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## November 20th: Psalms 52, 53, 54 & Acts 18:24—19:7

November 20, 2020



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The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God!". Contrasting disciples of John in Ephesus.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Psalms 52. To the Choir Master, a Mascal of David, when Doeg the Edomite came and told Saul, David has come to the house of Ahimelech. Why do you boast of evil, O mighty man? The steadfast love of God endures all the day.

Your tongue plots destruction, like a sharp razor, you worker of deceit. You love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking what is right. You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue.

But God will break you down forever. He will snatch and tear you from your tent. He will uproot you from the land of the living.

The righteous shall see and fear, and shall laugh at him, saying, See the man who would not make God his refuge, but trusted in the abundance of his riches, and sought refuge

in his own destruction. But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God, forever and ever.

I will thank you forever, because you have done it. I will wait for your name, for it is good in the presence of the godly. Psalm 52 is one of the psalms whose historical occasion is given to us in its superscription.

It comes from one of the more tragic episodes in David's flight from King Saul. In 1 Samuel chapter 21, Paul visited the priests at Nob and was given Goliath's sword and bread for himself and his men by the priest. David had not informed the priest that he was on the run from King Saul.

They thought that he was on some mission on behalf of the king. We are informed that Doeg the Edomite, the chief of Saul's herdsmen, was present at the time and observed the interactions between David and Ahimelech the priest. In the following chapter, Doeg informed King Saul that he had seen David at Nob and that the priests had assisted him.

There is a grim outcome of all of this recorded for us in 1 Samuel chapter 22 verses 18 to 22. Then the king said to Doeg, You turn and strike the priests. And Doeg the Edomite turned and struck down the priests.

And he killed on that day eighty-five persons who wore the linen ephod. And Nob, the city of the priests, he put to the sword. Both man and woman, child and infant, ox, donkey and sheep, he put to the sword.

But one of the sons of Ahimelech, the son of Ahitab, named Abiathar, escaped and fled after David. And Abiathar told David that Saul had killed the priests of the Lord. And David said to Abiathar, I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul, I have occasioned the death of all the persons of your father's house.

Along with this reaction of David to the news in 1 Samuel chapter 22, this psalm records David's response to the actions of Doeg. The wicked man with which this psalm is concerned is typically identified as Doeg, although some have made a case that King Saul is the figure in view. Doeg is a pawn of Saul's, not David's principal opponent.

Although this psalm has a specific occasion in Doeg's treachery and violence, like many parts of scripture, it is not so tied to the episode that provoked it that it cannot be applied to numerous other situations. Gordon Wenham translates the perceptive comments of Jean-Marie Auers, who comments on this, The historical titles of the Psalter thus depict a David not yet established, whose tears and wandering steps are reckoned in the great divine book. This David is shaped according to the image of his poor people, and so becomes a model for Israel in his humiliation and wanderings.

The historical titles thus give to the reader of the psalms as a type and model a certain

David, full of humility, trust in Yahweh, and penitence. Paradoxically, the attribution of the Psalter to David has the effect of facilitating the appropriation of the psalms by every pious Israelite, in so far as the son of Jesse has been presented as the model with which each one ought to seek to identify himself. As Alan Ross comments, this psalm is difficult to classify.

It isn't a lament or a prayer to God, rather it is a sort of prophetic denunciation of the wicked man and his schemes. The psalm begins with a characterisation of the wicked man, especially focusing upon his tongue. The opening verse is a difficult one, as the text is unclear both in the original and in its proper translation.

The second half of the verse reads, The steadfast love of God endures all the day, in the ESV. Most other major translations have something similar. However, such a statement seems out of place in the immediate context.

It might seem to fit in far better with the concluding section of the psalm, although it is possible that two contrasting ways of life are being set up here, or that the evil agency of the wicked is being contrasted with the steadfast love of God by which he acts. Beth Tanner notes that the Syriac transposes and reprints the Masoretic text to read against the godly, while the Septuagint reads, Violence all the day. She favours violence all the day.

Derek Kidner favours against the godly as the reading, while many others remain with the reading of the Masoretic text. While its textual support may be somewhat weaker, contextually it might seem to be the more natural reading. David might be addressing Doeg as the mighty man in a sarcastic manner.

Doeg might think himself a man of valour, but he has slain defenceless priests, and was just an evil and treacherous man, with no meaningful courage to praise. Doeg isn't just wicked, he boasts in his evil. He takes a perverse pride in his wickedness and cruelty.

His tongue is like a sharp razor in its scheming. He takes delight in evil over all that is good. He is devoted to lying over the truth.

