

The Enduring Lovingkindness of God

I have been preaching through the psalms that came from the time of David's fleeing from Saul, and in particular those clearly from the very beginning of that time, together with some very likely from that time. Having looked at Pss. 56, 34, 142, and 57 (yes, over nearly 2 years now), having celebrated God as refuge and as one whose promises are trustworthy, we now turn to Ps. 52. This psalm makes the occasion for its composition clear -

¹For the choir director. A Maskil of David, when Doeg the Edomite came and told Saul and said to him, "David has come to the house of Ahimelech."

(Ps. 52:1a)

When a psalm, like this one or like Ps. 34, makes the occasion very specific, it does not limit its application or make it worthless to anyone not in similar circumstances. No, far from it – but it does encourage us to read the story because there will be things to glean from the story that will be helpful to us. In Ps. 34, a good part of it is that the psalm says nothing about David's cleverness in getting out of the tight spot in Gath – *nothing*. Keeping the story in mind in Ps. 34 helps us notice what is missing in the psalm, and that gives to the teachable heart a lesson: give God the glory, great things He has done – and be silent on what you did. I think too that there must be fruit from this psalm that comes from keeping the story in mind.

So, remember that when David first fled from Saul, he went to the priests at Nob, and in particular from Ahimelech received provisions of bread and weaponry, and he did so under false pretenses (we must admit) of being on an urgent matter from the king. David, however, was seen there by someone.

⁷Now one of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained before the Lord; and his name was Doeg the Edomite, the chief of Saul's shepherds.

(1 Sam. 21:7)

(If we filmed this, we would have ominous music here.) David then flees to Gath, is recognized, has to feign madness to escape, hides in a cave, is joined by others, and eventually joined by someone who reminds him of that unfortunate witness to his visit to Nob.

⁶Then Saul heard that David and the men who were with him had been discovered. Now Saul was sitting in Gibeah, under the tamarisk tree on the height with his spear in his hand, and all his servants were standing around him. ⁷Saul said to his servants who stood around him, "Hear now, O Benjamites! Will the son of Jesse also give to all of you fields and vineyards? Will he make you all commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds?" ⁸For all of you have conspired against me so that there is no one who discloses to me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse, and there is none of you who is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me to lie in ambush, as it is this day." ⁹Then Doeg the Edomite, who was standing by the servants of Saul, said, "I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub. ¹⁰He inquired of the Lord for him, gave him provisions, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine."

¹¹Then the king sent someone to summon Ahimelech the priest, the son of Ahitub, and all his father's household, the priests who were in Nob; and all of them came to the king. ¹²Saul said, "Listen now, son of Ahitub." And he answered, "Here I am, my lord." ¹³Saul then said to him, "Why have you and the son of Jesse conspired against me, in that you have given him bread and a sword and have inquired of God for him, so that he would rise up against me by lying in ambush as it is this day?"

¹⁴Then Ahimelech answered the king and said, "And who among all your servants is as faithful as David, even the king's son-in-law, who is captain over your guard, and is honored in your house? ¹⁵Did I just begin to inquire of God for him today? Far be it from me! Do not let the king impute anything to his servant or to any of the household of my father, for your servant knows nothing at all of this whole affair." ¹⁶But the king said, "You shall surely die, Ahimelech, you and all your father's household!" ¹⁷And the king said to the guards who were attending him, "Turn around and put the priests of the Lord to death, because their hand also is with David and because they knew that he was fleeing and did not reveal it to me." But the servants of the king were not willing to put forth their hands to attack the priests of the Lord. ¹⁸Then the king said to Doeg, "You turn around and attack the priests." And Doeg the Edomite turned around and attacked the priests, and he killed that day eighty-five men who wore the linen ephod. ¹⁹And he struck Nob the city of the priests with the edge of the sword, both men and women, children and infants; also oxen, donkeys, and sheep he struck with the edge of the sword.

