

To the choirmaster: according to Do Not Destroy. A Miktam^[a] of David.

There are four Psalms that are written “according to Do Not Destroy” –
Psalms 57, 58, 59, and 75.

This could be a chant pattern (or tune) that was used for all these Psalms.
Of course, that doesn’t really help us much.

But the phrase “Do Not Destroy” occurs twice in the OT before this:

1 Samuel 26:9 – when David and Abishai creep into the camp of Saul,
and Abishai asks permission to strike down Saul,
but David tells his cousin,
“Do not destroy him,
for who can put out his hand against the LORD’s anointed
and be guiltless?”

and Deuteronomy 9:26 – when Moses asks God
“do not destroy your people and your heritage,
whom you have redeemed through your greatness”

Indeed, I would suggest that David’s use is rooted in Moses’ use.
Why does David refuse to let Abishai kill Saul?
Why does David say, “do not destroy him”?

It is because David has great confidence that no matter how bad Saul may be,
God has promised that he will not destroy his people –
and so therefore David can endure great personal and corporate injury,
trusting that God will, in his time, remove Saul.

The four Psalms “according to Do Not Destroy”
all share that same confidence.

Psalm 58 is a “Miktam of David.”

We don’t know what “Miktam” means –
but plainly we are supposed to think of this Psalm as a Davidic Psalm.
And during the Davidic era,
David and his sons were on the throne.

Psalm 58 is right in the middle of a number of Psalms that have similar themes.
Psalm 56 is set in the time when the Philistines seized him in Gath.
Psalm 57 is set in the time when David fled from Saul,
and hid in the cave.
Psalm 59 is set in the time when Saul sent men to watch his house
in order to kill him.

All of these Psalms include complaints about enemies/oppressors/wicked rulers
and all of these Psalms ask God to do something about them!
Maybe David wrote it about Saul –
but that doesn't help us understand what it is doing in Israel's songbook!

What are these songs doing in the Davidic psalter?
Are they speaking about foreign rulers who oppress Israel?
Or are they speaking about Israelite rulers who are wicked?

In one sense, we could say,
“If the shoe fits, wear it.
If the song fits, sing it.”

But the context of these Psalms strongly suggests that the focus is on Israelite rulers.
After all, these Psalms could also have been sung while David was king.
The kings of Israel could not guarantee justice
(we know from the story of Absalom
that many in Israel were frustrated with the slowness of justice).
Tribal leaders would still have been the main judges –
and although David was king,
he was only king because the tribal leaders *wanted him* to be king!
If he interfered too much in their local affairs,
they could easily abandon their allegiance to him.

So these laments in book 2 should be identified with the Davidic era.
In book 3 of the Psalter, the focus will be on the exile –
wondering whether God has forgotten his promises to David.
Book 2 of the Psalter, however, takes the Davidic context for granted.
The Davidic king is on the throne –
but that doesn't mean that everything is working properly.

Psalms 58 is a song for when the wicked rule.
The Son of David is king – but we do not yet see everything under his feet.

And that's exactly where we are.
Jesus is King – but we do not yet see everything under his feet.

Lena and I drove through Minnesota on Monday, May 13 –
the day that the Minnesota state senate debated the question of gay marriage.

Listening to the Minnesota state senate debate was fascinating.
No one was debating the question.
The whole focus was on the “religious exemption” –

would people with religious scruples be allowed to “withhold services”?

It also confirmed me in the conviction that Christians gave away the debate a long time ago, when we redefined marriage to focus on companionship and love.

In the PCA “suggested form,” the purpose of marriage is reduced to this:

“Marriage is a divine ordinance

instituted for the promotion of man’s happiness and the glory of God.”

There is not a single word in the whole form that could not equally apply to a gay couple.

The OPC “suggested form” is only slightly better.

The OPC form says that marriage is primarily about

“the enrichment of the lives of those who enter this state.”

It adds that marriage is also “for the orderly propagation of the human race,”

and “for the generation of a holy seed,”

but there is no prayer for children.

All the older language about sex and babies is gone.

The prayer simply asks that

“their marriage be fruitful for this life and for the life to come.”

The Canadian Reformed are slightly better –

they at least pray that “if it be God’s will” that he would give them children,

but that’s like praying, “if it be God’s will”

that God would bless the preaching of the gospel.

