

Ponderings in the Psalms

The following is a Messianic Study on

Psalm 52

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The *Pondering* studies were published in the Brit Chadashah Newsletter. Brit Chadashah (*New Covenant*) is a Messianic Fellowship in Sydney. Led by Paul Cohen a Jewish believer in Messiah Yeshua (Jesus). We meet together fortnightly for Bible studies from a Messianic Jewish Perspective. We are a unique fellowship made up of Jewish and Gentile people who are believers in Yeshua as the promised Messiah of Israel.

If you don't know Yeshua as your Messiah, we encourage you to search out the Scriptures for yourself. God promised in the book of Jeremiah, "*You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart*" (Jeremiah 29:13). And we hope you will make contact with us so that we can share more about the Messiah, His life and ministry.

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Pondering Psalms 52

Introduction

This psalm appears to be a part of a trilogy of *flight* Psalms: we read about David fleeing because of Absalom's attempt to overthrow the kingdom in Psalm 3, then there is the flight from Abimelech in Psalm 34, and finally, we read that David needs to flee after Doeg, the Edomite, betrays him to king Saul (Psalm 52:1 or superscript, 1 Samuel 21:7; 22:9,18,22). In these three psalms David is on the run from somebody.

Background to the conflict between Saul and David (1 Samuel 9:1-10:16 - 2 Samuel 8:1-15).

King Saul was so intent on killing David, that David had to flee. He escaped to the priestly city of Nob,¹ which is about 4 kilometres from the citadel of Zion (the oldest part of Jerusalem). There he received supplies, guidance and Goliath's sword from Ahimelech, the high priest (1 Samuel 21:8).

The exchange between Ahimelech and David was witnessed by one of King Saul's chief herdsmen, an Edomite named Doeg דֹּעַג (pronounced *Do'-eg*). Edom was a perpetual enemy of Israel, and many of the Edomites were taken as prisoners of war by Saul (1 Samuel 14:47), and they would have been put to work. Doeg would have started as a herdsman, but it appears that he quickly rose to chief herdsmen (1 Samuel 21:7). In this psalm Doeg is called a גִּבּוֹר (*gibbor*) a mighty man (Psalm 52:1). This is at the same time as David, and his mighty men, were roaming the country. Doeg is no longer just a herdsman, nor is he part of the regular army, but he was a hand-picked warrior. In all six Biblical references to him, he is called an Edomite, emphasising his foreign origin.

It seems strange that Doeg, a pagan shepherd, would be "*detained before the LORD*" at the sanctuary at Nob (1 Samuel 21:7). Considering his later actions, it does not appear that he is a convert, or one who is making a purification vow (Leviticus 13:4, 11, 21). It is more likely that he was on a spy mission, keeping an eye on whether the priests supported King Saul or David. Or it might be that he was on a special mission, guarding one of Saul's sons, which was in keeping with his *gibbor* status.

When Doeg the Edomite reported back to king Saul, he was commanded to kill, and on that day alone he killed eighty-five priests. After that he killed the inhabitants of the city of Nob (1 Samuel 22:18-19), killing "*both men and women, children and infants.*" The Jewish historian Josephus makes it clear that these are two distinct events. In total he killed three hundred and eighty-five members of the priestly family.² He was ruthless and merciless, and only one priest, Abiathar escaped and found refuge with David.

¹ Nov (Hebrew: נוב) This city Nob was not a city allotted to the priests, and it seems the tabernacle was now at Nob.

It is likely that Nob was inside the Tribal land belonging to Benjamin, it was most likely just west of Jerusalem. Not to be confused with the modern Israeli moshav in the southern Golan Heights.

² The number of priests slain according to the LXX and Josephus is three hundred and eighty-five. Josephus seems to indicate that it happened in two phases first Doeg killed a priest, secondly Saul also sent men to Nob. "Accordingly, he (Doeg) took to his assistance such wicked men as were like himself, and slew Ahimelech and all his family, who were in all three hundred and eighty-five. Saul also sent to Nob, the city of the priests, and slew all that were there, without sparing either women or children, or any other age" (Antiquities 6.12.6).

David felt responsible for this great tragedy; in these three Psalms we also see the depth of David's character, that despite the horrendous troubles, he kept his eyes on God. This is an important lesson in life for you and me, we must *keep our eyes on God*.

Desperate Needs; Defamed - Psalm 52:1-9

1. Psalm 52 the superscription (or verse 1)

For 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."

The director of music is informed to take note of this psalm, for this is a *maskil* מִשְׁכִּיל, a Hebrew word meaning *to make wise* or *bring understanding*. And so within this Psalm there is an education, the lesson is on the use of the tongue. As David's son Solomon observed "*Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits*" (Proverbs 18:21).

Here we see Doeg the Edomite slandering David and the priestly family of Ahimelech. From that time onwards Doeg serves as a symbol of for all evildoers who misuse the power of the tongue, while David, on the other hand, represents the righteous. This can be seen in his trust in God and the words of the Psalm. He is an example of saints who correctly use the power of the tongue.

As to the genre, this is a psalm of confidence, confidence in the LORD. This psalm is by King David, so that gives us a date of about 1000 BCE. David gives us the historical background, without going too deeply in it, and because he keeps the focus much wider, he makes this psalm applicable to every generation.

