Rather, in light of the tragedy at Nob, the people of God sang, and they sang this psalm. *To the choirmaster*, the psalmist writes.

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<sup>1</sup> Dane C. Ortland, "What Is Distinct about the Theology of 2 Corinthians?," Crossway, October 19, 2023.

Nob was a tragic event. There was no cause for it, no call for it. The tragedy cannot be explained, justified, or defended. Nob was a tragedy, and the people of God sang, *Why do you boast of evil, O mighty man?* This is the point of the psalm—the people of God sing while the mighty man boasts.

So horrific was the crime that it is enshrined forever in the Sacred Text here and in 1 Samuel 21 and 22. In fact the superscription comes near to quoting 1 Samuel 22:9 with the words of Doeg, the Edomite, to Saul, *David has come to the house of Ahimelech.*<sup>2</sup>

Recently, Pastor Aaron preached on the 1 Samuel text that prompted this psalm.<sup>3</sup> David was on the run from Saul. He had no time to gather provisions for his flight, so he stopped by the priestly city of Nob and asked Ahimelech the priest for bread and a weapon. David concocted a story of being sent by the king on an urgent, secret mission, leaving no time for preparations. Perhaps, David's ruse was an attempt to protect the priests. Unfortunately, Doeg the Edomite, Saul's chief herdsman, was *detained before the LORD* at Nob and saw the whole encounter take place (1 Samuel 21:7).

Later, in search of David, Saul lamented to his troops that they conspired against him and none of them felt sorry for him when his son sided with David (1Sam 22:8). Doeg saw the opportunity to advance himself and spoke up, *I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, and he inquired of the LORD for him and gave him provisions and gave him the sword of Goliath* (1Sam 22:9-10).

Saul sent for Ahimelech, who maintained his innocence in the matter. Unable to hear truth and act with reason, Saul ordered his men to kill the Ahimelech and all the priests at Nob. Saul's men refused to kill the priests of the LORD but they didn't care enough to protect them. So, Doeg the Edomite, that son of the devil, to advance himself, gladly struck down 85 priests that day. Fueled by blood, Doeg did not stop with the priests but extended his slaughter to the city of Nob, *both man and woman, child and infant, ox, donkey, and sheep* (1 Sam 22:19).

Both Saul and Doeg, each in his own way grasping for power, rationalized the murder of the priests and people of Nob, as if that somehow answered Saul's problem with David.

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<sup>2</sup> Goldingay points this out. BCOT, 142.

<sup>3</sup> Aaron O'Kelley, "Grace in the Wilderness," July 24, 2022. Accessed at [cccjackson.org](http://cccjackson.org).

I was absolutely shocked at the reaction of some of our congressmen and some students and faculty around the country to the Hamas attack on random Israelis on October 7—men, women, children, and families gruesomely murdered. You would think that would be a wake-up call to our country. But it gets more shocking yet. 51% of 18-25 year olds in our country are of the opinion that the *killing of Israeli civilians is justified by the grievance of the* <sup>4[OB]</sup>

Saul assumed the identity of the oppressed (1Sam 22:7-10), and so against moral reason justified the slaughter of the innocents at Nob. If Saul felt oppressed, Doeg has 2 more intersections; he was a herdsman, and he was an Edomite—and the text won't let us forget it. There is great danger in the justification of evil for some perceived grievance. When we justify evil, we open ourselves to every kind of evil. Can you imagine anyone looking at this text and congratulating Doeg? The White House press secretary would say, *Let's be clear, Edomite herdsmen are under siege.*

This is the world we live in. Psalm 52 helps us navigate this world. It shows us, on the one hand, that the madness we face is not unique. On the other hand, the psalm shows us that God takes note of the wicked and will judge the wicked and vindicate his people. The psalm shows these things in 3 short stanzas. Verses 1-4 deal with the boasts of the evil man; verses 5-7 show the judgment of the wicked and the vindication of the righteous; and verses 8-9 show us how to live in the present in light of the boasts of the wicked and the coming judgment of God.

The people of God always live in a world that is hostile to them. What can we learn from this psalm?

