

97-11-30a

As we prepare to worship God this morning, let's begin by going to Him in prayer. Father, we thank You, as always, for the many ways that You have expressed Your grace toward us, in providing for us and blessing us. We thank You that we are alive and have the opportunities that this life brings.

We thank You for the country in which we live. We have celebrated the Thanksgiving holiday, and we recognize during this time especially the bounty that You have bestowed on our nation. We thank You for our form of government and the freedom that we enjoy.

We thank You for the victories that our armed forces have achieved. We thank You that we have the freedom and the opportunity to pursue our relationship with You and to live our lives before You with a great degree of freedom and autonomy. We thank You for the opportunities that this gives us for missionary activity and for both inside and outside our country, and for the study of Your Word and the freedom that students of Your Word have to pursue an understanding of Your character and Your plan.

That is our endeavor this morning. Father, we pray that You will bless us as we fellowship together in the study of Your Word. We pray that God the Holy Spirit will give us insight and understanding.

We are always humbled as we see the magnitude and the magnificence of Your person and Your plan for the human race. We pray that our study this morning will fix that firmly in our hearts and give us the basis for living a life that pleases You. We ask these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. For our scripture reading this morning, if you'll turn with me to the book of Psalms, we looked this morning at a psalm of David. This is a miktam, a particular kind of song, set to one of David's favorite tunes.

It says this is to the chief musician set to do not destroy. That's what the Hebrew term means. And you'll find several psalms set to this tune.

But Psalm 58 is our psalm this morning. This is labeled in the New King James a cry for God's vengeance. Great way to start a Thanksgiving holiday weekend lesson with a cry for vengeance.

But we find here some links to our study in Genesis. So this is a miktam of David. Psalm 58.

Do you indeed speak righteousness, you silent ones? Do you judge uprightly, you sons of men? No, in heart you work wickedness. You weigh out the violence of your hands in the earth. The wicked are estranged from the womb.

They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies. Their poison is like the poison of a serpent. They are like the deaf cobra that stops its ear, which will not heed the voice of charmers, charming ever so skillfully.

Break their teeth in their mouth, O God. Break out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord. Let them flow away as waters which run continually.

When he bends his bow, let his arrows be as if cut in pieces. Let them be like a snail which melts away as it goes, like a stillborn child of a woman that may not see the sun. Before your pots can feel the burning thorns, he shall take them away as with a whirlwind, as in his living and burning wrath.

The righteous shall rejoice when he sees the vengeance. He shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked, so that men will say, Surely there is a reward for the righteous. Surely he is God who judges in the earth.

Well, now this is a pretty politically incorrect psalm, isn't it? It would appear on the surface that this is sort of a vindictive cry for vengeance and retribution on the wicked. It seems pretty unloving and pretty unsympathetic to celebrate washing one's feet in the blood of the wicked and so on. What exactly is going on in this psalm? Well, you know of course that we are in Genesis chapter 3. We're finishing that chapter.

We have seen the conversation between the serpent and Eve. We have seen the results of that conversation in Eve and subsequently Adam partaking the fruit. God pronouncing the consequences of that.

Cursing the serpent. Cursing the ground. And detailing what life will now be like for the man and for the woman on the earth.

The catalyst for this great change in the garden is the serpent. And we're going to take a look this morning at the serpent as he appears in scripture. You will recall if you think a little bit that serpents or the serpent are found mentioned many places in scripture.

What exactly are we to draw from that? Why is it a serpent and not a koala bear or a lion or some other animal in the garden? Why a serpent? And what is the significance when we encounter the serpent elsewhere in scripture? Well, Psalm 58 is one of those passages. And it begins, and I find this passage doubly interesting because as a part of my seminary reading requirements here to finish up, I have been reading John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion. If you know anything about Calvinism and Reformed theology, you know that at its very heart it has the depravity of man.

That mankind is without the ability to seek God or to choose God and is corrupt and totally depraved from birth. And one of the passages where this theology is drawn is right here in Psalm 58. Do you indeed speak righteousness, you silent ones? Do you judge uprightly, you sons of men? No, in your heart you work wickedness.

