

Psalms 52:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Why boastest thou thyself in mischief, O mighty man? the goodness of God endureth continually.

Analysis

Why boastest thou thyself in mischief, O mighty man? the goodness of God endureth continually. This opening question exposes the absurdity and futility of boasting in evil, immediately contrasting human wickedness with divine goodness. The psalm's superscription identifies the historical context: when Doeg the Edomite told Saul that David visited Ahimelech, resulting in the massacre of 85 priests (1 Samuel 22:9-19).

"Why boastest thou thyself" (mah-tithalel, מִתְהַלֵּל) uses halal (הַלֵּל), meaning to boast, praise, glory. This is the same verb used for praising God throughout Psalms ("Hallelujah" = praise Yah). The bitter irony is profound: the word for praising God is perverted to describe boasting in evil. Doeg gloried in his destruction of God's priests—taking pride in what should produce shame.

"In mischief" (bera'ah, בְּרַעָה) uses ra'ah (רָעָה), meaning evil, wickedness, calamity, harm. This encompasses both moral evil and the destructive consequences it produces. Doeg didn't merely do evil—he boasted in it, celebrated it, took perverse pride in causing harm. This represents evil at its most brazen: not merely committing wickedness but glorifying in destruction.

"O mighty man" (haggibor, הַגִּבּוֹר) drips with irony. Gibbor (גִּבּוֹר) means mighty one, warrior, hero. In context, this is mockery: Doeg demonstrated "might" by slaughtering unarmed priests. This challenges distorted concepts of strength—true might is moral courage and justice, not brutal violence against the defenseless.

God's true mighty ones defend the weak; Doeg's perverted might destroyed the innocent.

"The goodness of God endureth continually" (chesed El kal-hayom, חֶסֶד אֱלֹהִים כָּל-הַיּוֹם) provides stunning contrast. Chesed (חֶסֶד) is covenant love, steadfast mercy, loyal faithfulness. Kal-hayom (כָּל-הַיּוֹם) means "all the day"—constantly, perpetually, without interruption. While Doeg's evil is temporary and will be judged, God's goodness is eternal and unchanging. This contrast between transient wickedness and enduring divine mercy frames the entire psalm.

Historical Context

The historical context is crucial to understanding this psalm's passion. First Samuel 22 records the tragic episode: Saul, consumed with jealousy toward David, discovered that Ahimelech the priest had innocently helped David. Doeg the Edomite, Saul's chief herdsman, witnessed David's visit to Ahimelech and reported it to Saul. When Saul's own servants refused to kill the priests of the LORD, Doeg volunteered. He slaughtered 85 priests who wore the linen ephod and then destroyed the priestly city of Nob, killing men, women, children, infants, oxen, donkeys, and sheep (1 Samuel 22:18-19).

Doeg represents evil at its most horrifying: religious massacre, genocide against God's servants, the destruction of an entire priestly city. His enthusiasm for this atrocity—his willingness when others refused, his thoroughness in the slaughter—reveals depravity that goes beyond mere obedience to wicked orders. He took initiative in evil, boasted in destruction.

Yet David's response is remarkable: rather than cursing Doeg with his own anger, David appeals to God's goodness and justice. He recognizes that God's covenant love endures despite this horrific evil. This reflects mature faith that can hold together two realities:

1. evil is real, destructive, and must be opposed
2. God's goodness is more fundamental, more powerful, and more enduring than any evil.

The psalm anticipates New Testament teaching on responding to persecution.

Jesus commanded: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you" (Matthew 5:44). Stephen, while being stoned, prayed: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7:60). Paul wrote: "Recompense to no man evil for evil...Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12:17-19). David's appeal to God's justice rather than personal revenge models this approach.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. Why does boasting in evil represent a perversion of praise, and how does this reveal the fundamental disorder of sin?
2. How does calling Doeg a 'mighty man' use irony to expose the difference between true strength (moral courage) and false strength (brutal violence)?
3. Why does David immediately contrast human wickedness with God's enduring goodness rather than focusing entirely on condemning evil?
4. In what ways are you tempted to 'boast in mischief'—taking pride in achievements that harm others or advance yourself at others' expense?
5. How does remembering that 'God's goodness endures continually' help maintain perspective and hope when facing horrific evil?

Interlinear Text

מָה	תַּהֲבֵל	ל	בָּעֵה	בָּעֵה	וְרָא	הָגָב	וְרָא	לְעָדָה	לְעָדָה	אֶל
H4100	Why boastest	thou thyself in	mischief	O mighty	man the	goodness	of God			
	H1984		H7451		H1368		H2617			H410

כָּלְמִים:
endureth continually
H3605 H3117

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 103:17 (Parallel theme): But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children;

Psalms 107:1 (Good): O give thanks unto the LORD, for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever.

Psalms 94:4 (Parallel theme): How long shall they utter and speak hard things? and all the workers of iniquity boast themselves?

Proverbs 6:14 (Parallel theme): Frowardness is in his heart, he deviseth mischief continually; he soweth discord.

1 Samuel 21:7 (Parallel theme): Now a certain man of the servants of Saul was there that day, detained before the LORD; and his name was Doeg, an Edomite, the chieftest of the herdmen that belonged to Saul.

Isaiah 59:4 (Parallel theme): None calleth for justice, nor any pleadeth for truth: they trust in vanity, and speak lies; they conceive mischief, and bring forth iniquity.

Psalms 7:14 (Parallel theme): Behold, he travaileth with iniquity, and hath conceived mischief, and brought forth falsehood.