

Psalm 55 is “a song of the betrayed.”

One commentator notes that “the church has sung this Psalm in remembrance of Christ’s passion, trembling at the depth of evil in the ‘city’, but trusting in the Saviour, and with him seeking the forgiveness and conversion of those that would only deceive and destroy.” (Eaton, 217)

Our story tonight is all about the cross.

While it is true that David helped create the mess that he was in,  
at the same time, he is the LORD’s anointed.

And God has ordained that David will prefigure the sufferings of his greater son, Jesus.

David reminds us that even though much of our suffering happens because of our own foolishness, God uses that suffering to conform us to the image of his Son.

Psalm 55 does not specify a particular betrayal –

but since it is grouped with several Psalms that speak of various episodes in David’s life,  
we may certainly see it in connection with the betrayal of David in 2 Samuel 15-16.

Please turn over to 2 Samuel 15-16, as I retell that story so you can see how it connects.

Psalm 51 refers to David’s sin with Bathsheba.

That sin set in motion all the events that followed.

Not only did Bathsheba’s first son die at birth,

but the prophet Nathan said in 2 Samuel 12,

that just as David had slept with Bathsheba secretly,

so also David’s neighbor would sleep with his wives openly.

And that’s what happens in chapters 15-16.

In chapter 13 we hear how Amnon raped his half-sister, Tamar.

Tamar’s full brother, Absalom, then took revenge, killing Amnon,

and then fleeing to his grandfather, Talmai, the king of Geshur.

Then in chapter 14 we hear of the return of Absalom to Jerusalem.

Now in chapter 15, we see how Absalom conspires against his father and seizes the throne of Israel.

The LORD’s anointed is losing the hearts of his people.

Absalom is the classic false teacher.

He tells people what they want to hear–

regardless of whether he can produce.

But people will follow a man who tells them what they want to hear,

because the people have itching ears.

But it would be difficult to pull off a coup from inside of Jerusalem.  
Jerusalem, like all capital cities in those days, is packed with loyalists.  
Absalom must get outside of Jerusalem,  
but in order to do this without raising suspicion he needs a plausible reason.  
So he tells David,  
*Please let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed to the LORD, in Hebron.  
For your servant vowed a vow while I lived at Geshur in Aram, saying,  
“If the LORD will indeed bring me back to Jerusalem,  
then I will offer worship to the LORD”*  
(Literally, “I will serve the LORD.”)  
This is the echo of Jacob’s language in Genesis 28.  
Absalom is claiming to be the faithful Jacob returning from Haran.

It’s a good ruse.

It works.

And Absalom went to Hebron—in the heart of Judah.  
And he summoned his supporters from all over Israel.  
Ahithophel, Bathsheba’s grandfather,  
came to him in Hebron.  
*And the conspiracy grew strong, and the people with Absalom kept increasing.*

Absalom, in effect, curses his father by seeking to overthrow him.

When word comes to David that the hearts of Israel have gone after Absalom,  
David decides to run away.

Why?

Why doesn’t David stay in the stronghold of Jerusalem and fight?  
Whether rightly or wrongly, David is convinced that all Israel is against him.  
His intelligence reports tell him that Israel will follow Absalom.

So David decides to flee.

He leaves 10 concubines behind to keep the house,  
but the rest of the people of Jerusalem go with him.  
(Remember, capital cities were stocked with loyalists.)

David, however, stops at the last house of Jerusalem and allows his servants to pass by first.

The Cherethites and Pelethites (his bodyguard) go first,  
followed by 600 Gittites, led by Ittai the Gittite.  
The Gittites are “Gathites”—they are from Gath—the hometown of Goliath.

Gath was the Philistine city where David had taken refuge from Saul.  
Apparently David had made quite an impression upon the Gittites,  
because 600 Gittite followed him when he left.  
600 Philistine families had left their homes and their gods to follow David.

But David says to Ittai,

*you are a foreigner and also an exile from your home.  
You came only yesterday, and shall I today make you wander about with us,  
since I go I know not where?*

Ittai, however, understands that his only hope is in the LORD's anointed—  
he has a Christ-centered focus in life:

*As Yahweh lives, and as my lord the king lives  
(notice that he swears by Yahweh and Yahweh's Messiah)  
Wherever my lord the king shall be,  
whether for death or for life, there also will your servant be.*

If the Messiah is going into exile,  
then Ittai will follow Christ.

