

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 58

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Psalms 58 is a corporate imprecatory psalm attributed to David, addressed “To the choirmaster: according to Do Not Destroy” with the superscription “A Miktam of David.” The psalm moves in three distinct movements. First (vv. 1–2), David opens with a frontal accusation against unjust rulers — addressing them directly and exposing that their supposed authority is nothing but structured wickedness. The “gods” (*elohim*) here are most likely corrupt human judges or rulers charged with administering divine justice, not heavenly beings; David strips away their pretense by declaring that they do not speak justice or judge uprightly but rather weigh out violence with their hands. Second (vv. 3–5), David extends the indictment deeper — these rulers are not accidentally corrupt but constitutionally so. Their wickedness is congenital: they have gone astray “from the womb,” speaking lies from birth, venomous as a serpent that refuses to be charmed. The serpent imagery underscores willful, intractable rebellion — not ignorance but active resistance to all appeals for justice. Third (vv. 6–9), the psalm erupts into a sustained imprecation — a series of fierce petitions calling for God to break their teeth, cause them to vanish like water and grass, blunt their arrows, dissolve them like a snail, and remove them before they can bear fruit. The imagery is deliberately cumulative and visceral. Finally (vv. 10–11), the psalm closes with a vision of the righteous: they will rejoice when they see divine vengeance, bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked — and the watching world will declare that there is indeed a God who judges the earth.

This Text — Intent:

God’s intent through this psalm is to build in the covenant community a robust, theologically grounded confidence that He is the God who judges the earth — even when human systems of justice have fully collapsed into corruption. The psalm validates the righteous person’s grief and outrage over injustice rather than spiritualizing it away. It channels that outrage away from personal vengeance and toward God, entrusting judgment entirely to Him. It simultaneously warns those who wield power corruptly that their rebellion is not hidden, not tolerated, and not permanent. The intended effect is a form of double liberation: the righteous are freed from despair and cynicism by the certainty of divine judgment, while being simultaneously freed from the temptation to take vengeance into their own hands.

Subject Sentence: God alone judges the earth when human rulers utterly abandon justice.

Primary Claim: When earthly justice has collapsed entirely into corruption, God calls His people to bring their outrage to Him — not suppressing it, not acting on it — trusting that He alone is the Judge of all the earth who will not be evaded.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Identity of the “Gods” in Verse 1: The most significant interpretive question is the identity of the *elohim* addressed in verse 1: “Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods? Do you judge the sons of man uprightly?” Several readings exist. Some within Jewish tradition and in certain patristic readings have taken *elohim* as referring to divine or semi-divine beings — heavenly rulers corresponding to the nations (cf. Deuteronomy 32:8 in the Dead Sea Scrolls; Psalm 82). Others, including the majority of Reformed commentators and the ESV’s alternate rendering, take *elohim* as a title for human judges or rulers exercising delegated divine authority (cf. Exodus 21:6; Psalm 82:6–7 where Jesus cites this in John 10:34–35). The latter reading is preferred: the psalm’s specific language about “violence” and “weighing out” injustice in the earth (v. 2), and the closing vision of earthly vindication (v. 11), fits corrupt human rulers far more naturally than cosmic beings. The polemic is against those who bear the title of divine vice-regents but have abandoned the role entirely. The Reformed reading does not require ignoring the cosmic resonance — Psalm 82 shows the same pattern applied both to earthly rulers and their cosmic counterparts — but the primary referent here is human, and the application should stay grounded there.

The Imprecatory Passages (vv. 6–9): The violent imagery of verses 6–9 is the passage’s greatest pastoral and hermeneutical challenge. Several traditions handle this poorly in different directions. *Wesleyan/Arminian* exposition sometimes softens the imprecations into mere expressions of emotional release, essentially evacuating their theological content — reducing the passage to a “venting” psalm rather than a theology of divine judgment. This underreads the text. *Charismatic/Pentecostal* interpretation occasionally redirects the imprecations toward spiritual warfare against demonic forces, reading “break their teeth” as spiritual-strategic prayer. This is a legitimate extension but should not become the *primary* reading, which concerns human injustice on the earth. *Lutheran* exposition, applying strict Law/Gospel categories, tends to read the psalm as a Law word exposing human wickedness and driving the reader to the Gospel — a valid structural insight that, however, stops short of the psalm’s own resolution in divine judgment. The Reformed reading, following Calvin and more recently John Goldingay and Bruce Waltke, takes the imprecations as theologically legitimate prayers that transfer the desire for justice entirely to God. They are not permission to act but petitions for God to act. They are honest before God in a way that pietistic suppression of anger is not. They are also *eschatological* in orientation — the imagery is hyperbolic and points toward the final judgment, not toward a specific act of violence. This reading must be qualified: the New

