

Entrusting Our Souls to God

Psalm 58

Unfortunately, illustrations of injustice abound. We don't have to dig back into the archives of history to find some elusive tale of injustice.

Recently, we've seen the New Year's Eve attack on Bourbon Street in New Orleans killing 15 and injuring 57 others. On October 7, 2023, Hamas terrorists launched an attack in Southern Israel near the Gaza Strip brutally murdering 1200 people and taking around 250 hostages. On average 17 Nigerian Christians are martyred every day. How can these things happen?

While these things in and of themselves are manifestly unjust, what is startling is the inability of some in power to acknowledge the injustice of these events. In fact, some go so far as to justify the perpetrators of such evil.

We don't have to go so far away to see injustice. While details are slowly emerging, a local eating establishment was the scene of one person being shot and killed and three others wounded. The police chief said, *From what I'm getting, we believe that this incident was a targeted attack rather than a random thing. So, I don't think any of the community needs to be upset or in an uproar right now...*ⁱ

I don't want to nitpick the chief's words, but when we get to the place where people are attacking and shooting each other while we dip our chicken nuggets and we are not upset or in an uproar, we have lost the ability to judge the situation rightly.

Psalm 58 addresses the perennial injustice that is the lot of mankind living in a corrupt world. The psalmist addresses unjust judges (1-2) and contrasts them with God (cf. 10-11), explains why injustice continues (3-5), prays for God to deal with the wicked (6-9), and anticipates the final judgment (10-11).

The psalmist's purpose is shown both in the arrangement of Psalms 56-60 and in their superscriptions. This grouping of psalms are *miktams*, which show they are deliberately placed together.ⁱⁱ

Of the group of 5 psalms (56-60) only Psalm 58, the middle of the 5, does not have a historical reference relating to the life of David. That is to be expected when you

consider the psalm backs up from dealing with specific unjust acts to dealing with the larger idea of injustice.ⁱⁱⁱ David's wider concern for God's glory began to surface in the refrain of Psalm 57 (vv5, 11).

Do Not Destroy, however, is probably a tune with history behind it.^{iv} Of interest, in the Saul/David saga, *Do Not Destroy* is the order David gave his men when Saul was at their mercy (cf. 1Sam 26:9). It's conjecture, but perhaps the tune to these psalms arose from David's attempt to navigate the injustice he experienced in light of the injustice that so plagues all humanity.

The psalm gives us a picture of the righteous living in an unjust world and shows us how to think about it and respond to it.

1. We must acknowledge the inability of judges to judge rightly (1-2)

The psalm opens with two rhetorical questions for the *gods*: *do you decree what is right?* and *do you judge uprightly* (1)? The word *gods* (elim) refers to judges, who are to uphold the righteous character of God in their decisions. But in this psalm, they are presented in deliberate contrast to the God they represent (cf. 10-11). Justice is an attribute of God, and its application in the world of men should reflect his character as revealed in Scripture.

When the character of God as revealed in Scripture is no longer the objective standard of judgment, you are at the mercy of corrupt judges.

The rhetorical questions of verse 1 expect a negative answer, and the psalmist blurts it out in verse 2, *No!* We have two things going on here, both of which show a rejection of an objective standard of truth: some judges are knowingly unjust, using their office as a means of gain, and others invert right and wrong, yet operate with a good conscience.^v Regardless in both cases, the psalmist says, they *devise wrongs in their hearts* (evil) and *deal out violence* (hamas) *on earth* (2).

We have a startling example of the human inability to judge what is proper in the recent funeral of former President Jimmy Carter. He was elected president in 1977. He was peanut farmer from Georgia, and also the governor of Georgia, a born-again Christian, a Southern Baptist, and a Sunday School teacher. We thought the KOG had come. Fast forward to his funeral tour and the stop at the Washington National Cathedral, which is officially known as the Cathedral Church of Saint

Peter and Saint Paul in the City and Diocese of Washington. It is an Episcopal church that has services every Sunday.