Peter will say the same thing to Jesus—  
but Peter, the Jew, will not have the courage of his convictions.

Ittai the Gittite will.

He will lead one-third of the armies of David into battle against Absalom.  
Ittai the Gentile will understand that whether in life or death I belong to the LORD's anointed.

And so David crossed the brook Kidron with his disciples and went up the Mount of Olives.

Whoa!

Does that sound familiar?  
John 18:1 tells us that after Judas had gone out to betray Jesus,  
Jesus left Jerusalem and crossed the Kidron valley and went up the Mount of Olives.

Jesus recapitulates the exile of David,  
revealing to us that David's exile was all about him.

David is going forth, leading a mixed multitude into exile.

The *real* application from this passage is not that you need to be a good father,  
or that you need to succeed where David failed—  
after all, that's absurd.

The *real* application is that you need to be like Ittai the Gittite!  
You need to follow Christ—  
even if that means suffering, exile and death.

Absalom wants you to follow him—

and his political platform looks a lot more attractive than the Messiah's.

In order to follow the Messiah you need to have the single-minded attitude of Ittai:

“Wherever my lord the king shall be . . . there also will your servant be.”

And David tells Abiathar and Zadok and the priests to remain in Jerusalem.  
David understands that his exile involves being separated from God’s presence.  
It is only if God has mercy and shows favor to him  
that he will be restored to the vision of God.

This is where Jesus will be—  
forsaken by God and alone.

*But David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went,  
barefoot and with his head covered.*

His son would weep in agony in this very place 1000 years later...

And it was there, as he climbed the Mount of Olives  
that word came to him of the betrayal of Ahithophel, David’s most trusted advisor.  
Ahithophel was also Bathsheba’s grandfather.  
Perhaps Ahithophel was upset at David for what David had done to his granddaughter?  
Perhaps it was something else.

And it was there—within sight of what would one day be the Garden of Gethsemane,  
that David prayed, *O LORD, please turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness.*

(Ahithophel’s counsel, by the way, will be the counsel of Judas—move immediately and take him!  
Take him *tonight*. (17:1))

(For that matter, Absalom’s rebellion begins with a kiss in 2 Sam 14:33;  
Absalom is the kissing bandit who steals the hearts of the people)

*While David was coming to the summit, where God was worshiped...*  
In those days the temple had not yet been built.  
Even as Samuel had led worship in numerous places around Israel,  
so also the “high places” remained as the places where Yahweh was worshiped  
until well after the temple was built.

So having heard the news of his betrayal,  
David now comes to the place of worship—  
and there he hears the answer to his prayer.  
Hushai the Archite came to meet him *with his coat torn and dirt on his head—*  
mourning for David’s exile.  
Hushai will be the means God uses to turn the counsel of Ahithophel to foolishness.  
David counsels Hushai to return with Zadok and Abiathar the priests  
and join them in frustrating the plans of Absalom.

Some have said that David erred by sending Hushai.

They say that he should have “trusted God” to frustrate Ahithophel.

That would be like saying that when someone asks us to pray that God would give him a job, then you shouldn’t send out any applications, but should just wait for God’s answer!

Prayer and action are not opposed to each other!

Indeed, I would argue that Hushai’s arrival just after David has learned of Ahithophel’s betrayal *is* God’s answer:

“Here, David, Hushai will be my instrument of thwarting Ahithophel’s counsel.”

In chapter 16, we see the triumph of the betrayer.

The traitor triumphs.

The rebel is enthroned in Jerusalem on the throne of his father, David.

And Ahithophel and Hushai come to him:

the plot thickens!

Hushai says *Long live the king! Long live the king!*

A double entendre if ever there was one!

Absalom marvels that Hushai has abandoned David,

but he is easily deceived, because everyone else in his entourage has given the same reason for following him!

Ahithophel had served his father,

so when Hushai says *As I have served your father, so I will serve you,*

Absalom believes him.

Is Hushai breaking the ninth commandment?

He is blatantly lying to Absalom.

He will not serve Absalom as he served David.

He is seeking to deceive Absalom in order to give him bad counsel, and in order to protect David.

But he is also keeping his word to David.

He is serving the LORD’s anointed by lying to the usurper.

We will look more at this next week,

because Hushai’s deception will prove to be the LORD’s means of saving David.

But I would argue that Hushai is right in what he does.