It *is* God’s will that the preaching of the gospel would convert sinners.

It *is* God’s will that marriage would produce babies.

That’s not saying that everyone who hears believes!

Nor is it saying that every marriage will produce babies!

But marriage is the God-ordained means *for* producing babies.

Think of Eve.

She was created as a “helper” suitable for Adam.

What does Eve do to help?

Of the 19 uses of the word “helper” in the OT,

16 of them refer to *God* as our helper.

As Luther put it, “*Our Helper* he amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.”

God is our helper – why?

Because he does for us what we could not possibly do for ourselves.

A helper is not a servant.

A helper is not an inferior.

A helper is one who does what we could not possibly do for ourselves!

In the same way, Eve is a helper.

She does something that Adam could not possibly have done by himself.

Adam can rule the animals – he names them all before she is formed!

But he is *helpless* to be fruitful and multiply.

The reason why marriage must be between a man and a woman
is because the point of marriage is babies.

That doesn't mean that all marriages will produce babies!

Barrenness is a result of the fall –

because of the fall, everyone malfunctions in some way.

Due to God's "common wrath" against sin

some people get cancer,

some houses get hit by tornados,

some cities are devastated by crazy ants,

and some couples are barren.

But the *point* of marriage is babies.

And even barren couples can be very fruitful –

whether through adoption or through mentoring young people who need parents.

But as far as I can see,

we've lost the marriage debate –

we gave away the game a hundred and fifty years ago.

So what do we do now?

Our rulers are changing the rules to allow gay marriage.

What should we do?

I suggest that we sing Psalm 58.

1. The Gods of Violence (v1-2)

58 Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods?^[b]

Do you judge the children of man uprightly?

²*No, in your hearts you devise wrongs;*

your hands deal out violence on earth.

Who are the "gods" of verse 1?

Some say that it refers to the gods of the nations around Israel.

Others say that it refers to the rulers of Israel –

the tyrants who are oppressing the people.

I'm not sure that we need to choose between them.

The ancient world saw a close connection between the gods and human rulers.
And whenever human rulers “devise wrongs” and “deal out violence on the earth”
it is inevitably because they are following idols,
rather than the living and true God.

Psalm 82 opens with a similar picture – but much more detailed:

“God has taken his place in the divine council;
in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:
‘How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?’”

The divine council is God’s heavenly throne room.

The gods are seen as gathered around the throne.
(Think of Job 1, with the “sons of God” appearing before the throne,
and Satan also among them).

In Psalm 82:6 God says, “I said, ‘you are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you;
nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince.’”

Psalm 82 plainly seems to connect the heavenly beings and the earthly rulers together.

Certainly Jesus, in John 10:34, rebukes the Pharisees
by quoting Psalm 82:6, reminding them,
“Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods’?”
which Jesus then applies to the Jewish rulers.

This makes sense of Psalm 82 – and Psalm 58.

Earthly rulers share in the divine prerogative of rule.
If your rulers speak what is righteous and judge with equity
then they are rightly reflecting God’s dominion.
But if your rulers “devise wrongs” in their hearts
and if their hands deal out violence on earth,
then they demonstrate that they are the seed of the serpent.

Genesis 3-6 traced out the story of the two seeds:

the seed of the woman – the holy seed, the sons of God (the godly line of Seth);
and the seed of the serpent – those who rebelled against God (the line of Cain).

2. The Seed of the Serpent (v3-5)

³ *The wicked are estranged from the womb;
they go astray from birth, speaking lies.*

⁴ *They have venom like the venom of a serpent,
like the deaf adder that stops its ear,*

⁵ *so that it does not hear the voice of charmers
or of the cunning enchanter.*

Verses 3-5 describe the wicked as the seed of the serpent.

And just like the serpent of Genesis 3,
they speak lies.

Verses 3-5 focus on words.

The wicked speak lies – their words are venomous –
and they are incapable of hearing.

You cannot “charm” these snakes.

But remember who we are talking about?

who are these rulers?

David may have been speaking of Saul –

or, for that matter, of wicked judges in Israel during his own reign!

All throughout the years of the Davidic monarchy

this Psalm would be a song for the faithful to sing whenever *any* ruler
“devised wrongs” and “dealt out violence on earth.”

