

PSALM 37

Of David.

- ¹ Do not fret because of the wicked;
do not be envious of wrongdoers,
- ² for they will soon fade like the grass,
and wither like the green herb.

- ³ Trust in the LORD, and do good;
so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.
- ⁴ Take delight in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

- ⁵ Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will act.
- ⁶ He will make your vindication shine like the light,
and the justice of your cause like the noonday.

- ⁷ Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him;
do not fret over those who prosper in their way,
over those who carry out evil devices.

- ⁸ Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.
Do not fret—it leads only to evil.
- ⁹ For the wicked shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.

- ¹⁰ Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there.
- ¹¹ But the meek shall inherit the land,
and delight in abundant prosperity.

- ¹² The wicked plot against the righteous,
and gnash their teeth at them;
- ¹³ but the LORD laughs at the wicked,
for he sees that their day is coming.

- ¹⁴ The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows
to bring down the poor and needy,
to kill those who walk uprightly;
- ¹⁵ their sword shall enter their own heart,
and their bows shall be broken.

¹⁶ Better is a little that the righteous person has
than the abundance of many wicked.

¹⁷ For the arms of the wicked shall be broken,
but the LORD upholds the righteous.

¹⁸ The LORD knows the days of the blameless,
and their heritage will abide for ever;

¹⁹ they are not put to shame in evil times,
in the days of famine they have abundance.

²⁰ But the wicked perish,
and the enemies of the LORD are like the glory of the pastures;
they vanish—like smoke they vanish away.

²¹ The wicked borrow, and do not pay back,
but the righteous are generous and keep giving;

²² for those blessed by the LORD shall inherit the land,
but those cursed by him shall be cut off.

²³ Our steps are made firm by the LORD,
when he delights in our way;

²⁴ though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong,
for the LORD holds us by the hand.

²⁵ I have been young, and now am old,
yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread.

²⁶ They are ever giving liberally and lending,
and their children become a blessing.

²⁷ Depart from evil, and do good;
so you shall abide for ever.

²⁸ For the LORD loves justice;
he will not forsake his faithful ones.

The righteous shall be kept safe for ever,
but the children of the wicked shall be cut off.

²⁹ The righteous shall inherit the land,
and live in it for ever.

³⁰ The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom,
and their tongues speak justice.

³¹ The law of their God is in their hearts;
their steps do not slip.

- ³² The wicked watch for the righteous,
and seek to kill them.
- ³³ The LORD will not abandon them to their power,
or let them be condemned when they are brought to trial.
- ³⁴ Wait for the LORD, and keep to his way,
and he will exalt you to inherit the land;
you will look on the destruction of the wicked.
- ³⁵ I have seen the wicked oppressing,
and towering like a cedar of Lebanon.
- ³⁶ Again I passed by, and they were no more;
though I sought them, they could not be found.
- ³⁷ Mark the blameless, and behold the upright,
for there is posterity for the peaceable.
- ³⁸ But transgressors shall be altogether destroyed;
the posterity of the wicked shall be cut off.
- ³⁹ The salvation of the righteous is from the LORD;
he is their refuge in the time of trouble.
- ⁴⁰ The LORD helps them and rescues them;
he rescues them from the wicked, and saves them,
because they take refuge in him.

1 SAMUEL 22:6-23

⁶ Saul heard that David and those who were with him had been located. Saul was sitting at 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, you Benjaminites; will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards, will he make you all commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds?'⁸Is that why all of you have conspired against me? No one discloses to me when my son makes a league with the son of Jesse, none of you is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as he is doing today.⁹Doeg the Edomite, who was in charge of Saul's servants, answered, 'I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech son of Ahitub; ¹⁰he inquired of the LORD for him, gave him provisions, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine.'

¹¹ The king sent for the priest Ahimelech son of Ahitub and for all his father's house, the priests who were at Nob; and all of them came to the king. ¹²Saul said, 'Listen now, son of Ahitub.' He answered, 'Here I am, my lord.'¹³Saul said to him, 'Why have you conspired against me, you and the son of Jesse, by giving him bread and a

sword, and by inquiring of God for him, so that he has risen against me, to lie in wait, as he is doing today?’

14 Then Ahimelech answered the king, ‘Who among all your servants is so faithful as David? He is the king’s son-in-law, and is quick to do your bidding, and is honoured in your house. ¹⁵Is today the first time that I have inquired of God for him? By no means! Do not let the king impute anything to his servant or to any member of my father’s house; for your servant has known nothing of all this, much or little.’ ¹⁶The king said, ‘You shall surely die, Ahimelech, you and all your father’s house.’ ¹⁷The king said to the guard who stood around him, ‘Turn and kill the priests of the LORD, because their hand also is with David; they knew that he fled, and did not disclose it to me.’ But the servants of the king would not raise their hand to attack the priests of the LORD. ¹⁸Then the king said to Doeg, ‘You, Doeg, turn and attack the priests.’ Doeg the Edomite turned and attacked the priests; on that day he killed eighty-five who wore the linen ephod. ¹⁹Nob, the city of the priests, he put to the sword; men and women, children and infants, oxen, donkeys, and sheep, he put to the sword.

20 But one of the sons of Ahimelech son of Ahitub, named Abiathar, escaped and fled after David. ²¹Abiathar told David that Saul had killed the priests of the LORD. ²²David said to Abiathar, ‘I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul. I am responsible for the lives of all your father’s house. ²³Stay with me, and do not be afraid; for the one who seeks my life seeks your life; you will be safe with me.’