You weigh out the violence of your hands in the earth. The wicked are estranged from the womb. They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies.

Now, it's not difficult to tell that this is hyperbole. It's exaggeration. Obviously, people don't speak as soon as they are born.

If you don't speak, then you can't very well speak lies. But this is emphatic language. It is hyperbolic language, which means that it pushes the emphasis to an extreme.

And the point here is that we are all wicked from birth. We are conceived in iniquity and born in sin, David tells us elsewhere. You can turn back just a few pages to Psalm 53, where you have the famous passage quoted in the New Testament.

The fool has said in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt and have done abominable iniquity. There is none who does good.

God looks down from heaven upon the children of men to see if there are any who understand, who seek God. Every one of them has turned aside. They have together become corrupt.

There is none who does good. No, not one. Have the workers of iniquity no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God? They are in great fear where no fear was, for God has scattered the bones of him who encamps against you.

You have put them to shame because God has despised them, and so forth. So, the conclusion is drawn that we are corrupt from birth, which is correct. And that is the point in verse 3 of Psalm 58.

The wicked are estranged from the womb. Of course, all of us are estranged from the womb. And all of us have in our hearts the nature to be deceitful.

The difference is, there is the possibility of change. There is the possibility of redemption. There is the possibility of God intervening to rescue us from that condition.

If we reject that salvation, if we reject that deliverance, we remain unchanged. We are as we have been from birth. And that is what David is emphasizing here in Psalm 58.

In Psalm 53, God is looking down at the adult generation in Israel, the perverse generation, none of whom seek after God. And you will notice that these workers of iniquity, in verse 4 of Psalm 53, eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon God. That is their condemnation.

That is their fault. Because, yes, we are all depraved. Yes, we are all sinful and corrupt from birth.

But, we all have the ability to call upon God. And it is failing to call upon God, failing to receive His grace, that results in remaining in a state of condemnation and remaining in a state of corruption. So there is a difference between 53 and 58.

And there is also a similarity. Both of them focus on the responsibility that we have as mature individuals, whatever point we arrive at where we can make a decision about God. The wicked are estranged from the womb.

They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies. And look at verse 4. Their poison is like the poison of a serpent. They are like the deaf cobra that stops its ear, which will not heed the voice of charmers, charming ever so skillfully.

We're going to come back to the idea of snake charming in our study of serpents this morning. Why is that mentioned so many places in Scripture? But this is the unrepentant wicked that David is focusing on. It's not just that they are wicked.

It is that they have failed to receive God's deliverance from that. So that David says that they are silent. They don't speak righteousness in verse 1. They don't seek a different way in their heart in verse 2. In their heart they work wickedness.

They weigh out the violence of their hands in the earth. Now, why this vindictive language in the remaining portion of the psalm? Break their teeth in their mouth, O God, in verse 6. Break out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord. Well, what are they doing? What does a serpent do with its fangs and with its venom? It attacks and poisons others.

And David's call here for their teeth to be broken out is to prevent what happens in verse 4. The poison of the serpent. The serpent who will not be charmed. What can you do with a serpent in a basket? Or at least what can these Middle Eastern guys with the turbans and the little flutes do? Well, from ancient times, snake charming has been a form of entertainment and mysticism in the Middle East.

Especially with cobras. You put a cobra in a basket, take the lid off, play this tune, and the combination of the music and the swaying motions of the snake charmer will cause a cobra, which by nature wants to coil and strike, display its hood and so forth. It appears to put the snake in some sort of a trance, where it does not conform to its nature.

It doesn't strike. It doesn't bite. It sways back and forth.

Its hood is out. But it does not fulfill its potential for harm. And in our society, we have similar... There's an analogy there.

Our laws, the threat of capital punishment, although that's been much maligned in recent days. The threat of capital punishment and the strength of the law retards criminal activity. Slows it down.

Hopefully prevents it. And this doesn't change the nature of the criminal, but it drives the crime underground. It drives it out of sight.