²⁰But one son of Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, named Abiathar, escaped and fled after David. ²¹Abiathar told David that Saul had killed the priests of the Lord. ²²Then David said to Abiathar, "I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul. I have brought about the death of every person in your father's household. ²³Stay with me; do not be afraid, for he who seeks my life seeks your life, for you are safe with me."

(1 Sam. 22:6-23)

That is the context; let us hear is the Psalm that comes from it:

Why do you boast in evil, O mighty man?
The lovingkindness of God endures all day long.
²Your tongue devises destruction,
Like a sharp razor, O worker of deceit.
³You love evil more than good,
Falsehood more than speaking what is right. Selah.
⁴You love all words that devour,
O deceitful tongue.
⁵But God will break you down forever;
He will snatch you up and tear you away from your tent,
And uproot you from the land of the living. Selah.
⁶The righteous will see and fear,
And will laugh at him, saying,
⁷"Behold, the man who would not make God his refuge,
But trusted in the abundance of his riches
And was strong in his evil desire."

⁸But as for me, I am like a green olive tree in the house of God;
I trust in the lovingkindness of God forever and ever.

⁹I will give You thanks forever, because You have done it,

And I will wait on Your name, for it is good, in the presence of Your godly ones.

(Ps. 52, NASB, here and hereafter)

Here is some of the good fruit of the LORD from this wretched occasion; let us receive it as such and feed upon it. [Prayer.]

The first verse in this psalm may sound like a *non sequitur*, but is not:

Why do you boast in evil, O mighty man?

The lovingkindness of God endures all day long.

(Ps. 52:1b)

Here are pitted against each other two things: boastful wickedness of men in their strength, and the enduring lovingkindness of God, His steadfast love. *Might* is pitted against *lovekindness*, yes – but more than that, it is *man* pitted against *God*. Which will prevail? Who will prevail? If lovingkindness seems weak to us, or even foolish, we need to bear in mind that the foolishness of God is wiser than man, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (1 Cor. 1:25). What and who will prevail we know, that it is God and His lovingkindness that will prevail and so it is asked: why do you boast in evil, O mighty man? The question implies that such boasting is not good, is groundless, and that it will come up against something that will rip it to shreds. The psalmist could have recalled the power of the Lord – He is the Mighty God, He is the LORD God Almighty – but no, it is the lovingkindness, the enduring lovingkindness of God, that the psalmist brings to mind. Against those who would desire to snuff out patience, compassion, slowness to anger, and abounding lovingkindness, comes God giving all those things to His people. That will prevail, and must prevail. That is the theme of the psalmist, and he shows it to us in showing us the nature of the evil, God’s judgment upon it, and exults in the good grace God shows His people. Let us look at each in turn.

I. The Nature of Evil (v. 2-4).

In celebrating the lovingkindness of God, David does not gloss over the enormity of the evil pitted against it. Instead, he reveals it with precision and in its extremity:

²Your tongue devises destruction,

Like a sharp razor, O worker of deceit.

³You love evil more than good,

Falsehood more than speaking what is right. Selah.

⁴You love all words that devour,

O deceitful tongue.

(Ps. 52:2-4)

Two things are emphasized here, three times: *destruction* and *deceit*. Destruction is also figured as evil, which carries with it the sense not only moral evil but calamity, and devouring. Deceit is

also called falsehood, or lying, and the deceitful tongue. Speech is the focus of these words, as it is in so many of the proverbs, and in the book of James. I will return to that, but before that we must see that David is pointing to the nature of evil not just in a particular man, Doeg, but in general. To see this, let us remember what Jesus said to those from amongst the Pharisees who, hearing him speak of His being the light of the world, and being sent from the Father, believed him in some sense:

⁴⁴You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

(John 8:44)

Jesus emphasizes two things here: murder and lies. Destruction of life, and deceit. Doeg is showing his lineage here in what he does. He is of his father, the devil. Satan lied in the garden, sowing suspicion about God's motives in the one rule He gave them, and what the consequences would be – you will not surely die – but toward the end that *they would surely die*. A liar, and a murderer. And Doeg does the same. Let us not show that lineage – but apart from God's grace, that describes us as well. Can we own that? And if you believe the modern lie that we are all basically good, then realize that that is a lie that will kill you – the only way to life lies with the realization, first off, of how bad we are, and how that reveals itself in how we destroy, and deceive, even just with our speech.

