

# Psalm 58

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[ 0 : 00 ] Canon Andrew White of St. George's Anglican Church in Baghdad posted this week. I'm going to read what he posted. He posted many things, but I'm going to read one of his posts.

Some of you may have seen him on Newsnight. He was interviewed two or three nights ago. And he writes, You know I love to show photos, but the photo I was sent today was the most awful I have ever seen.

A family of eight, all shot through the face, lying in a pool of blood with their Bible open on the couch. They would not convert, and it cost them their life.

I thought of asking if anybody wanted to see the picture, but it is just too awful to show to anybody. This is Iraq today. The only hope and consolation is that all these dear people are now with Yeshua in glory.

One family massacred in cold blood for the heinous crime of refusing to deny Christ. The world now knows, finally, that this unseen family is but one of countless thousands.

[ 1 : 12 ] The remnant of the ancient Christian community in Iraq that before the war in 2003 numbered some one and a half million. And that today stands at around 400,000, but diminishing by the hour, be it by death or flight.

Just a couple of days ago, the largest city in the north of Iraq, Karakosh, fell to the jihadists of the Islamic State, and thousands have fled to Erbil in Kurdistan.

But now their persecutors are closing on Erbil. And it's not just Christians who are victims of this grotesque violence. We've all heard and seen the images of the thousands of Yositites dying on a mountaintop.

The latest news that I was able to find this morning is that some of them have been able to escape as a result of Kurdish fighters opening a way of escape from the mountain, from one side of the mountain.

But there remain, as I understand it, many thousands still stranded there. How do we respond to such cruelty and brutality?

[ 2 : 25 ] What are we to do in the face of excruciating evil and wanton wickedness? What can we do? We can raise our voice of solidarity and protest and advocacy.

We can give to those involved in providing relief and shelter, to those who have fled from their homes. And in the intimation sheet, if it reaches you, there are some pointers to help you do just that.

In the event that that doesn't happen, I'll seek alternative means of doing so. But what else can we do? What else can we do? What else must we do? Well, we can pray.

But what are we to pray for? If I can refer again to Canon White in Baghdad. Yesterday he posted and spoke of how the Christians there would be gathering today, as we do, and that they would be praying.

And he said, let me share with you a prayer request, that you would join us as we pray for the three Ps, for protection, for provision, and for perseverance.

[ 3 : 34 ] And that, of course, is a very good place to start, as we would pray for God's people in Iraq, for protection, for provision of their needs, and for perseverance in the face of all that they are enduring.

But what of the persecutors? We have no difficulty, at least in our minds, in getting around the idea of praying for the persecuted.

We could do no other. It makes absolute sense to do so. But what of the persecutors? Can we pray for them? Can we pray for the wicked?

Can we pray for those responsible for these atrocities? Of course, the answer is that we can. We can pray for them. We can pray that they would be brought to repentance and faith, to bow the knee before King Jesus.

They will all do so on the last great day, but we can pray that they would do so now. And we can, and we must, also pray against them, that God would frustrate their purposes, that God would bring confusion and chaos into their ranks, and that God would bring judgment against them.

[ 4 : 56 ] The psalmist repeatedly prays in this manner against the wicked. We've read Psalm 58, which, along with many others, includes what are called imprecations.

What are imprecations? Well, the word imprecation means a call to bring down harm or a curse on someone or a group of people, in this case, the wicked.

Now, in the context of the Psalms, this imprecation invariably involves asking God to frustrate or punish or destroy the wicked.

The language that the psalmist employs, that we've read in Psalm 58 and elsewhere, offends our sensibilities. We are shocked by the harshness of the language employed.

We find it not only difficult language, we find it also repulsive language. And I use that in the literal meaning of that word. We are repulsed by what we read.

[ 6 : 03 ] We recoil at the harshness of the words and the repugnance of the images employed. But, and on this we must be very clear, these are the words of God.

This is the Word of God. All Scripture is God-breathed. God speaks through David. God reveals who He is through these words that we recoil from.

He doesn't reveal all that He is, but He reveals aspects of His character in these words. These words and sentiments not only enjoy divine sanction, they are the words of God.

And it simply won't do to dismiss them with a careless, oh, that's the Old Testament. You know what the Old Testament's like? Full of blood and gore and violence.