SERMON

There’s a lot of stuff happening in our nation right now, right? I mean, there’s always a lot happening, but things feel particularly terrible to me at this moment. I think it’s the kids in cages without medical care or soap thing, and maybe the crossing over into North Korea as if it’s a picnic stroll thing, and maybe it’s the looming shadow of real conflict with Iran thing. Or maybe it’s the image of Oscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his daughter Valeria drowned in the Rio Grande. Or, even more likely, all of this isn’t new, it just feels big because it’s acute. Because I could easily rehearse similar stories in different times, right? Images of Alan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach, Japanese-American families locked up in some of the same camps that now hold Hispanic children, looming aggression with Iraq or Russia or Germany or whomever, leaders cozying up to dictators for photos in South America or wherever. Same song, different key.

And as horrific as these stories are, we can trace them further back than just 50 years. Back to the Inquisition, the witch trials, the crusades, the persecuted Roman Christians, Jesus on the cross, King David, King Saul, and all the rest. It seems that if you want to see it, the thread of injustice and evil traces all the way back. In fact, that’s why we have the story of Cain and Able, of the apple in the garden. It’s not that we’re supposed to believe those stories as deep fact, truthful events that played out against a real historical backdrop. No, they’re myth and legend, the ancient Hebrew’s early grappling with an

explanation for evil in their midst. Why would brother kill brother? Did God create evil? Like Raven bringing light or stealing fire in the local indigenous legends of our area, Cain and Able, Adam and Eve, the apple and the snake...they're our myths of evil. And what they say is this: evil has been with us, from the very beginning. It can take brother from brother, son from mother, and it can cut us deeply, in our most tender and vulnerable places. And it arises, in many ways, as a byproduct of our own free will.

In the Christian tradition, we place a high and lofty value on the gift of free will. We believe that God has given each one of us the absolute ability to choose for ourselves who we will follow, what we will do, how we will act. And this, ultimately, allows us to freely choose to follow in the teachings and example of Christ, which makes it a valid choice. But the tremendous and horrible cost of free will is that evil must coexist. It must be an option to choose what is most wrong: to become violent and selfish, to ignore the needs of others and instead only see our own. What our school of theology would say is that God did not invent evil, but God allows evil, because otherwise our choices would be constrained and not actually choices, and thereby our free will would be destroyed.

And maybe free will isn't worth it, but that's a different conversation altogether, perhaps for another time.

Today's story, like so many of the stories in Samuel, it lays out the terrible consequences of choices made in anger and selfishness. And, in an odd way, it also gives us a path back to our own humanity.

We come in this story to King Saul, who is currently in the absolute rock bottom of his own madness and jealousy. He's been informed that God no longer stands behind his kingship, he's been abandoned by the prophet Samuel, and he is out for the head of his faithful servant, the young David. David has been on the run, fleeing with a band of loyal rebels to cave after cave. In some cases relying on the kindness of the towns he visits, in others, attacking and taking what supplies they need. And a few towns back he visited with the priests at Nob. Priests he had spoken with many times before.

And Saul is in hot, crazy pursuit of David, raging against even his own closest generals, fearing that the rot of treason might reach even the highest levels of his own ranks. It's not founded in reality so much as a marker of his deep paranoia and inability to trust. He hears that David has spoken with the priests at Nob, and calls them to account. The priests speak honestly with him: "Yes, of course we saw David, why wouldn't we? David has always been faithful to you, he served in your court, we've spoken to him before? Why is this time any different? There's nothing to fear!" But fear was the entirety of Saul's world, and he goes ballistic, ordering his men to slaughter the priests. It's a horrific crime, and the soldiers refuse. But Saul isn't having it, so he orders his general, Doeg, and whether out of real obedience to Saul or because he's afraid of being perceived as a traitor to the man in power, Doeg does it. And not just the priests, but the entire town of Nob. Men, women, children, dogs, cats, and cattle. The entire place leveled in a blood bath of Saul's madness and rage.

It is evil. It was evil for Saul to order it, and it was evil for Doeg to comply. Both men are complicit. And, rightfully, we might lay the blame at their feet.

But one man escaped. And he ran to David, telling him the whole story. And David's response is somewhat shocking. He says, "I am responsible for the lives of all your father's house." David offers safety and a different future, but first he takes responsibility for the evil and violence of Saul. Why? It wasn't his fault, right?

David offers us, here, a really interesting example of how to behave in the face of atrocity. He reminds me of a story I heard from a catholic theologian a few years back. I went to a series of lectures at St. Mary's Academy, downtown, presented by Megan McKenna. She has spent a good deal of her career working with indigenous groups around the globe, and she told a story about the Pueblo people who live down in the four corners region of Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona. McKenna was there with them for a lengthy period of time right after 9/11, and this bus full of tourists came by one day, as they often did to see the pueblos. And the tourists were chatting with a group of indigenous folks while she was nearby and a tourist asked, "How do you all see this terrible violence, this 9/11 that just happened?" or something like that. And the native woman who heard the question got quiet and began to chant in response, and soon all of the indigenous people were chanting with her, in their native language. The tourists were sort of freaked out, because they had no idea what they were saying. They got back on their bus and left. But McKenna, who speaks the language, understood. They were chanting, "all my relations, all my relations" over and over again.

And the meaning behind the chant was this: those men who hijacked a plane and flew it into a building and killed thousands, they are all our relations. And whatever is so broken in them as to commit such an atrocity, we are all responsible. We cannot wash our hands of the evil of others, we must take responsibility for it, as we are all connected, one to another. Whatever is broken in Saul, in a sense, David owns it, and he offers a new future moving forward. Whatever is broken in our nation, in our own leader, in ICE or the news pundits or even our own neighbor—we must take responsibility if we want to change the narrative moving forward. We have to say, "I take responsibility, because they are all my relations."

It's a revolutionary and deeply countercultural approach to rectifying evil, but it's one I believe in my core we are required to take, if we really do want to be human.