

Psalm 52

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[0 : 00] Well, let me invite you to turn with me to Psalm 52. That's page 474 in the Black Pew Bible, if you want to follow along there.

I believe we'll also have it on the screens above, if you want to follow along on the screens. Psalm 52 is the text on which our teaching will be based tonight.

Let me read this psalm for us. To the choir master, a mascal of David, when Doeg the Edomite came and told Saul, David has come to the house of Ahimelech.

Why do you boast of evil, O mighty man? The steadfast love of God endures all the day. Your tongue plots destruction like a sharp razor, you worker of deceit.

You love evil more than good and lying more than speaking what is right. You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue. But God will break you down forever.

[1 : 03] He will snatch and tear you from your tent. He will brute you from the land of the living. The righteous shall see and fear and shall laugh at him, saying, 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.

But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever. I will thank you forever because you have done it.

I will wait for your name, for it is good in the presence of the godly. Well, one of the brute realities of life in a fallen world is that the wicked often prosper at the expense of the righteous and the innocent.

You know, we often teach our kids the saying that cheaters never prosper, but sadly that isn't always true. Sometimes, sometimes they do. Sometimes it seems the wicked do prosper.

Sometimes, indeed, oftentimes the righteous are the ones who suffer. And that is the background of our psalm tonight, of Psalm 52.

[2 : 17] Admittedly, it's a pretty harsh psalm when you first read it, but it's written for a very harsh reality. The heading of the psalm, the superscription, tells us that David wrote this psalm after an episode involving a guy named Doeg the Edomite.

My guess is, as many of you don't remember, Doeg the Edomite from your reading of the Old Testament. You can find the story in 1 Samuel 21 through 22. It basically goes like this.

David is on the run from Saul, and he goes to the city of Nob, to Ahimelech the priest, to get some help. And David doesn't tell Ahimelech that Saul is after him. He just says, I'm on an urgent mission.

And Ahimelech helps David out. He gives him some food and a sword and sends him on his way. But it turns out that one of Saul's servants, named Doeg, happens to be there and sees David with the priest.

Soon after that, Saul is trying to get some information on David's whereabouts as he's seeking to track him down. And no one's saying anything, but finally Doeg steps up and informs Saul, well, hey, I saw David with Ahimelech, the priest.

[3 : 23] So Saul rounds up all the priests and accuses them of conspiring with David, of plotting against him. And the priests, of course, have no idea what he's talking about.

They deny the charges. They don't know what's going on. But Saul orders them all to be killed anyway. Now, Saul's servants don't dare to lay a hand on the priests of the Lord.

So Saul turns to Doeg and tells him to do it. And he does. Doeg ends up killing off about 80 of the priests.

And then afterwards, he actually goes to their city. He goes to Nob and cuts down the rest of the village with a sword. It happens that one of Ahimelech's sons named Abiathar escapes and he flees to David in the wilderness.

And presumably at that point, David learns from Abiathar the awful report of what has happened. And he writes this psalm, Psalm 52. It's a pretty grisly, gruesome story, isn't it?

[4 : 31] It's a pretty gruesome example of how the wicked, in this case Doeg, often prosper at the expense of the godly. This guy Doeg murders a whole village of priests in order to what?

In order to ingratiate himself with Saul, most likely in the hopes of gaining some kind of financial reward, perhaps possibly hoping to gain some kind of higher ranking office among Saul's other henchmen.

Now, maybe you haven't encountered something that awful in your own experience. But at the same time, how do you deal with the similar fact that the wicked often seem to win?

That sometimes evildoers succeed in bringing great harm and ruin upon seemingly righteous and innocent people. And how do we deal in those moments with the particular temptations that start cropping up in our hearts when we see such a reality, when we see the wicked having the upper hand?

There are at least three particular, I think, temptations that come on to us in those moments. I'm sure there are more, but I'll just mention these. One temptation, isn't it?

[5 : 47] Isn't one temptation when we see the wicked prosper, isn't one temptation the desire to get revenge, to make them pay for what they've done, especially when the harm has been against us?

Doesn't that sort of desire and passion come flooding in your heart to be driven by bitterness and hatred against your perpetrator?

And of course, you know that you never just want to make them pay. You want to make them pay more, even more than what they've done to you, right? And of course, we know, we know that this drivenness for revenge will only consume us, and we know that getting revenge won't actually heal our wounds, and it won't take away the bitterness and anger, and we know it's foolishness.

But still, at the same time, when we see the wicked prosper, the temptation to take revenge comes flooding in. And the question is, what are we going to do? How are we going to face that? But if there's a temptation to revenge, there's also, don't we also face a temptation towards what I'll call resignation?