David repeats this couplet three times with different words, which I understand to raise it to the superlative, the highest degree, in Hebrew speech. It is not enough to mention destruction and deceit once; but three times moves it to the extreme. All of the priests of the Lord at Nob, save one, put to death. The city, put to the edge of the sword with a thoroughness that was lacking in Saul when that was his command against the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15). But as usual in poetry like this, it is not mere repetition. What was done is revealed in the first, but where that comes from is revealed in the verses 3 and 4: you *love* evil more than good, you *love* words that devour. The affections of the heart are revealed; this is where his heart lay. Jesus teaches us through His words to the Pharisees:

³⁴You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. ³⁵The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil.

(Matt. 12:34-35)

Or a few chapters later Jesus is teaching His disciples with these words:

¹⁸But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.

(Matt. 15:18-19)

In the middle of this comes a pause, a Selah. Some read that word as a musical interlude – I don't know what sort of music you use to fill the space while the congregation considers this: that the heart loves lies, loves destruction. More than simple actions, but the affection of our heart. Here is what we are apart from the grace of God in Jesus.

But there is something else, large, here that we learn from remembering the account we read. In that account, Doeg is a man of few words. . . “I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub. ¹⁰He inquired of the Lord for him, gave him provisions, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine.” Those were his words. Why then the emphasis on speech in this psalm? If you commissioned me to write a psalm fitting for this occasion, I don’t think I would have focused on deceit, because not only are the words so few, but the words as recorded are, every one of them, factually true. Did Ahimelech give David provisions? Yes. Did he provide him with a sword? Yes. Did he inquire of the Lord for David? The story doesn’t relate that, but in Ahimelech’s response he admits he did: “Did I just begin to inquire of God for him today?” So, three times, yes. All true. And yet David focuses on his speech, calls it deceitful, devouring – why? Has David, who did lie to Ahimelech, miss the mark here? No! - this is the Holy Spirit speaking, and it is right judgment. This is large and I think we need to catch it and be warned by it. How can David call Doeg’s speech deceitful? Because Doeg knew how to position the truth for maximum misinterpretation and to the greatest harm to those he apparently hated, and to his own anticipated benefit: he alone would appear to be faithful to King Saul. He knew how Saul would receive this information, how this man would interpret this circumstance in which Ahimelech was innocent, and he omitted any words that might dissuade Saul from misinterpretation. Doeg didn’t have to invent lies because he knew Saul would do it for him. He lied by proxy. This is how bad we can be: we can figure out how to use true facts to serve a lie and thereby to destroy – or sprinkle the smallest amount of lie into truth to do the job. I have read that Hitler insisted his propaganda be as truthful as possible. You can hear the same thing at work from many TV preachers: 99% truth, 1% crucial lie that will take us off the narrow path. Or in many pulpits, what is more telling is what *is not said* rather than what *is said*, because the needed truth is omitted - just like what Doeg did not say what he could have, that might have saved Ahimelech, nor did he even just keep his mouth shut. Deceitful, devouring tongues we have, even when we stick to the truth – aren’t you glad I am not the psalmist, but that the Holy Spirit speaks to show us these things? Lord, save us from the deceitful, devouring tongue – those of others, and our own!

II. God’s Judgment upon the Wicked (v. 5-7).

Only the Lord can save us from this deceit and destruction, from ourselves and from others. He does so in two ways, by how He judges the wicked, and by the grace He shows His people. First, His judgment:

⁵But God will break you down forever;
He will snatch you up and tear you away from your tent,
And uproot you from the land of the living. Selah.
⁶The righteous will see and fear,
And will laugh at him, saying,
⁷“Behold, the man who would not make God his refuge,
But trusted in the abundance of his riches
And was strong in his evil desire.”

