

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

David reproves wicked counsellors and judges, who pervert justice, and stir up the strong against the weak and innocent, Psalm 58:1-5. He foretells their destruction, and describes the nature of it, Psalm 58:6-9. The righteous, seeing this, will magnify God's justice and providence, Psalm 58:10, Psalm 58:11.

The title seems to have no reference to the subject of the Psalm. See the introduction to Psalm 57:1-11 (note). Saul having attempted the life of David, the latter was obliged to flee from the court, and take refuge in the deserts of Judea. Saul, missing him, is supposed by Bishop Patrick to have called a council, when they, to ingratiate themselves with the monarch, adjudged David to be guilty of treason in aspiring to the throne of Israel. This being made known to David was the cause of this Psalm. It is a good lesson to all kings, judges, and civil magistrates; and from it they obtain maxims to regulate their conduct and influence their decisions; and at the same time they may discern the awful account they must give to God, and the dreadful punishment they shall incur who prostitute justice to serve sinister ends.

Verse 1

Do ye indeed speak righteousness - Or, O cabinet seeing ye profess to act according to the principles of justice, why do ye not give righteous counsels and just decisions, ye sons of men? Or, it may be an irony: What excellent judges you are! well do ye judge according to law and justice, when ye give decisions not founded on any law, nor supported by any principle of justice! To please your master, ye pervert judgment; and take part against the innocent, in order to retain your places and their emoluments. Saul's counsellors appear to have done so, though in their consciences they must have been satisfied of David's innocence.

Verse 2

Yea, in heart ye work wickedness - With their tongues they had spoken maliciously, and given evil counsel. In their hearts they meditated nothing but wickedness. And though in their hands they held the scales of justice, yet in their use of them they were balances of injustice and violence. This is the fact to which the psalmist alludes, and the figure which he uses is that of justice with her scales or balances, which, though it might be the emblem of the court, yet it did not prevail in the practice of these magistrates and counsellors.

Verse 3

The wicked are estranged from the womb - "This," says Dr. Kennicott, "and the next two verses, I take to be the answer of Jehovah to the question in the two first verses, as the Psalm 58:6, Psalm 58:7, and Psalm 58:8, are the answer of the psalmist, and the remainder contains the decree of Jehovah." He calls these wicked men, men who had been always wicked, originally and naturally bad, and brought up in falsehood, flattery, and lying. The part they acted now was quite in character.

Verse 4

Their poison is like the poison of a serpent - When they bite, they convey poison into the wound, as the serpent does. They not only injure you by outward acts, but by their malevolence they poison your reputation. They do you as much evil as they can, and propagate the worst reports that others may have you in abhorrence, treat you as a bad and dangerous man; and thus, as the poison from the bite of the serpent is conveyed into the whole mass of blood, and circulates with it through all the system, carrying death every where; so they injurious speeches and vile insinuations circulate through society, and poison and blast your reputation in every place. Such is the slanderer, and such his influence in society. From such no reputation is safe; with such no character is sacred; and against such there is no defense. God alone can shield the innocent from the envenomed tongue and lying lips of such inward monsters in the shape of men.

Like the deaf adder that stoppeth her ear - It is a fact that cannot be disputed with any show of reason, that in ancient times there were persons that charmed, lulled to inactivity, or professed to charm, serpents, so as to prevent them from biting. See Ecclesiastes 10:11; Jeremiah 8:17. The prince of Roman poets states the fact, Virg. Ecl. viii., ver. 71.

Frigidus in prati cantando rumpitur anguis.

"In the meadows the cold snake is burst by incantation."

The same author, Aen. vii., ver. 750, gives us the following account of the skill of Umbro, a priest of the Marrubians: -

Quin et Marru bia venit de gente sacerdos,
Fronde super galeam, et felici comptus oliva,

Archippi regis missu, fortissimus Umbro;
 Vipereo generi et graviter spirantibus hydris,
 Spargere qui somnos cantuque manuque solebat,
 Mulcebatque iras, et morsus arte levabat.
 "Umbro, the brave Marubian priest, was there,
 Sent by the Marsian monarch to the war.
 The smiling olive with her verdant boughs
 Shades his bright helmet, and adorns his brows.
 His charms in peace the furious serpent keep,
 And lull the envenomed viper's race to sleep:
 His healing hand allayed the raging pain;
 And at his touch the poisons fled again."
 Pitt.

There is a particular sect of the Hindoos who profess to bring serpents into subjection, and deprive them of their poison, by incantation. See at the end of this Psalm.

