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O Mighty Man

Psalm 52

Pastor Bryan Clark

According to the New Testament, if you are a follower of Jesus, you are an alien—an alien and a stranger. And the reality is if you really are a follower of Jesus, you feel that on a daily basis.

What the New Testament means by that is, as one who has trusted Jesus as Savior you become a citizen of heaven. And as a citizen of heaven, you really don't fit into the value system of this world anymore. And I would say on a daily basis I feel that. I watch television; I go to a movie; I read a magazine; I listen to the nightly news...and I'm constantly reminded I don't fit here; I don't belong here; I feel like I'm counterculture; I feel like I'm swimming upstream. And frankly, that tends to weary us over time.

The reality is I'm on a different page than the rest of the culture. If you're a follower of Jesus, so are you. What we do with our time and our money is different. What we think gives life meaning and purpose is different. What we think ultimately brings us pleasure and satisfies is different. We're on a different page, and we know that; we feel that. I am an alien.

Whenever I think about this, I can't help but think about C. S. Lewis's words from *The Screwtape Letters* where he says:

The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid “dens of crime” that Dickens loved to paint. It is not done even in concentration camps and labour camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried, and minuted) in clean, carpeted, warmed, and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voice.

-C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* revised edition, (Macmillan, 1961) p. x.

You know, I think C. S. Lewis is right on track. What he's essentially saying is the greatest evil in our world is really not done in some back alley somewhere: it's not done in a crack house. It's done by the movers and shakers, the people of power and influence that promote a value system contrary to God's. In a very quiet, articulate, sophisticated way, they destroy the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. And that is true.

The question is, how do we respond? Ultimately the enemy is the author of the value system of our world. But he's got his mouthpieces—his movers, his shakers—in our world that promote that value system. So how do we respond? The reality is we can't escape it. Some people try to just hunker down in a fortress and hope it'll go away. But that certainly doesn't work. You have to live in it. You have to process it somehow.

Well, there are several ways to process it that I think are very unhealthy; they're very destructive. One way to process it is to respond in fear—to respond in a sense of fear and reaction and panic. If I were to identify what I think the last 25 years of the culture wars have been about, I think this is it. I think in many cases we've just reacted with this sense of fear and panic. It's kind of “Chicken Little, the sky is falling in.” And there's panic everywhere you look.

The reality is, nothing good ever comes from fear. Fear never causes us to make wise decisions. Fear often causes us to make foolish decisions. We get reactionary. Besides, fear is contradictory to our faith. We gather like this and we worship and we proclaim these magnificent truths of God, and then we go out and act like we don't believe a word of it. Fear is always contrary to our faith.

So that's not a good way to respond. We can't respond out of panic as if somehow God has lost control and everything is up for grabs.

Sometimes people respond with irritation. This is more the camp I would land in. The reality is, sometimes we're just so aggravated; we're angry; we're irritated; we're tired of hearing it. Sometimes I want to just take the TV and shake it. I want to tell the person on there, "Stop saying that!" And maybe the reason is because while they sit and articulate in very sophisticated fashion a value system opposed to God, I'm the one that ends up cleaning up the messes. I'm the one that deals with the shattered lives. And I want them to stop it. So I want to shake my TV or wherever it's coming from.

But the reality is, I can't stop them and there's nothing accomplished with that kind of anger and irritation. What typically happens is we just get ourselves worked into a lather and we just spout off in places where it's not productive at all. We go to work or we go to the campus and we just start spouting off with people that have different political views and different values. And all we do is isolate ourselves. We're kind of venting our frustration but we're looking for an argument everywhere we can find it, and we just kind of get labeled as "that nutty Christian" and everybody avoids us.

And you really have to ask the question, what did that accomplish? We're just kind of venting our irritation, our anger. But in reality, that's very contrary to our mission to love people and introduce them to Jesus. That's not a good way to respond.

I suppose a third way—and perhaps the most deadly of all but also certainly the most subtle of all—is the idea "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em." It's this subconscious feeling that, you know, it seems like their team is winning. And so we start moving our way over and assimilating into the culture—you know, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

I don't think we think about it consciously, but the reality is little by little we become more like the culture than like Christ. And that certainly isn't the way we want to go. So how do we react? How do we respond when daily we're bombarded by all these messages that conflict and contradict the value system and purpose of God?

If you have a Bible with you this morning, turn with me to Psalm 52 and we'll see if we can answer that. I need to give you just a little background of Psalm 52 to understand it. When David was a teenager, David was anointed by Samuel to be the next king in Israel. But David would have to wait until God removed Saul from the throne before David could become king.

