

## **When Friendship Becomes War**

### Psalm 55

If you're just joining us, we have spent most of this summer looking together at selections from Book 2 of the Psalms, chs. 42-72. Because Psalms offer us a hymnbook for all of life. These songs give voice to the whole range of life's experiences in a fallen world—a world that doesn't work the way it's supposed to, because of human sin. But a world where God reigns nonetheless, where his voice is our guide, his mercy and justice are our hope, his presence our protection, and his glory our prize. And so it's a book of lament, as we cry out when our world falls apart. It's a book of faith, as we wait on the Lord. It's a book of praise, as we recognize who God is and celebrate what he has done. It's a book of thanksgiving, as God rescues us from our troubles.

And trouble is something that Psalms is not shy about. There's no hesitancy to call it like it is, or to call it like we see it, even if we know something else might be going on. And we have that kind of honesty in the psalm before us this morning—Psalm 55.

This Psalm is a lament—a desperate cry for help when life becomes war. That's the situation being described here. The psalmist has been attacked, ambushed. The language and imagery of war peppers the whole poem. He speaks of his “enemy” in v. 3, and the “oppression of the wicked,” who “drop trouble upon” him (v. 4)—like lobbying stones or burning coals onto the enemy's head from atop a wall (cf. Ps. 140:10). He sees “violence and strife in the city,” v. 9. “Day and night they go around it on its walls, and iniquity and trouble are within it; ruin is in its midst; oppression and fraud do not depart from its marketplace” (vv. 10-11). It's a stronghold of violence and wickedness. He is “embattled,” v. 18, with many arrayed against him—armies lined up for attack. The victim of “war,” v. 21, waged by “men of blood and treachery,” v. 23. For the psalmist, life has become war.

And his heart reacts to the situation the way one reacts to the terror of war. He is restless in his moaning and complaining, v. 2. Verse 4: “My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me” (vv. 4-5, cf. v. 17). If you're a veteran who has served on the battlefield during wartime, as some of you have; or if you're someone like my brother-in-law, who grew up in El Salvador during their civil war, where every evening at curfew you had to be at home, on the ground below the windows in your house, lest you get shot; or even if you were in Manhattan or D.C. on Sept. 11, 2001, as some of you were during the terrorist attack—you know what vv. 4-5 are talking about. “My heart is in anguish . . . the terrors of death . . . Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.” The psalmist wants to flee. He wants to run away and escape (vv. 6-8). He wants to be vindicated, for justice to come upon his enemies (vv. 9-11, 15, 23). His emotional, physical reaction is the way one reacts to war.

But what is the precise nature of the conflict here in Psalm 55? It looks like war, it sounds like war, it feels like war. But what kind of war? The answer is surprising, and unsettlingly personal: the ambush the psalmist describes and reacts to is the betrayal of an intimate friend.

We see this revealed in vv. 12-14:

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. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to take sweet counsel together; within God's house we walked in the throng.

This psalm reminds us of the unfortunate reality that friendships in a fallen world can sometimes become war. An ambush on the battlefield can break your body, but an ambush by a friend whom you trusted can rip out your heart and stomp it to pieces. And that's what has happened here. One author explains: "The attacker is an intimate associate, whom the psalmist knows well from long experience and as a 'close' confidant. The 'sweet fellowship' shared is confidential conversation between friends who trust each other."<sup>1</sup> There's an intimacy that's been betrayed. This friend "violated his covenant" according to v. 20—he broke a sacred agreement and turned his friendship into war.

Now we don't really know which friend of David he's talking about. David is the psalmist here, and there are several people whom he could have in mind—his wife, Michal who despised him (2 Sam. 6); his son, Absalom, who tried to usurp him (2 Sam. 15-18); his counselor, Ahithophel, who deserted him for Absalom (2 Sam. 15). We're not told, and there's no real way to pin down who it is. And I think that's intentional. The precise life situation that inspired many of the psalms is often left unspecified by the authors, because these songs are meant to be applied broadly by God's people. Because David's story of betrayal and broken friendship, is our story too. We will all face betrayal in this fallen world, and experience the pain of when someone we trusted hurts us or turns against us. And this psalm gives us a voice for when that happens. For when our intimacy and trust is betrayed by a friend, by a spouse, a parent or sibling, a child, a pastor or spiritual mentor, a coach, a colleague, a boss.