Verse 5

Which will not hearken to the voice of charmers - The old Psalter translates and paraphrases these two verses curiously: -

Vulg. Furor illis secundum similitudinem serpentis; sicut aspidis surdae et obturantis aures suas: Quae non exaudiet vocem incantantium et venefici in cantantis sapienter.

Trans. Wodes (madness) til thaim aftir the liking of the neddier, as of the snake domb and stoppand her eres.

Paraph. Right calles he tham wod, (mad), for that hafe na witte to se whider that ga: for that louke thair eghen, and renny's till the are thaire wodness til clumsthed that wil nocht be turned as of the snake that festis (fastens) the ta ere til the erth, and the tother ere stoppis with hir taile: Sua do thai that thai here not Godis word; that stope thair eris with luf of erthli thing that thai delite thaim in; and with thair taile, that es with all synnes, that that will nocht amend.

Trans. The whitte salle nocht here the voyce of charmand, and of the venim in akare of charmand wisli.

Paraph. This snake stopis hir eres that she be nocht broth to light; for if she herd it, she come forth sone, he charmes swa wysli in his craft. Swa the wikkid men wit nocht here the voyce of Crist and his lufers that are wys charmes; for thi wild (would) bring them till light of heven. Wyt ye well (know) that he (i.e., Christ) lufes nocht charmers and venim makers but be (by) vices of bestes, he takes lickening of vices of men.

It seems as if there were a species of snake or adder that is nearly deaf; and as their instinct informs them that if they listen to the sounds which charmers use they shall become a prey; therefore they stop their ears to prevent the little hearing they have from being the means of their destruction. To this the Old Psalter refers. We have also an account of a species of snake, which, if it cast its eye on the charmer, feels itself obliged to come out of its hole; it therefore keeps close, and takes care neither to see nor be seen. To this also the Old Psalter alludes; and of this fact, if it be one, he makes a good use.

Verse 6

Break their teeth - He still compares Saul, his captains, and his courtiers, to lions; and as a lion's power of doing mischief is greatly lessened if all his teeth be broken, so he prays that God may take away their power and means of pursuing their bloody purpose. But he may probably have the serpents in view of which he speaks in the preceding verse; break their teeth - destroy the fangs of these serpents, in which their poison is contained. This will amount to the same meaning as above. Save me from the adders - the sly and poisonous slanderers: save me also from the lions - the tyrannical and blood-thirsty men.

Verse 7

Let them melt away as waters - Let them be minished away like the waters which sometimes run in the desert, but are soon evaporated by the sun, or absorbed by the sand.

When he bendeth his bow - When my adversaries aim their envenomed shafts against me, let their arrows not only fall short of the mark, but be broken to pieces in the flight. Some apply this to God. When he bends his bow against them, they shall all be exterminated.

Verse 8

As a snail which melteth - The Chaldee reads the verse thus: "They shall melt away in their sins as water flows off; as the creeping snail that smears its track; as the untimely birth and the blind mole, which do not see the sun."

The original word שֶׁבִיל (shablul), a snail, is either from שֶׁבִיל (shebil), a path, because it leaves a

shining path after it by emitting a portion of slime, and thus glaring the ground; and therefore might be emphatically called the pathmaker; or from $\text{x}^{\text{TM}}\text{x}^{\text{C}}\text{x}'$ (yashab) to dwell, x' (be), in, $\text{x}\text{œ}\text{x}^{\text{C}}\text{x}'$ (lul), a winding or spiral shell, which is well known to be its house, and which it always inhabits; for when it is not coiled up within this shell, it carries it with it wheresoever it goes. See Bochart. These figures need no farther explanation.

Verse 9

Before your pots can feel the thorns - Ye shall be destroyed with a sudden destruction. From the time that the fire of God's wrath is kindled about you, it will be but as a moment before ye be entirely consumed by it: so very short will be the time, that it may be likened to the heat of the first blaze of dry thorns under a pot, that has not as yet been able to penetrate the metal, and warm what is contained in it.

A whirlwind - Or the suffocating simoon that destroys life in an instant, without previous warning: so, without pining sickness - while ye are living - lively and active, the whirlwind of God's wrath shall sweep you away.

Verse 10

The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance - He shall have a strong proof of the Divine providence, of God's hatred against sinners, and his continual care of his followers.

He shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked - This can only mean that the slaughter would be so great, and at the same time so very nigh to the dwelling of the righteous, that he could not go out without dipping his feet in the blood of the wicked. The Syriac, Vulgate, Septuagint, Ethiopic, Arabic, and Anglo-Saxon, read hands instead of feet. Every thing that is vindictive in the Psalms must be considered as totally alien from the spirit of the Gospel, and not at all, under our dispensation, to be imitated. If the passage above be really vindictive, and it certainly will admit of the interpretation given above, it is to be considered as not belonging to that state in which the Son of man is come, not to destroy men's lives, but to save.