Testament does not rescind the imprecatory psalms but does clarify that in the present age the believer blesses enemies (Romans 12:14, 20) even while praying for God’s justice to be done. The tension is not resolved by choosing one or the other but by holding both — honest imprecatory prayer to God *and* active non-vengeance toward the human enemy.

Verse 10 — “The Righteous Will Bathe Their Feet in the Blood of the Wicked”: This verse is frequently either bowdlerized (simply avoided) or misread as a celebration of vengeance. Some commentators (including many popular-level treatments) skip the verse or issue extended apologies for it. The Reformed reading, following Calvin, affirms that the righteous do not *rejoice in suffering* but in *vindication* — the ultimate demonstration that God is just. The parallel in Revelation 19:1–3 (where heaven rejoices at Babylon’s judgment) confirms that this kind of joy is eschatologically legitimate. It should be preached, not avoided.

Key Canonical Support

- **Psalms 82:1–8** — The closest canonical parallel: God judges among the “*elohim*” who have failed to defend the poor and needy; God himself will “arise” and judge the earth. Psalm 82 explicitly does what Psalm 58 anticipates.
 - **Genesis 18:25** — Abraham’s foundational question, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” — the bedrock theological conviction underlying every imprecatory psalm, including this one.
 - **Romans 12:17–21** — Paul’s New Covenant application: leave room for God’s wrath; do not take vengeance yourself; the imprecatory instinct is redirected, not abolished. Verse 19 quotes Deuteronomy 32:35 (“Vengeance is mine, I will repay”) — precisely the logic Psalm 58 embodies in poetic form.
 - **Revelation 6:9–11** — The martyrs under the altar cry “How long, O Lord, holy and true, before you will judge and avenge our blood?” — the New Testament imprecatory prayer, confirming that Psalm 58’s petition is canonically continuous into the new covenant age.
 - **Romans 3:10–18** — Paul quotes Psalm 5, 14, 36, 140, and Isaiah 59 to establish universal human depravity; Psalm 58:3–5’s “gone astray from the womb, speaking lies” is the psalm-world backdrop for Paul’s extended indictment of humanity’s universal corruption.
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Aim: To show that God’s people can bring their outrage over injustice to God without shame, without vengeance, and without despair — because the Judge of all the earth has not abdicated, and His judgment will be complete.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Direct accusation of unjust rulers: they do not speak justice or judge uprightly; instead they devise violence and weigh out injustice with their hands	<i>Elohim</i> = most likely human judges bearing delegated divine authority; the indictment is public and frontal, not whispered
3–4a	Corruption is congenital: the wicked have gone astray “from the womb,” speaking lies from birth	Radicalizes the indictment — this is not accidental or fixable corruption but constitutional; connects to NT doctrine of total depravity
4b–5	Extended serpent metaphor: venomous as an adder that “stops its ear” and refuses to hear the charmer	The serpent deliberately resists correction; the image evokes Genesis 3; deliberate, willful hardness against all appeals to justice
6–7	First imprecation cluster: “O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions”; may they vanish like water, wither like cut grass, be blunted in their arrows	“Break the teeth” — removes capacity to destroy; water imagery = sudden evaporation; the prayers accumulate in intensity
8	Second imprecation cluster: may they dissolve like the snail that melts as it goes; like a stillborn child who never sees the sun	Snail imagery: uncertain referent (possibly dissolving snail trail); stillborn = existence without effect or legacy; both images convey utter futility
9	Third imprecation: before their pots feel the heat of thorns, He will sweep them away in wrath — whether green or ablaze	Difficult verse; the image of thorns burning under a pot = a brief, hot fire; God’s judgment falls before the wicked can complete even a momentary act of harm
10	The righteous shall rejoice when he sees vengeance; he	This joy is theologically legitimate joy in divine

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	shall bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked	vindication, not personal cruelty; eschatological in orientation (cf. Rev 19:1–3)
11	The watching world concludes: “Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth”	The psalm closes on a missiological note — God’s judgment vindicates His character before a watching world; the righteous are publicly vindicated

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–2	The Accusation: Justice Perverted by Those Entrusted with It
2	3–5	The Indictment Deepened: Corruption Is Constitutional, Not Incidental
3	6–9	The Petition: God, Act — Let Justice Come
4	10–11	The Resolution: The World Will Know There Is a God Who Judges

Subject Sentence: God alone judges the earth when human rulers utterly abandon justice.