It reduces it. It hinders it. And when a snake charmer charms the snake, he doesn't change the snake, doesn't take away his poison, doesn't take away his fangs.

All it does is keep him from fulfilling his nature. And when these snakes here in Psalm 58 don't respond to the charmer, they continue to exhibit their snake-like nature, then stronger measures are called for. You can't just charm the snake to keep it from biting.

You've got to break out its teeth to stop its potential for spreading harm. So these rebellious, impudent, sin-of-the-high-hand type of criminals, David is calling for God's retribution. They don't conform even to the charming inhibitions that are a part of society.

And so David calls for God to respond equally violently to their violence. Let them flow away as waters which run continually. When they bend their bow, let their arrows be as if they are cut in pieces.

Stop their potential for harming others. You break out the snake's teeth. You cut up the arrows that are being shot at others.

Don't let them spread their malignancy. Let them be like a snail which melts away as it goes. And as a child in Southern California, this was a common sight to go outside in the early morning when the dew was on the grass and see the snails and the slugs out in abundance.

And then as the sun rose and the heat of the day, if they didn't get under foliage and down into the moist earth, you literally watched them melt away, shrivel up. And, of course, you could hasten that process if you had a little salt on hand. And slugs, of course, if you're trying to raise any sort of garden plants, slugs are bad.

And so you'd see people out there salting the slugs, and they just literally melt away before your eyes. And this is David's prayer to God against the wicked. Not just those who are wicked in heart, but those who are spreading that wickedness, who do not respond to the normal strictures and things that are designed to restrain them.

Like a stillborn child of a woman that they may not see the sun. Don't let them grow and develop. Don't let them come to maturity.

Before your pots can feel the burning thorns, he shall take them away as with a whirlwind, as in his living and burning wrath. There's some great imagery here that we don't have time to go into in detail. Thorns were used as a fuel.

That's about all they were good for. You could put a pot on a thorn fire. It burns briefly,

but very hot.

And even during this brief thorn fire, they're not going to have time to even warm up the pot. It's going to be snatched away like the whirlwind. This, in other words, is a call for swift action on the part of God.

Before they even heat something up in a fire made of thorns, which is almost a flash fire, take them away as with a whirlwind, in living and burning wrath. Now, verse 10. The righteous shall rejoice when he sees the vengeance.

Now, this seems like kind of a petty attitude. But what are we talking about here? What is the difference between rejoicing when we see righteousness and rejoicing when we see wickedness put in its place, when we see the retribution and the vengeance of God against wickedness? Well, how much do we understand of God's righteousness? How much do we understand about God's justice? There is a satisfaction. There is a sense of rightness in seeing rebellious wickedness snuffed out and put in its place.

We have a mixed feeling. You think about Capital Punishment. There was recently an episode of a program.

I've actually seen one TV program that's a new show on TV. It's one of the few that I have seen, period. But I like it.

It's on Saturday nights and it's called The Practice. It's a law firm. They're down in the trenches and the sort of grimy trenches of law.

They defend people, some of whom are not really defensible. This creates some stress and some crisis of conscience. If you defend someone and succeed in getting them off because that's your job and then they go out and commit another crime, what does that do to you? So they explore some of these issues.

It's thought-provoking, which is the only reason to really pay much attention to entertainment. Hopefully it has some lasting value. Recently they had an episode where there was a man who had been convicted of a terrible crime and was sentenced to death.

One of these lawyers, they didn't actually go into whether the man was innocent or guilty, but they were trying to get a stay and try to keep him from being executed that night by lethal injection. The show takes you through the afternoon and the evening where they're frantically trying to find a way to keep this man from being executed. They're his lawyers and they're looking for any hole, anything.

They get a temporary restraining order, but then that gets unrestrained. But this probably more sensitive lawyer is assigned to stay with the client all the way up until the end. The point of this show, with which I disagree, but I don't fault them for bringing it

out, was this lawyer who is sensitive and so forth starts out at the beginning of the show affirming that he's in favor of capital punishment.