Verse 11

So that a man shall say - That is, people, seeing these just judgments of God, shall say, There is a reward ($\text{x}\text{œ}\text{x}'\text{x}^{\text{TM}}$ (peri), fruit) to the righteous man. He has not sown his seed in vain; he has not planted and watered in vain: he has the fruit of his labors, he eats the fruit of his doings. But wo to the wicked, it is ill with him; for the reward of his hands has been given him.

He is a God that judgeth in the earth - There is a God who does not entirely defer judgment till the judgment-day; but executes judgment now, even in this earth; and thus continues to give such a proof of his hatred to sin and love to his followers that every considerate mind is convinced of it. And hence arise the indisputable maxims: "There is, even here, a reward for the righteous;" "There is a God who, even now, judgeth in the earth."

I have seen Indian priests who professed to charm, not only serpents, but the most ferocious wild beasts; even the enraged elephant, and the royal tiger! Two priests of Budhoo, educated under my own care, repeated the Sanscrit incantations to me, and solemnly asserted that they had seen the power of them repeatedly and successfully put to the test. I have mislaid these incantations, else I should insert them as a curiosity; for to charms of the same nature the psalmist most undoubtedly alludes.

The term $\text{x}\text{—}\text{x}^{\text{C}}\text{x}'$ (chober), which we translate charmer, comes from $\text{x}\text{—}\text{x}'\text{x}'$ to join, or put together; i.e., certain unintelligible words or sentences, which formed the spell.

I once met with a man who professed to remove diseases by pronouncing an unintelligible jingling jargon of words oddly tacked together. I met with him one morning proceeding to the cure of a horse affected with the farcin. With a very grave countenance he stood before the diseased animal, and, taking off his hat, devoutly muttered the following words; which, as a matter of peculiar favor, he afterwards taught me, well knowing that I could never use them successfully, because not taught me by a woman; "for," said he, "to use them with success, a man must be taught them by a woman, and a woman by a man." What the genuine orthography may be I cannot pretend to say, as I am entirely ignorant of the language, if the words belong to any language: but the following words exactly express his sounds: -

Murry fin a liff cree

Murry fin a liss cree

Ard fin deriv dhoo

Murry fin firey fu

Murry fin elph yew

When he had repeated these words nine times, he put on his hat and walked off, but he was to return the next morning, and so on for nine mornings successively, always before he had broken his fast. The mother of the above person, a very old woman, and by many reputed a witch, professed to do miracles by pronouncing, or

rather muttering, certain words or sounds, and by measuring with a cord the diseased parts of the sick person. I saw her practice twice: 1st, on a person afflicted with a violent headache, or rather the effects of a coup de soleil; and, 2ndly, on one who had got a dangerous mote or splinter in his eye. In the first case she began to measure the head, round the temples, marking the length; then from the vertex, under the chin, and so up to the vertex again, marking that length. Then, by observing the dimensions, passed judgment on the want of proportion in the two admeasurements, and said the brain was compressed by the sinking down of the skull. She then began her incantations, muttering under her breath a supplication to certain divine and angelic beings, to come and lift up the bones, that they might no longer compress the brain. She then repeated her admeasurements, and showed how much was gained towards a restoration of the proportions from the spell already muttered. The spell was again muttered, the measurements repeated, and at each time a comparison of the first measurement was made with the succeeding, till at last she said she had the due proportions; that the disease, or rather the cause of it, was removed; and that the operations were no longer necessary.

In the case of the diseased eye, her manner was different. She took a cup of clean pure water, and washed her mouth well. Having done so, she filled her mouth with the same water, and walked to and fro in the apartment (the patient sitting in the midst of the floor) muttering her spell, of which nothing could be heard but a grumbling noise. She then emptied her mouth into a clean white bason, and showed the motes which had been conveyed out of the patient's eye into the water in her mouth, while engaged in muttering the incantation! She proffered to teach me her wonder-working words; but the sounds were so very uncouth, if not barbarous, that I know no combination of letters by which I could convey the pronunciation.

Ridiculous as all this may appear, it shows that this incantation work is conducted in the present day, both in Asia and Europe, where it is professed, in precisely the same manner in which it was conducted formerly, by pronouncing, or rather muttering certain words or sounds, to which they attach supernatural power and efficiency. And from this came the term spell: Anglo-Saxon a word, a charm, composed of such supposed powerful words; and (wyrkan spell) signified among our ancestors to use enchantments.