

Last time we looked at Psalm 50 – which is unusual for the Psalms,
in that it is spoken by God to the people
(whereas most Psalms are in the voice of the people to God,
or in the voice of the king/people to each other).

Since I’ve already preached on Psalm 51,
I’ll only mention here that Psalm 51 opens a segment of Davidic Psalms
that run from Psalms 51-71 (including a couple of anonymous psalms),
most of which are associated with various episodes in David’s life.
They are not in chronological order –
but they generally deal with various aspects
of what it means for David to be the LORD’s anointed –
both in suffering and in glory –
both in his sin (Psalm 51) and in his triumph (Psalm 65).

Tonight we turn to Psalm 52 – which is *very unusual* among the Psalms
in being addressed neither to God nor to the people,
but to a wicked man!

There are plenty of Psalms that sing about the wicked to God (or to each other),
but few are addressed to the wicked.
In Psalm 82, God addresses the wicked for a significant portion of the Psalm,
but Psalm 52 is a song sung primarily to the wicked!

Introduction: “When Doeg, the Edomite, Came and Told Saul...” (1 Samuel 21-22)

The title of Psalm 52 provides some historical background.

To the choirmaster.

*A Maskil^[a] of David, when Doeg, the Edomite, came and told Saul,
“David has come to the house of Ahimelech.”*

This could mean that David wrote the Psalm on that occasion.

It could also mean that David wrote the Psalm later, reflecting on that occasion.

It could also mean that someone else wrote the Psalm, reflecting on David’s experience.

It could also mean that someone wrote the Psalm,

and a later editor realized that it fit what happened to David beautifully.

But whoever wrote it –

the result is the same:

God wants us to think about Psalm 52 in the light of 1 Samuel 21-22.

So let’s look back at 1 Samuel 21-22 and see what was happening to David.

In 1 Samuel 16, David was anointed by Samuel.

In chapter 17, David killed Goliath,

and then in chapters 18-20, all the house of Saul follows David:
his son, Jonathan, befriends David,
his daughter, Michal, marries David,
and both of them protect David from their father's wrath.

In the book of Samuel, there are lots of good fathers who have worthless sons:
Eli's sons do not follow their father.
Samuel's sons do not follow their father.
David's sons – for that matter – do not turn out so well!
Saul is the only father whose children generally turn out well
(but we'll come back to that later).

In 1 Samuel 21-23 we see the Messiah in Hiding.
David flees to Ahimelech the priest,
then to Achish the Philistine King of Gath,
and then to the cave of Adullam, to Moab and to the forest of Hereth.
These three flights are paralleled by three betrayals:
the betrayal of the priests by Doeg,
the warning from God that the men of Keilah will betray David,
and the betrayal by the Ziphites.

The next section of Samuel will focus on the two times that David spares Saul's life,
sandwiched around the death of Samuel
and the lengthy narrative of how David married Abigail (1 Sam 24-26).
The final section of 1 Samuel then deals with David among the Philistines,
and Saul among the dead.

1 Samuel 21-23 is all about the Messiah betrayed.
The book of Samuel makes frequent reference to "the LORD's anointed"
Ha Meshiach Yahweh.
David often uses it to refer to Saul,
but it has an unmistakable connection to David as well,
because David is also the LORD's anointed.
He is the Messiah.

Once you have seen this,
it is easy to see parallels to Jesus as he teaches and makes disciples in Galilee—
hiding in the wilderness, gathering followers,
as he awaits God's timing.

Jesus recapitulates the history of Israel—
and since Israel has failed,
and God has anointed David to be the king who succeeds where Israel fails,
it is not surprising to see David himself recapitulating the history of Israel.

David must wander in the wilderness (as Israel had done, and as Jesus would do),
and wait for the LORD's appointed time.

The LORD's anointed—the Messiah—has no place to lay his head,
and worse, he will be betrayed even by those whom he has delivered from their enemies!

First, David Flees to Ahimelech the Priest (21:1-9)

Things start out well.

David left Jonathan in the field,
and went to Nob, where Ahimelech the priest lived.

And David told Ahimelech that he was on a secret mission from Saul.

And so Ahimelech offers holy to bread to David
(bread which only the priests were to eat).

Ahimelech offers it on condition that the men have kept themselves from women
(any sexual intercourse rendered a man unclean until sundown).

But Leviticus 24:5-9 is very clear:

this bread is for Aaron and his sons to eat.

It is not for the king, nor is it for "the young men"
that David was supposedly going to meet.

It is for the priests.

But in Mark 2, Jesus says that Ahimelech did what was right.

David was not guilty of profaning the holy bread.

Because David was the Lord's anointed.

In Matthew 12 Jesus uses another example as well:

the priests profane the Sabbath (by doing their work)
and yet are guiltless.