He is duplicitous and untrustworthy, false, treacherous and destructive. Doeg's words had led to the deaths of many people, and yet he took pleasure in his power to speak in ways that occasioned others' ruin. The destructive potential of words is a common theme in biblical wisdom literature.

The epistle of James famously characterises the tongue as follows in chapter 3 verse 5. The boasting tongue has a tremendously destructive force, and while for many this force is seen more in their simpleness or their folly, for a man like Doeg it is a vicious power that he takes pleasure in. However, the doom of the wicked is certain. David declares to Doeg that the Lord will break him down and cut him off from the land.

He will be like a removed tent or a tree uprooted from the ground. His place in the land of the living will be no more. Then the righteous will respond by fearing the Lord in his just and mighty judgments, mocking the wicked man who thought that he could escape the hand of God.

The wicked man was a fool for not trusting in God and making him his refuge. Rather he trusted in his own corruptible riches and took security in his capacity to destroy other people. David develops the arboreal imagery that he has just employed of the wicked man.

While the wicked man will be uprooted from the land of the living, David is like an olive tree in the house of God. God's steadfast love is his unalterable security, in which he is firmly rooted by faith. He concludes the psalm by turning from his address to the wicked man to address God.

His thanks will forever be given to God because God has met his needs and provided him with the certain refuge that he requires. God's name is, as Alan Ross argues, the revealed nature of God, the divine attributes demonstrated in divine works. God hallows his name, for instance, as he redeems his people and judges justly.

David waits patiently yet confidently for this revelation to occur, joining with the rest of the godly in the assembly to do so. Psalm 53 To the choir master, according to Mehalath, a mascal of David. The fool says in his heart, there is no God.

They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity. There is none who does good. God looks down from heaven on the children of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God.

They have all fallen away. Together they have become corrupt. There is none who does good, not even one.

Have those who work evil no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God. There they are in great terror, where there is no terror, for God scatters the bones of him who encamps against you. You put them to shame, for God has rejected them.

Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion, when God restores the fortunes of his people. Let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad. Psalm 53 is a surprising psalm, in the fact that it is virtually identical to Psalm 14.

The most notable differences are found in changing four instances of the divine name Yahweh to God, and in Psalm 53 verse 5, There they are in great terror, where there is no terror, for God scatters the bones of him who encamps against you. You put them to shame, for God has rejected them. Which contrasts with Psalm 14 verses 5 to 6, which read as follows, There they are in great terror, for God is with the generation of the

righteous.

You would shame the plans of the poor, but the Lord is his refuge. One further difference is seen in the superscription of this version of the psalm, which gives the music to which it was to be put. This psalm belongs in the second book of the Psalter, while Psalm 14 belongs in the first.

This would seem to give some weight to the idea that both of these books circulated independently before being made part of this single book. Marvin Tate suggests that there is a slight shift of the emphasis from Psalm 14, which focuses upon Israelites who devour the righteous, to Psalm 53, which might have foreigners more in view. Alan Ross adds that Psalm 14 might provide slightly more comfort for the faithful, and Psalm 53 more of a warning for the wicked.

He cautions against the presumption that Psalms 14 and 53 simply have exactly the same message, and that the differences between them can merely be attributed to some editorial hand. Rather, he suggests that Psalm 14 may have been amended at some later point for a specific situation, with some proposing events during the reign of Hezekiah or Jehoshaphat as possible contenders. The psalm is a sort of prophetic denunciation of the sinfulness of mankind, its claims taken up in Paul's famous catena of scriptures on the subject of universal sinfulness in Romans 3, verses 10-19.

The psalm opens with a description of the mindset of the fool. The fool declares to himself that there is no God. This claim is less one of theoretical than a practical atheism.

The fool believes that he can live and act as if God didn't see or know, as if God were indifferent to or incognizant of his deeds. Such practical atheists act as if there were no divine judgment that might come upon their actions. This fool might be a particularly pronounced case, but broadening the frame to include humanity more generally, the same general faults can be found in all.

All have corrupted their way. None is committed to what is good. They don't seek after God.

Each has, in his own manner, fallen away, together becoming unfitted for God's presence. The judgment that there is none who does good in verse 1 is intensified in verse 3. Not even one. However, the fool has fallen into a catastrophic misjudgment.

He is complacent as he preys upon the people of God and does not seek God. In verse 5 he experiences his comeuppance. In the very place where the man who does not consider God thought that he was secure, sudden and great terror comes upon him.

Those who encamped against the people of God are swallowed up and their bones littered across the earth as God's fearful judgment comes upon them. One could imagine

this psalm fitting in the context of the Lord's defeat of the invading Assyrians during the reign of Hezekiah, for instance. God puts those who disregard him to shame, but Israel looks to the Lord for its deliverance, its eyes fixed upon his house.