You cannot have real friendship without vulnerability, and being vulnerable is risky. A good friend of mine describes intimacy between friends or within marriage as taking off your armor and handing the other person your sword. You're opening yourself up and letting people in to the raw truth of who you are, how you think, what you're doing. You have to really trust someone to go there. The psalmist trusted his friend. He took off his armor and handed him the sword. And his friend looked at the armor on the ground and the sword in his hand, and plunged it deep into the psalmist's heart.

But it wasn't a literal sword. We see later in v. 21 (and hints of it elsewhere in the psalm), that the weapons wielded by this unfaithful friend were not swords, but *words*. "His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords." We teach our kids the playground coping mechanism, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' But the longer you live, the more you realize, it doesn't really work that way. Words can destroy us. They can destroy our reputation through gossip and

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1 (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

slander. They can destroy our trust or security through lies and deception. They can destroy our self-image through mockery and sarcasm, and our confidence through constant criticism. Sticks and stones can bruise our flesh, but words attack our hearts. They can create bruises that no one else knows about, no one else can see. Wounds that can therefore go neglected for years, festering in silence. As Proverbs 12:18 puts it, “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

And to make matters worse, there was a spiritual component to the intimate friendship described by the psalmist. He and his companion weren’t just work buddies, or workout buddies; they worshiped together. “Within God’s house we walked in the throng”—the processional of worship at the temple (v. 14). They didn’t just bond over shared interests, or shared ambitions; their hearts were knit together in their relationship with God and their worship of God. Which makes the pain of betrayal all the more amplified and acute.

Many of us can tell stories like this. And if not our story, the story of people we know and love. I have a former brother-in-law whose betrayal is still wreaking havoc on our family three years later, and will continue to reverberate for years to come through the pain and hardship he’s created. He was a close friend. He was a youth pastor; he led worship at his church. He committed adultery and hid it. Then he did it again. Eventually he wound up in an ongoing affair. He repented and came back; then he reoffended. Then he repented again; everyone celebrated. It lasted little over a week. And then again, this time less than a week.

Can you imagine learning to trust someone again after having your heart played with like a disposable plate, rather than the priceless piece of china that it is? Can you imagine explaining to your kids, ‘Daddy’s back! . . . Now he’s gone again. . . . Daddy’s back . . . Now he’s marrying someone else’?

Some of us know exactly what it feels like. Some of us know what it’s like to cause that pain. And when that happens, you get what the psalmist says in v. 12—“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.” It would have been so much easier for a complete stranger, a nameless adversary to turn on us, than for someone you knew intimately and loved and trusted.

And when we experience that kind of deep, personal betrayal and the warlike trauma it creates, and even when the betrayal we experience is relatively minor—a cruel word, your boss breaks her promise, your friend ditches you to hang out with someone else—we typically try to respond in one of two ways: what’s often called fight or flight. We try to run away, or we try to get even. We see both of those longings in our psalm.

In vv. 6-7, we see the psalmist’s desire to escape from the trial, to run away or retreat. “And I say, ‘Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; yes, I would wander far away; I would lodge in the wilderness; . . . I would hurry to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest.’” When life gets hard, when relationships don’t turn out the way we thought they would, when we’re under attack, we want to run. We might run away physically. And just a side note: there are times when a person needs to seek physical distance from someone who is hurting or betraying them. If someone is abusing you physically or sexually—you may still love that person but you are not the one who’s going to be able to fix them. You need to get out and seek

help; you need to talk to someone you trust. And we need to be ready to listen to those who confide in us. So there are times when fleeing is a correct answer to betrayal. When you're in danger, you need to seek distance.

But it's easy for us to think that running, escaping, is always the answer. Or the easy answer. Running away physically. Running away emotionally. We vow never to let this happen again, and we close ourselves off. We isolate ourselves emotionally; build a wall around our hearts to try and protect ourselves from every being hurt like that again. Or perhaps we look for other ways of escape, to self-medicate—we run to alcohol, to food, to entertainment, to porn, to drugs—anything that will give me some small semblance of having escaped the storm, at least for a moment. The problem of course is that the escape isn't real and it doesn't last. It doesn't actually address the trouble; it usually just compounds it.

So the first common response to betrayal is to retreat. The second is to retaliate. And we can see that desire in our psalm as well. Verse 9: "Destroy, O Lord, divide their tongues; for I see violence and strife in the city." Verse 15: "Let death steal over them; let them go down to Sheol alive; for evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart." The psalmist wants justice. He wants the treachery of his companion to come back upon his own head.

