

PSALMS

Chapter 58

Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods? Do you judge the children of man uprightly? ²No, in your hearts you devise wrongs; your hands deal out violence on earth. ³The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies. ⁴They have venom like the venom of a serpent, like the deaf adder that stops its ear, ⁵so that it does not hear the voice of charmers or of the cunning enchanter. ⁶O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD! ⁷Let them vanish like water that runs away; when he aims his arrows, let them be blunted. ⁸Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime, like the stillborn child who never sees the sun. ⁹Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns, whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away! ¹⁰The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked. ¹¹Mankind will say, “Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth.”

Ps 58† A prayer for God, the supreme Judge, to set right the affairs of men, judging those rulers who corrupt justice, and championing the cause of the righteous. (The psalm finds its climax and fulfillment in Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin; see Mt 26:57–68 and parallels.) Concern for the just use of judicial power is pervasive throughout the OT. This was the primary agency in the administrative structures of the ancient Near East for the protection of the innocent, usually the poor and powerless, against the assaults of unscrupulous men, usually the rich and powerful. Israelite society was troubled with the corruption of this judicial power from the days of Samuel to the end of the monarchy (see, e.g., 1Sa 8:3; Isa 1:23; 5:23; 10:1–2; Eze 22:6, 12; Am 5:7, 10–13; Mic 3:1–3, 9–11; 7:2). Even in David’s time all was not well (see 2Sa 15:1–4). For the central concern of this psalm see Ps 82. Structurally, the psalm is framed by a rhetorical address to the wicked judges in their absence (vv. 1–2) and by a reassuring word to “the righteous” (vv. 9–11). The frame also emphasizes the fact that those who do not judge uprightly (v. 1) will be judged by God (v. 11). (CSB)

David does not refer to a concrete historical situation as he does in Ps 51; 52; 54; 56; 57; 59; and 60. (TLSB)

Format: Vv 1–2, judgment against gods; vv 3–5, state of the wicked; vv 6–9, condemnation of the wicked; vv 10–11, rejoicing of the righteous. (TLSB)

8:1–5 Accusation against the wicked judges whose mouths, hearts and hands (vv. 1–2) are united in the pursuit of injustice. (CSB)

58:1 *gods* – A title applied to those whose administrative positions called upon them to act as earthly representatives of God’s heavenly court. (CSB)

Sometimes used to describe earthly rulers. Rulers and judges have great power over ordinary people (“children of man”). Unlike the supreme judge (God), human leaders may distort justice and pervert righteousness. (TLSB)

By the instigation of Satan such corrupt rulers misuse the power God has given them. The judgment against such corrupt rulers will be especially severe because they are God’s servants who have the responsibility to punish evil and reward good (Romans 13:17). (PBC)

58:2 *deal out violence* – Issue decisions that result in cruel injustice. (CSB)

58:3 *from the womb...birth* – All people begin life as sinners, rebels against God and self-centered (even David, 51:5). In the case of the “wicked,” this becomes a way of life, unrestrained by love for God or people. (TLSB)

speak lies – They have never been concerned for the truth (see Jn 8:44). (CSB)

These people have been going astray all their lives, and the immediate evidence of their sinfulness is their lying. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

58:4-5 Snake charmers seem to control deadly serpents by their music (although snakes actually follow the motion of the musical instrument). Wicked people, like serpents, have sealed their ears against God’s warnings and the pleas of people. (TLSB)

58:4 *venom* – What issues from their mouths is as cruel and deadly as the venom of snakes (see 140:3; Mt 23:33; Jas 3:8). (CSB)

By comparing the corrupt rulers to snakes, David may be making a subtle reference to their master the devil. (PBC)

stops its ear – They are incorrigible; nothing—neither appeals nor threats—will move them. (CSB)

58:6–8 Prayer for God to purge the land of such perverse judges. The author uses imagery drawn from conventional curses of the ancient Near East. (CSB)

58:6 Let the weapons of their mouths (see 57:4) be broken and torn out. (CSB)

Shifting metaphors from snakes to lions (both serious dangers in ancient Israel), David asks God to render the wicked powerless, unable to harm him or anyone else. (TLSB)

We can rest assured that, if there had been any hope of turning these men from their evil ways, no one would have been happier than David to see them turn. (Leupold)

58:7 *water that runs away* – And is absorbed by the ground. (CSB)

Like water flowing into the hot sand, leaving no trace behind. (TLSB)

arrows – Malicious pronouncements. (CSB)

blunted – Like a dull blade, their selfish schemes and wicked plans are ineffective. (TLSB)

58:8 *snail* – That appears to dry up to nothing as it moves over a stone in the hot sun. (CSB)

According to popular tradition, a snail or slug dissolves to form its slimy path. (TLSB)

still born child – Or, miscarriage. Author hopes the wicked have no more future and no greater accomplishments in life than a stillborn child. (TLSB)

58:9–11 Assurance that God will surely judge them (see note on 3:8). (CSB)

58:9 The verse may be speaking picturesquely of the speed of God’s judgment—speed probably signifying here the inescapable certainty of his judgment (see also Lk 18:7–8). (CSB)

thorns – Twigs from wild thornbushes were used as fuel for quick heat (see 118:12; Ecc 7:6). (CSB)

Thorns (dry or green) burn very quickly, almost in an instant. He prays that God will frustrate their plans even more quickly than the time it would take for a flame to reach the cooking pot above it. (TLSB)

sweep them away – As by a storm—God’s storm (see Job 27:21). (CSB)

58:10 *righteous* – Here a judicial term for those who are in the right but who have been wronged. (CSB)

rejoice – The reason for the saint’s rejoicing is not personal revenge, but joy that God’s honor is upheld, sin is deterred, and the righteous are rewarded. (PBC)

Graphically depicted, the ultimate outcome of the wicked under the administration of a just and righteous God will be their defeat and the exoneration of the righteous. (TLSB)

sees vengeance – When the wrongs committed against them are redressed. (CSB)

bathe his feet in the blood – Vivid imagery borrowed from the literary conventions of the ancient Near East (see 68:23). Its origins are the exaggerated language of triumphant reports of victory on the battlefield. (CSB)

58:11 The climax: When God has judged the unjust “gods,” all people will see that right ultimately triumphs under God’s just rule. No more will people despair, like those in Mal 3:15. (CSB)

God keeps things in hand and under control. This is not clearly apparent at all times. (Leupold)

reward – Just as sin produces fruit that leads to condemnation (cf Gal 5:19–21), so faith shows itself through action and ultimately receives God’s approval (cf Mt 25:31–46). It might look as though people get away with all kinds of wickedness on earth, but God’s justice will finally prevail. (TLSB)

Ps 58 David challenges the leaders of the people (judges and rulers) by condemning the unjust and dishonest. When you find yourself in a position of power over someone, treat that person as one precious to God, purchased by the blood of Christ. Jesus suffered unjustly before the Jewish Council (the Sanhedrin) and the Roman governor. The plans of both sets of judges came to nothing; ultimate justice was served on the cross (condemnation of sin) and at the empty tomb (public vindication of Jesus as our Savior). • Heavenly Father, lead us to do the right thing, even when it seems no one notices. Lead us to live for You and remember that You set all things right in the end. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen. (TLSB)