Even as the work of worship is proper activity for the Sabbath,
so also nourishing the Lord's anointed and his people
is the proper function of the holy bread.

At this point we hear that Doeg was present,

but nothing more is said of him until the middle of the next chapter.

All we know is that Doeg was an Edomite –

he is not part of the 12 tribes of Israel,
but he is an outsider.

Nonetheless, he is the chief of Saul's herdsmen –
he has oversight of Saul's flocks and herds.

(Both Saul and David will have a fair number of foreigners in their administration –
foreigners are not "beholden" to local tribal leaders,
and so could be more faithful to the king.

Indeed, we'll see that Doeg has Saul's interests at heart
more than the rest of Saul's servants!)

We also know that Doeg was “detained before the LORD” –
probably he was unclean –
but it is important to note the language:
it was no accident that Doeg was there;
he was detained before the LORD!

Second, David Flees to Achish the King of Gath (21:10-15)

But then, carrying the sword of Goliath, David fled to Achish, the king of Gath.
Gath was one of the five cities of the Philistines,
and Goliath is also known as “Goliath of Gath.”
So for Goliath’s killer to come to Goliath’s home with Goliath’s sword,
would not appear to be one of David’s most brilliant moves.

But his ability to imitate a madman certainly does!
Psalm 34 reflects on this experience.
Psalm 34 praises God because “I sought the LORD and he answered me
and delivered me from all my fears.”
David may have delivered the performance of a lifetime
when he persuaded Achish to declare him insane,
but David recognized that it was God who delivered him.
After all, it would have been easy for Achish to say–
“He’s just faking it–kill him!”

But Psalm 34 is also very explicitly a Psalm of the cross:
verse 20 is quoted in John 19:36
“He guards all his bones; not one of them is broken.”

John connects the sufferings of David with the sufferings of Jesus.
But now is not the time for the crowds to say “crucify him!”
And so the Messiah is brought through trial and tribulation
out of the hands of his enemies.
And so David escaped.
At the beginning of the book of Samuel
the ark of the covenant was captured and taken to Ashdod,
where the LORD cast down the image of Dagon in Ashdod;
then the ark of the covenant was sent to Gath,
where the LORD struck down the people of Gath.
David, like the ark of the covenant,
has passed through Gath in triumph.
Remember that!
The ark of the covenant had been captured and sent to Gath,
where it destroyed the Philistines.
Now David, the slayer of Gath’s mighty warrior,
escapes from their clutches as well!

Third, David Flees to the Cave of Adullam (22:1-5)

Then David escaped to the Cave of Adullam.

Adullam is in Judah,
not far from Bethlehem.

And the whole area is pocked with caves.

And there at the Cave of Adullam David was joined by his father's house
(no doubt they were afraid of what Saul would do to them),
along with "everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt,
and everyone who was bitter in soul." (22:2)

And David went to Mizpeh of Moab and asked the king of Moab to shelter his parents
"Till I know what God will do for me."

But the prophet Gad warned David not to remain in the stronghold (probably Mizpeh),
and so David departed and went into the forest of Hereth
(probably the region around the caves of Adullam).

Here in central Judah,
David had the best chance to avoid both Saul and the Philistines.

So long as no one rats him out!

But chapter 22 tells us that rats were plenty common in the Messiah's day!

And Finally, David and the Priests Are Betrayed by Doeg (22:6-23)

When Saul hears news that a young upstart is in the forest of Hereth,
gathering a band of malcontents,
he does what any decent king would do.
He sets out to crush the rebellion before it gets too big.

Saul starts by berating his servants—those from his own tribe of Benjamin:

*Hear now, people of Benjamin;
will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards,
will he make you all commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds,
that all of you have conspired against me?
No one discloses to me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse.
None of you is sorry for me or discloses to me
that my son has stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait as at this day.*

You can see what Saul is thinking.

Saul thinks that David is preparing an assault to try to take the throne.

But even so, no one answers except Doeg the Edomite.

A foreigner—a son of the rejected Esau—takes the side of the rejected Saul.
And when Doeg tells Saul what the priests had done for David,

Saul summons the priests and demands an explanation for their *conspiracy* against him:
why have you conspired against me, you and the son of Jesse,
in that you have given him bread and sword and have inquired of God for him,
so that he has risen against me, to lie in wait, as at this day? (22:13)

Ahimelech's reply demonstrates that there was no conspiracy.
But convinced that everyone is against him, Saul refuses to believe Ahimelech,
and he orders his guard to kill the priests.
But they are good Israelites—
and whatever faults they may have,
they know better than to strike down the priests of the LORD!