But, ah, the New Testament. Now that's so much better. It's all about love and mercy and forgiveness. That simply won't do. Such a simplistic and groundless contrast drawn between the Old Testament and the New doesn't stand up to any serious scrutiny.

[ 7 : 26 ] Jesus Himself, the Prince of Peace, quotes approvingly from the Psalms and in particular from the imprecatory Psalms.

He does so on a number of occasions. If we can make reference to one occasion where, if not a quote, certainly an allusion to. In Luke chapter 19, where in the context of Jesus speaking of the imminent fall of Jerusalem, a fall that was the direct result of their rejecting the Messiah, Jesus solemnly makes use of the horrific language that we find in Psalm 137.

We also have the telling words of Peter on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 1 and in verse 16 when he quotes from arguably the most shocking of the imprecatory Psalms, Psalm 109.

We're not going to read it now, but if you do, it's not pleasant reading. And Peter quotes from that Psalm. And then he goes on to say of the Psalm, and I quote, which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas.

Now, it wouldn't be necessary for Peter to have said that, for us to be persuaded that that was so, but it's surely significant that Peter chooses to explicitly make it clear that the Psalm that he is quoting from are the words spoken by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of David.

[ 9 : 01 ] Now, we could say more, but it's best to proceed to look at the Psalm, Psalm 58, and as we do, there will be opportunity to say more concerning this matter of how we, as Christians, are to pray as the psalmist prayed.

The psalm can be divided into four sections, and this provides a structure to help us consider and try to understand what God is saying to us today.

And we do so not with the intention of satisfying some morbid theological curiosity, but that we might pray as God would have us pray.

The four sections of the psalm or one way of dividing the psalm is as follows. First of all, the psalm presents to us the wicked accused, the wicked accused.

But then it goes on, and we have a section that we could entitle the wicked described. The psalm then moves on, and we have a section that we are describing as the righteous pray.

[ 10 : 04 ] And then finally, the psalm ends with the righteous rejoicing. So the wicked accused, the wicked described, the righteous pray, and the righteous rejoice.

First of all, then, the wicked accused, verses 1 and 2. Do you rulers indeed speak justly? Do you judge uprightly among men? No. In your heart you devise injustice, and your hands meet out violence on the earth.

Now we need to establish who the wicked are. They're described almost as a group, the wicked, in verse 3, the wicked, and then also in verse 9, the wicked.

Who are the wicked? Now in the case of this psalm, this wouldn't be true on every occasion when we meet those described as the wicked, but in the case of this psalm, they are identified as rulers or mighty lords.

Do you rulers indeed speak justly? In effect, they are those who exercise authority, or certainly they are the ones who David is thinking of as he writes this psalm, those who exercise authority.

[11:18] Now be that formerly constituted authority or de facto authority, is neither here nor there. They are those who exercise authority who are being described by David as the wicked.

Of course, he's not saying that all who exercise authority should be so described. And of course, it's also true that it's not only rulers who can be described or classified as wicked, but such fall under greater judgment precisely because of the God-given authority that they wield.

But what are these rulers guilty of? We have the accusation at the beginning of the psalm. Well, they're guilty of sins of omission and of commission.

They're guilty of failing to speak justly. They're guilty of failing to judge uprightly as the rhetorical questions make clear in verse 1.

But they are also and more particularly accused of actively carrying out acts of violence on the earth. And notice how the psalmist with surgical precision identifies the depraved process whereby the wicked act.

[12:37] What do they do first? Well, they first devise injustice in their heart. Verse 2. In your heart, you devise injustice.

And then having devised injustice in their heart, then their hands mete out violence. We could say of the wicked that their actions are coldly calculated.

This is something that they devise. It's not something that happens in the passion of the moment. No, they devise their wickedness. It's coldly calculated but then brutally executed.

This is what the psalmist recognizes as he accuses them. Now, this process described by the psalmist wherein the heart wickedness is devised and then with the hands it is executed, of course, this is a process that is at work in all of us in a measure.

But certainly and chillingly describes the wicked who command ISIS or the Islamic State. These men gather. Maybe even as we gather here, they're gathering.

[13:46] They're gathering to devise injustice. How will we massacre the Nazarenes? How will we purge the land of the infidels?

Which community will be cleansed first and which will follow? They gather and they devise. How are we going to do this? How will we secure our objectives?

And then having devised their evil plan, their hands or the hands of the blood-crazed followers that are at their command proceed to mete out the violence.