### **1. The steadfast love of God empties the boasts of our enemies (vv1-4)**

In unusual fashion, the psalm starts, not with an address to or about God, but with a confrontation of the boastful *mighty man*? *Why do you boast of evil, O mighty man?*, the psalmist asks. He goes on to describe the *evil* that the *mighty man* boasts in: He plots and then works his plan of destruction (2). Getting to the motives of the evil man, he *loves evil more than good, lying more than speaking what is right, and words that devour* (3-4a). He has a *deceitful tongue* (4b). In both word and deed, the mighty man in view is evil.

The question the psalmist in verse 1 is rhetorical. The mighty evil man should stop

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<sup>4</sup> Rod Dreher, "The Mortal Danger of 'Yes-Buttery': Manson Family Values and Why We Don't Dare Minimize the Evil of Hamas's Butchery," October 24. The view of 25-34 year olds is not much better at 48%.

and think, *If the steadfast love of God endures all the day (constantly), why am I boasting of evil (momentary)?*

Often, we look at this the other way around. The momentary boasts of the mighty cast doubts in our minds on the constancy of the love of God for us. If God loves us, why is life at times so hard, so painful, and so disappointing? But notice the wording of the text: It is the steadfast love of God for his people that empties the boasts of the mighty man.

If the world is against us, we reason, God must not be for us. Perhaps, the very reason the world is against is because God is for us. Saul was not hunting David because David was evil. The priests at Nob were not killed because they had done wrong. No. Just the opposite was true. Saul was in reality fighting against God, and that fight was futile.

All too often we think at the level of the mighty man. That is, we operate as if this momentary reality is all there is. This psalm calls us to operate at another level. It calls us to live in the reality of God's enduring love for us regardless of our circumstances. The psalm points to a world more real, more solid, more tangible than the present age, and that world has already dawned in the resurrection and ascension of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit into the world.

I see and experience it all the time, and you do too. We need to take note of it and point it out. The fulness of the Spirit comes alongside to aid, help, instruct, comfort, heal, and order our lives. There is the life changing application of the God's word. Over and over, I see the Spirit give wisdom and insight in godly counsel. I, also, see people dismiss and resist the Spirit's guidance to hold one more day to their own plan that is not working.

The constancy of the steadfast love of God changes everything and empties the boast of the mighty man. It is not the believer who holds to an imaginary world, but it the boastful man who thinks there is no reckoning for his crimes.

## **2. The coming judgment of God resolves the paradox of the present age (5-7).**

A paradox is something that seems to contradict itself but is, nevertheless, true. The psalm shows the strength of this age to be weakness and the wisdom of this age to be foolish. What if the evil man who thinks he is *on top* is actually *on the bottom*. It seems outlandish that one day Christ will return in the sky and will show the power of the powerful to be weakness.

That is exactly what the coming judgment does. This psalm moves from the present boasting of the mighty man to the coming judgment of God. Here is where wrongs are set right, where the great reversal takes place, and what was certain death becomes life.

The judgment to come is a sobering thought for both wicked and the righteousness.

First, the evil mighty man is set in contrast to God. We hear the boasts of the evil mighty man in verse 1 and, then, *but God* in verse 5. A series of verbs follow that conjure up pictures of the end of the wicked. The mighty man boasts in his power, plots destruction, works deceit, and loves evil. *But God*, on the other hand, will break him down like the destruction of a building, and not for a moment but *forever* (5a). He will *snatch and tear* him from his dwelling (5b). He will *uproot him from the land of the living* (5c).

Verse 5 is an astounding picture of coming judgment: *break down, snatch and tear, and uproot*. Why would God do this? For all the reasons God will judge the wicked, chief among them is his *steadfast love* for his people (1b). The mighty man did not consider that God loves his people.

Jesus talked about the coming judgment: *For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken the one left* (Mt 24:37-41).

We must realize that the last word on any issue has not yet been spoken. The boasting of the mighty man is not the last word.

First, the wicked mighty man is set in contrast to God. Then the psalmist shows the vindication of the righteous in two surprising ways. First, the righteous *see and fear* (6a). When the wicked are broken, snatched and torn, and uprooted, the righteous *see and fear*. Imagine what Noah and his family saw and felt when the rains came. Imagine the sense of fear at the sight of people being snatched away. We can understand that response. Who can see God's judgment and not fear?

Then their fear gives way to *laughter* (6b) and they say, *See the man who would not make God his refuge, but trusted in the abundance of his riches and sought refuge in his own destruction* (7). The *mighty man* (gibbor) of verse 1 is now just

*the man* (geber), an ordinary man (7). His refuge had been his might, his ability to destroy. He trusted in his wealth. But his wealth and power were not what he thought they were and are nothing compared to God.

The *righteous will laugh at him*. At first glance that is a bit strange, perhaps even rough. We read those texts where God laughs, like in Psalm 2 when the LORD laughs at the rebellion of the kings of the earth: *He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision* (Ps 2:4). Is the meaning the righteous are deriding the man *who would not make God his refuge but sought refuge in his own might*?

This laughter is a bit different than divine laughter. It is more like fear that turns to laughter. Fear and laughter often follow each other in that order. I was out for a run one day when a terrible thunderstorm suddenly rolled in. I was a mile and a half from home with fields on either side of me and a power line running along the road. The lightning was flashing, the electric lines were buzzing, and I could feel the energy and static all around me. There was no shelter. All I could do was try to run faster and pray. When I got home to safety, I could not help but laugh. It's like when you almost step on a snake. Fear shoots through your body. Then when you are safe, laughter follows, and the story becomes part of the lore of your life. Anytime snakes are mentioned, you tell the story.

The response of the righteous when the wicked are broken, snatched and torn, and uprooted is fear and then the laughter that will for ages recount the story of God great love for us and how he intervened and saved us from a hopeless situation.

The coming judgment of God resolves the paradox of our lives in the present age. *Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal* (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

### **3. The steadfast love of God is sufficient to sustain us, and even make us thrive, in this present age (vv8-9).**

Notice the movement of the psalm from the boasts of the evil mighty man to the reality of the judgment to come to how that impacts life in the present. If the second stanza (5-7) contrasts God and the mighty man, the last stanza contrasts the psalmist and the mighty man.

The mighty man will be *uprooted* (5c), but the psalmist is planted like a green

olive tree in the house of God (8). This picture recalls psalm 1 where the righteous man is *like a tree planted by streams of water* (1.3). The olive tree is known for its fruitfulness and longevity. The evil mighty man is passing away, but the righteous are planted and are fruitful in pain, suffering, and even death, all the seeds of joy and life.

While the mighty man *trusted in his riches and sought refuge in his own destruction* for the fleeting moment of his life (7b), the psalmist would *trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever* (8b). The moments of the boasting of the evil mighty man seemed so long, but they were momentary. It was the constant nature of the steadfast love of God that confronted the mighty man with his own futility in verse 1. That same never-ending love of God for his people is what strengthens the psalmist in the present. It confronts the wicked and comforts the faithful (cf 1b and 8b).

When we understand and embrace the paradoxical nature of our lives with Christ in the new realm, we will have the spiritual maturity to know and feel that God loves us even when we suffer, he comforts us in affliction, and even if/when we die he loves us too much not to raise us up, for his love is eternal.

That then gives us the spiritual capacity to be thankful, with a thankfulness that extends eternal, knowing the reversal of our suffering, pain, and death is as good as done (9a). Therefore, we can wait, we can persevere in the company of the godly knowing that God is good and is doing good for us.

The saints get in distress when they feel that God is withholding good from them. You deserve better than what you have gotten. You see others advance whom you have assessed to be not as talented or gifted or able as you. You have yourself in a position that you no longer see or are comforted by the care God lavishes on you.

Don't you see why God has you in the position he has you in. If he gave you what you think he has withheld, it would destroy you. God is not the evil mighty man who delights in planning destruction. Rather, his unfailing love for his people cancels the boasts of the mighty. He has reserved a day of judgment that will reveal the truth, and we can therefore trust his constant love for us even in the most trying times.