So Saul said to Doeg—you do it!
And so Doeg struck down 85 priests (those who wore the ephod),
slaughtering the whole city of Nob,
both man and woman, child and infant, ox, donkey and sheep (22:19).
An Edomite slaughtering the innocents
(there will be another Edomite – Herod, after all, was an Idumean –
who would slaughter the innocent in an attempt to destroy
one who he feared would supplant him!)

But there is another irony here:
Saul had failed to devote the Amalekites to destruction,
but he now devotes the priests of Yahweh to destruction!
And while this is properly viewed as a horrible crime,
it is also the fulfillment of what God had said to Eli,
that his household would be cut off.

The rejected king renders judgment upon the rejected priest by the hand of the rejected son—
Doeg the Edomite (“Jacob have I loved, but Esau I hated”).

And so the last heir of Eli, Abiathar, the son of Ahimelech, fled to David,
and David acknowledges that he was indeed the cause of the death of Ahimelech's house.
And so David takes upon himself the obligation of protecting the last priest of the house of Eli.

With this background Psalm 52 makes a lot of sense.

1. The Indictment of the Devouring Tongue (v1-4)

52 Why do you boast of evil, O mighty man?

The steadfast love of God endures all the day.

Psalm 52 opens with a lament about the tongue of a “mighty man.”

“Mighty man” is the Hebrew word “gibbor.”

We have seen before that a “gibbor” is one who does great deeds
and speaks wise and persuasive words.

Doeg is an “anti-gibbor.”

Both in his speaking and in his acting,
he serves Saul faithfully –
but in so doing he destroys David with his tongue,
and the priests of God with his sword.

And so David sings to him:

Why do you boast of evil, O mighty man?

The steadfast love of God endures all the day.

It takes the form of a lament –

but a very odd lament, sung to Doeg, the Edomite.

A couple weeks ago we looked at Psalm 44 –

a song for the persecuted church.

Psalm 52 is a song for those who are persecuting the church!

Should we write hymns like this?

Should the church in Soviet Russia have sung hymns to Stalin?

I’m not quite sure how to do that.

But at the very least, we should sing Psalm 52 from time to time –

and when we do, we should sing it to Doeg’s latter-day heirs.

Mighty Men, why boast of evil?

God’s steadfast love endures all day!

Nothing you do can thwart his purposes!

It is the song of David as he laments the destructive plots of Doeg.

It is the song of Jesus as he laments the destructive plots of Judas.

And it is the song of the church as we lament the destructive plots of the peoples today.

² *Your tongue plots destruction,
like a sharp razor, you worker of deceit.*

³ *You love evil more than good,
and lying more than speaking what is right. Selah*

⁴ *You love all words that devour,
O deceitful tongue.*

Think about this language:

“words that devour.”

We talk about “back-biting” in English.

To bite someone’s back is an odd phrase –

but very many languages have similar ways of saying it.

The mouth devours.
And so words that destroy have the effect of “eating” a person.

“Sticks and stones can break my bones...”
but words?
can break my heart.

David’s heart is broken when he hears that Doeg *told* Saul
“David has come to the house of Ahimelech.”
All the rest of Doeg’s evil stems from what Doeg said –
because Doeg loved evil rather than good –
because Doeg loved deceitful words rather than truth.

Of course, someone might say:
Whoa! Wait a minute!
Doeg simply spoke the truth!
Doeg simply answered the question of the King – the LORD’s anointed!
Why does David say that Doeg loved “lying more than speaking what is right”?

Doeg simply spoke the truth – he gave the king an honest answer!
The rest of Saul’s servants were hiding the truth from Saul!

But that is because the rest of Saul’s servants understood that Saul wished to harm David.
If you know that someone wants to use the truth to destroy someone,
then you need to be silent!

Yes, Doeg was also the one who used his sword to slaughter the priests –
but David sees clearly that Doeg’s tongue was a far sharper sword!
Doeg (on his own authority) could never have killed a priest!
But because of his words – because he used his tongue to persuade the king –
he could slaughter and destroy with impunity.

This is why James 3 says,

*“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers,
for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*

² *For we all stumble in many ways.*

*And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man,
able also to bridle his whole body.*

³ *If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us,
we guide their whole bodies as well.*

⁴ *Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds,
they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.*

⁵ *So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.*

James is reflecting on the same thing as Psalm 52.

And at the heart of the deceitful tongue is a misdirected love.

“You love evil more than good.”

And when you love evil more than good, the result is deceitful speech.

As James goes on to say:

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!

⁶ *And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.*

The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body,

setting on fire the entire course of life,^[a] and set on fire by hell.^[b]

⁷ *For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature,*

can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind,

⁸ *but no human being can tame the tongue.*

It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹ *With it we bless our Lord and Father,*

and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

¹⁰ *From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.*

My brothers,^[c] these things ought not to be so.

