



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



# The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 58

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# Introduction

- This Psalm is titled *To the Chief Musician. Set to "Do Not Destroy."* *A Michtam of David*
- According to the title David is the author
- The title indicates, as it was mentioned in previous Psalms, that it was directed toward the *Chief Musician*, whom some suppose to be the Lord God Himself, and others suppose to be a leader of choirs or musicians in David's time, such as Heman the singer or Asaph
- *Do Not Destroy* may refer to the tune
- Or to David's determination to not destroy Saul



# Introduction

- Or to David's plea that God would not allow him to be destroyed
- *Michtam* indicates golden and that they are golden Psalms
- The title seems to have no reference to the subject of the Psalm
- However, according to the Syriac language version, this Psalm was written when Saul threatened the priests, because they did not show him where David was, when they knew it
- Others believe it refers to Absalom's rebellion
- The psalmist David has long suffered from the deception of king Saul who has put in his heart to kill him





# Introduction

- David also suffered from the deception of his friend and counselor, Ahitophel
- The Psalm warns those of authority, who abuse their positions, those who not only fail to administer justice fairly and rightly, but are themselves among the worst of wrongdoers



# Introduction

## Psalm Outline

- Rebuking the Deceptive Wicked 58:1-5
- A Just Judgment from God is Sought 58:6-8
- David's Confidence in God's Judgment 58:9-11

# Rebuking the Deceptive Wicked

## 58:1-5



- David directly addresses the ones who are causing the trouble in his life
- He identifies their unrighteous speech and their unjust judgements
- He exposes their inner wicked plans and their desire to spread *violence* on the earth – not *justice*, but rather *violence*
- Some think they were leaders aligned with Saul who passed judgment on David, condemning him to a death sentence as a traitor



# Rebuking the Deceptive Wicked

## 58:1-5



- And some think it might be a reference to Absalom's pretended zeal for justice (2 Samuel 15:2), while in reality he was meditating the most evil shocking crimes
- David challenged these rulers and the uprightness of their decisions
- They should have defended him or other innocents but instead stayed *silent* when they ought to speak
- It is a general condemnation on the rulers of the earth for their lack of just and righteous judgment

# Rebuking the Deceptive Wicked

## 58:1-5



- All men ought to speak that which is right and truth; but especially judges, who are to judge the people with just judgment, Deuteronomy 16:18
- David points out that the rulers are not judging fairly but practice injustice in their hearts and violence by their hands
- The judges are addressed as sons of men to remind them that they are but human, and themselves subject to a higher Judge
- Both questions in verse 1 are asked in bitter irony, as it is clear from the context
- After questioning the words and justice of his enemies, David examined their intentions and their actions



# Rebuking the Deceptive Wicked

## 58:1-5



- Their intention was to *work wickedness* and in their actions, they dispensed *violence in the earth*
- *in heart you work wickedness*, With free choice and consent; with premeditation and plans
- They might keep silent, or speak sweet words, but their works testify to their evil
- What they think in their hearts and minds are exposed by their deeds, when they publicly practice oppression; according to the words of the prophet Micah: *“Woe to those who devise iniquity; and work out evil on their beds! At morning light they practice it; because it is in the power of their hands”* (Micah 2:1)

# Rebuking the Deceptive Wicked

## 58:1-5



- Verses 3-5 show how evil these rulers truly are
- Their whole lives have been full of wickedness, as if they have been liars from birth
- David identified the problem of the judges; they were *wicked* at the root, in their nature, from birth
- David understood this of all humanity including himself (Psalm 51:5)
- *“The imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth”* (Genesis 8:21); but these men have shown a more than ordinary capacity for wickedness

# Rebuking the Deceptive Wicked

## 58:1-5



- It has become to them a second nature
- *are estranged*, From God and His laws, “*alienated from the life of God,*” (Ephesians 4:18); “*alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works*” (Colossians 1:21)
- According to St. Augustine, those who were *estranged from the womb* refer to them, who after being born in the church, got estranged from it, bore the spirit of animosity against it, and were alienated from the truth
- David does not speak here of the doctrine of original sin



# Rebuking the Deceptive Wicked

## 58:1-5



- What the psalmist means is that those who ultimately become vile sinners, for the most part show, even from their early childhood, a strong tendency towards evil
- *speaking lies*, according to St. Augustine, 'they utter lies, for they bear evil, hidden in their hearts'
- They are not only deceptive and poisonous as serpents, but firmly and unwaveringly oppose all attempts to control them
- *like the deaf cobra* as most venomous of all serpents, which resists all the arts of the charmer
- In the old, some people used a kind of charming or magic to protect themselves and others from the bite of serpents