It's happening right now as we speak. The wicked accused. But the psalm doesn't only accuse the wicked. The psalm goes on or the psalmist goes on to describe the wicked in verses 3 to 5.

And in these verses there are three aspects of their depravity or wickedness identified and in a measure described. The first thing that we can say is that their wickedness is ingrained.

[14:52] Notice what the psalmist says there in verse 3. The psalmist assures us that even from birth the wicked go astray. From the womb they are wayward and speak lies.

What do we make of this conclusion of the psalmist? This description of the wicked? Is this just poetic hyperbole? Or is the psalmist recognizing a disturbing yet accurate reality of the human condition?

Namely, that we are fallen creatures predisposed even from birth to do that which is wrong. Does this description fit the murderous warlords roaming Syria and northern Iraq?

Well, I think it certainly does. But is this not also true of us? Any difference? And of course there is a difference. Any difference is a difference of degree not of kind.

Their wickedness is ingrained. But also we can say from what the psalmist says is that their wickedness is destructive and deadly. They are venomous. Their venom is like the venom of a snake the psalmist declares.

[16:09] And their venom twists and warps and destroys. Again, casting our gaze to the zealous jihadists that populate the ranks of ISIS.

How many of them? Including from our own country. our young men who imbibed the venom of their masters. Imagining that wielding the sword for Allah would bring direction and purpose to their lives.

But the venom that they've imbibed only kills both their victims and indeed they themselves. The wicked are venomous.

They're destructive. They're deadly. There's another thing of their wickedness that the psalmist identifies and that it is that their wickedness is unyielding.

The psalmist and this is very important for us to focus on and to have very clear the psalmist describes the wicked as deliberately refusing to listen to correction.

[17:11] They cover their ears. Their venom is like the venom of a snake like that of a cobra that has stopped its ears that will not heed the tune of the charmer however skillful the enchanter may be.

The language of course is picture language. It's poetic language but the truth that has been declared is very evident. They won't listen. They won't listen to those who would warn them that they ought not to do what they are doing.

They cover their ears. They cover their ears that they would not hear the voice of God. They cover their ears that they would not hear the voice of others offering wise counsel or urging a change of direction.

Perhaps even the psalmist is contemplating how they cover their ears to the voice of victims pleading for mercy. They will not listen.

And as a result and this is the important point to be very clear on as a result their wickedness is plainly and unequivocally culpable. They deliberately do what they do.

[18:22] They deliberately continue to do what they do. The description of the wicked serves as an accurate description of the perpetrators of violence against Christians in Syria and northern Iraq.

But of course the sobering reality is that in the words of the psalmist we discover not only a portrait of others but a mirror for ourselves. We too are predisposed to sin.

The very same psalmist in a psalm just a few pages before recognizes his own condition as one who in the words of Psalm 51 and verse 5 surely I was sinful at birth sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

That is also true of us. We too are capable of venomous thoughts and words and actions. We too so often would block out the discomfiting and accusing voice of God.

We are also culpably guilty. But that is not thank God the whole picture. As Christians we have been rescued from ourselves.

[19:33] We have been given a new heart. We have been indwelt by the love and grace of God by His Spirit. We have been given an appetite for God and for His Word.

And this is all of grace and it is all in and through Jesus Christ. And so as we look on in understandable horror at the wicked in Iraq and much closer to home we must with humble gratitude whisper there but for the grace of God go on.

The wicked accused, the wicked described, but we also have in this psalm how the righteous pray.

From verses 6 to 9 we have the righteous praying, the psalmist representing the righteous prays.

And how does he pray? Well let's be very clear that what the psalmist is doing in these verses is not, let's begin with what he's not doing, he's not directing his curses at the wicked.

The direction of his words is not towards the wicked, that's not what he's doing. Rather what he is doing is praying to God. And what does the psalmist pray against the wicked or what curses does he call down from God upon the wicked?

[20:55] Well we can go through the verses before us beginning at verse 6. And first of all we can say that the psalmist prays that the wicked would be prevented from doing evil. In verse 6 we read, break the teeth in their mouths O God, tear out O Lord the fangs of the lions.

It's very gory language. But of course it is metaphorical language, it's picture language. The wicked are being portrayed as serpents or lions, clearly they're not literally either of these creatures, and the prayer is that they would be deprived of their weaponry, their teeth or their fangs.

And we too can and must likewise praise that the wicked would be deprived of the means to carry out the wickedness that they have devised.