¹¹ *Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?*

¹² *Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs?*

Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.”

All of you have experienced the brutality of the tongue!

As children you have been hurt by the viciousness of another child’s lies.

As teenagers you experience how slander and gossip destroys friendships.

And as adults you have felt the razor-sharp tongues of colleagues and friends –
even your husband or wife!

If you have ever experienced the destructive power of the words of a mighty man
then you will understand David’s response in verse 5:

2. Uprooted: God’s Verdict Against the Mighty Man (v5)

⁵ *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. Selah

In the same way that you have destroyed others with your tongue,
so also God will destroy you.

The blessed man shall be like a tree planted by streams of living water –
but the wicked – the mighty man who boasts in his evil deeds –

he will be torn from his tent
and uprooted from the land of the living.

And when God passes this verdict,
then the righteous will join together in what they say:

3. Seeking Refuge in Destruction: the Righteous Mock the Mighty Man (v6-7)

⁶ *The righteous shall see and fear,
and shall laugh at him, saying,*
⁷ *“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!”*

You see a clear picture of this in Acts 12.

Acts 12 records the death of Herod Agrippa –
who shares the same Edomite heritage as Doeg.
When the people shout that Herod’s voice is “the voice of a god, not of a man!”
an angel of the Lord struck him down because he did not give God the glory.

The very next verse says, “But the word of God increased and multiplied.” (12:24)

Luke is the righteous who laughs at Herod, saying, in effect:
“See the man who would not make God his refuge!
He trusted in the abundance of his riches and sought refuge in his own destruction!”

Luke points out to us that the destructive tongue of Herod brought him down to the pit.

4. God’s Steadfast Love Is the Confidence of the Olive Tree (v8-9)

⁸ *But I am like a green olive tree
in the house of God.*

Remember James 3?

Can a fig tree bear olives?
I am like a green olive tree in the house of God.

Why is a green olive tree so important?
There are lots of olive trees in Israel.

But this one is curious:
this is a “green olive tree in the house of God”!

What is an olive tree doing in the *temple*?

Zechariah 4 spoke of the prophet's vision of a lampstand with two olive trees,
one on either side.

The reason why you would want an olive tree in the house of God
is so that you could have a never-ending supply of olive oil for the lampstand.
The image in Zechariah is of branches from the olive trees
from which oil flows to golden pipes that feed the lampstand.

And the reason why he says that he is like a "green" olive tree
is not because the tree has green olives! –
but because the *tree* is green.

An olive tree can live for a thousand years (or more)

When David says "I am like a green olive tree in the house of God"
he is saying that his line of anointed kings will last forever –
supplying oil for the lamp of God forever.

Why?

*I trust in the steadfast love of God
forever and ever.*

⁹*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.*

Now, finally, David turns and addresses God.

My trust is in the steadfast love – in the *hesed* of God.
After all, it is *God* who is worthy of thanks because *he has done it!*

He has done what?

From the standpoint of Psalm 52,
Doeg is still alive –
and David is still on the run.

From the standpoint of Psalm 52,
Stalin is still alive –
and the faithful are still being persecuted.

From the standpoint of Psalm 52,
Herod is still alive –
and the apostles are being martyred for their faith.

The Jerusalem Bible provides a helpful translation of this final verse:

I will “put my hope in your name,
that is so full of kindness,
in the presence of those who love you.”

Earlier I said that the one father in the book of Samuel whose children turn out well – is Saul!
1 Samuel 20:42 says:

Then Jonathan said to David,

*Go in peace, because we have sworn both of us in the name of Yahweh, saying
Yahweh shall be between me and you,
and between my offspring and your offspring forever.
And he rose and departed and Jonathan went into the city. (20:42)*

It is perhaps no accident that it was a Benjaminite named Saul
who took the gospel of Jesus, the son of David,
to the Gentiles.

Jonathan’s tribe remained faithful to David,
as Benjamin became united to Judah.
And it was a Benjaminite who followed the last prince of his tribe,
and yielded all to the son of David,
proclaiming that the Son of David had come through suffering to glory,
and had delivered his people from sin and death.

But Saul’s namesake started out every bit as bad as his progenitor!

Saul of Tarsus did everything in his power to destroy the people of David’s Son.
And yet God had mercy on this heir of Saul
(no doubt because Jesus remembered the covenant
that Jonathan had sworn to David!)

And so Paul declares

*Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,
I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

*I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.
(Phil 3:13-14, 12)*

Saul of Tarsus was a true son of Jonathan.
He wanted no kingdom for himself,
but only to exalt the kingdom of Jesus.

May we – whose natural heritage, perhaps, is more akin to the Doeg’s of the earth –
likewise deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Jesus –
thanking God forever because Christ Jesus has made us his own!