Faith in the Face of Evil

Psalm 52

When dealing with unspeakable evil, many will ask, "Where is God?" It functions more as an accusation, as if He is to blame Him for letting it happen. In Psalm 52 David confronts the murder of 85 priests and an unknown number of men, women, children, and infants in the city of Nob. He responds with faith in the face of evil.

Summary & Structure

Psalm 52 forms a chiasm:

Superscription: To the Chief Musician, On the evil plot against the house of Ahimelech
1-4 The wicked boasts & devises destruction
5 God will destroy and uproot you
6-7 The righteous fear God and laugh at folly
8-9 He flourishes in God's house while praising and waiting on Him

The House of Ahimelech

The scene of this psalm occurs after David visits the tabernacle at Nob, a city where the priests lived. In 1 Samuel 21 David is on the run from Saul who is trying to murder him. In need of food, he asks Ahimelech the priest for bread saying the king has sent him on private business. This should have protected the Ahimelech from being accused of harboring and helping David. There's no bread so the priest gives David the showbread from the tabernacle, as well as the sword of Goliath which happens to be there wrapped up behind the ephod (v. 9). Doeg the Edomite also happens to be there and sees this take place (v. 7). Later when Saul is raging and accusing his men of conspiring against him to protect David, Doeg tells him that Ahimelech sought the Lord for David and gave him bread and the sword (22:10). Saul then summons Ahimelech and the priests to accuse him of conspiracy, which he denies and points out that David is his most faithful servant (v. 14). Saul orders his servants to kill the priests of the Lord, and when they won't, he commands Doeg to do it which he does along with the men, women, children, infants, oxen, donkeys, and sheep in the city of Nob (vv. 18-19). Abiathar, son of Ahimelech, escapes to tell David who responds: "I have caused the death of all the persons of your father's house. Stay with me; do not fear. For he who seeks my life seeks your life, but with me you shall be safe" (v. 23).

The Power of the Tongue

The proverb, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, / And those who love it will eat its fruit" (Prov. 18:21), is no hyperbole. Good words give life by edifying, encouraging, correcting, teaching, motivating and blessing others. Those who love that power feed on it. Those who hate wisdom and the wisdom of words love death (Prov. 8:31). Doeg was a worm-tongue, playing on the fear, paranoia, insecurity, and madness of Saul who was still completely responsible for his actions. Doeg boasts in this evil (v. 1). David seems to mock him when he calls him, "O mighty man." Doeg deceived his king and took a bunch of soldiers to murder unprotected priests and civilians, women and children. "Why?", David wants to know. It requires reflection: "You love evil more than good, / Lying rather than speaking righteousness. *Selah*" (v. 3). The obvious answer is to get stuff, but Doeg was already in charge. He hates David and loves evil because he does, and it ultimately makes no sense. Sin and sinful words are irrational.

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Just Judgment

This is why God will destroy Doeg forever (v. 5). He can't be in the Lord's presence like this and wouldn't want to be anyway. David sees the justice of God coming: "He shall take you away, and pluck you out of your dwelling place, / And uproot you from the land of the living. *Selah*" (v. 5). This is sober, careful, measured, and weighed talionic justice. David has a sober understanding of the way his actions led to this tragedy and the strength to tell Abiathar that's' how it happened. His actions were not sinful, and in fact Jesus cites this scene as a righteous example of doing what is technically unlawful, since the showbread was only for priests, but not at all unlawful in this circumstance (Matt. 12:3-4). He was right to go to Nob, right to ask for the bread and the sword, and faithfully wise to deceive Ahimelech about his flight from Saul. David doesn't respond to this evil by blaming himself nor by wanting ungodly personal vengeance. Instead, he turns to the perfect justice of God. He's confident that the Lord will mete out justice both on earth and afterwards. Romans 12:19: "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." To love someone biblically is treat them lawfully from the heart. Apply the golden rule and put yourself in Doeg's shoes. If you had done that, how would you want to be warned? Psalm 52 is an honest description of the depth of his wickedness and the consequences that will follow apart from repentance.

Righteous Laughter

This righteous respond to the fall of the wicked in two ways: "The righteous also shall see and fear, / And shall laugh at him" (v. 6). Evangelical Christians who believe the Holy Spirit inspired the entire canon of Scripture like the first part but stumble at the laughter. We don't want to sinfully scorn and despise the wicked which flows easily from pride. But this isn't the only kind of laughter. Jesus mocks the scribes and Pharisees at length in Matthew 23. Like David in Psalm 52, He has a point. Some will respond with repentance, and others will learn a lot about foolishness, hypocrisy, and evil: "They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven" (vv. 6-8). So Jesus laughs and makes others laugh. The Father laughs at those who try to overthrow His reign (Ps. 2:4). And the righteous laugh at Doeg and his ilk who do not make God their strength but trust in wealth and double down on wickedness (v. 7). Humor relies on surprise and incongruity, and evil rebellion against God's good and almighty power sets up a contrast, the rat against the lion. It's true we can go wrong in our laughter and so we should be wise like David who also sang Psalm 51. We can go wrong in our love, too, lacking zeal and godly jealously.

Lasting Praise

Olive trees can live from 300 to 500 years, some breaking 1000 like the Tree of Vouves in Crete which at least 2000 years old. Evil is a short-term and fruitless game, but David is like a green olive tree in the house of God, trusting in *His* mercy forever and ever (v. 8). The tabernacle is lit with olive oil in the lampstand (Ex. 27:20), it's placed on grain offerings, the showbread on the table is baked with it (Ex. 29:2), and children are like olive trees around the table (Ps. 128:3). Sorrow about at the tragedy at Nob is appropriate and necessary, but it's not the final word. Saul and Doeg tried to end the priesthood, obliterating the worship of the living God. Abiathar escaped and God will sort it out—David says He has done it so he wait on His name in the presence of the saints (v. 9). That's how he went to worship after this, full of faith to move mountains.