It is instructive to note that the Bible gives many approved examples of faithful men and women lying and deceiving the wicked (Rahab, Hushai, Jeremiah, etc.),

but I can think of no example in the Bible where a faithful person intentionally tells a truth that results in the death of others.

Every time a faithful person is in a position where telling the truth would result in the death of the faithful, they deceive the wicked.

In other words, a faithful Christian may serve as a double agent in the CIA!

(The CIA's webpage actually has a report on Hushai,  
describing him as one of the first secret agents in human historical writing).  
But Absalom is still relying on Ahithophel for counsel.  
And Ahithophel urges Absalom to go in to his father's concubines.  
*So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof.*  
*And Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel.*

To lay claim to the king's concubines was to lay claim to the king's throne.  
Sex and power are more closely related than we like to think.  
Why did lynching arise in the South only after the Civil War?  
As long as blacks were slaves, there was no question as to where the "power" was.  
But when blacks became free,  
the claim to equality was taken as a claim to white women.  
The king's concubines are only "available" for the king.  
No one less than the king may lay claim to them.

The concluding comment of the chapter turns our attention to Ahithophel:  
*Now in those days the counsel that Ahithophel gave*  
*was as if one consulted the word of God;*  
*so was all the counsel of Ahithophel esteemed, both by David and by Absalom.*

You don't get any wiser than the word of God!

Ahithophel was the wisest of counselors.

When Ahithophel speaks,  
even *kings* listen!  
Ahithophel was David's closest counselor.  
And yet he betrayed David and handed over David's concubines to Absalom.

It is in this light that we should read Psalm 55  
David is betrayed by one of his closest friends and counselors—  
even as our Lord Jesus Christ was betrayed by one of the twelve.  
We sing this in Christ.  
And we pray that God would frustrate the counsels of traitors—  
of apostates who have seized control of Christ's church.  
You don't need to name names as you sing this (David didn't)--  
but we can sing this of those who are leading the mainline churches astray,  
of those who are leading Roman Catholic churches astray—  
and indeed, even of teachers in the PCA, of whom Paul says,  
"he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing."  
We may have our doctrinal ducks in a row,  
but Paul's definition of a false teacher goes beyond doctrine!  
Sing Psalm 55 as a plea for God to rescue his church from all false teachers

who trouble Christ's church with division and heresy!

**1. A Plea for Mercy (v1-8)**

**a. My Enemies Oppress Me (v1-3)**

*Give ear to my prayer, O God,  
and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy!  
<sup>2</sup> Attend to me, and answer me;  
I am restless in my complaint and I moan,*

As we have seen before, many laments open with a command.

David calls out to God with the imperative mood:

“Give ear...do not hide yourself...attend to me and answer me.”

And yet, this is not the imperative of a superior ordering his servant around.

This is the supplication of the helpless crying out for mercy.

And he is restless in his complaint.

We saw when we went through the book of Job that we need to learn how to complain!

David gives us a good example of a proper complaint in Psalm 55.

He is not grumbling or murmuring against God.

But he is pouring out his heart before the LORD.

And he quickly identifies the problem:

<sup>3</sup> *because of the noise of the enemy,  
because of the oppression of the wicked.  
For they drop trouble upon me,  
and in anger they bear a grudge against me.*

Notice that David presents his complaint in general terms.

He could have identified Ahithophel and Absalom.

But David is not writing in his personal diary.

He is writing for the people of God to sing throughout the ages.

So he writes in general terms,

trusting that each generation will know how to apply it!

Is anybody making your life miserable because they are holding a grudge against you?

And maybe you deserved it at first!

Maybe you really did make a mess of things (like David did!).

But now others are responding sinfully to what you did.

David's response in verses 4-8 will sound familiar:

**b. The Terrors of Death Have Fallen on Me: Get Me Out of Here! (v4-8)**

<sup>4</sup> *My heart is in anguish within me;*

*the terrors of death have fallen upon me.*  
<sup>5</sup> *Fear and trembling come upon me,  
and horror overwhelms me.*  
<sup>6</sup> *And I say, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove!  
I would fly away and be at rest;*  
<sup>7</sup> *yes, I would wander far away;  
I would lodge in the wilderness; Selah*  
<sup>8</sup> *I would hurry to find a shelter  
from the raging wind and tempest."*

Get me out of here!  
I just want to get away!  
I'm tired of all this.  
Won't they ever just leave me alone?

Oh that I had wings like a dove!  
I would fly away and be at rest!