# Rebuking the Deceptive Wicked

## 58:1-5



- Snake charming is alluded to in Ecclesiastes 10:11; Jeremiah 8:17; Sirach 12:13
- As the *cobra* is deaf to the voice of the enchanter, so these men shut their ears to the warnings and exhortations of the prophets
- The *lies* are harmful; they are like *poison*
- The words of judges and rulers have special power to oppress others, and were as dangerous as a deadly, unpredictable *cobra*
- They do not listen to what other people say
- Rather, they are going to act according to their evil ways regardless of what the people say or do

# Rebuking the Deceptive Wicked

## 58:1-5



- According to St. Athanasius, the soul of an angry man is like the serpent that appeared in paradise, pretending to be wise before our first parents, Adam and Eve; and to bear the spirit of friendship toward them; yet it condemned itself to death
- So was king Saul who pretended to bear the spirit of friendship toward David, when he intended to kill him
- And so did the scribes and the Pharisees, to our Lord Jesus Christ, when they addressed Him politely as “Rabbi”, and “Teacher”, when they intended to kill Him



# Rebuking the Deceptive Wicked

## 58:1-5



- By that they came to liken the ancient serpent in evil, and refused to hear the sayings of the sent prophets who brought them the wise teachings
- By their own choice, they stopped their ears so as not to hear; that to them apply the words of the prophet Isaiah: *“Make the heart of this people dull, And their ears heavy, And shut their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart, And return and be healed.”* (Isaiah 6: 10)

# A Just Judgment from God is Sought 58:6-8



- The psalmist changes the metaphor from that of the serpent returning to the image of the young lion
- 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
- He represents his enemies as cruel and bloodthirsty, and as stronger than him; and therefore, he asks God, who could, as He sometimes did, break the teeth of the ungodly by taking the power and instruments of harming from them

# A Just Judgment from God is Sought 58:6-8



- *Break their teeth in their mouth*, May mean their malicious words, lies, and slanders
- Teeth are the instrument of speech; and by *breaking* them, preventing their malice plans
- The heretics and atheists, use their mouths to blaspheme God, and lead the believers astray from the truth
- As we read: *“Arise, O LORD; Save me, O my God! For You have struck all my enemies on the cheekbone; You have broken the teeth of the ungodly.”* (Psalm 3:7)



# A Just Judgment from God is Sought 58:6-8



- And Solomon says: *“There is a generation whose teeth are like swords, And whose fangs are like knives, To devour the poor from off the earth, And the needy from among men.”* (Proverbs 30:14)
- After the types of cruel and violent evil, come four striking images of the foolishness of the wicked man’s plans, and his own near destruction
- David wants these unjust enemies to be like *lions* or like *water* or like *snails* or like a *stillborn child*
- The common theme with all of these images is harmlessness, ineffectiveness, and insignificance

# A Just Judgment from God is Sought 58:6-8



- The lion is one of the most dangerous beasts on the earth
- And yet, what is a lion without its teeth? It's relatively harmless
- No one is afraid of a toothless lion
- Water has great strength, David calls for God to make these rulers flow away, vanish or disappear as waters which sometimes run in the desert, but are soon evaporated by the *sun*, or absorbed by the *sand*
- Let them be unstable as water that is continually running, let them never be settled, but always changing in their state and circumstances, Genesis 49:4

# A Just Judgment from God is Sought 58:6-8



- They are useless and insignificant, as water is when passed and gone
- *When he bends his bow*, Let the wicked who aims his arrows to the righteous to kill him miss their goal, and do the righteous no harm; let them be disheartened, and their courage fail them, and let there be no spirit left in them, Joshua 7:5
- David prayed that the unjust would be ineffective with the picture of the unjust drawing back his bow and all of a sudden, he becomes aware that his arrows are *as if cut in pieces*



# A Just Judgment from God is Sought 58:6-8



- What kind of damage can an arrow cause without a sharp point to it? None!
- He prays that unjust people would be rendered harmless by the Lord
- Then David asks that these unjust people would be rendered ineffective like a *snail* or a *stillborn child*
- David asked for the rapid and complete dispersion of these men and their power *like a snail which melts as it goes away*
- The snail is a soft animal that lives inside a shell

# A Just Judgment from God is Sought 58:6-8



- While working with all their strength and speed to catch the righteous in their hands, the wicked are only compared to a snail, that moves very slowly and who is inside its shell, helpless to resist anyone who intends to carry it away
- The wicked are likened to snail that, in the time of danger, changes its color from bright red to pale white, as though dead, and hides inside its shell
- As the snails move, they leave a trail of slime which is gradually weakens, melts away, and dies
- He prays that everyone of his enemies might die in like manner