Israel's fortunes and the fortunes of the Lord's people will be restored, and they will be given reason to rejoice in God's goodness. Psalm 54 has the typical features of a psalm of complaint, as Conrad Schaeffer argues. The superscription of the psalm connects it with the events of 1 Samuel 23 verses 19-20 or the similar event of chapter 26 verse 1. Once again David was in a situation of considerable vulnerability and was betrayed to the one seeking his life.

The betrayal of the Ziphites might have been felt more keenly by David, because these were people of his own tribe. He calls upon God to deliver him from their hands, so that he will have cause once again to thank God for his goodness to him. David calls out to God for deliverance by his name.

God's name is his nature and his character, that by which he is identified. This provides David with assurance of salvation in his situation. Parallel to this petition for salvation by God's name, is a petition for God to vindicate him by his might.

God's salvation is now presented as a legal act, as a vindication of his servant from false accusation. God's might, to which David appeals, is that which guarantees that God is able to rescue him from his adversaries. Having expressed the grounds for his confidence for a favourable and effective response from He calls upon God to hear his prayer as strangers seek his life.

The seeming description of the Ziphites as strangers or foreigners, presuming that the superscription of the psalm is correct, is surprising. They are David's own tribe's people. Why would he call them foreigners? Perhaps the intended sense is that they are behaving like foreigners to him.

Like the fool who denies that there is a God, David's adversaries do not set God before themselves. They conduct themselves as if God did not see or even exist. However, God is the one who will come to David's aid.

He is the helper in David's cause and will protect David's life. He will provide recompense, returning the evil of David's enemies to them, and in his faithfulness bringing judgement upon them. David is able to leave the matter in God's hands, knowing that God upholds his cause and will bring justice in his situation.

When he knows deliverance, David's response will be one of thanksgiving and offering. He anticipates the salvation and vindication that will come, and declares what he will do when it does. This confidence is grounded in long experience of God's deliverance.

God has delivered him from a series of enemies and troubles, so he can trust God with

his latest threat. Storing up in memory past experiences of God's goodness will give us more confidence as we seek his deliverance in the future. A question to consider.

What are some of the ways in which we can further unpack the notion of God's name, drawing upon various other parts of scripture? Acts chapter 18 verse 24 to chapter 19 verse 7 Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord.

And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus. And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus.

There he found some disciples. And he said to them, Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? And they said, No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit. And he said, Into what then were you baptized? They said, Into John's baptism.

And Paul said, John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus. On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.

There were about twelve men in all. In Acts chapter 18 verse 23, Paul begins his third missionary journey, not long after returning to Antioch after his second. On his return from that journey, in verse 19, he had left Aquila and Priscilla at Ephesus, which is the location of the events at the end of chapter 18 and the beginning of chapter 19.

Paul had intended to spread the gospel in the region of Asia on his second missionary journey, but had been prevented by the Holy Spirit. Now, on his third missionary journey, he probably intends to visit places that he hadn't been able to visit previously. Ephesus was a huge city by ancient standards, one of the largest in the entire Roman Empire.

It was thriving and prosperous in one of the wealthiest regions of the empire, with possibly more than a quarter of a million inhabitants, although estimates of ancient city sizes are very vague in most cases. It would be a perfect hub from which the message of Christ could spread further, and would provide a stronger bond between the churches in Galatia, Phrygia, Pamphylia and Cilicia, with the newer churches in Macedonia and

Achaia. Ephesus historically had ties to Athens, but was a very cosmopolitan place, with lots of foreign religions, within a primarily Hellenistic cultural setting.

Ephesus and Asia also seem to have been a focus for the Apostle John's later ministry, with the book of Revelation being addressed to seven churches in the region, Ephesus being one of them. The story is picked up before Paul arrives in Ephesus, however. Aquila and Priscilla are still there, where Paul had left them, but an important new figure comes upon the scene, Apollos.

Apollos is, like the others, a diaspora Jew, whereas Paul is from Cilicia, and Aquila from Pontus, Apollos is from Alexandria. Alexandria was second only to Rome as a city of the empire. It was the largest city in the east, was an important site of learning, and had a large and influential Jewish community.

Alexandria, while in Egypt, was founded by Macedonians, and elite status was held by Greeks. It had a huge Jewish population, with lots of tensions between the Greeks and Jews of the city. Philo of Alexandria had likely died only a few years previously, and it is entirely possible that Apollos had encountered him, and not beyond the bounds of possibility that he had studied under him.