I'm convinced that when Samuel anointed David, neither of them understood what that journey would look like. Neither of them imagined that for the next decade and a half, David would live a miserable existence—fleeing for his life, hiding in caves, living more like an animal than a person—because Saul in his insecurities would be threatening to kill David. But that is indeed what happened.

As God's hand of blessing was obviously on David, David began to emerge in the kingdom. And Saul, who was very insecure with himself, was threatened by that. At first he thought maybe David would take over. And then he decided David must die. And so David had to flee for his life. And for about a decade and a half, David was fleeing and hiding, and Saul was trying to kill him. It was a miserable existence.

Somewhere along the way, David ended up in a town named Nob. This town was the home of the priests of Israel. David arrived there and opened up a discussion with Ahimelech, who was the chief priest there. Ahimelech was obviously very nervous about David and what he was doing, and this all seemed a little bit strange to him. Ahimelech was nervous, but David said that he needed bread; he was famished. And so Ahimelech gave him some bread. He also gave him a sword that belonged to Goliath because David was unarmed, and sent David on his way.

As David was leaving the city of Nob, he looked over and there was Saul's chief shepherd by the name of Doeg. David will tell you that when he looked over and he saw Doeg, he made a mental note, *This is gonna be trouble*. He could see it coming. But he left and he went on his way.

Meanwhile, "back at the ranch," Saul was sitting in a tree, waxing eloquently with his troops. On one hand he was telling them that he was the almighty powerful king and there was nobody like him. On the other hand he was saying, "But nobody likes me. Everybody likes David; they don't like me. And everybody's siding with David. When will somebody emerge and be faithful to me and tell me where David is?"

Well, Doeg was there and he heard this as an opportunity to be promoted in the kingdom. So Doeg steps forward and says, "I know where David *was*. He was just recently in Nob, and Ahimelech, your chief priest, took care of him and fed him and gave him a weapon and sent him on his way."

Well, Saul is absolutely outraged by this. So he sends for Ahimelech to be brought to him. Ahimelech comes, and Saul confronts him and asks him what he thinks he was doing. Well, poor Ahimelech—he doesn't know what to say—says, "I thought David was on your team. I thought I was doing you a favor. I was just taking care of your general."

Well, Saul doesn't buy a word of that, and Saul orders that his soldiers slaughter Ahimelech in cold blood. But his soldiers are so taken by this order to slaughter the priests of God, they won't do it. They just won't do it. They don't budge.

So guess who comes to the rescue? We'll, it's Doeg, of course. This is his chance. So Doeg steps forward, pulls out his sword, and in cold blood he slaughters Ahimelech, the chief priest. But that's not enough. He then goes on and slaughters 85 priests of God in cold blood. But that's not enough. He goes to the town of Nob and he slaughters every woman, every child, every infant, every animal in the city. It is an absolute bloodbath.

Only one person escapes, and that person escapes and finds David and tells David what has transpired. Now David has got to feel the weight of what has happened and his part in all of that. And he has got to be wondering, *What's going on here? I'm supposed to be God's anointed. I'm supposed to become king. I spend my whole life fleeing from Saul. Now Saul is allowed to slaughter all these people. Where is God in all of this?*

David could have easily responded in fear. Or he could have responded in anger. Or he could have become just like Saul—filled with lies and deception—and sought to get even.

But how does David respond? Well, that's Psalm 52. It is out of that circumstance that David writes the words of this psalm. With that in mind, we begin in verse 1.

Why do you boast in evil, O mighty man? (vs. 1a, *NASB)

Some people think that David is talking to Doeg in this psalm. I think he's talking to Saul. Many of these lines don't really apply to Doeg. They do apply to Saul perfectly. The "mighty man" is a note of sarcasm. We might say in our culture "a big man." He's saying, "Why do you boast in evil and think you're a big shot? You think you're a big man because you're on the throne; because you're rich; you're powerful—oh, you're such a big man."

And then he follows it with the statement:

The lovingkindness of God endures all day long. (vs. 1b)

In other words, what he's saying there is, "Why do you boast in your evil and think you're such a big shot when you know that at the end of the day, the lovingkindness of God wins?" That really sets the tone, then, for the psalm.