Primary Claim: When earthly justice has collapsed entirely into corruption, God calls His people to bring their outrage to Him — not suppressing it, not acting on it — trusting that He alone is the Judge of all the earth who will not be evaded.

Applications (Five)

1. Bring your outrage to God rather than suppressing it or acting on it. (*Mind/Belief*)

Psalm 58 gives explicit theological permission to feel the full weight of injustice and to say so to God in the most direct possible terms. The failure mode for many Christians is not rage but a false peace — a sanitized interior life in which genuine grief over evil is spiritualized into passive acceptance. This psalm refuses that. It models bringing the unvarnished reality of injustice before the throne, naming it in detail, and then — crucially

— leaving it there. The discipline is not the suppression of the emotion but the redirection of its energy: not toward personal retaliation, but toward God who alone can and will judge rightly.

2. Stop expecting unregenerate systems to produce regenerate justice. (*Mind/Belief*)

Verses 3–5 teach that those who have “gone astray from the womb” will not, left to themselves, produce justice — they will produce structured wickedness. The Christian who expects fallen institutions reliably to deliver just outcomes will live in perpetual disappointment and bitterness. This is not cynicism; it is realism grounded in anthropology. The point is not disengagement from institutions but the calibration of hope: our ultimate confidence is not in the system, the election, the court, or the policy — it is in the God who judges the earth. Where institutions produce justice, give thanks; where they fail, do not be destabilized.

3. Let the certainty of God’s final judgment free you from the compulsion to secure your own. (*Affections/Worship*)

The imprecatory movement of verses 6–9 is an act of worship, not violence — it is the explicit transfer of the desire for justice from the self to God. The believer who cannot pray imprecatory prayers has, in practice, either concluded that God is not a just judge (theological failure) or has decided to secure justice personally (practical vengeance). The psalm calls for a third posture: genuine, fierce, honest petition to God — “You do it; I won’t” — which is simultaneously an act of faith and an act of surrender. This is the affectional core of Romans 12:19: making room for God’s wrath requires actively vacating that room yourself.

4. Pursue justice in your sphere of authority precisely because God is watching those who do not. (*Will/Behavior*)

The indictment of verses 1–2 is addressed to those with delegated authority — those entrusted to judge. Every Christian exercises some sphere of authority: in the home, the workplace, the community, the church. The psalm’s indictment falls not on the powerless but on those who hold power and corrupt it. The positive application is concrete: where you have authority, use it justly, defend the weak, refuse to weigh out violence with your hands. The knowledge that God judges unjust rulers should produce soberness, not paralysis, in those who lead.

5. Fix your expectation on the vindication of the righteous, not on the success of the righteous in this age. (*Affections/Worship*)