But he sits with this individual who is experiencing everything for the last time all the way up until 12.03 or whenever it is that they give him the lethal injection. He gets to know him and they're looking through the Guinness Book of World Records together and so forth. The execution takes place and he's feeling awful and he goes back to his apartment.

He's single and picks up his copy of the Guinness Book of World Records and he's thinking about his time that he spent with this individual and so forth. They're saying, if you get up close and personal with capital punishment, do you still feel as strongly about it? Well, what's the truth of that? No one rejoices in the death of the wicked, not even God. God says himself, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

However, at the same time, there is a satisfaction and a rightness and an affirmation of justice and righteousness in the righting of wrongs and in the stopping of wickedness and its spread. This psalm is about the spread of wickedness, about serpents biting, about arrows being shot at others and the stopping of that, the stamping out of these who don't even... It's not a matter even of them not being serpents anymore and coming to God. This is a matter of just responding to the snake charmer and not biting others.

These are those rebellious, impudent types of criminals that we see in our society today who are arrogant and openly, in your face, evil. I dare you to stop me. I dare you.

You see this especially among people in their late teens and early twenties who just have absolutely no respect, who disdain any sort of authority. To see that stopped and removed from society is a satisfying thing. We ought to be glad that that goes away and that God stops that.

The righteous shall rejoice when he sees the vengeance. He shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked. Now, what does that mean? That seems to be going beyond satisfaction.

You're going to go down and wash your feet in the blood of the wicked. What is washing the feet? What is that a picture of? Remember Jesus in the upper room the night before he was crucified? We talk about being washed in the blood of the Lamb. But Jesus, the night before he was crucified, wrapped a towel around his waist and washed the feet of the disciples and gave in that action a lesson about forgiveness and cleansing.

That we have been cleansed at salvation in the sense of having had a bath or illustrated in the sense of having a bath. But in Jesus' dialogue with Peter there, you see that Jesus says, unless you let me wash your feet, you have no part with me. Peter says, well, wash me all over.

And he says, no, you don't need to be washed all over again. You need your feet washed. And it's a picture of the daily cleansing that we claim when we go before God and acknowledge our sin.

To look around, and that's in the personal realm. We see that we have failed. We go before God, and he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from unrighteousness.

And that gives us a clean start, a clean slate. That particular issue is resolved between us and God. We claim his cleansing and his forgiveness, and we move on.

That's on the individual level. At a corporate level, when you look around in the church today or you look around in our nation today, it's much as believers would have done in this day and age looking in their nation. There is national sin.

There is societal evil. And it's a legitimate thing to confess that. Look at the prophets who confessed that before God.

Look at Ezekiel. I come from a people who are unclean. I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in a nation of unclean people.

Many places in Scripture you see corporate responsibility being acknowledged by believers. And in the same way, when that is acknowledged, when it is confessed, when it is brought before God and God cleanses it, that's a healthy thing for the society and for the nation. And the righteous, in that sense, wash their feet in the blood of the wicked.

Why? So that men will say there is a reward for the righteous. Surely he is God who judges in the earth. This is for a purpose, not just retribution against the wicked, but so that people will acknowledge that there is a righteous God.

There is an absolute standard of right and wrong, and God is it. And he is in his heaven, and he does reward those who diligently seek him. As it says in Hebrews 11.6, he that comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him.

The key there is diligently seek. God is not a rewarder of the casually interested. He is not a rewarder of the occasionally interested.

He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek. And this is on an individual level and also on a national level, on a corporate level. And to see the wicked from God's viewpoint is to take pleasure in their eradication from society.

That is what God is going to do for the nation of Israel. When he cuts out their heart of stone and gives them a heart of flesh, he is going to remove that which contaminates and that which spreads evil. Now, what does all of this have to do with our study in

Genesis chapter 3? Well, let's return there now and remember that after the fall, after partaking of the fruit of one of two trees at the center of the garden, at this point we tend to kind of forget a little bit that there is another tree beside the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the tree of life.