When Athaliah, daughter of the house of Ahab,
was united with the house of David,

then you see the mingling of the seed of the serpent with the seed of the woman.

When the wicked rule – then the lies of the serpent spread throughout the land.

Now, how should we think about this today?

After all, our rulers devise wrongs in their hearts
and deal out violence on earth.

Whether the wrongs of gay marriage,
or the violence of unjust wars or abortion,

our rulers fit well the definition of the wicked gods.

Sex and violence dominate our entertainment –

our entertainment is at the heart of our culture (our worship),
and so it is not surprising that our society reflects our worship.

It is preposterous to think that we could fix this by electing a new president.

Psalm 58 plainly sees the problem as being deeper and wider than the king.

You could have a good king and still sing Psalm 58 about wicked judges.

Psalm 58 recognizes that the problem goes all the way back to Genesis 3.

The problem is that the wicked are estranged from the womb –
they are the seed of the serpent –
they have venom like the venom of the serpent...

And what is more, they are like the deaf adder that *stops its ears*.

Notice – it is not that the deaf adder is *unable to hear*.

No, it *stops its ears* – it refuses to hear.

Think of the judicial court that stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr:

“Lo, I see the heavens opened, and the son of Man standing on the right hand of God,
to the Jewish prelates that was so insufferable a testimony,
that in order to retain their poison, they stopt their ears, and cried aloud.” (Arnd)

3. The Curse Upon the Wicked (v6-9)

⁶ *O God, break the teeth in their mouths;*

tear out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD!

⁷ *Let them vanish like water that runs away;*

when he aims his arrows, let them be blunted.

⁸ *Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime,*

like the stillborn child who never sees the sun.

⁹ *Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns,*

whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away!^[c]

Verses 6-9 contain a seven-fold curse that utilizes aspects of all the earthly creation.

There are seven requests for God to judge the wicked rulers:

1) “break their teeth... 2) tear out their fangs”

the first two parts of the curse focus on the image of the mouths of lions,
a toothless lion will not strike fear into the hearts of the weak!

3) “Let them vanish like water that runs away”:

water is a precious commodity in the middle east –
but it is always running away, evaporating, or seeping into the earth;

4) “when he aims his arrows, let them be blunted”:

the fourth part of the curse strikes at their weapons –
blunt arrows cannot do great harm.

5) “Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime” –

literally, “like a snail melting as it goes”

6) “like the stillborn child who never sees the sun” –

literally, “like the miscarriage of a woman not seeing the sun” –

the two images in verse 8 are strikingly different:

the snail “melts” as it travels –

leaving behind a trail of slime

(and then if you squish a snail it appears to be all slime!),

even so, let the wicked melt, leaving nothing behind!

But then let them be like a stillborn child –

this was Job’s request in Job 3 –

if only I had died before I was born!

You can echoes of this in Jesus' words regarding Judas:
It would have been better for him if he had never been born! (Mt 26:24)
And finally, 7) "Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns,
whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away."

The Hebrew of verse 9 is very odd,
but it appears to suggest the image of a pot over a fire of thorns.
Thorns blaze up very quickly,
so the idea is that the wicked will be swept away
quicker than a fire can heat a pot.

But however obscure this seven-fold curse may be in its details
it is perfectly clear in its point:

David is asking God to defang the wicked rulers and make their orders toothless
(it's what I do when I pray that God would overrule the folly of rulers).
David is begging God to make the rulers vanish – disappear – go away!

Theodoret, a fifth century historian,
tells the story of Publia, a widow in the church of Antioch,
who had established a convent in her house.
When the emperor Julian (the Apostate) passed by her convent during a visit to Antioch,
she had her choir of virgins sing Psalm 115.

Theodoret comments:

"As the Emperor passed by, they sang together more loudly than usual,
since they looked upon this 'destroying angel'
as an object of contempt and derision.
They sang especially those songs which satirize the impotence of idols,
declaiming in the words of David that:
'The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of men's hands.'
And after this declaration of the idols' insensibility they added:
'Let those who make them be like them, and so too all who trust in them.'
When the Emperor heard these things, he was greatly upset
and commanded them to keep silent at the time of his passing by.
Publia, however, having little respect for his laws,
instilled greater enthusiasm in her chorus,
and when he came by again bade them sing:

'Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered.' [Ps 68]"

(quoted in James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature, p105)

Theodoret adds that Julian had her ears boxed –

but she took that as an honor and went back to her house
to continue her "accustomed assault on the Emperor in spiritual song."