Sometimes you just want to get out of the situation.  
And sometimes that's exactly what you should do!  
David did not stand and fight against Absalom.  
He ran away to the wilderness.

Nowadays we call it depression and we offer you a pill to make it go away!  
I'm not saying that taking medicine is wrong!  
But sometimes our bodies are sending us signals that something is wrong –  
and if all you do is treat the symptom,  
you may miss the underlying cause,  
thereby only prolonging the problem.  
David wants to fly to the wilderness to get away.  
When you've been through a traumatic event,  
sometimes that's exactly what you need!

Even so, when the terrors of death come upon us, sometimes we want to run and hide.  
The word for "terror" here is used only a few times in the OT –  
but it is used to refer to the dread that fell upon Abraham in Genesis 15,  
when God made his covenant with him.  
It is used in Exodus 15 to speak of the terror of the LORD that destroyed Egypt  
at the Red Sea,  
and in Ex 23 and Joshua 2 to speak of the terror that filled the Canaanites.  
Job often uses the word to speak of God's terrors that have fallen on him.  
Here it is the terrors of death.



That is why Psalm 55 is very much a song of the betrayed –  
a song of Gethsemane –  
because this is where Jesus comes “on the night when he was betrayed.”  
He would have loved to escape – to fly away –  
but this time he could not.

And so the Messiah prays that God would “divide their tongues.”

## **2. A Call for Judgment Against My Former Friend (v9-16)**

### **a. Divide Their Tongues (v9-11)**

<sup>9</sup> *Destroy, O Lord, divide their tongues;  
for I see violence and strife in the city.*  
<sup>10</sup> *Day and night they go around it  
on its walls,  
and iniquity and trouble are within it;*  
<sup>11</sup> *ruin is in its midst;  
oppression and fraud  
do not depart from its marketplace.*

The word “to divide” is the word “palag” –  
which reminds us of Peleg, in whose days the tongues of men were divided  
at the Tower of Babel.

David sees Jerusalem becoming like Babel –  
a city of violence and strife.

There are seven sins found in the city:  
violence and strife, iniquity and trouble, ruin, oppression and fraud.

Earlier in book 2, we heard about the holy city – the city of God –  
a city of righteousness and peace (esp. Psalms 46 and 48);  
but now the city is overrun by these seven vices.

At Babel the tongues were divided.

But at Jerusalem, on the day of Pentecost, tongues were united,  
as the Son of David poured out his Holy Spirit on his people,  
establishing his church as the holy city – Jerusalem as she should be!

Psalms 46-48 describe Jerusalem as she should be, with the Davidic king on the throne.  
Psalm 55 describes what happens when the king is betrayed by his friend.

And you hear reference to this in verses 12-14:

### **b. It's Worse Because It's *You*, My Close Friend (v12-14)**

<sup>12</sup> *For it is not an enemy who taunts me—  
then I could bear it;  
it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—  
then I could hide from him.*  
<sup>13</sup> *But it is you, a man, my equal,  
my companion, my familiar friend.*  
<sup>14</sup> *We used to take sweet counsel together;  
within God's house we walked in the throng.*

Ahithophel was one of David's closest friends and advisors.  
They had once taken "sweet counsel together" –  
and the memory of their sweet times together  
only makes his betrayal more bitter.  
And so David says in verse 15:

**c. Let Them Go Down to Sheol (v15)**

<sup>15</sup> *Let death steal over them;  
let them go down to Sheol alive;  
for evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart.*

This is what happened in Numbers 16, when the earth opened its mouth  
and swallowed Korah, Dathan and Abiram, and all their households.  
Korah, Dathan and Abiram had opposed Moses and rebelled.  
Now David prays that God will do to his betrayer as God had done to Korah.

As Arnd puts it: "It was a frightful thing for the earth to open and swallow up those wicked men,  
but it is a great consolation to the persecuted church,  
when she reflects upon the preceding examples of vengeance and of righteous judgment,  
as God by his word and appointment has always ordered it,  
and will certainly carry on matters to the end, if we betake to him for refuge."

Last week I spoke with former missionaries to Indonesia who told the story of two local pastors  
who sought to reintroduce pagan funeral customs into the church.  
Another local pastor objected and led the faithful away from the funeral,  
warning that God's judgment would come against those who returned to paganism.