# A Just Judgment from God is Sought 58:6-8



- David prays the wicked will also melt away because of their unjust acts
- *Like a stillborn child*, With a severe image, David prayed for the death of his enemies, or rather that they had never been born to see the light of day
- He likens them to a *stillborn child* of a woman that did not complete its growth, born dead
- The prayer is, that his enemies might perish or be cut off, and that he might thus be saved from them
- Basically, David calls to God to stop their attacks upon the innocent



# David's Confidence in God's Judgment 58:9-11



- The final verses of the Psalm speak about David's confidence that God will bring justice and the wicked will be judged and eventually, God will sweep them away and the righteous will be rewarded
- David seems to recognize that judgment against the wicked may take some time in coming, but it will come
- In verse 9, David prayed that God's judgment would come upon his enemies like a flash of fire
- It is another image for the swift destruction of the wicked and their plans

# David's Confidence in God's Judgment 58:9-11



- *Before your pots can feel the burning thorns*, Which is soon done; for as dry thorns make a great fire and give a quick heat; the pots soon feel them, or the water in them soon receives heat from them
- *He shall take them away as with a whirlwind*, The Psalmist prophesies and foretells the sudden destruction of wicked men, which would be before a pot could be heated with a fire of thorns
- They will be taken away as with a *whirlwind*
- The imagery of the *whirlwind* is intended to raise and create a feeling of terror

# David's Confidence in God's Judgment 58:9-11



- They were to be taken away suddenly, or rapidly, before the pots could feel the soon burning and intense fire of thorns
- They were to be taken off by some terrible catastrophe, like the furious burning of thorns, to which the wrath of God is frequently compared and is described as *living and burning*
- The fire represents the malicious will of the evildoers, the pots their devises which they are planning
- Before the wicked judges can enjoy the fruits of their wickedness, the fierce wrath of God will come upon them like a storm, and sweep both them and the products of their evil away (2 Samuel 23:6-7)



# David's Confidence in God's Judgment 58:9-11



- David thought of the happiness coming to the *righteous* at God's judgment on these unjust and oppressive rulers, as if *the righteous* walked the victorious field of battle with God *his feet in the blood of the wicked*
- It was the custom in the old battles, that the conqueror washes his feet or hands in the blood of the slain enemies
- It is as though the psalmist proclaim that the victory over evil is complete and final (Psalm 68:23; Isaiah 63)
- As the good man is pained when he sees the ungodly prosper, so he cannot but feel a certain satisfaction and pleasure when punishment overtakes him

# David's Confidence in God's Judgment 58:9-11



- It is important to observe that the rejoicing of the righteous is at the *vengeance* which God has taken upon the wicked, and that *vengeance* is only taken upon those who have willfully and adamantly unwaveringly resisted every effort for their return (Psalm 58:4-5)
- God has proclaimed, “*Vengeance is Mine*” (Deuteronomy 32:35; Nahum 1:2)
- In other words, the time must come when evil can no longer be tolerated but must be uprooted (2 Thessalonians 1:8), and the righteous cannot but rejoice at the triumph of good over evil

# David's Confidence in God's Judgment 58:9-11



- God is true to His revealed character as a just Judge and sovereign Ruler
- It is not for them to take or assume God's role and purpose and avenge themselves, but they must rejoice when right is vindicated
- *So that men will say*, David desired the world to see there was a moral order under God where righteousness is rewarded and wickedness is judged
- The justice of Divine Providence shall be so evident and convincing by any man and every man



# David's Confidence in God's Judgment 58:9-11



- God's righteous judgment being seen in the punishment of the wicked, men will no longer doubt of the ultimate reward of the godly
- David declares there is a reward for the righteous and punishment for wicked
- St. Paul said, *“And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality.”* (Colossians 3:23-25)
- There is a God who judges on earth and the rulers of the nations will not get away with wickedness

# David's Confidence in God's Judgment 58:9-11



- The rulers who choose to ignore the will of God and ignore justice for the people, God will judge
- St. Augustine says, “Behold, before that there comes that which is promised, before that there is given life everlasting, before that ungodly men are cast forth into fire everlasting, here in this life there is fruit to the just man. What fruit? ‘In hope rejoicing, in tribulation enduring.’ What fruit to the just man? ‘we glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” (Romans 5:3-5)



# Discussion

- What accusations did David make against the wicked?
- To which of God's roles did the psalmist appeal?
- How does this Psalm describe the consistency of the sins of the wicked?
- Why did the Psalmist compare the wicked to a deaf cobra?





# Discussion

- What imagery is used to emphasize the certainty of God's judgment?
- What do people mean when they say, "There's no justice in this world"?
- How did the Psalmist use his knowledge of God?
- What does this Psalm teach us about God?



# Discussion

- What's wrong with taking vengeance?
- Why should we turn to God for justice?
- What should motivate us to seek righteousness?