(Ps. 52:5-7)

Here is what the wicked purchase: death and derision. Destruction for themselves and shame before those whom he hated. A falling into the pit he dug for others, and holy ridicule.

There is a breaking down, or a destruction – the AV says “God shall likewise destroy thee for ever” – here is an everlasting destruction which surely pictures hell for us. The wicked die; He plucks them out of their tent, this mortal body, out of the land of the living and into judgment. Death should give us occasion to pause, to consider, as the Selah instructs us to do. Let us pause in the house of mourning, rather than linger in the house of feasting, as it should lead us to better judge not only what goes on around us, but within us, to keep us in the fear of the Lord.

⁶The righteous will see and fear,

(Ps. 52:6a)

And as we pause and reflect on the reality of death, we have to bear in mind what the Bible teaches us about death and what comes after. We need to bear in mind death is *the wages of sin* (Rom. 6:23). We have to bear this thought in mind:

⁴⁴ it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment,

(Hebrews 9:27)

Yes, we all die, the wicked and the righteous. We are sons of Adam. Just like the beasts we die, as Solomon reminds us (Eccl. 3:18-22). If all we look at is life under the sun, we will be perplexed and exasperated as was Solomon. Job has been reminding us of that for several months now as we have read through the book of Job: in this life, it doesn't always work out so cleanly as his friends expect: righteous suffer, wicked prosper. It made Asaph stumble; he saw the prosperity of the wicked, and he envied them, and it wasn't until he considered eternal things that he judged rightly.

¹⁶When I pondered to understand this,

It was troublesome in my sight

¹⁷Until I came into the sanctuary of God;

Then I perceived their end.

¹⁸Surely You set them in slippery places;

You cast them down to destruction.

(Ps. 73:16-18)

David repeats this theme in Ps. 37 again and again: do not fret when you see the wicked prosper. It will only last a lifetime – for each individual, that's as long as the injustice can stand. If we fail to account for eternity, this will cause us great consternation; in the light of eternity, all is clear.

God Himself holds the rebellious in derision (Ps. 2), but here He does so through His people. As we have worked through these psalms, we have seen David again and again go to God as refuge: he prays to God, He trusts in God's word, in God's manifold promises to him, praises that word, makes God not only his refuge but his portion – what a contrast between David, fleeing from Saul and taken from his worldly possessions, and this one, who would not make God his refuge but trusted in the abundance of his riches to deliver him – riches he anticipated, or riches he already had. But -

Riches do not profit in the day of wrath,
But righteousness delivers from death.

(Prov. 11:14)

He made himself strong in his evil desires, or, as the ESV translates it, “He sought refuge in His own destruction.” If we are not trusting in God, if we are not hidden in Him, if He is not our portion, then that is what we are doing: seeking refuge in our own destruction – in one lie or another by which we comfort or encourage ourselves, but to our own destruction. Let us flee from this! If you are trusting in anything other than God, seeking refuge anywhere else, repent and flee to God and have Him be your refuge and portion.

III. God’s Grace upon His People (v. 8-9).

As much time as is spent in this psalm on evil and on the consequences that God metes out upon the wicked, what overarches this entire psalm is the enduring lovingkindness of God. This psalm begins with it:

The lovingkindness of God endures all day long.

(Ps. 52:1b)

Here is the force against which all the boasted wickedness of man is utterly futile. Surely every martyr knew this: that the steadfast love of God is so strong and immense, so broad, long, high and deep, that all the rocks for throwing, lions with their teeth, and consuming fires or whatever else men in their wickedness invent, - that all these spend their energy against God’s lovingkindness towards His people only in futility. David was confident and rested in that. So confident was he, that when Abiathar joins him, he encourages him to stay with him, since Saul was seeking them both. I would have thought that a better strategy would have been to split up, but that reasoning doesn’t account for God’s promise to David, and that makes all the difference in the world. Though all the world be against you, if you are in Christ, you are in the safest place in the world. I have to preach that to myself; preach it to yourselves as well.

