

Psalms 58:8

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

As a snail which melteth, let every one of them pass away: like the untimely birth of a woman, that they may not see the sun.

Analysis

Vivid Imagery of Divine Judgment

This verse employs two striking metaphors for the destruction of the wicked. The first image, "as a snail which melteth" (kemo shablul temes yahalok), draws from ancient observation that snail trails appear to be the creature dissolving as it moves. The Hebrew temes means "to melt" or "dissolve," creating a picture of gradual disappearance. Some translations render this "like a slug that melts away," emphasizing the creature's apparent self-destruction through its own secretions.

The second metaphor, "like the untimely birth of a woman" (nefel eshet), refers to a miscarriage or stillbirth—a child who never sees the sun (bal-chazu shemesh). This sobering image emphasizes the futility and incompleteness of wicked lives: like a stillborn child, they exist briefly but accomplish nothing of lasting value, never experiencing the light of life's fulfillment. The phrase "may not see the sun" can refer both to physical death and to never experiencing joy, blessing, or divine favor.

These imprecatory images aren't expressions of personal vindictiveness but appeals for divine justice. David asks that the wicked, who have perverted justice and oppressed the innocent (verses 1-2), experience the futility and emptiness their choices deserve. The melting snail and stillborn child represent lives wasted in rebellion, leaving no lasting legacy.

Historical Context

David's Context of Unjust Judges

Psalm 58 is a Michtam (meaning uncertain, possibly "golden" or "inscribed") of David, addressing corrupt rulers who pervert justice. The historical setting likely reflects David's experiences with Saul's court, where officials falsely accused him and sought his death despite his innocence. David had repeatedly experienced unjust judgments from those who should have upheld righteousness.

The ancient Near Eastern context makes this psalm particularly significant. Judges held immense power, often determining matters of life and death. When they corrupted justice—taking bribes, showing favoritism, or deliberately condemning the innocent—the entire social order collapsed. The helpless had no recourse except to appeal to God, the ultimate Judge who sees all and judges righteously.

David's imprecatory language must be understood within covenant theology: God had promised to curse those who cursed His anointed (Genesis 12:3) and to defend the cause of the righteous. David isn't seeking personal revenge but calling on God to fulfill His covenant promises by bringing justice. This psalm became part of Israel's worship, teaching generations to trust God's justice when human courts failed.

Related Passages

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How should Christians today understand and use imprecatory psalms that call for judgment on the wicked?
2. What do the images of the melting snail and stillborn child teach about the ultimate futility of a life lived in wickedness?

3. When have you experienced unjust treatment, and how did you bring your case before God rather than seeking personal revenge?
4. How does this psalm's emphasis on divine justice encourage those suffering under corrupt or unjust authorities?
5. What is the difference between seeking God's justice (as David does) and harboring personal bitterness or vengeance?

Interlinear Text

כִּמּוֹ	שֶׁבַלְוִל	תִּמְסֶה	יִהְיֶה		
H3644	As a snail	which melteth	let every one of them pass away		
	H7642	H8557	H1980		
	כִּפֹּל	אִשָּׁת	בֵּל	זֶה	שֶׁשֶׁשׁ
	like the untimely birth	of a woman	H1077 that they may not see		the sun
	H5309	H802	H2372		H8121

Additional Cross-References

Job 3:16 (Parallel theme): Or as an hidden untimely birth I had not been; as infants which never saw light.

Ecclesiastes 6:3 (Parallel theme): If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also that he have no burial; I say, that an untimely birth is better than he.