Your tongue devises destruction. (vs. 2a)

This is the idea of plotting and planning. It's the idea that those in positions of influence and power are plotting and planning that which ultimately brings destruction. You have to remember, Saul was a liar and a deceiver. Saul was promoting all kinds of things about David that were not true, but he was needing to convince the people that David was the bad guy; David was the enemy; David needed to be eliminated—because the people, for the most part, loved David. And so he's plotting and scheming destruction.

Like a sharp razor, O worker of deceit. You love evil more than good, falsehood more than speaking what is right. (vs. 2b-3)

I think those verses capture very accurately the culture in which *we* live. We all understand that we live in a culture that no longer values truth. Truth is up for grabs. Truth is whatever it needs to be for me to promote my agenda, for me to get my way. The reality is, we live in a world of relativism, and truth is just not a value.

You listen to a politician on either side of the aisle get behind a microphone, and you find yourself asking, *I wonder if that's true*. You read an article in a magazine and you say, *I wonder if that's even true*. You listen to the nightly news and you find yourself saying, *How do we know that's even true?* You listen to a preacher in church and you wonder, *Is that even true?* You listen to a professor in a university classroom and you're wondering, *Is that even true?* You read something in a university textbook and you say, *How do we know that's even true?*

The fact of the matter is, we don't live in a culture that values truth. We live in a culture that's pushing agendas. And everybody is willing to put their spin on something or to misrepresent something if it promotes their point of view, if it promotes their agenda.

Well, that's exactly the same thing that David was dealing with. Saul was just a big liar: he valued falsehood more than truth. He was willing to say anything in order to have his way. And each time he lied, hundreds of people died. There was a great destruction to what he was doing.

You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue. (vs. 4)

Think about David's situation. David is hiding. David doesn't have wealth; David doesn't have power; David doesn't have position. He really doesn't have much of anything to fight back with. Saul has it all. Saul must have seemed unreachable; he must have seemed unbeatable. David must have struggled with how could he possibly ever end up on the throne? And yet that's where he goes

in this psalm. There's a reminder that God will take care of business and you just have to trust Him with that.

But [this is the contrast] God will break you down forever. (vs. 5a)

“Break you down” is a Hebrew phrase used to describe the tearing down of a wall. In the ancient world, any major city had a significant wall around it that was absolutely essential for protection. If some other city came marching on them, they had to have some way to at least slow them down, that they might defend themselves. So that was critical to survival. Of course, a king would be behind multiple walls and into the palace, and in many ways seemed very hard to get to. The idea is that these people think they are so powerful; they think they have wealth and influence and position—they're behind their walls and they seem almost unreachable. And what David is saying is, “When God wants them, He just comes up and slaps their wall down. It isn't going to stop Him.”

He will snatch you up and tear you away from your tent. (vs. 5b)

This again is a similar imagery where, whether it's a tent or a palace, this person of influence is hiding in their tent and it seems like there's no way to even gain access to get to them. Yet when God wants them, God knocks down the walls. He reaches in the tent and He grabs them and He snatches them up. It's not a problem. They're not safe and protected from God and His judgment.

That Hebrew phrase “snatch you up” is an interesting one. It was also used to describe reaching into a bed of coals and snatching out a coal and isolating it. You know, one of the interesting things about coals is, when you leave them together they will burn for hours. But if you get a coal out of the fire and isolate it, in a matter of minutes it is cool and then cold.

What happens is these movers and shakers—these people of influence, these people that are calling the shots and promoting an agenda—they tend to group together and they live in this isolated world where they think everybody thinks like them. And there's this heat that's generated from that type of camaraderie. But what David is saying is, “God will reach in there. He'll pull them out of their group and set them by themselves and they'll cool off in a hurry.” It's a vivid imagery. He says:

And uproot you from the land of the living. (vs. 5c)

“Uproot you” is a gardening term. It means to uproot a flower—in this case, a weed. Imagine a garden full of flowers, and a thistle grows up and it looks like this big powerful thistle is going to take over. And suddenly there comes this big hand of the gardener and grabs the thistle and yanks it up and tosses it out of the garden. It's exactly the imagery here: that this king may seem powerful, may seem invincible, may seem unreachable. And yet the reality is, when God wants him He'll knock down the walls. He'll reach in the tent and, like a weed, He'll pluck him out and cast him out of the land of the living.

The imagery here is very powerful. You'll notice these verses are followed by a “Selah,” which most people think just means, “Stop and think about this.” If you have a tendency to think that maybe the other team is winning, and you start to assimilate and become more like the culture, you might want to stop and think about that for a moment. That's really what the psalmist is saying.