But then we can go on and notice that the psalmist prays that God would frustrate their plans. He would frustrate their plans. And how that would be achieved, well, the psalmist suggests possibilities, but ultimately he leaves it in the hands of God.

Their plans could be frustrated by their own death, let them vanish like water that flows away, but their plans could also be frustrated by any other means that God chooses to employ.

[ 22 : 15 ] When they draw the bow, let their arrows be blunted. And so they would be frustrated in killing as they plan because in this case the suggestion is that their arrows be blunted.

So he prays that they would be prevented from doing evil. He prays that God would frustrate their plans, but the psalmist also prays for the ultimate and complete removal or destruction of the wicked.

Verse 8 speaks of that which disappears without a trace, like a slug melting away as it moves along, like a stillborn child may they not see the sun.

And then in verse 9, the language more is language that points to ultimate and definitive destruction before your pots can feel the heat of the thorns, whether they be green or dry.

And then especially how the verse finishes, the wicked will be swept away, swept away, removed altogether from the scene and from the capacity to do that which they are doing.

[ 23 : 26 ] And we too can and must likewise pray. But let's for a moment grapple with the question why. Why does the psalmist so pray?

We see what he's asking for. We can describe what it is that he asks of God, but why does he pray in this manner? And I think we can identify two reasons that the psalmist so prays.

First of all, perhaps the most obvious one to our minds is his concern for the plight of the innocent victims. He sees those who are suffering at the hands of the wicked.

He is concerned for them. And so he prays to God that by the actions of God the innocent would be protected. And altogether worthy reason for praying in this manner, that the innocent would be protected.

But that's not the only reason, and I don't think that's the fundamental reason that he prays in this manner. The fundamental reason is his covenant loyalty to God, which finds expression in two related or connected ways.

[ 24 : 31 ] First of all, he recognizes that God's enemies are his enemies. This is a central element of the covenant, that our enemies are God's enemies, that God's enemies are our enemies.

And the psalmist recognizes that his cry is not for vengeance against his own personal enemies. No, they are the cries of one who has recognized who are the enemies of God.

And his loyalty to God is what moves him to pray that God would act against his enemies. But he also recognizes as an expression of his covenant loyalty that God's purposes are his purposes.

And we know, even in the language, also the very difficult language of revelation, we know that God's ultimate purpose is to deliver his world from the wicked and their wickedness.

And so the psalmist, in praying as he does, is simply praying that God's will be done. The manner and the timescale is left in God's hand.

[ 25 : 39 ] And we similarly pray. We similarly pray when we pray the Lord's prayer. How often as we pray the Lord's prayer, we pray, thy kingdom come. Thy kingdom come. Do we ever consider?

Do we ever imagine? Do we ever realize that when we pray thy kingdom come, that coming necessarily involves a clash of kingdoms and the destruction of the kingdom of Satan?

And so when we pray thy kingdom come, we're praying really in a very similar manner to the manner in which the psalmist prays here in this psalm, even if the language is much more agreeable to us.

Before moving on, I think there's something else we also need to say. And we need to say clearly what the psalm leaves unsaid. The calls, the prayer for God's judgment upon the wicked, are subject to the opportunity for repentance.

That's true not only here, but it is invariably true. Indeed, when God himself announces judgment, the announcement of judgment is invariably conditional. This judgment will take place in the event that those upon whom it will take place do not repent.

[ 27 : 02 ] And while it is true as we read the psalm, especially the words that we've noticed briefly in verses 4 and 5 that suggest that the wicked have obstinately gone beyond a point of no return, or certainly that's the impression that we draw, they refuse to listen.

And that notwithstanding, it remained the case that were they to repent, to repent of their sin and seek forgiveness, God would grant them the forgiveness sought.

And the experience of grace would disarm the curses called down upon them. I think of the words, the very beautiful words of Proverbs chapter 2 and verse 6, like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow, an undeserved curse does not come to rest.

And in the case of the wicked who repent, that curse becomes undeserved. And why? Because the curse has already rested on another.

that curse has rested on the Messiah. And so, we can and we must pray that the wicked will repent, but as we do so, we must also recognize that in the absence of repentance, then the judgment of God will come upon them.

[ 28 : 33 ] We pray simultaneously, difficult though that may be for us to do, both for their repentance and their destruction. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who died a martyr's death at the hands of the Nazis, preached a sermon on Psalm 58, and he touches on this matter.