In other words, when we see how the wicked prosper sometimes, don't we start to resign ourselves to thinking that, well, hey, that's just how the world works. If you can't beat them, join them.

[7 : 02] And we resign ourselves to the fact that treachery and deceit and conniving and scheming, well, that's just how you play the game. And even though we know that if we go sliding down that slope, it will make us more and more the kind of people we don't want to come, when we see the wicked prosper, that temptation is still there to resign ourselves to the world's values.

How do we face it? But third, another temptation, perhaps one that's sort of riding underneath all of these, when the wicked prosper, don't we face the temptation just simply of despair?

We lose hope that things could get better, especially if we've been a victim of violence and wrongdoing. We start to see ourselves and our world as helpless and hopeless. We stop trusting God.

We start losing our confidence in his goodness and love. Our hearts start to shut down. We start caving into self-pity and self-loathing. And of course, we know, we know that this self-pity and this despair will just eat us from the inside out, won't it?

But when we see, when we see the wicked prospering, isn't that temptation there to give in to despair? And the question is, how? How do we face it?

[8 : 20] How do we face it? Psalm 52 meets us in this gritty and real place. When the wicked seem to be winning, when the dough eggs of the world are gloating over their exploits, when thoughts of revenge and resignation and despair start creeping into our hearts, that's where Psalm 52 meets us.

You know, reading it, it's not a pretty psalm. It's not a psalm with a white picket fence and a lemonade stand out front saying, hey, come relax in the shade. It's as gritty and real as the situation out of which it was written.

But you know, it's exactly the kind of psalm that we need. And the message of this psalm is exactly the message that we need in our fallen world, where sometimes the wicked do indeed prosper.

So tonight I want to look at each of the three parts of this psalm. The psalm has three parts. And each of the three parts tells us something critical to remember when we're confronted with this kind of situation, when the wicked seem to be winning, when evil seems to have the upper hand.

So first, the first part tells us to consider and to remember the absurdity of evil. This is verses one through four.

[9 : 40] In the opening part of the psalm, we have David's simple denunciation of the evildoer. He's basically saying, you fashion yourself a mighty man. But in reality, at the end of the day, you're nothing but a lying tongue.

In other words, in these verses, David is calling a spade a spade. He's publicly exposing evil and wrong for what it is. And David goes on to say that despite all your lying and scheming, none of it can thwart God's steadfast love.

Look at what he says in the second half of verse one. And God's steadfast love endures all the day. And because of that, because God's steadfast love endures all the day, that is why boasting in evil is utterly absurd.

That's David's opening question. Why do you boast of evil, O mighty man? Do you think you've actually gained something by what you've done or won something or achieved something, David's saying?

No. To boast of evil in light of God's steadfast love is like boasting about your little sandcastle while a tidal wave is headed towards the beach. That sandcastle is going to mean and amount to nothing when the water hits the shore.

[11 : 02] But you know, it's even more poignant and worse than that. You see, God's steadfast love, what is it? God's steadfast love is his unbreakable, passionate, unrelenting commitment to his people and to his glory.

It's his love that burns with the intensity of a thousand suns. And when you consider that, you think about the fact that participating in evil is putting yourself in complete opposition to that, the burning passion of God.

Friends, and to put yourself in opposition to that is complete foolishness. Is it not? And what David's saying here is that his enemies are boasting in evil.

Not only are they putting themselves in opposition to God's world-righting steadfast love, they're boasting about it. David's saying, you might as well boast about kicking a bear cub while mama bear is standing right over your shoulder.

It is foolishness and insanity. But you know, think about it. Every time we see the wicked prosper and we're tempted to think, well, you know, maybe that's just the way the world works.

[12 : 20] Maybe we should resign ourselves to the fact that you just have to play the game and play by the world's rules if you're really going to get anything done. Maybe we should just start lying and cheating and stealing. When that thought of resignation comes into our hearts, we need to remember that it's only God's steadfast love that endures all the day.

Yes, when the wicked prosper for a season, it might sure seem like that's how the world works. But friends, listen to this psalm. It is not. It is like building a sandcastle in the face of a tidal wave. It is absurdity. So we protect our hearts from the resignation that crops up by remembering the absurdity of boasting and evil.

But in the next part of this psalm, we go a step further. When the wicked seem to be winning, it's not just the absurdity of evil we have to consider, but it's also the certainty of God's judgment.

We find this in verses 5 through 7. Now, of course, the Bible's insistence that God is a God not just of love but also of holiness and justice and judgment can often feel like something that's a bit embarrassing when we come to the Bible.

[13 : 38] We're much more comfortable culturally with a God of love, aren't we, than a God of justice and a God of wrath. But you see that in the context of this psalm, it's precisely because God is a loving God and intensely so that God judges.