I want you to notice three things:

First, these early Christians knew the Psalms really well –
and thus recognized which Psalms applied to whom!
And second, Publia did not take her choir to the imperial palace and stage a protest.
Rather, she waited until he passed by *her* house.
And third, we don't hear of Christians doing this with the *pagan* emperors.
Pagan rulers don't know any better!
We only hear Christians doing this with an *apostate Christian* emperor.
Julian had been raised as a Christian by his uncle Constantine.
He only apostatized immediately after he became emperor.

And that's why I think Psalm 58 works so well for us today.
We live in a post-Christian society,
in which most of our rulers are baptized Christians.
They *ought* to know better.

The last two verses focus on the joy of the righteous –
but at the same time, they are perhaps the most difficult:

4. The Joy of the Righteous (v10-11)

¹⁰ *The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance;
he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.*

¹¹ *Mankind will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous;
surely there is a God who judges on earth."*

The ESV takes verse 11 to refer to mankind reflecting on God's judgment.

You could translate verse 11 as,

"A man will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous;
surely there is a God who judges in the land.""

But given the language of the serpent earlier in the Psalm,
and the creational language in the seven-fold curse in verses 6-9,
I am inclined to agree with the ESV.

And when you think about the great fulfillment of verse 10 in the cross of Christ,
where our Savior triumphed over sin and death through his own death and resurrection,
you begin to see how it is *adam*, it is mankind that speaks in verse 11.

But that doesn't make verse 10 any easier.

The joy of the righteous is "when he sees the vengeance" –
when he bathes his feet in the blood of the wicked.

Again, Johann Arnd has some helpful reflections:

"That he shall bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked, is not to be understood literally,
as if the fearers of God must avenge themselves by the shedding of blood,

or have pleasure therein,
but so, that if they entreat vengeance of God,
God wonderfully vindicates their cause.
When Saul fell upon his sword, sore pressed by the Philistines,
that was God's vengeance,
and David bathed his feet in the blood of the wicked
and incurred no guilt by Saul's destruction.
When Ahab was shot in the battle, so that his blood ran through the chariot,
and the dogs licked it, that also was God's vengeance,
and the prophet Elias bathed his feet in the blood of the wicked."

Some have said that this is an "Old Testament" plea,
but that in the New Testament we should say,
"Father, forgive them."

Actually, *both* are found in *both* the Old and New Testaments.

David says in Psalms 35 and 109 that he prayed for his enemies
and afflicted himself in fasting for their healing when they were sick.
But now that they have rejected his prayers and his love,
he asks God to destroy them.

Likewise, we need to understand that Jesus' prayer, "Father, forgive them,"
likewise has its limits.

When Paul writes to the Thessalonians to encourage them in their afflictions,
he says in 2 Thessalonians 1:5-8 –
"This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God,
that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God,
for which you are also suffering—
⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,
⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us,
when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven
with his mighty angels ⁸ in flaming fire,
inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God
and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."

Those who attack and trample God's people underfoot
will receive God's righteous judgment in the end!

The *New Testament* says,
"God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you....
inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God..."

We should never hold a grudge –
and we should always pray that God would have mercy and convert the wicked –
but at the same time, we should never doubt
that God’s vengeance is for those who “stir up strife,”
and who seek to destroy God’s people.

Now, our culture has fallen prey to the cult of niceness.
Some have referred to it as the 11th commandment,
“Thou shalt be nice!”
And quite frankly, it is *not* nice to say
that God will inflict vengeance on those who do not know him.

But God never promised that he would be nice!
You can only be nice in a world in which sin is not a problem.
Nowadays people often ask, “Can’t we all just get along?”

The answer is “no.”

In a world that has been corrupted by sin and the fear of death,
there are problems for which there is no solution
that allows everyone to get what they want!

So long as rulers devise wrongs in their hearts –
and so long as the gods of the age deal out violence on the earth,
we will need to sing Psalm 58.