Verses 10–11 close the psalm not with earthly triumph but with eschatological vindication. The righteous person rejoices — but the joy is at seeing God’s judgment completed, not at personal advancement. This reorients the Christian’s fundamental relationship to outcomes: faithfulness may not produce visible success in this age, and the wicked may appear to prosper throughout their entire earthly life. The psalm gives the righteous permission to acknowledge that honestly and then to look past it — not to a future they engineer but to a judgment God will complete. The watching world will, at last, declare that there is a God who judges the earth.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 58 makes a claim that is both foundational and uncomfortable: God is the righteous Judge of all the earth, and His judgment will be complete and visible — not merely inward or private. The psalm teaches that God takes structural wickedness with absolute seriousness; corruption by those entrusted with authority is not a political inconvenience but a direct affront to God’s own character as the divine Judge. The doctrine of divine judgment here is not merely punitive but restorative — the world’s declaration in verse 11 that “there is a God who judges on earth” is the vindication of reality itself against the lie that justice is negotiable or that power is self-justifying. The psalm also teaches that God is not indifferent to the prayers of those who suffer under unjust authority — He receives their petitions, and those petitions are theologically coherent acts of faith, not failures of grace.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 58 is a concentrated expression of several distinctively Reformed theological commitments. The description of wickedness as congenital (vv. 3–5) — “gone astray from the womb, speaking lies from birth” — is one of the psalter’s clearest articulations of total depravity, the doctrine that human corruption is not incidental or correctable by education or environment but structural and constitutional. This is the same anthropological realism that grounds Paul’s argument in Romans 1–3. Reformed theology also insists that God’s sovereignty extends to political structures and that those entrusted with authority are accountable to God as His vice-regents; Psalm 58’s indictment of corrupt rulers is precisely the logic of Romans 13:1–4 taken seriously — rulers exist to execute justice under God, and when they fail to do so, God does not simply shrug. Finally, the psalm models the Reformed integration of prayer and eschatology: the imprecatory petitions are acts of faith in God’s sovereign judgment, not failures of sanctification. Calvin’s reading of the psalm as theologically legitimate prayer — honest, fierce, but fully entrusted to God — remains the most pastorally accurate and exegetically grounded reading available.

Main Takeaway

The world’s justice systems will fail — sometimes spectacularly, sometimes permanently. When they do, you do not have to pretend you are fine with it, and you do not have to fix it yourself. Bring your outrage to God, the only Judge who has never once gotten it wrong, and trust that He will complete what no human court ever has. There is a God who judges the earth — and that is not a threat to hide from but a truth to live from.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Avoiding or apologizing for the imprecatory verses.** The most common homiletical failure with Psalm 58 is to spend the bulk of the sermon apologizing for verses 6–9 rather than preaching them. This produces a congregation that leaves embarrassed by the psalm rather than equipped by it. The imprecations are not an embarrassment to be managed but a theology to be taught: they model the transfer of the desire for justice from the self to God. Preach them with confidence, explaining both their canonical legitimacy and their New Covenant application (Romans 12:19; Revelation 6:9–11).
- **Reducing the psalm to an emotional release mechanism (“venting to God”).** The psalm is often reduced in pastoral application to “it’s okay to be angry at God” — as if its primary function is therapeutic permission-giving. While that application is not wrong, it significantly underreads the psalm. Psalm 58 is not primarily about what the believer is allowed to feel; it is primarily about who God is and what He will do. The theological claim — God judges the earth — must not be swallowed by the pastoral application.
- **Moralizing the psalm as a charter for political activism.** The psalm’s indictment of unjust rulers can easily be conscripted as a warrant for specific political causes — essentially importing the preacher’s political program into the psalm. This is a serious misuse. The psalm does not endorse any particular political agenda; it entrusts justice entirely to God rather than to any human movement or party. The application is to the posture of the heart (prayer and trust) and the exercise of personal authority (justice in one’s own sphere), not to political organizing or partisan engagement.
- **Neglecting the constitutionality of wickedness (vv. 3–5) and therefore preaching a naive anthropology.** Verses 3–5 are structurally necessary for the psalm’s argument: the reason the imprecatory petitions are necessary is precisely because these rulers will not reform. If the preacher skips this section or softens it, the congregation will be left with the impression that bad systems can be fixed by better people — which the psalm explicitly denies. The doctrine of total depravity embedded here should be taught, not elided.
- **Treating verse 10 (“bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked”) as a throwaway verse or cutting it entirely.** This verse regularly gets skipped in popular exposition. It should not be. It makes a specific claim about eschatological joy in divine vindication — a claim that is canonically continuous (Revelation 19:1–3) and pastorally important: the righteous are not asked to be indifferent to outcomes, but to place their delight in God’s justice rather than in personal triumph. Preach it, explain it, and connect it to Revelation.

- **Failing to connect the psalm's resolution (v. 11) to its missionary and apologetic weight.** The psalm's final word is missiological: the watching world will declare "there is a God who judges on earth." The vindication of the righteous is not a private matter — it is a public demonstration of the reality of the God of Israel. This should be developed in application: the church's persistent faithfulness under unjust conditions, and God's eventual vindication of that faithfulness, is itself a witness to the watching world. Do not end the sermon without surfacing this dimension.