Slandering tongue - Psalm 52:1-3

**¹ Why do you boast in evil, O mighty man? The lovingkindness of God endures all day long. ² Your tongue devises destruction, Like a sharp razor, O worker of deceit. ³ You love evil more than good, Falsehood more than speaking what is right.
Selah.**

Doeg, a "*mighty man*," reads as an ironic statement because he is the opposite of that from God's perspective. Doeg's actions brought death and destruction. His boast of killing priests, defenceless men not trained in war, shows the act of a contemptible man. However great his boast, he was evil in the eyes of David and in the eyes of the LORD. He is condemned for both his deceitful tongue and for his abhorrent actions.

Throughout this psalm Doeg and God are contrasted; Doeg had slandered David; God had pronounced blessings and a Covenant upon David; Doeg brought destruction and death upon the priestly family, God brought restoration and a hope for the future for them. David's response to Doeg's slander and mass-murder is to place his life into the hands of God. David trusted that God would do what was right. That faith in God's inevitable and righteous judgment is brought out in verse 5.

Selah, the verse ends on the word Selah, סֶלָה In the book of Psalms, as mentioned in previous studies, this is most likely a musical notation, meaning pause, asking the choir to be silent for a moment.

And so, we too need to pause and reflect. Do we boast in evil, do we think of ourselves as mighty men and women oppressing the poor? Or in contrast to the world, do we trust in the lovingkindness (*chesed*) of God all day long and sing about that every day?

The reason for God's judgment - Psalm 52:4-5

**⁴ You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue. ⁵ But 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.**

A righteous God cannot tolerate evil forever. Because of the grace and patience of God, we may not see justice happen in our lifetime. Although the LORD is patient, the righteous have an assurance that God will act in His time. Note that the punishment will be God removing them from His presence forever.

Observe God's actions to the wicked. He "*will break*", "*will snatch*", will "*tear you away*" and will "*uproot you.*" The utter destruction of the wicked is portrayed. The point is that they stand condemned before the LORD, the Judge of all the earth, and will be removed "from the land of the living." They will cease to be, their actions and words have condemned them, and they will be judged (Matthew 12:34b-37).

The principle we see is that David understood that judgement would be metered out to the wicked. He leaves that with God, and he does not pray for personal vengeance. He could not make things right, and yet he could not be silent either. This too is a lesson for us; when we see evil we must speak up, and in prayer ask the Lord to act. Some of us may want to connect with the powerful of our day, the politicians, and petition them to protect the vulnerable!

Again there is a Selah pause, ponder and reflect.

Lessons in wisdom - Psalm 52:6-9

Then we come to the contrast, what can the righteous learn from Doeg? What can we learn from all who abuse their powers? David presents us with both sides.

The negative lesson is found in verses 6-7; the positive lesson is found in verses 8-9.

Negative lesson Psalm 52:6-7

**6 The 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."**

As we read these verses, we might be shocked that the righteous *laugh*. We do not want any to suffer and we do not gloat, even when an enemy falls (Proverbs 24:17-18), so this is not personal, vindictive laughter. No, they join in with the LORD (Psalm 2:4, 37:13, 59:8). I read this as a sign of relief and peace, knowing that true righteous justice is accomplished.

And so the righteous will observe and will fear as they understand God in His holiness. While the wicked reap what they have sown, based on the Abrahamic Covenant, they will receive from the LORD either blessing for blessing or curse for curse (Genesis 12).

The unrighteous are those who did not trust the Lord, but trusted in their wealth or power. The JPS translation ends with “*strengthened himself in his wickedness.*” This is what king Saul had done. Rather than trust the Lord, he had strengthened himself with wicked men, showing his true wicked desire for power and strength.

It is a struggle we still deal with, why do the wicked seem to prosper? Does God not care? We need to be like David, be men and women after God’s heart, leave the judgement to God, for while the wicked prosper here, God will judge all things in His timing.

Positive - Psalm 52:8-9

⁸ But 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. ⁹ I 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.

The conclusion of the psalm should not just be David’s desire, but also our longing, *I will trust and I will give thanks, and I will wait...* David’s situation had not changed, the problem had not been solved. Saul was still king and Doeg, the murderer, was still hunting David. And yet.... And yet David speaks to his heart, I will trust in *God’s unfailing love for ever and ever.* David is still on the run, yet he *gives thanks to God*, much like Silas and the apostle Paul *praying and singing hymns* when in jail (Acts 16:25). Their situation was not looking good, and yet they kept on praying and singing. We might believe this lockdown is harsh, but surely, we too can trust the Lord and pray and sing psalms and spiritual songs, and wait on His Name, for He is Good.

To wait on His name, means firstly that we are full of expectation that He will do something. And secondly, that we will continue steadfastly in His way. The Name of God is Good *because He is good* כִּי־טוֹב (*ki-tov*).

The metaphor of the righteous flourishing like a tree, would have been appealing to David, as he would no longer be roaming the country, seeking shelter and safety, but would be forever in the presence of God. It is claimed that an olive tree (a symbol of long life), can live for many hundreds of years. As such David paints another picture; the roots of the righteous go deep, while the wicked in verse 5, would be removed and uprooted. Another contrast is that the righteous man is in God’s house בַּיִת (*beit*), while the ungodly are removed from his tent (*ohel*).

Selah
Blessings in Messiah
Sue and Paul