Nevertheless, in that tradition Carter's coffin encased body sat parallel with the congregation to symbolize his last gathering with the people of God on earth even as he was gathering with the people of God gone before, a communion of the saints on earth and in heaven. 3000 of the most powerful and privileged people on earth gathered as Garth Brooks and Tricia Yearwood sang John Lenon's *Imagine*.

Imagine there's no heaven

It's easy if you try

No hell below us

Above us only sky

Imagine all the people living for today

As the camera panned the audience I hoped to see confused looks, something to indicate the inappropriateness of it all. Surely, some in attendance were flabbergasted, but the point I want to make is in our society at highest levels of power, there is no sense of what is proper.

If you expect justice from people who have lost any sense of what is proper, you will be disappointed. We do not look to the powers that be for our salvation. They are not the proper objects of hope.

We must acknowledge the inability of judges to judge rightly. That raises the question, from where does this inability arise?

2. We must realize the universal sinfulness of mankind (3-5)

The problem is worse than we may think. The psalmist backs up from the particular acts of injustice perpetrated by wayward judges to consider why people are wicked in the first place. He moves from talking about the way things are to *why* things are the way they are.

He argues for the doctrine of original sin and the total inability of man.

A. Original sin

From birth, he says, they are *strangers* and *go astray* (3). Unlike Rousseau's noble

savage,^{vi} inherently good and uncorrupted by society, the psalmist says, *No, their corruption is prior to their enculturation. They are estranged from the womb* (3a). In case we missed it, he reiterates the point in the second line, *they go astray from birth speaking lies*. The reason they do not *decree what is right* is they are acting according to their nature to speak lies (cf. 1, and 3b).

This is not the first time the psalmist has voiced this conviction. He realized that this is true even of himself, *I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me* (Ps 51:5). The problem is worse than we think. All of us without exception are infected with the sin virus. When we consider our own potential to sin and our tendency toward it, we understand that the difference between the categories of people called the *wicked* (3) and the *righteous* (10) is only by the grace of God.

The tendency to sin we all feel is to be resisted and repented of.

B. Total inability

The psalmist points out not only the inherent sinfulness of mankind, but also the inability that comes with it. He compares them to venomous *snakes* (4a) and *deaf adders* that cannot be charmed (4b-5). The point is that they are insensible to reason. They will not reason themselves to holiness.

The human race apart from God's saving grace is universally corrupt and pervasively wicked. Were it not for the common grace of God that restrains human evil, life would be impossible. If wicked people manage to do something good, it is owing to the common grace of God, not to their moral ability. The psalmist is saying, the corrupt actions of man arise from his corrupt nature.

With each new generation, the forces of human wickedness are resupplied. They are like what Isaiah wrote: *they hatch adders' eggs; and they weave spider's web; he who eats their eggs dies, and from one that is crushed a viper is hatched. Their webs will not serve as clothing; ... Justice is turned back and righteousness stands far away; for truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter* (Isa. 59:5-6, 14). Adrian Rogers preached a sermon on this Isaiah text he called *Snake Eggs, Spider Webbs, and Traffic Jams*. The point was we fight injustice, and when we stamp it out in one place it pops up in another.

We must acknowledge the inability of judges to judge rightly and the universal sinfulness of mankind.

3. We must entrust our souls to God who judges rightly

The psalmist has addressed the unjust rulers who misrepresented God. He then backed up from their actions to address the inherent corruption of humanity. Now in verses 6-9, he calls on God to rectify the situation, giving graphic word pictures that describe how he wants God to do it: *break their teeth* (6a), *tear out their fangs* (6b), *let them vanish like water runs off* (7a), *let them be like blunted arrows* (7b), *dissolve like snails* (8a), *be like a stillborn child* (8b), and *sweep them away like a thorn fire under a pot in the desert* (9).