And so David ends this psalm with these words:

⁸But as for me, I am like a green olive tree in the house of God;
I trust in the lovingkindness of God forever and ever.

⁹I will give You thanks forever, because You have done it,

And I will wait on Your name, for it is good, in the presence of Your godly ones.

(Ps. 52:8-9)

Having seen God’s wrath upon the wicked, here we see *God’s grace upon His people*. What does this lovingkindness look like? How does God grant it to His people? We know that God is a refuge for His people, even their portion, and One most worthy of all trust as are His promises. Here, brothers and sisters, is Gospel; David here gives us words that are Good News to the weary soul, words that, knowing the fuller revelation of the Gospel in Jesus Christ, open beautifully to us. Let us look at God’s grace for His people – enjoy it afresh if you know it, desire it if you do not.

The first thing that the Holy Spirit points us to, through David, is *eternal life*. David says: “[b]ut as for me, I am like a green olive tree in the house of God”. This is not a boast; this is a confession, as we will see, of what God has done, and in putting it into a psalm to be sung by others, he wants all of God’s people to be able to confess this. A green olive tree. Green here means not color, but life. A live tree we call green, even if its bark is brown and its leaves are red like our Japanese maple. ‘Olive tree’ points to two things, I think. First is fruitfulness, some good coming from the tree. But the second is longevity; olive trees are well-known for their long lives. If you go to visit the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem, guides there will tell you that some of the trees likely date from a few centuries after the life of Christ. It is hard to reliably date these trees, apart from consistent witness, because the heartwood, which would be the oldest, is rotted out and missing. But successive generations, living in the same place, would have known and passed on to their children how old those trees were. Life, and length of life, point to eternal life, life everlasting. Yes, David longed for a return to public worship, and to be fruitful there, but, brothers and sisters, having pointed to a breaking down forever for the wicked, should I only point you to the worship that we have in the here and now, worship which should be (I hope is) very precious to us, but at the same time is weak and faltering, marred by weakness of one kind or another? This has to point to the fruitfulness that God will grant throughout eternity, worship of Him. For that, we need eternal life. Eternal life is not just the sort of life we have here, but without an end; it is a different sort of life. Our lives here are marked by death even before we too die: loss of family, loved ones, loss of trust, loss of health; homes can burn and a thousand memories with them even if we escape with our lives, cancer can claim parts of us like uprisings against an established order. Just like *shalom*, Hebraic peace, is not just the absence of war, eternal life is not simply the absence of death, but -

“This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”

(John 17:2)

Can anything excel this? Is not eternal life worth it? Is it not worth the giving up of family, barns, farms, to gain a hundred times more here and now, and hereafter eternal life? (Matt. 19:29, Mark 10:30, Luke 18:30) Is it worth loss of hand or foot, or eye to gain it? (Matt. 18:8) Is it worth hating your life in this world so that you will keep it to life eternal? (John 12:25) You know how our Lord answers all these questions.

We desire that for our children, that they be like olive trees around our table (Ps. 128:3): fruitful and destined to enjoy everlasting life, rather than the second death. What are options for them, or for any of us? Eternal life, or eternal punishment. When the Son of Man comes in glory, with His angels, and sits upon His throne to judge, to separate the sheep from the goats, we read:

“These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

(Matt. 25:46)

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Rom. 6:23)

We know why Christ came the first time: to be lifted up, so that whoever believes in Him would have eternal life. Here is the love of God for a rebellious house: that He gave His only begotten,

that Son in whom He was well-pleased, “that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:15-16) The choice is clear again later in that chapter:

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

(John 3:36)

Those are the choices: snatched up from your tent, uprooted from the land of the living, broken down forever, or: like a green olive tree in the house of God. When Paul says, at the beginning of the book of Titus (1:2), regarding “the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago,” I have to believe that passages like this from David are part of that promise.