Verses 1 through 4 emphasize God's steadfast love. And those flow, those verses flow right into 5 through 7. What we see here is that God's judgment is not opposed to God's love, but it's grounded in it.

And it flows out from it. It's because God's steadfast love endures that we can be certain that evil will be called into account and will not have the last word.

God indeed judges, and that doesn't mean God is less loving than people want or expect, but in fact that he's more loving. Think of it this way.

Think of a parent who had a son or a daughter who was severely wronged or victimized. And imagine that the parent simply ignored it, just turned away, didn't make any efforts to appropriately

vindicate the child, didn't do anything in the proper manner to right the wrongs.

[14:47] And you would ask that parent, why aren't you doing anything? Why aren't you standing up for your child? Why aren't you coming to her aid? Why aren't you working to put things right? And imagine if a parent said, well, you see, I'm a parent of love, not a parent of judgment.

You're asking me to be a primitive, judgmental, retrograde parent of justice. Well, we all know we can't believe in parents like that anymore. This is the 21st century, right? And of course, you would think that this person is totally confused.

As a parent, you pursue justice precisely because you love, not in spite of it. And friends, it is the same with God. His justice flows from his steadfast love.

Now, some of the descriptions of God's judgment here do seem shocking at first. The image in verse 6 of the righteous not just seeing and fearing, but even laughing at those who are being judged is particularly striking.

Is it not? At first, it sounds almost unnecessarily vindictive or spiteful. But that's not what's intended. This verse, this image is meant to communicate the utter humiliation of the wicked more than any particular attitude the righteous might have toward them.

[16:09] In other words, though the wicked mocked and scorned others in this life, though they exalted themselves above their victims, they will not ultimately have the last laugh.

God will make sure even that is put to rights. It's a sobering and a solemn picture.

And it's one that ought to make us all pause as we think about our own hearts and our own lives.

You know, the certainty of God's judgment does more than just assure God's people of his steadfast love for them.

It does more than just warn us. Of the need for repentance and faith in Christ. We said earlier that one of the temptations we face when we see the wicked prosper is the temptation to take revenge, to take vengeance in our own hands.

To take matters into our own hands and to make the evildoers pay. And some people think that if you believe in a God who judges evil, that that belief will actually provoke you to go after revenge all the more.

[17:15] But actually, you know, the opposite is actually true. You know, if you don't believe in God, and if you don't believe that God will ultimately and finally make things right in the end, then will you have anything truly strong enough to stop your heart from seeking its own revenge?

You know, in the minor wrongs of everyday life, sure. But what about in the face of intense evil and intense personal wrong? Without a deep-seated belief that God will judge, nothing will stop your heart from usurping the words of verse 5 and saying, not God will do this, but I will break you down forever.

But friends, on the other hand, if you know and if you believe that God judges justly and perfectly and righteously on account of his steadfast love, if you know and if you believe that God is a loving judge in heaven who will make things right, then you will have the power to relinquish your own desire for revenge.

That's why Paul can say in Romans 12, 19, Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God. For it is written, Vengeance is mine, and I will repay, says the Lord.

And then Paul goes on to talk about how our role is to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. So these verses free us from revenge because we know that God is the one who will judge justly.

[19:06] But you know, as we look more closely at these verses, they also free us from pride and from a spirit of revenge because we know our own hearts. The analysis of verse 7 is perhaps the most surprising verse in the whole psalm.

The ultimate reason why God's judgment falls isn't because the man had done all sorts of lying and plotting and destroying. The ultimate reason is because he had rejected God as his refuge, we're told.

Because he had rejected God as his refuge and placed his heart's trust in a false God and worldly wealth. And that idolatrous trust, that replacing of God was the wellspring of his actions and thus the real reason for his end.

And friends, when I look at my own heart, and I trust that when you look at your own heart, you know that you too are prone to seek refuge in things other than God.

Are we not? And but for God's grace in showing us our sin and showing us how Christ paid the penalty for our sin on the cross.

[20 : 25] But for God working in us, the heart change of conversion where we come to admit our sin and acknowledge that we too often love evil more than good. And then as a result, deserve God's just judgment.

But for God coming to us in his grace and allowing us to take our trust off of ourselves and place our trust in Christ alone for our righteousness and life and salvation, not because we deserve it or because we're better, but because we know that we are utterly lost without him.

Friends, but for all that, we know that we'd still be under God's just sentence. Friends, we know our own hearts and that keeps us from revenge.

It's helpful to remember that the same David who wrote Psalm 52, this psalm we're looking at tonight, would later in his life write Psalm 51. Last week we saw in Psalm 51 that David acknowledges his sin and calls out to God for forgiveness and brokenness and in contrition. And although Psalm 51 comes chronologically later in David's life, it's fitting that canonically, in the sequence of the Bible, Psalm 51 comes before Psalm 52.