But they partake of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In verse 7 of chapter 3, the eyes of them both were open and they knew that they were naked and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

And Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. Then the Lord God called Adam and said to him, where are you? So he said, I heard your voice in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself. We see in that statement by Adam the complete insufficiency of the fig leaf solution, don't we? Adam and Eve have come to the realization that they are naked and they are ashamed of that nakedness, not so much before each other as the possibility of facing God.

And so they sew these fig leaves together and make themselves a covering. But when they hear the sound of the Lord God, they don't stroll out to the Lord God and say, well, you know, I'm perfectly okay now, got these fig leaves. The fig leaf solution doesn't even convince them that they are now not naked.

And Adam says, I hid myself because I knew that I was naked. I hid myself because I was naked. And he's wearing the fig leaves, but he's just as naked as before.

And this is the fallacy of human effort that man by man's efforts can make himself acceptable in God's eyes. This is a very common misconception. Adam thought it would work.

Adam and Eve got together and said, you know, we're naked. God's going to be in the garden. We've got to cover ourselves up.

Let's get busy. So they picked the leaves. They found the vines or whatever it was that they used to fasten them together.

You can imagine the labor involved in this fig leaf operation. Just imagine now that you find yourself stranded in the backyard, locked out of the house with no clothes on, and all there is in the backyard is a fig tree, maybe a few other garden bushes out there. And so you're going to take leaves off the tree and make for yourself clothing.

You just think about that. What are you going to use to sew them together? You know how fragile leaves are. What's going to keep them from ripping and tearing? It's going to be a lot of work just to get them to hang together enough to stay on you.

So this was probably the work of a few hours to make a garment for both of them out of leaves. Yet the moment the Lord God shows up in the garden, they are instantly convinced that this effort is worthless. Every time you see an individual in the Bible coming face to face with God, the prophets in the Old Testament, even in vision form, when they see God, what do they do? They are on their face just like Ezekiel.

I am a man of unclean lips. I am unworthy. They are on their face in the dust when they come in the presence of God because there is nothing that can make us acceptable.

There's nothing we can do. There's nothing we can say. There's no amount of prostration or humiliation that we can put ourselves through.

There's no leaves that we can sew together that will make us presentable in God's sight. And that's why Adam says what he says. I knew that I was naked the moment I heard your sound in the garden.

Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat? The man said, The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate. The Lord God said to the woman, What is this you have done? The woman said, The serpent deceived me, and I ate. So the Lord God said to the serpent, and without any further ado.

You notice the sequence here. We pointed this out last time, but it's been a few weeks since we covered that ground. I'll review it just briefly.

Notice that God goes in reverse order here. He starts with the last, the very last thing that happened was that Adam and Eve sewed the fig leaves together and tried to cover themselves up. And so God starts with that.

Who told you that you were naked? So then they work backward, and he's talking to Adam, who is the last actor in the previous scene. He's the last one to partake of the fruit. The man says, The woman gave me, and I ate.

So then he goes to Eve, who saw in verse 6 that the tree was good for food, pleasant to the eyes, desirable to make one wise, and took of its fruit and ate. And so he addresses her and asks her questions. What is this you have done? She responds, The serpent deceived me, and I ate.

And you would expect at this point that God would say, Serpent, what is this you have done? And engage in dialogue with the serpent. But you will notice that after the serpent says, You will be like God, knowing good and evil in verse 5, there's not another peep out of the serpent. It doesn't say another word.

He is still present there when God comes. Isn't this interesting? You may not have thought about this, but Adam and Eve partook of the fruit, spent the afternoon making

the little fig leaf outfits, and when God comes and speaks to Adam and Eve, the serpent is still there. Why do you suppose that is? He's hanging around.

He's right there with Adam and Eve, still yet. Well, he wants to see what happens when God comes back, because this is something aimed at God as much as Adam and Eve. This is one of the ways we know that Satan is involved, because Satan has an agenda, has an issue with God.

And he wants to see, now that the man and woman have fallen, what is God going to do? And that's why he's there. And he's still there. So you would expect, God talks to Adam, he works his way back and talks to Eve, now he'll work his way back and talk to the serpent.