He said the following, whoever comes to him, that is to the Messiah, whoever comes to him, whoever cleaves to him, will never more be touched by the wrath and vengeance of God.

That person is in the protection of the righteousness of Christ, whoever he may be. Whoever will not come, whoever will not cast himself down before the cross of Christ, whoever despises the cross, will suffer God's wrathful judgment, the vengeance of God, as it came upon Christ, but not unto life, rather unto eternal death.

And so, the righteous pray. We pray for the persecuted, but we pray also for the persecutors. We pray for repentance, but we also pray for justice and God's just judgment to fall upon the wicked. But then the psalm ends with the righteous rejoicing, verses 10 and 11. And the righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.

[ 29 : 57 ] Then men will say, surely the righteous still are rewarded. Surely there is a God who judges the earth. In some regards, this is the most difficult aspect of the psalm.

Even if we can get our heads round the place and need for just judgment, the picture painted of the righteous rejoicing when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked is, again, I repeat, it is a repulsive image that is being painted, certainly to our mind, certainly to my mind.

We can try and understand what has been said concerning the righteous being glad, rejoicing by posing and answering two questions very briefly. When and why? When do they rejoice and why do they rejoice?

When will the righteous rejoice? I think the then of verse 11 is very significant. Then men will say, and it's describing events that are also described in verse 10.

Then men will say, surely the righteous still are rewarded. Surely there is a God who judges the earth. Then men will say, men, all men, they will clearly see on that occasion, at that time that has been described, they will clearly see that there is a God who judges the earth.

[ 31 : 15 ] Now that is not what men see today. When will that be? Well, ultimately it will be when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. Now that's not to say that there's no place for being glad in the measure that God chooses to exercise judgment against the wicked in the here and now.

But ultimately, the righteous rejoicing described in this psalm is reserved for a time when such rejoicing will also be sinless, something that would not be possible for sinners such as we are today.

When will the righteous rejoice? But then, why do the righteous rejoice? Well, the bottom line is that they rejoice in the justice of God, justice that finds parallel expression in the rewarding of the righteous in Christ and the just retribution meted out upon the wicked who reject Christ.

We rejoice in God. And in that rejoicing in God, we don't have the luxury of being selective. We can't rejoice in His grace and grumble at His justice.

That's unworthy of us. We rejoice in God, in who He is, and in all that He is. On that great and solemn day when the righteous rejoice, will you be among them?

[ 32 : 38 ] Will you be among those who rejoice in God? Are you today among the righteous? Not your own righteousness, but the righteousness of Christ that is given to all who put their trust in Him.

Are you among the righteous? Or are you among the wicked who close their ears and will not listen to God? In the face of the terrifying violence and wickedness that is being visited upon the innocent

in Iraq, what can we do?

What must we do? We must pray. We pray for protection and provision and perseverance, as we've been asked to do. We pray for the persecuted.

But we must also pray for and against the persecutors. We pray that they might repent, but we pray also that in the absence of repentance, that they might be disarmed, frustrated, and destroyed.

We pray with the psalmist that God would act in just retribution upon all who oppose Him and all who persecute His people.

[ 33 : 46 ] Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we come to You again, and we pray that You would help us to know You better, help us to rejoice in You, in all that You are.

and we continue to recognize our limitations in understanding Your Word and in understanding Your purposes. We're conscious that even in the matters that we've considered this morning, our understanding is limited, and there are aspects that we do not, and perhaps in some regard, cannot understand.

But we pray that You would grant us a measure of understanding, that You would help us and enable us to pray as we ought. With the disciples of old, we come and we say, teach us to pray, and that we would pray according to Your will, that we would pray in the manner that You direct us, and that our prayers would indeed involve and cover all that You would have us pray.

Guide us in this, and help us, and instruct us. And all of this we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to sing now the psalm that we've been giving some thought to this morning, Psalm 58.

You'll find that on page 75 in Sing Psalms. Psalm 58, we'll sing, the whole of the psalm, we'll sing to the tune, Ellers.

[ 35 : 10 ] You rulers, do you know what justice is? Among mankind, do you judge uprightly? No. You devise injustice in your hearts, and on the earth, you mete out cruelty.

Psalm 58, we'll sing, the whole of the psalm, we'll stand to sing. Amen. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

[ 38 : 24 ] Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen.