

Psalm 52: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Psalm 52. 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. He will snatch and tear you from your tent. He will uproot 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. Psalm 52 is one of the psalms whose historical occasion is given to us in its superscription. It comes from one of the more tragic episodes in

David's flight from King Saul. In 1 Samuel chapter 21, Paul visited the priests at Nob, and was given Goliath's sword and bread for himself and his men by the priest. David had not informed the priest that he was on the run from King Saul. They thought that he was on some mission on behalf of the king.

We are informed that Doeg the Edomite, the chief of Saul's herdsman, was present at the time, and observed the interactions between David and Ahimelech the priest. In the following chapter, Doeg informed King Saul that he had seen David at Nob, and that the priests had assisted him.

There is a grim outcome of all of this recorded for us in 1 Samuel chapter 22, verses 18 to 22. Then the king said to Doeg, You turn and strike the priests. And Doeg the Edomite turned and struck down the priests, and he killed on that day 85 persons who wore the linen ephod. And Nob, the city of the priests, he put to the sword, both man and woman, child and infant, ox, donkey and sheep, he put to the sword. But one of the sons of Ahimelech, the son of Ahitab, named Abiathar, escaped and fled after David. And Abiathar told David that Saul had killed the priests of the Lord.

[2 : 26] And David said to Abiathar, I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul, I have occasioned the death of all the persons of your father's house. Along with this reaction of David to the news in 1 Samuel chapter 22, this psalm records David's response to the actions of Doeg. The wicked man with which this psalm is concerned is typically identified as Doeg, although some have made a case that King Saul is the figure in view. Doeg is a pawn of Saul's, not David's principal opponent. Although this psalm has a specific occasion in Doeg's treachery and violence, like many parts of scripture, it is not so tied to the episode that provoked it, that it cannot be applied to numerous other situations. Gordon Wenham translates the perceptive comments of Jean-Marie Auerz, who comments on this, The historical titles of the Psalter thus depict a David not yet established, whose tears and wandering steps are reckoned in the great divine book. This David is shaped according to the image of his poor people, and so becomes a model for Israel in his humiliation and wanderings. The historical titles thus give to the reader of the Psalms as a type and model a certain David, full of humility, trust in

Yahweh, and penitence. Paradoxically, the attribution of the Psalter to David has the effect of facilitating the appropriation of the Psalms by every pious Israelite, insofar as the son of Jesse has been presented as the model with which each one ought to seek to identify himself. As Alan Ross comments, this psalm is difficult to classify. It isn't a lament or a prayer to God, rather it is a sort of prophetic denunciation of the wicked man and his schemes. The psalm begins with a characterisation of the wicked man, especially focusing upon his tongue. The opening verse is a difficult one, as the text is unclear both in the original and in its proper translation. The second half of the verse reads, The steadfast love of God endures all the day, in the ESV. Most other major translations have something similar. However, such a statement seems out of place in the immediate context.

It might seem to fit in far better with the concluding section of the psalm, although it is possible that two contrasting ways of life are being set up here, or that the evil agency of the wicked is being contrasted with the steadfast love of God by which he acts. Beth Tanner notes that the Syriac transposes and repoints the Masoretic text to read against the godly, while the Septuagint reads violence all the day. She favours violence all the day. Derek Kidner favours against the godly as the reading, while many others remain with the reading of the Masoretic text. While its textual support may be somewhat weaker, contextually it might seem to be the more natural reading.

David might be addressing Doeg as the mighty man in a sarcastic manner. Doeg might think himself a man of valour, but he has slain defenceless priests and was just an evil and treacherous man, with no meaningful courage to praise. Doeg isn't just wicked, he boasts in his evil. He takes a perverse pride in his wickedness and cruelty. His tongue is like a sharp razor in its scheming. He takes delight in evil over all that is good. He is devoted to lying over the truth. He is duplicitous and untrustworthy, false, treacherous and destructive. Doeg's words had led to the deaths of many people, and yet he took pleasure in his power to speak in ways that occasioned others' ruin. The destructive potential of words is a common theme in biblical wisdom literature. The epistle of James famously characterises the tongue as follows in chapter 3 verse 5. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! The boasting tongue has a tremendously destructive force, and while for many this force is seen more in their simpleness or their folly, for a man like Doeg it is a vicious power that he takes pleasure in. However, the doom of the wicked is certain. David declares to Doeg that the Lord will break him down and cut him off from the land. He will be like a removed tent or a tree uprooted from the ground.

His place in the land of the living will be no more. Then the righteous will respond by fearing the Lord in his just and mighty judgments, mocking the wicked man who thought that he could escape the hand of God.

[6 : 51] The wicked man was a fool for not trusting in God and making him his refuge. Rather he trusted in his own corruptible riches and took security in his capacity to destroy other people. David develops the arboreal imagery that he has just employed of the wicked man. While the wicked man will be uprooted from the land of the living, David is like an olive tree in the house of God. God's steadfast love is his unalterable security, in which he is firmly rooted by faith. He concludes the psalm by turning from his addressed to the wicked man to address God. His thanks will forever be given to God because God has met his needs and provided him with the certain refuge that he requires. God's name is, as Alan Ross argues, the revealed nature of God, the divine attributes demonstrated in divine works. God hallows his name, for instance, as he redeems his people and judges justly. David waits patiently yet confidently for this revelation to occur, joining with the rest of the godly in the assembly to do so.