

A Psalm About “The System”

Psalm 58

Studies in the Psalms #59

RIGHT off the bat this Psalm seems so different, doesn't it? Look at verses 1–2: they're addressed by David to Israel's leaders called “**gods.**” Then verses 3–5 are descriptive of these so-called “**gods.**” We call the Psalms “songs.” But we don't sing to other people unless we're in love with them! We call the Psalms “prayers.” But we don't address prayers to anyone else but God. We say they're full of “devotional material.” But then there's material like this, where godly men like David reflected on their less-than-devotional troubles. I mention this because it's interesting but also because so many young, zealous Reformed people over-react to the contemporary Christian music they've left behind and advocate the singing only of the Psalms. It's more complicated than that. It's not until verse 6 that we get an actual prayer to God. Let's look at this PSALM ABOUT “THE SYSTEM” in more detail.

OUR LAMENT OF SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE (vv. 1–5)

Let's personalize the Psalm as we look at verses 1–5: OUR LAMENT OF SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE. **Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods?** (v. 1a)

Who are we referring to? Leaders. In Israel there was no separation between church and state, but for us, the **gods** are pastors *and* politicians or anyone who is in a place of being over another. You see that in the parallel part of the verse:

Do you *judge* the children of man uprightly? (v. 1b) The ancient judges were raised up by God to rid society of its enemies and lead revival among Israel. Remember back in John 10 Jesus cited Psalm 82 in reference to the Pharisees: “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods?’” (v. 34) God is the great and heavenly Judge (vv. 1, 8) but he’s placed earthly judges over his people. Why does he call them “gods?” He’s not saying these judges are by nature divine. No, as those who stand in the place of God they’re not supposed to “judge unjustly and show partiality” (v. 2), they’re supposed to “give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute” (v. 3). They’re supposed to act consistent with their God-given authority. **Do you indeed *decree* what is *right*...Do you *judge*...*uprightly*?** This is a lament of injustice.

No, in your hearts you devise wrongs; your hands deal out violence on earth (v. 2). Brothers and sisters, as you very well know there is inequity and injustice in the world. My calling as a minister of the Word is not to give you the conservative or liberal answers to it. As you well know, there are capitalistic answers, there are Marxist answers. One of the things that makes me so sad today is how many of us Christians are being sucked into a worldly worldview. When you have an ideology where there is no god something has to take its place. For so many of our neighbors it’s the State. But why are *we*

being “conformed to this world?” (Rom. 12:1) Why are trapped into thinking the only answers are political?

With the Psalm, recognize that injustice is a theological problem: **The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies** (v. 3). What’s he describing? Fallen, sinful human nature. What we call “original sin.” This is one of the reasons why political ideologies like communism and progressivism are false. They only envision utopia here on earth. They don’t take into account human nature. With this sin nature humans who get into government take that nature with them: **They have venom like the venom of a serpent, like the deaf adder that stops its ear, so that it does not hear the voice of charmers or of the cunning enchanter** (vv. 4–5). In other words, like a deaf snake to a charmer sinful human nature is irreformable on its own; sinful human nature cannot be changed by laws.

OUR LONGING FOR SYSTEMIC JUSTICE (vv. 6–11)

The theological problem that causes so much injustice here on earth only has a theological solution. Look at verses 6–11 and OUR LONGING FOR SYSTEMIC JUSTICE. The Psalm shifts from address to unjust leaders to God himself: **O God, break the teeth in their mouths** (v. 6a). That’s harsh! Yes, but remember it’s a poetic image. Of what? God taking away these vipers’ bites

so that they're useless. **Tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord!** (v. 6b)

Again, a graphic image meant to make a powerful point: render these fierce animals useless. **Let them vanish like water that runs away** or as the New Living Translation images it: “into thirsty ground” (v. 7a). Again, make them useless and powerless. **When he aims his arrows, let them be blunted** (v. 7b).

What's that image of? The same thing: render them ineffective. **Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime** (v. 8a). A snail can't eat your garden if it's gone! Then hears another harsh image: **like the stillborn child who never sees the sun** (v. 8b). **Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns—**

imagine cooking over an open flame—**whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away!** (v. 9) Now, since Jesus teaches us to pray for our enemies and bless those who persecute (Matt. 5:43–48) and the apostle says we're supposed to let God take vengeance, not us (Rom. 12:19), this means we pray that God would deal with unjust rulers and make them and their ideologies and policies be as if they never were!

I think one thing that would help us as Americans today is to realize that there never has been a nation that was a “shining light on a hill.” Every nation has been filled with injustice. I was reading this week about the supposed godly, Puritan leader of England's civil war in the 1640s–50s, Oliver

Cromwell. He started a naval war against the Dutch, who were fellow Protestant, Reformed Christians. Why? He wanted control of worldwide trade. So much for godly Puritanism!

The last part of this prayer is so helpful. While we long for a more just society in which to live, our ultimate longing is praying towards the future. We pray, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” but recognize that the only way that will be true on earth is by a complete renewal of all things. So we long: **The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked** (v. 10). This is an image of see the utter defeat of the unrighteous (cf. Ps. 68:23). We long for God’s just verdict on unrighteousness. **Mankind will say, “Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth”** (v. 11).

As we lament injustice in the world and even seek to be empathetic to those who at least feel it if not experience it, we need to root out injustice from our own hearts, from our homes, from our congregation. One writer said it like this: “Christian struggle against evil in this world is not, in its first instance, political or social, but ascetical. It commences in the heart of man in the prayer of a warring faith.”¹

Notes

¹ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 114.