There is much more that could be said there, but we must move on. The second thing that David points to is *trust*, as he has in so many other places in these psalms – in other words: *faith*. “I trust in the lovingkindness of God forever and ever.” Faith is the fitting instrument for God to use in His grace shown to His people. Our total inability to save ourselves means that no work is fitting to save us, but only faith,

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; ⁹not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

(Eph. 2:8-10)

Faith is fitting, and faith is necessary, not as the one small work we can manage, but as the first thing that God grants so that He is most glorified. We must trust in God, and in His lovingkindness, His steadfast love, as David has encouraged us so many times before, and note that it is forever and ever. We trust Him for things eternal and we will trust Him eternally.

And God is the one who grants all this, for the third thing that David confesses here is that, as we saw in Ps. 57, it is *God who accomplishes*. “I will give You thanks forever, because You have done it.” God accomplishes all things for me, God completes His good work, He fulfills His purposes toward me. Our salvation by grace through faith – it is not of ourselves, it is the gift of God, so that not only should we not boast of wickedness, like Doeg, but we cannot boast of our works, for we are His workmanship. It is all God’s work – we were created in Christ Jesus, God prepared our good works for us, those we walk in - , and it is fitting that we respond with gratitude, with thanksgiving.

Next David says that “And I will wait on Your name, for it is good.” He has been given a heart to *wait for God’s name*. That is the fourth thing we see: he *waits for God’s good name*. More lovingkindness. Do you love the names of God that reveal Him in what He is and what He does? Do you love the God Who Sees, as David did, this God who knew his path, and how strewn with snares it was? Do you love the name of Jesus, given that name because He saves His people from their sins? Do you love the name of Emmanuel, God with us? Do you not only love, but *wait* for those names? Wait for the fullness of what they mean to you? Will you wait for the God who Sees, for His perfect timing in delivering you from the present distress, the present persecution, or simply from this vale of tears, to show you that He has seen your path all this time?

Precious in His eyes are the death of all his saints. Will you wait for the name of Jesus, for it is good, and there is a full salvation ready to be revealed at the last time? Will you wait for the name of Emmanuel, be satisfied in the abiding Spirit that He has given us, which He sent to us, until such time as we are in that place where we dwell with God, He being our God, and we His people, until that everlasting tabernacling of God with man? Here is faith fleshed out in waiting, in living in the hope, the sure and certain hope, of life eternal.

Lastly, we see that this waiting for God's good name is not in isolation, but "in the presence of Your godly ones." Again and again through these psalms David desires other people. That is understandable for a person fleeing and largely alone, but these words, handed over to the choir director, means he knows it is needed for those gathered in congregations as well. In Ps. 34 he desired to increase the praises in the mouths of others. In Ps. 142 he looked forward to be surrounded by the righteous. In the midst of dire circumstances, disappointment with people, betrayal, hurt, and so much that has been vandalized in our culture at large and in our lives, we have to avoid the real temptation to simply withdraw to ourselves or our families. We need to worship as families, as couples, if God has granted us those situations. But for all of us it is also true: we need the body of Christ at large, just as for those alone, for whatever reasons, it is so acutely and obviously needed. God saves us into a body. And because we are not infinite, we are called into local bodies of other particular sinners for whom the blood of Christ has been shed. All the apostles commend the love of the brethren in no uncertain terms – the brethren, "the excellent ones in whom is all my delight."

In conclusion know this, brothers and sisters: that all the boasted wickedness of man is nothing compared to the enduring lovingkindness of God. If God be for you, who can be against you? Destruction and deceit which mark the evil that we see in this present age, has its appointed end executed by God, in repentance through the working of the Holy Spirit (and for such we pray), or through eternal judgment, and He delivers all His saints, all of whom have had to repent of their sins, to life eternal. It is His promise, to be trusted in and waited for.

Preached, it is my prayer, for God's glory and for the comfort and the strengthening of
His people, 2/10/19
Strict quotations are from NASB