And he's not wrong to want that. He has been seriously wronged. What happened to him is not something that can just be shrugged off or swept under the rug; he's been offended to the core of his soul. He wants justice; he *deserves* justice. The question is, from whose hand will it come? Because there's a difference between justice and retaliation, between vindication and revenge.

When we're betrayed, we want to retain control over the justice system. We want to act as prosecutor, judge, and jury. To issue the verdict and decide the sentence. And we want exclusive jurisdiction over the parole board too, to make sure they don't get off too early. So what often happens is that we resort to a vindictive manipulation, where we force people to make it up to us. You have to work your way back into my good graces. But I'm always going to hold the bar just an inch or two higher than you can reach, so that I can keep you in debt to me and make you know and feel the pain you've caused me to feel. Or, we make take the more passive-aggressive approach, and instead nurture an unforgiving resentment. I may not make a big deal of your sin, I might not even tell you how you hurt me, but I won't forget it. I might smile and nod when others praise you, but I know. And I simply add each new offense to a secret list of grievances that I'm carrying around in my pocket, until one day, when you really blow it, the whole thing is coming out.

Betrayal is war. And when you're ambushed, it's so easy to just want to run away, or to pick up a sword and strike back.

But the psalmist isn't given either option. He longs to run away but he can't; he's stuck facing the trial. And he desperately wants justice, but he refrains from taking the sword into his own hand. And that's because not only does this psalm give voice to the bitter experience of betrayal, it also gives us guidance on what to do when it happen to us. And the answer is not to retreat or retaliate; it is to do what the psalmist is doing. To call on God and trust him with the results.

This is the psalmist's example. Verse 1:

Give ear to my prayer, O God, and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy! Attend to me, and answer me; I am restless in my complaint and I moan, because of the voice of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked.” (vv. 1-3)

You can hear the desperation in his cry—the repetition of his plea for God to hear him, to hear his complaint. He’s not afraid to call it what it is—he’s *complaining* to God. But he’s complaining *to God*. This is a prayer. He directs his attention to God in heaven, because he knows he’s the only one who can really do something about the situation.

And this is not just how the psalmist responds—calling out to God. It’s his counsel to us as well. Verse 22: “Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.” Don’t take matters into your own hands, running or retaliating. Don’t feel like this is a burden you have to bear alone. Cast your burden on God. Give your pain and anger and frustration and fear to him; let him sustain you. Because listen to the promise: “he will never permit the righteous to be moved.” There is a security, a stability that God promises to provide to his children, even in the midst of intense personal betrayal.

That’s a big promise. In fact, it sounds a little too big. When your companion compromises your trust and the intimacy of your relationship, the promise that God won’t allow you to be moved or shaken sounds a bit simplistic and trite. Too little, too late. Couldn’t you have acted before I got hurt?

But that assumes that there is no purpose in hardship, or nothing to be gained from sharing in the sufferings of Christ. That assumes that God’s main job is to make us happy and protect us from hard things, when in fact there is a much, much bigger and more beautiful purpose for which he is working *all* things out—namely, his own kingdom and glory.

And it’s this kingdom and glory that we learn to focus on and fix our hopes on, when we cry out to the Lord in trouble and cast our burdens upon him. Because when we trust him instead of taking matters into our own hands, it’s then when we see his power to protect and to save on full display.

This is what we see in vv. 16-19, where the psalmist gives the reasons for calling out to God in the midst of such personal betrayal.

But I call to God, and the LORD will save me. Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice. He redeems my soul in safety from the battle that I wage [or the battle against me], for many are arrayed against me. 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.

Even when our closest friendships fail, God is faithful to protect us and redeem us. Even from the deepest pain, we can cast our burdens on him with confidence. And these verses give us four reasons we can trust him.

First, *he is still on his throne*. “He who is enthroned from of old . . .” As much as we would wish our circumstances to be different, it’s not as though God fell asleep on the job, or slipped off his throne for a moment and then everything fell apart. He has reigned from eternity past, he will

reign for eternity future, and is reigning right now in the midst of our hardship and heartache. And he is reigning for our benefit. For our good. It might not make sense to us. Just like our children don't always understand why we make them do difficult things—sitting in a dentist chair while someone drills a hole in your tooth—that's painful. Why would you let that happen to your kid? But it's for their good. So God, in Christ, is working all things for our good and his glory (cf. Rom. 8:28-29).