[21 : 38] Because Psalm 51 gives us the humility to remember that we are by nature sinners in needs of God's grace through the cross of Christ.

And so that when we come to Psalm 52, our hearts are appropriately humble. So friends, remembering the certainty of God's judgment will keep us and keep our hearts from seeking revenge.

But finally, David puts before us not just the absurdity of evil or the certainty of judgment, but also finally, the security of God's steadfast love. This is verses 8 and 9.

We're told that those who put their trust in anything other than God will be uprooted in verse 5, but those who trust in the steadfast love of God will be like a green olive tree planted in the house of God.

The image of the olive tree is an image of undiminished life in God's presence, in God's care, in God's provision. You know, on the one hand, olive trees are some of the longest living trees.

[22 : 41] They can live for hundreds and hundreds of years. So David is saying that because of who God is, because of his steadfast love, David knows he will dwell secure with God forever.

But David also points out that it's a green olive tree, which is meant to be a picture of vitality and fruitfulness. You see, our life before God isn't just forever, but it's increasingly vibrant and alive. So when the wicked prosper, what will give us the confidence to continue thanking God and waiting on God, as verse 9 describes? To have that composed, God-centered disposition that that verse describes?

What will keep us from despair and from doubt? What will keep us from bitterness and from fear? Friends, it's the promise that we are utterly secure in him. It's the assurance that nothing that the wicked can do can ultimately harm us.

We are planted in God's presence both now and for all eternity, rooted and grounded in love, as the New Testament puts it. You know, when you consider David's circumstances when he wrote this psalm, and perhaps when you imagine Abiathar, the young man who lost his whole family, you imagine them singing this psalm together with David.

[24 : 08] It's simply stunning, isn't it? There they were, hiding in the wilderness, on the run from Saul, their lives in danger. Worthless enemies like Doeg seeming to win at every turn, and yet, in the face of all that, David can sing, I'm like a green olive tree in the house of God.

Even when circumstances were at rock bottom, David and his companions could still see themselves as secure in light of God's steadfast love. The wicked had not stolen their most prized possession.

The wicked had not touched their source of joy and identity, God's steadfast love. And friends, if that was true for David, how much more is it true for us today?

Especially now that we see and know God's steadfast love in all of its fullness. You see, David saw God's steadfast love, but he saw it as it were from afar.

But friends, you and I now see him face to face, the one who bled for us so that we might live in him. And now, as Paul writes in Romans, who shall separate us from the love of God?

[25 : 34] Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it's written, for your sake we're being killed all day long. We're regarded as sheep to be

slaughtered. No. In all these things, we're more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Friends, do you know this love? Do you know this steadfast love that endures all the day? Do you know this love that can free you from bitterness and despair and revenge and resignation?

The love that can make you like a green olive tree in the presence of God? Do you know this love? This love that was broken for you and torn for you and uprooted and laughed at and scorned for you but was raised to life and ascended to heaven for you?

Do you know his love? Friends, at the end of the day, we will only be able to live in a world where the wicked prosper at the expense of the righteous when we come to know and to trust Jesus Christ, the righteous one who suffered for the sake of the wicked.

[27 : 10] The steadfast love of God endures all the day. Do you know his love? Let's pray. Father, we do thank you for this psalm.

Lord, it is gritty and it is real and it speaks of realities that many of us care not to think about but God, thank you that you give us these words to show us the absurdity of evil and the certainty of your steadfast judgment and love and God, thank you for the overwhelming promise that those who place their trust in you are secure forevermore because we have a faithful Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ.

God, I pray for my friends who have gathered here tonight, Lord, that we would come to see and to know your steadfast love in deeper and truer ways, Lord, and when we find ourselves tempted to resignation or revenge or even despair, God, that you would come by your spirit and you would remind us, Lord, that your love endures all the day.

God, and as we think about the fact that you will judge and you are holy and you are perfect, God, we confess that we look into our own hearts and we tremble to see what we find there.

God, we don't find a pure love for you. We don't find a pure love for our neighbors. God, we find selfishness. We find a heart that loves evil more than good. God, we realize that were we left to our own devices, we would surely face your judgment with terror.

[28 : 55] So, God, tonight we thank you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ, so that we might face your judgment without fear because we know that he has gone through judgment in our place and we can be clothed in his righteousness and stand before you as objects of your love.

God, I pray if there's any here tonight who has not come to turn from sin and place their trust in your Son, God, that tonight, that today would be the day of salvation, that they would hear you knocking on their hearts and they would turn and open to you.

And Lord Jesus, as we come to the Lord's Supper, I pray that you would meet us in this time as we remember your sacrifice for us.

God, assure us of your steadfast love through these means as we continue to worship you therein.

We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.