But he doesn't say, he doesn't ask the serpent a question. The serpent doesn't say a word. Why is that? Because the conversation between God and the serpent, the conversation between God and Satan, has already taken place in the heavenly realms prior to creation.

The question has already been asked and answered between God and Satan. And so it doesn't come up here. God launches immediately into the curse on the serpent in verse 14.

Because you have done this, there's no question of the serpent's guilt. There's no asking for a reason or explanation. Because it's a whole different issue between God and Satan.

So the Lord God said to the serpent, Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle and more than every beast of the field. On your belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life. Now, this is a pronouncement on the serpent.

The physical snake, the race of snakes, descended from the original serpent in the garden, bear this. But we say, well, wasn't he possessed by Satan? Why does the relatively innocent, dumb snake pay the price for this? Well, this is communication from God to us. This is God's acting out of the lesson, acting out of the message.

God uses nature to communicate about himself. We know this from Romans 1. What may be known of God is manifest in creation. And it's one of the reasons that man is without excuse.

They've got spacecraft up on Mars. They've got the little cute dune buggy thing rolling around up there with its little arm picking up rocks and sampling, doing little scientific experiments and things. Well, if that little Mars buggy up there rolls 10 or 15 feet away and scoops up a shovel full of soil and rolls it over, and they find an alarm clock, what do you think they're going to conclude? It's evolution on Mars.

Look at that. The rocks and minerals have evolved into a clock on Mars. They're not

going to conclude that at all.

They're going to immediately conclude that there is life elsewhere in the universe. The faint traces of what may be a chemical compound that can sometimes be left behind by an organic form of life, they found that little trace in the Mars rock, and they said, see, there was life on Mars. They're looking for a cause.

As soon as they find it, they say, this didn't get here by accident. This came from something. If there is design, there is a designer.

Well, they just don't want to see that designer as God. It has to be life on other planets. If they find an alarm clock on Mars, they're going to say there are Martians.

There is intelligent life on Mars. Well, creation forces us to the conclusion that there is a designer. They try to use the design and say, well, the design designed itself, but design means a designer, and creation speaks of God.

The snake is used by God to demonstrate a point. In the same way, think about all the sacrificial lambs and goats and bulls. What did the lambs and goats and bulls ever do that hundreds of thousands of them were slaughtered in Israel for sacrifices? They are a picture.

They represent something that is a deeper truth. So God's dealing with the serpent here doesn't imply that there is some sort of guilt or culpability on the part of this particular snake in letting Satan control its body or anything else. It's a picture.

It represents God's attitude towards Satan and that which comes from Satan. On your belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enemyship between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed.

He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. Now, this has been the subject of all kinds of investigation, but in a nutshell, this is a curse on the serpent, right? It's not a curse on man. So who is going to win out? Well, somebody is going to have their head crushed, and someone is going to have their heel crushed.

One is fatal, one is not. He shall bruise your head. The serpent and that which the serpent represents, Satan himself, Satan's design, Satan's way of thinking, Satan's ability to bite and poison others is going to be crushed.

And you shall bruise his heel. This is not going to come without a cost. There is going to be pain and suffering involved in crushing the head of the serpent.

And I see this as taking place more or less simultaneously. It's not that the head crushing takes place at one point and the heel crushing takes place at another. You get the idea that this is a collision between heel and head that bruises both.

One person is going to survive out of that. And, of course, this is ultimately a reference to Jesus Christ himself. And on the cross, in being bruised for our iniquities and wounded for our transgressions, Jesus Christ crushed the head of the serpent and achieved the victory that secures our salvation and also seals Satan's fate.

To the woman he said, I will greatly multiply your sorrow in your conception. In pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you.

Then to Adam he said, Because you have heeded the voice of your wife and have eaten from the tree which I commanded you, saying you shall not eat of it, cursed is the ground for your sake. In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you and you shall eat the herb of the field.

In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. For dust you are and to dust you shall return. This is a good place to pause and take our break.

When we come back, I'm going to note a couple of interesting pieces of vocabulary here in this statement and then we're going to move forward and see the exodus from the garden and the reason for it. Let's pause here and take a break.