Philo was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, most famous for his more allegorical reading of the scriptures, which harmonized them with Stoic philosophy. Apollos is a gifted orator, and powerful in the scriptures. The extent and nature of his knowledge when he first came to Ephesus is unclear.

It seems that he had heard about the message, and even the death and resurrection of Christ. He had received instruction concerning Jesus, but he might have been ignorant of the church and its mission. He knew about John the Baptist and the movement formed around him, but was unaware of the form that the Jesus movement was taking.

One can imagine as early disciples scattered and passed through various parts of the empire, many people in places that wouldn't have a church for several years yet would have had a rudimentary but incomplete knowledge of the message, and many others would have had a distorted second-hand impression. He is described as fervent in spirit, which might be a reference either to the fervency of his own spirit, or to that of the Holy Spirit. If it is a reference to the latter, it suggests that Apollos had received the gift of the Holy Spirit, even though he was not yet a member of the church.

Given the contrast between Apollos and the twelve disciples of John the Baptist in the passage that follows, this might be a reasonable supposition. The Holy Spirit, throughout the Book of Acts, frequently displays his power through bold and effective speech, which Apollos undoubtedly manifests. Indeed, the description of Apollos here might remind us of no one so much as Stephen back in chapter 6. Apollos speaks in the synagogue, where he is heard by Priscilla and Aquila, who take him aside and instruct him further

and more accurately in the way of God.

It seems likely that this was a more extended process of further instruction, delivered in the context of hospitality in their own home, rather than just being a few words exchanged after the synagogue meeting. Their taking him aside implies that they did not publicly respond to him or confront him. Apollos would likely not only have been more receptive to such further instruction, but might well have been eager to receive it from people with a clearer and more extensive knowledge of the message of Jesus than he had received.

Priscilla's role in Apollos' instruction here has provoked much discussion in various quarters concerned with the question of women in pastoral ministry. Priscilla's active participation in the explanation of the way of God is implied, as is the fact that she is educated and informed, and well suited to pass on such instruction. While this was noteworthy, and would have presented Priscilla as an exceptional woman, it wouldn't have been that scandalous or out of keeping with societal norms.

The areas that would have been more restricted would be in public realms, with women acting in public disputation, or in the oversight of communities, both of which are matters that Paul speaks of in his letters. Having been so instructed, Apollos crosses over into Achaia, with the commendations of the Ephesian Christians. In this move, Apollos would have strengthened the bonds between the churches of Ephesus and Corinth.

Priscilla and Aquila had come to Ephesus from Corinth, and now Apollos was sent as a sort of return gift from Ephesus to Corinth. In Achaia, he once again demonstrated his giftedness in speech and argument, publicly refuting Jewish opponents of the Christians, demonstrating from the scriptures themselves that the Messiah was Jesus. This would presumably have involved showing that the Old Testament texts concerning the Messiah clearly pointed to Jesus, that he fit their description.

A different encounter is described at the beginning of chapter 19. Apollos had only known the baptism of John, and when Paul arrives in Ephesus, by which time Apollos was in Corinth, he met some disciples of John who were in a somewhat similar, though contrasting condition. The contrast between the two is well observed by Robert Tannehill.

Both know only the baptism of John, but they differ at two significant points. First, the effect of the spirit is manifest in Apollos' speech, but the disciples in Ephesus have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit. Second, Apollos knowing only the baptism of John is nevertheless able to teach accurately the things concerning Jesus.

In contrast, Paul must instruct the other group that John's baptism of repentance was meant to prepare the people for faith in Jesus, the one coming after John. In the case of Apollos, John's baptism led him to teach about Jesus, because he accepted John's

testimony about the coming one, and recognised Jesus as its fulfilment. However, the response by the so-called disciples to Paul's first question in chapter 19 verse 2 seems to lead him to doubt whether they even knew about Jesus, and the need for faith in him.

Paul has to instruct the disciples of John further in the message of John, and then to connect that to Jesus, to whom it was supposed to point. The ministry of John was the starting point for the telling of the gospel in the gospel narratives, and its importance was also underlined at the beginning of the book of Acts, and on a few further occasions within it. Once the twelve disciples of John received the message of Jesus, they were baptised, Paul laid his hands upon them, and they received the Holy Spirit, demonstrating the reception of the Spirit by speaking in tongues and prophesying, whereas Apollos seemingly did not require baptism, they did.

One of the things that these two accounts illustrate is the manner in which the ministry of the early church and its missionaries would have involved the delivery of updates through the many nodes in the growing network of churches and ministers, to people who needed various degrees of upgrades or patches of their knowledge and experience of God's recent work in their days. A question to consider, what do we learn of Apollos elsewhere in the scripture, especially in the book of 1 Corinthians?