We can cast our burdens on God because he is still on his throne reigning. Second, we can trust him because *he hears*. “Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice.” It may feel like no one is listening, like our prayers are bouncing off the ceiling. But when we pray in Christ, God hears our prayers in heaven. Think about it: the God who rules the entire universe cares enough about you personally to listen to your prayers, even your nasty complaints. Imagine trying to put a call into the White House. What are the chances you'll get through to the President? Somewhere between slim and none. But the God of the universe hears you personally when you pray.

Third, *God redeems*. He doesn't just hear our prayers, he acts to redeem and to save. “But I call to God, and the LORD will save me. . . . He redeems my soul in safety from the battle against me . . .” He doesn't leave us alone in the pain. In his mercy and compassion he meets us where we are, to deliver us and to redeem us—to restore our broken hearts.

Sometimes that means restoring the broken relationship. God can do it. There is nothing that sin touches on earth that the grace of heaven cannot redeem. No marriage is beyond repair if both husband and wife are willing to submit their lives to Christ. No friendship is irreparably damaged if both parties are willing to seek the grace of God in Christ together. It's not easy, and it takes time, and it often takes a lot of help. I takes a miracle of God. Which means hoping against hope if you've been betrayed, and clinging to the cross as your *only defense* if you've done the betraying. There is hope. Because if the cross and resurrection of Christ can redeem our souls from hell, then they can repair a broken marriage, a broken family, a broken friendship. I've seen it time and again.

But sometimes the redemption of God doesn't come by reversing the offense—making the friendship just like it was before. Sometimes God's redemption comes by giving us something even better: himself. A friend who will never betray us. Who always hears us, who always speaks the truth. A companion who will never leave us nor forsake us, but in fact laid his life down for us to make us his forever. That's the friend we have in Jesus.

But not only do we have an eternal companion in Christ, we have a Savior who is intimately acquainted with personal betrayal. Think of Judas, one of his twelve disciples. One of just twelve men whom Jesus personally chose and called to follow him. And he sold his king for just thirty pieces of silver (cf. Matt. 26:14-56). But it wasn't just Judas. All of his disciples ultimately abandoned him at the cross. Those who swore never to leave him, pretended like they didn't know him to save their own skin (cf. Matt. 26:56, 69-75). Jesus knows what it's like to be betrayed by an intimate friend. A betrayal that resulted in his excruciating death on the cross.

And yet, it was on the cross where Christ defeated the power of betrayal by willfully taking it on himself, refusing to run or retaliate. It's in the cross that the sin of betrayal can be forgiven—the

betrayal we experience *and* the betrayal we commit. And it's through the cross that we can find grace to follow Christ's example in loving the friends who betray us, rather than retreating or retaliating. Through Jesus, we no longer need carry the weight of betrayal ourselves, but can cast our burdens on the Lord, entrusting ourselves to the just judge and leaving the results in his hand.

And that brings us to the fourth reason the psalmist calls on God—because *God will establish justice*. Look again at v. 19: “God will give ear and humble them [the companion who betrayed us], . . . because they do not change and do not fear God.” And v. 23: “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.”

Casting our burden on God in the face of betrayal doesn't mean we're saying it doesn't really matter, or it didn't really hurt. It does matter, and it does hurt, and betrayal deserves to be met with justice. But God is the just judge, and calling on him is putting the matter in his hands, and leaving it there. Listen to how 1 Peter 5:6-7 puts it, which echoes our passage: “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.” You can't cast your burdens on God unless you humble yourself before him and trust him with the results. We want to exalt ourselves; we have to trust God to exalt us at the right time. He is our vindication.

And he will deal justly with betrayal, and with all human sin. Either through the cross, where Christ took it on himself and exhausted God's wrath against it, such that forgiveness is possible. Or in the final judgment, where those who reject Christ will bear the weight of sin themselves. But justice will be served.

And if we have confidence in God to establish justice, that means we don't have to take matters into our hands. We don't have to bear a grudge or get even. We are free to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, just as Christ commanded and just as Christ models. And here's the real miracle—we are free to *forgive*, because God in Christ has forgiven us (cf. Eph. 4:32).

This is the example Christ has given us, to which he has called us. Listen to 1 Peter 2:21-23:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

He didn't run. He didn't retaliate. He relinquished his right to get even, because he knew that he had a just judge who reigns above the unjust circumstances on earth. And this is the kind of faith he has called us to in the face of personal betrayal.

Paul describes it like this in Romans 12:

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom. 12:17-21)

That's impossible apart from the grace of Christ. But in Christ it's not just possible, it's normal. It's how the Christian life works. Even when our closest friendships fail, God is faithful to sustain us and redeem us. "Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved" (Ps. 55:22).