

Psalm 52

Office of Readings Wednesday Week 2

This is a meditation on the behaviour and destiny of those who do evil and those who do good. The former boast of the evil that they have the power to do, but they will be uprooted from their tent by God. This is in stark contrast to those who are faithful to the covenant. They trust in God and are like a fruitful olive in God's house. We recall Jesus' words: 'You cannot serve God and wealth' (Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:13).

The title reads: 'To the leader. A Maskil* of David, when Doeg the Edomite came to Saul and said to him, "David has come to the house of Ahimelech".' The account is found in 1Samuel 21:8; and 22:6ff.

¹O mighty one, why do you boast of God's kindness* and do evil?

or

¹O mighty one, why do you boast of evil done against the godly?

or

¹O mighty one, why do you boast of evil and insult God?

The difficulty with verse one is with the translation of the Hebrew *ḥsḏ* [חַסֵּד]. If we read it as *ḥesed* it refers to God's kindness, and the psalmist is accusing those who wield power ('O mighty one') of presuming on the goodness of God while ignoring the covenant and being interested only in acquiring wealth unjustly. This idea can be found in Sirach:

Do not say, 'I sinned, yet what has happened to me?' for the Lord is slow to anger.

Do not be so confident of forgiveness that you add sin to sin.

Do not say, 'His mercy is great, He will forgive the multitude of my sins', for both mercy and wrath are with Him, and his anger will rest on sinners.

– Sirach 5:4-6

If we read it as *ḥāsîd*, [חַסִּיד] the psalmist is accusing the powerful of doing evil against those who are faithful to the covenant.

However, in Leviticus 20:17 and Proverbs 14:34, *ḥsḏ* has another meaning. It is translated 'insult', 'disgrace'. If this is the intended meaning here, the psalmist is accusing them of boasting of their evil and insulting God. The evil of which they are guilty is described in verses two to four.

²All day long you are plotting destruction. Your tongue is like a sharp razor, you who deal in deceit.

³You prefer evil to good, and choose to lie in preference to speaking the truth. [Selah*]

⁴You love the destructive word, O deceitful tongue.

The psalmist warns the evil that they will suffer the consequences of the choices which they are making.

Jesus, too, speaks of the uprooting of those who do evil:

Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.

– Matthew 15:13

By contrast, the just maintain a profound sense of awe, living their life in the presence of their God.

The psalm ends in a cry of praise and thanksgiving. The Hebrew text includes *hesed* [חֶסֶד], referring to God's kindness, and *hāsîd* [חֲסִיד], referring to those who are 'faithful' to God's covenant love (see verse one).

The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of YHWH; they flourish in the courts of our God. In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap.

– Psalm 92:12-14

Note the following from Paul:

You, a wild olive shoot, were grafted to share the rich root of the olive tree.

– Romans 11:17

The psalmist knows where he stands: with the just, whose hope is not in wealth or power but in the grace of God.

⁵Very well, God will break you down and remove you forever; God will snatch you from your tent and uproot you from the land of the living.

[Selah*]

⁶The just* will see, and fear*, and will laugh at the evildoer, saying,

⁷So this is the one who would not take refuge in God, but trusted* in the power of wealth and grew powerful through crime!

⁸Here am I like a green olive tree in the house of God.

I have always trusted in the kindness* of God.

⁹I will thank you for evermore, because of what you have done.

In the presence of the faithful I hope* in your name, for it is good.