Within a week, one of those two pastors had died in his sleep –  
and the other was nearly killed by a tree that fell on him while he walked down the street.  
Needless to say, when he recovered, he repented  
and the church never again used those pagan customs!

David concludes his Song for the Betrayed with a statement of confidence:

### 3. A Statement of Confidence in God (v16-23)

#### a. The LORD Will Save Me from the Many Who Oppose Me/Do Not Fear God (v16-19)

<sup>16</sup> *But I call to God,  
and the LORD will save me.*  
<sup>17</sup> *Evening and morning and at noon  
I utter my complaint and moan,  
and he hears my voice.*

Remember verse 10?

The seven vices stalking the city?  
Day and night?

The peril of the city – by day and by night –  
is outmatched by the complaint and moan of the Psalmist.

I will utter my complaint unceasingly:  
evening, morning and noon.

If he had said, “at evening and at morning,”  
it would have suggested a connection with the morning and evening sacrifice.  
It would have suggested that he began the day and ended the day with prayer.

But so perilous is his plight, that David insists that he prays evening and morning *and at noon*.  
Even in the middle of the day, when most people are occupied with their business,  
David moans before the LORD.  
And David has confidence that the LORD hears his voice.

<sup>18</sup> *He redeems my soul in safety  
from the battle that I wage,  
for many are arrayed against me.*  
<sup>19</sup> *God will give ear and humble them,  
he who is enthroned from of old, Selah  
because they do not change  
and do not fear God.*

David has confidence that God will humble his foes.

He has complete confidence that *in this matter* he is innocent,  
and therefore, God will vindicate him.

When David is guilty,  
he humbles himself and repents (Psalm 51).

When David is innocent,  
he brings his complaint to God and demands vindication (Psalm 54)

And that’s why, in Psalm 55, David is confident that no matter who may betray him,

God will redeem his anointed and deliver him.  
God is enthroned from of old –  
and he *will hear* the one who cries out to him for help.

In verse 20, David returns to Ahithophel:

**b. My Companion Has Broken His Covenant (v20-21)**

<sup>20</sup> *My companion<sup>[b]</sup> stretched out his hand against his friends;  
he violated his covenant.*

<sup>21</sup> *His speech was smooth as butter,  
yet war was in his heart;  
his words were softer than oil,  
yet they were drawn swords.*

I say Ahithophel – but you could also say Judas,  
or anyone else through all history who fits the description of a smooth-talking traitor.

How do you use your words?

Do you use words to love?

Or do you use words as weapons?

Remember 2 Samuel 16:23 –

“Now in those days the counsel that Ahithophel gave  
was as if one consulted the word of God;  
so was all the counsel of Ahithophel esteemed,  
both by David and by Absalom.”

**c. Cast Your Burden on the LORD Who Will Cast Down the Treacherous (v22-23)**

<sup>22</sup> *Cast your burden on the LORD,  
and he will sustain you;  
he will never permit  
the righteous to be moved.*

In verse 22, the voice suddenly shifts to the second person singular.

It is as if another voice suddenly enters the conversation  
and urges David to cast his burden on the LORD.

Of course, there is another voice mentioned in verses 20-21 –  
a voice that had many times addressed David –  
the voice of the betrayer!

Is it possible that verse 22 is a quote from Ahithophel?

Is this the “sweet counsel” that Ahithophel gave to David as they walked in the throng –  
as they celebrated the feasts of the LORD in the “old days”?

If that is the case then verses 22-23 are more closely connected than they appear.

If Ahithophel was the one who told David to “cast your burden on the LORD,  
and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved,”  
then verse 23 can be taken as David’ reply:

<sup>23</sup> *But you, O God, will cast them down  
into the pit of destruction;  
men of blood and treachery  
shall not live out half their days.  
But I will trust in you.*

Ahithophel was right:

The LORD will never permit the righteous to be shaken.  
But God cast Ahithophel down – because Ahithophel turned to blood and treachery.

It is in a similar context of danger, persecution, and suffering that Peter quotes Psalm 55:22.

Peter says, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God  
so that at the proper time he may exalt you,  
casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.” (1 Pet. 5:7)

Think of how Jesus treats those who crucified him:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”  
And yet, for those who do not repent, that same Lord Jesus will come at the final day  
in order to destroy them and cast them into the lake of fire.

Even so, we should sing Psalm 55 as those who heed the call of the Psalm:

“cast your burden on the LORD and he will sustain you;  
he will never permit the righteous to be moved.”