We've used this metaphor before: What difference does it make if your team is winning at halftime, if at the end of the game they lose? And the reality is, sometimes it seems like the other team is winning. Sometimes it seems like they're winning the day. And that's what sometimes

tempts us to start to drift that way and assimilate in. But we read these verses and we realize, *I don't think I want to be on that team; that doesn't look very inviting when you see it from God's perspective.* He goes on and says:

The righteous will see and fear. (v. 6a)

The righteous—the people of God—will see God's judgment and will fear. That doesn't mean be afraid. It does mean to be awestruck, like the "fear of God." There is a certain level of intimidation and intensity in that. When we enter the presence of God and recognize His glory, there is a sense of awe that causes us to gasp. And there's a level of intimidation in that—at the magnificence of our God. Well, the same is true of His judgment. When God chooses to step in and to deal with people, there is a sense in which it is so decisive and it is so intense that even the righteous will pull back and gasp a little bit.

Many times David must have wondered, *Where is God and why doesn't God act? Why doesn't God deal with Saul? Look at all the devastation that he's causing.* Here David is regaining some perspective.

In the same way, we look at the movers and the shakers and the proponents in our world of that which is opposed to God. And we wonder, *God, why don't You do something? Why don't You shut them up? Why don't You silence them?* We pray that, but what the psalmist is saying is, "When God chooses to step in and deal with them, we will see that and we'll kind of step back. It will be so deliberate and so intense that we'll kind of step back and even *we* will gasp at the severity of God's judgment."

The righteous will see and fear, and will laugh. (vs. 6a)

That's not laugh as in "that's funny," but laugh as in "how could those people have been so stupid to think they could fight God and win?" That's David looking at Saul and, in a sense, laughing at him and saying, "Saul, what is wrong with you? What makes you think that just because you have a palace, and just because you have position and wealth and power, that somehow you can fight against God—and through lies and through deception you can ultimately win? That's so stupid it's laughable." That's what he means there: that the righteous will look at those people and it's laughable that they thought somehow those people could win over God.

...will laugh at him, saying, "Behold [*this is the idea of "take a good hard look"—that's what "Behold" means*], the man who would not make God his refuge, but trusted in the abundance of his riches and was strong in his evil desire. (vs. 6b-7)

Again, the psalmist is saying, "Before you start thinking maybe you want to change teams—maybe God has lost control; everything's going so well for the other team—you better stop and take a good look because this is a clear picture of their ultimate end, of their destruction. This is the person who chose not to put their refuge in God. This is the person who thought he was self-sufficient: thought he had enough wealth and power of position that *I can go contrary to God and somehow I can make that work.* And ultimately they obviously find out otherwise.

David says,

But as for me, I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. (vs. 8a)

“House of God” is probably referring to just creation in general. This is a very interesting description David makes of himself. At this point, David is living like an animal. David is fleeing for his life. He is in and out of caves. David has a little ragtag army up against Saul’s great position, his wealth, his power. David doesn’t really look like a green, growing, productive tree. He looks like a weed in the garden.

And yet David is seeing this through God’s eyes and he realizes, no matter how big Saul’s army is; no matter how much position, no matter how much power, no matter how much influence he has—Saul is ultimately going to experience the destruction of God. And David, because of his commitment to God and God’s way, is green and healthy and productive.

The idea of an olive tree is a very powerful imagery from the ancient world. It’s a “green olive tree,” meaning it’s alive and productive. An olive tree would give about six gallons of oil every other year, so they considered it to be very valuable, very productive. But an olive tree was also very enduring. An olive tree would be productive for several hundred years.

So the imagery was very powerful: that while God is reaching down and plucking out this weed and casting it out of the garden, here’s a tree that’s green and healthy and productive and will endure year after year after year. And David is seeing himself as that—through the eyes of God, not through the eyes of his circumstances.

But as for me, I am like a green olive tree in the house of God; I trust [*in what?*] in the lovingkindness of God forever and ever. (vs. 8)

David is saying, “I don’t trust in position; I don’t trust in power; I don’t trust in wealth; I don’t trust in circumstances. I trust in the lovingkindness of God. And *that* will ultimately be my hope.”

I will give You thanks forever, because You have done *it*. (vs. 9a)

Notice the “it” in your Bible is in italics. That tells you that it isn’t in the original. The Hebrew actually stops with “because You have done.” It might be better translated “because You have acted.” It’s very interesting that David puts this in the past tense even though the action is yet future. This is a common technique in the Psalms. It’s a way of saying that my faith in God is so strong, I know that God will act. It is such a sure thing that I’m going to write it down as if it has already taken place—even though it’s yet future. That’s exactly what he does here. Given what he has already said, he says, “I will be thankful to God forever, because I know He will act.”

