

PSALM FIFTY-EIGHT

PSALM 58

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

A Significant Warning to Corrupt Judges.

ANALYSIS

Stanza I., vers. 1-5, Corrupt Judges Apostrophised, Described in their Evil Doings and Training, in the Harm they Do and the Hopelessness of Trying to Reform them. Stanza II., vers. 6-9, 11, the Judgment which has Overtaken them, by the Advent of a Righteous King. (A Maccabean cry for vengeance, ver. 10.)

(Lm.)—By David—A Tablet.

- 1 Do ye indeed ye mighty ones¹ speak righteously?
with equity do ye judge the sons of men?
- 2 Nay! ye all² do work perversity,
throughout the land it is violence that your hands weigh out.
- 3 Lawless men have been estranged from birth,
they have gone astray from nativity speaking falsehood:
- 4 They have poison like the poison of a serpent,
like a cobra deaf and stopping his ear;
- 5 That will not hearken to the voice of whispers,
when the wise one is casting his spells.
- 6 God hath broken³ their teeth in their mouth,
the incisors of young lions hath Jehovah knocked out.³
- 7 Let them flow away like water let them disperse of
themselves,
are they luxuriant as grass? so let them fade!⁴
- 8 Like a snail that melteth away as it goeth:
there hath fallen fire they have not viewed the sun:
- 9 Before they perceive it they have become like brambles,
while they are yet green⁵ in hot anger he sweepeth them away.⁶

1. So *Gt.*; cp. Exo. 15:11—Gn.

2. So it shd. be (w. Syr.)—Gn.

3. Tenses changed by mere change of vowel-points.

4. So w. Sep. and Br. in this and following lines.

5. *ML.*: "living."

6. *M.T.*: (prob. Maccabean addition):—

10 Let a righteous man rejoice that he hath seen an avenging,
His feet let him bathe in the blood of the lawless one.

STUDIES IN PSALMS

- 11 A son of earth then may say—Surely there is fruit for a righteous man!
Surely there are messengers divine who are judging¹ in the land!
(Lm.) To the Chief Musician. (CMm.) Do not destroy.

PARAPHRASE

PSALM 58

Justice? You high and mighty politicians don't even know the meaning of the word! Fairness? Which of you has any left? Not one! All your dealings are crooked: you give "justice" in exchange for bribes.²

3 These men are born sinners, lying from their earliest words!

4, 5 They are poisonous as deadly snakes, cobras that close their ears to the most expert of charmers.

6 O God, break off their fangs. Tear out the teeth of these young lions, Lord.

7 Let them disappear like water into thirsty ground. Make their weapons useless in their hands.³

8 Let them be as snails that dissolve into slime; and as those who die at birth, who never see the sun.

9 God will sweep away both old and young. He will destroy them more quickly than a cooking pot can feel the blazing fire of thorns beneath it.

10 The godly shall rejoice in the triumph of right;⁴ they shall walk the blood-stained fields of slaughtered, wicked men.

11 Then at last everyone will know that good is rewarded, and that there is a God who judges justly here on earth.

EXPOSITION

So little excuse is there for discrediting the superscription of this psalm by *David*, that we no sooner accept for it the proffered historical setting, than we become conscious of a powerful appeal to our sense of the fitness of things. There is nothing inherently improbable in the supposition, that, when David began to reign,

1. Plural in Heb., warranting reference to 82:1, 97:7, also Exo. 21:6, 22:8, 9, 28.

2. Literally, "you deal out the violence of your hands in the land."

3. Or, "Let them be trodden down and wither like grass."

4. Literally, "when he sees the vengeance."

PSALM FIFTY-EIGHT

he found occupying the position of judges throughout the land, men utterly unfit for it: wealthy, overbearing, careless; accustomed to falsehood from their youth up. Carry forward the state of things known to have existed from the time of "the judges"; recall how little the sons of Eli and of Samuel did to inculcate a high standard of national righteousness; notice how conspicuous by their absence are any efforts by King Saul to elevate the practical godliness of the nation; then remember how, as we have lately seen (Ps. 55), a comparatively short period of royal remissness, somewhere after this time, brought forth an enormous crop of noxious weeds in Jerusalem itself—and the conclusion will no longer seem far-fetched, if we assume that, when David came to the throne, he discovered judicial conditions so corrupt as to cause to flame out his known passion for righteousness. We know, from Ps. 101, the purity he deemed essential to his court; and, from Ps. 82, the estimate formed by his Chief Singer Asaph of the enormous wrongs easily inflicted on the helpless by a lax administration of justice. Hence we need feel no surprise to find him, in this psalm, equal to the occasion of giving corrupt judges notice, in solemn psalmody, of the drastic treatment which their perversion of righteousness might expect at his hands: no surprise to discover what a mighty instrument he was thus employing to create a purified and elevated public sentiment, likely to aid him in subsequent detailed endeavours to make Israel a law-abiding and holy people.

From this point of view, survey this psalm; and how fitting an instrument it appears for the forwarding of these noble ends. It grips these high-placed evil-doers with a will; sets their wrong-doing plainly before their faces; shows them that their characters have been thoroughly reckoned up; warns them that little is expected of them by way of reform—even the *spell* of a psalm is unlikely to save them from the consequences of their inborn and long-practised depravity. Such is the purport, under poetic guise, of the first Stanza of this psalm. The warning is veiled; but men must be stupid as well as stubborn if they cannot see through it.

The King, however (Stanza II.), has them in his power; and he knows it. They may yet be as fierce as lions; but in setting over them his righteous servant David, *God has* already, in effect, *broken their teeth in their mouth*; yea, let the young magnates, who are prepared to exceed their fathers in high-handed injustice, know, that *Jehovah hath* already *knocked out*

STUDIES IN PSALMS

their *terrible incisors!* The best thing they can do, is to disappear *like water* that drieth up; *like grass* for which the sun is too hot, whose luxuriating hours are done; *like snails* crawling away and wasting as they go. Otherwise, if they will not be admonished, let them beware lest they be suddenly made like unto *thorns*; yea, even though they be like *green brambles*, lest the *fierce fire* and *strong wind* of Divine wrath scorch and scatter them as in a storm of retribution!

Is it terrible? Yea, but it is just? Is it unmerciful? Nay, for they are thus publicly warned. The tempest will clear the air, and bring about health and peace. Justice is the foundation of grace. The common *man* has to be cared for. Well-doers must be encouraged—must have given back to them the conviction, that *there is fruit for a righteous man*: that, as there are visible *representatives of God judging in the land*, so there is an invisible God judging on the earth and in heaven.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. If we relate this psalm to David who are the judges here described? . . .
2. Does verse three teach “hereditary total depravity”? If not what does it teach?
3. W. Graham Scroggie divides this psalm into three parts: (1) The sin, vs. 1-5; (2) The sentence, vs. 6-9; (3) The satisfaction (of the righteous at the overthrow of the wicked) vs. 10, 11. List and discuss the various characteristics and cause for the sin of injustice as set forth in verses one through five.
4. The sentence of David against such corrupt leaders is indeed “terrible”; is it “just”—even “merciful”? Discuss.
5. We must not, we cannot, we will not read vindictiveness into the justice of God—why not? What then shall we say? Discuss—especially as related to verses ten and eleven.

PSALM 59

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

The Beleaguered Psalmist Prays for Rescue and Avenging.