This cry for vengeance seems harsh to our sensibilities. We almost want to say to the psalmist, *Wow, do you feel better?* Did Jesus not tell us to love our enemies (cf. Mt 5:43)? So, is it inconsistent for the Christian to pray for God's judgment on evil doers, knowing we ourselves deserve the same?

We tend to read the command to love our enemies as the only thing the NT has to say about our disposition toward the wicked. Did Jesus have in mind for us to pray for them to have a nice day, do better, repent or some else?

Perhaps, Jesus meant to entrust vengeance to God. How else will we pray for his kingdom to come and his will to be done (Mt 6 :9)? How will we ever pray for the Father to forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors if we do not entrust evil doers to the just judgment of God (Mt 6:12,14-15)?

The psalmist is praying for God to act justly in accord with his divine character. This is not revenge; it is a reckoning, setting things right. The psalmist is not saying, *I'm going to break their teeth*. He is asking God to.

So, is he reducing God to his personal bodyguard? No, the psalmist had plenty of those. If this were revenge, he could easily pull that off. Verse 6 is one of the rare times in Psalms 42-83 the psalmist uses the covenant Name for God, LORD. This shows the main concern of the psalmist is the LORD vindicating his holy character by upholding his covenant with his people (cf. Ps 57:5,11).

Psalms that call for God to judge one's enemies are not prayers for revenge, but prayers for God to defend his character and in so doing vindicate his people for

placing their trust in him in the first place. Such prayer is asking God to uphold the stipulations of the covenant to set things right. Thus, the martyrs under the altar in heaven pray, *How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth* (Rev 6:10)?

The view of divine justice upheld in this psalm is illustrated perfectly in the Saul/David story. David had more than one opportunity to kill Saul but would not do it. The *Do Not Destroy* theme arises on one of those occasions. David and two of his men snuck into Saul's camp while Saul lay sleeping with his spear stuck in the ground next to his head. Abishai, one of David's men, wanted to pin Saul to the ground with Saul's own spear.

David said, *Do not destroy him, for who can put out his hand against the LORD's anointed and be guiltless? As the LORD lives, the LORD will strike him, or his day will come to die, or he will go down into battle and perish. The LORD forbid that I should put out my hand against the LORD's anointed. But take now the spear that is at his head and the jar of water, and let us go* (1Sam 26:9-11).

David did not kill Saul; he gave place to the God's wrath. This is what Scripture calls us to do.

The only way you can avoid the poison of anger toward those who wrong you is to entrust them to God who judges rightly. This is what Jesus himself did when he unjustly suffered: *When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly* (1Pet 2:23). This is what we are instructed to do as well: *Therefore, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful creator while doing good* (2Pet 4:19).

At least at the popular level, there is a common misconception regarding God's judgment in the OT compared to the NT. It is as if God has reformed his ways, is a bit more civilized now, perhaps tamer. Not so. God does not change. He is as wrathful now as then and as loving then as now.

If anything, the NT clarifies and intensifies the reality of eternal punishment and judgment to come. It is worse, much worse than we would ever realize by reading the OT.^{vii} The images are *lake of fire, outer darkness, eternal punishment, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth*.

The pictures of God's wrath are in embryonic form in the OT. The closer we get to the reality of final judgment in Scripture, the pictures of wrath become more intense. Every act of judgment in the OT and every prayer for God to judge points to the final judgment in some way.

God will one day set things right. Entrust your soul to God.

4. We must hope in the judgment of God (10-11)

The psalmist forecasts two startling responses to the day of vengeance: one from the righteous and one from mankind in general. Both show the holiness and character of God.

A. The response of the righteous

The psalmist cares deeply about justice, as it relates to the vindication of the holiness of God and the faith of God's people. Vengeance is first and foremost about God upholding his holy character.

The existence of a holy God and a corrupt world is an unsustainable situation. As believers, we feel the contradiction that suffering and injustice are in the world, and it should create in us a longing for things to be set right. Yet, as this psalm acknowledges, we cannot set things right. We are powerless to do so. We have no standing to do so as forgiven sinners. So, we pray, *LORD, have mercy on me, and break the teeth of the lions*, and that is not a contradiction. It is the reality of justice and redemption. It is what enables us to plead with people to repent.

If you love justice and redemption, you will rejoice in retribution, in the day of vengeance. There is no other way to live in this corrupt world and love your neighbor and have hope. Knowing justice is coming frees us to love and preach and pray and hope.

The psalmist anticipates the righteous will rejoice when the wicked are destroyed. God alone is able to uphold justice. If killing were all that was needed, David could have done that, but justice is another thing. Only God can judge rightly, and he will set things right. He will uphold justice because to uphold justice is to uphold his righteous character. He cannot be other than who he is. Hope in the judgment of God

B. The response of mankind

The second response to the day of vengeance is the world's assessment of it. When it finally comes, the world will finally acknowledge that the righteous are vindicated for trusting the mercy of God and that God really does judge the world rightly. The brain-fog will clear, the mind virus will subside, and, perhaps, for the first time people will see clearly.

The psalm is framed by the unjust judges who misrepresent God and perpetrate evil in the world (1-2), and God who judges rightly (10-11). What the unjust judges do not consider is that one day the tables will be turned.

This is the warning Jesus gave the Sanhedrin when he was on trial. The high priest put Jesus under oath to say whether or not he was the Messiah. Jesus answered, *You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven* (Mt 26:64). Jesus is saying you are in the place of judging now, but the day will come when he will be their judge.

In that day, you will not be able to keep from being glad.

We live in a corrupt world where justice is inverted. All mankind is inherently sinful by nature. In such a world, we must entrust our souls to God who judges rightly. As we come to the table, we testify to the fact that our standing is not a self-righteousness standing, but our standing is in the righteousness of another, the Lord Jesus Christ.

ⁱ <https://www.wbbjtv.com/2025/01/21/police-respond-to-shooting-at-slim-chickens-in-north-jackson/>

ⁱⁱ The psalms I have taken up in this series of sermons from the Psalter began with Psalm 56. It seems that Psalms 56-60 form a group of psalms deliberately placed together for a theological purpose. For example, each of the group of 5 psalms is a miktam. That stands out because only one other psalm in the entire Psalter is a miktam, Psalm 16. Now we don't know for sure what the terms means, but minimally 5 miktams in a row is a deliberate arrangement.

ⁱⁱⁱ Since the surrounding Psalms have historical notes connected to David's life, this middle psalm may express the psalmist's desire for vindication related to the injustice he has been experiencing at the hands of Saul. In other words, out he 5 psalms, Psalm 58 expresses the Psalmist dependence on God to answer the injustice he had experienced.

^{iv} The middle 3 psalms in the group of 5 psalms (56-60) have this tune (57-59), like a medley within the group. This tune occurs only elsewhere in Psalm 75. Again, its placement is deliberate.

^v Both operate off of the idea that justice is not fixed and objective but fluid. Something cannot be just at one point in history and unjust at another point in history. That is politics not justice. Justice is as fixed as the character of God.

^{vi} This idea is central to his works, such as "Émile, or On Education" and "The Social Contract," where he explores the impact of society on human nature.

^{vii} Jesus had much to say about hell. Today, he would get the label of being a *hellfire and brimstone preacher*. Hear a sample of what he said,

The sons of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 8:12).

The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (13:41-42).

These will go away into eternal punishment (Mt 25:46).

Jesus had much more to say, but the epistles take this up as well.

Paul said, *God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might ... (2Thess 1:6-9).*

Peter said, *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed (2Pet 3:10).*

In the Revelation when Jesus comes again, the text says, *The armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God almighty (Rev 19:14-15).*