And I will wait on Your name. (vs. 9a)

That is David’s hope. That is his response. This is what we’ve been talking about. David isn’t going to fear; he isn’t going to panic; he isn’t going to respond in anger; he isn’t going to assimilate into the culture. He’s going to wait.

I will wait on Your name, for it is good, in the presence of Your godly ones. (vs. 9b)

I do find it interesting that David says that he will wait in the presence of God’s godly ones. In other words, the reality is as aliens and strangers we cannot walk this walk alone. When bombarded daily by the messages of the culture that are contrary to God’s value system, if I am isolated and by myself I will eventually cave in. Nobody is that strong.

But David is saying, “I will wait not by myself in isolation, but I will wait with other aliens—with the other godly ones who constantly remind me what it means to be an alien. We’re in this together and we trust and believe. Our hope is in God.”

Every weekend we gather together, and that’s a part of what we’re doing. Worship is toward God but it’s also toward one another. Worship is reminding ourselves that God is great, that God is powerful, that God’s lovingkindness endures. Our hope is not in power; it’s not in position; it’s not in numbers; it’s not in wealth. It is in the lovingkindness of God. So together, at an alien gathering, we encourage and remind ourselves that we’re on the right track and that we’re in this together. And we wait upon the Lord.

The reality is, every day as a follower of Jesus Christ you are bombarded with the movers and shakers of the value system of this world that are seeking to convince you that their team is winning and that they are right. Their promoting of that value system leads to the destruction of hundreds of thousands of lives. It’s very wearying. We often wonder, *How do I respond?*

I don’t want to respond out of fear, out of a sense of panic: “The sky is falling.” That’s counterproductive: nothing good can come from that.

I don’t want to respond with a level of anger and irritation where I’m just venting everywhere I go and everybody stays clear of me and I’m just kind of a nutcase that everybody wants to avoid. That’s counterproductive. Our mission is to love people. It’s to introduce people to Jesus, not to attack them over their political position or something else.

Thirdly, I certainly don’t want to assimilate into the culture, because I know in the end that’s destruction.

So what do I do? Well, I trust. I trust in the lovingkindness of God. I hope and I wait. In other words, I’m set free from bondage so I can be about the mission that God has called us to accomplish. In David’s case it was waiting until God would one day remove Saul from power and put David on the throne. And he would wait for that day.

For us, it’s understanding that we’re waiting for the return of Christ. And in the meantime, we need to be about the mission of the kingdom. We need to not be distracted with all this stuff but busy about the assignment that God has given us. But we don’t do so with a heart of fear; we don’t do so with a heart of anger; we don’t do so with a heart of compromise. We do so with a heart of faith, trust, and hope that properly represents our message to the world.

The movers and shakers of the value system of this world are still people that we want to reach for Jesus. We don’t want to hate them; we don’t want to attack them. We want to love them; we want to introduce them to Jesus. And to do that, you have to have a right perspective; you have to be in the right frame of mind; you have to be responding correctly to the opposition we feel on a daily basis.

Sometimes when you read a text of Scripture you walk away saying, “This is something I need to do.” But oftentimes out of a text of Scripture you realize, *This is something I need to know. It’s a realignment; it’s a regaining of perspective. I need to know it and I need to believe it. And if I know it and I believe it, it will dramatically affect on a daily basis what I do.*

Our Father, we are thankful that You are the almighty, sovereign God. Lord, we feel what David felt. To the movers and shakers and people of influence in our culture that promote a value system that is opposed to You, we want to say with David, “Why do you boast in your evil as if you’re some sort of a big shot, when you know at the end of the day God wins?” Lord, we identify with the lies and the deceit and the planning and plotting and scheming that leads to the destruction of hundreds of thousands of lives in our culture every year. Lord, help us to regain our perspective: that You—in Your own timing, in Your own way—will knock down the walls and You’ll reach down and You’ll pluck these people out and cast them out of the garden of the living. You will deal with these people in Your time, Lord, that we might respond correctly, that we might respond with hearts of faith, that we might appear to be a green, productive, healthy tree—not characterized by fear, not characterized by anger or compromise, but by faith—that we believe in the lovingkindness of our God, that we will hope and we will wait, that we will be in the right frame of mind every day, to love those around us and to introduce them to the life-changing message of Jesus. We pray this in His name, Amen.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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