



Psalm 55 - Complaint about a Friend's Treachery

To the leader: with stringed instruments. A Maskil of David.

Introduction

Like many other individual laments, this psalm prays for God's help against dangerous enemies who hate the faithful. There is a unique twist here, though: the danger comes from betrayal by a close friend who had seemed a fellow pilgrim on the path of life.

Some deny that David could be the author of this psalm, because there is no clear instance of such betrayal in the recorded life of David. However, that misses the point: the psalms are hymns, not merely autobiography. David has provided this psalm for God's people to sing under this kind of duress. In addition, David was betrayed by his son Absalom and by his counsellor Ahithophel in 2 Samuel 15:12 and 16:15-23.

Psalm 55:1-3 - Hear My Prayer

The prayer is earnest, it is a plea for mercy, i.e. <<**troubled in my complaint**>> (v.2), and its occasion is the noise of the enemy and the oppression of the wicked, namely, <<**for they bring trouble upon me**>>, i.e. as if they were placing a burden too great to bear. As usual in the psalms, these are not simply people who dislike the singer; they are enemies of true piety, who will even take violent measures to ruin the godly and stamp out true faith.

- ¹ Give ear to my prayer, O God;
do not hide yourself from my supplication.
- ² Attend to me, and answer me;
I am troubled in my complaint.

I am distraught ³ by the noise of the enemy,
because of the clamour of the wicked.
For they bring trouble upon me,
and in anger they cherish enmity against me.

Psalm 55:1-3

Do not hide yourself from my supplication. It is sensed in David's prayer that he felt God was distant, as if he were hiding from David: <<***Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!***>> (Psalm 27:9), and: <<***you heard my plea, 'Do not close your ear to my cry for help, but give me relief!'***>> (Lamentations 3:56). He asked God to attend to him, and hear him. David believed he could face almost anything with the strong sense of God's presence and pleasure.

I am troubled in my complaint. At the beginning of this psalm David had little peace. He was restless, complaining, and moaning; and his moans were noisy. He needed help from God.

For they bring trouble upon me. David was troubled by the noise of the enemy, this psalm seems to emphasise the singular instead of several enemies, and the clamour of the wicked. They hated David and caused great trouble for him: <<***For the enemy has pursued me, crushing my life to the ground, making me sit in darkness like those long dead***>> (Psalm 143:3).

Psalm 55:4-8 - I Am Desperate

This section describes more fully the earnestness of the singer: in anguish, terrors of death, fear, trembling, and horror. If he could fly he would take refuge in the wilderness away from the raging in the city. The dove is probably a symbol of both innocence and swiftness.

- ⁴ My heart is in anguish within me,
the terrors of death have fallen upon me.
- ⁵ Fear and trembling come upon me,
and horror overwhelms me.
- ⁶ And I say, 'O that I had wings like a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest;
- ⁷ truly, I would flee far away;

I would lodge in the wilderness; Selah

⁸ I would hurry to find a shelter for myself
from the raging wind and tempest.'

Psalm 55:4-8

My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. The stress of this crisis did cause David mental anguish, increased by the real danger of death. All this made David tremble in fear and feel that horror overwhelms me: <<*Terrors frighten them on every side, and chase them at their heels*>> (Job 18:11).

O that I had wings like a dove! David wished he could just escape this terror-filled situation and remain in the wilderness. It is likely that David wrote this under the stress and intrigues of power once he came to the throne. He longed for the simpler days when he repeatedly saw God's faithfulness in the wilderness: <<*David remained in the strongholds in the wilderness, in the hill country of the Wilderness of Ziph. Saul sought him every day, but the Lord did not give him into his hand*>> (1 Samuel 23:14).

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect.

I would hurry to find a shelter for myself from the raging wind and tempest. If David had the wings of a bird he would simply escape from his present problems. Most people can identify with David's longing. This thought matches the symbolism of God protecting his people as this present age draws to an end: <<*But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time*>> (Revelation 12:14).

Psalm 55:9-11 - Destroy Those Who Bring Such Ruin

In such a situation the singer prays for deliverance, which ordinarily means the thwarting of the wicked schemes of the enemies. It cannot be compassionate to remain indifferent to the suffering that these enemies bring to the innocent, i.e. violence, strife, iniquity and trouble, ruin, oppression and fraud. In such hymns, the singer would prefer that the enemies repent of their evil; but here the singer seems to expect that they will not. For more on such prayers, refer to the comments made on Psalms 5:10 and 35:4-8.

9 Confuse, O Lord, confound their speech;
for I see violence and strife in the city.
10 Day and night they go around it
on its walls,
and iniquity and trouble are within it;
11 ruin is in its midst;
oppression and fraud
do not depart from its market-place.

Psalm 55:9-11

Confound their speech. Confound or divide, Hebrew *palag*, probably evokes the name Peleg, <<*in [whose] days the earth was divided*>> (Genesis 10:25b), which in turn is probably a reference to the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), where God confused the language of the human schemers. The prayer is thus for the enemies to be prevented from working together to carry out their evil.

For I see violence and strife in the city. The attacks against David may have begun with words but did not end with them. People walked the city day and night causing trouble for David. The crisis at hand was not merely a problem for David, but for God's people in general. The problems that some people caused day and night are a complete contrast to the work of others: <<*There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day*>> (Luke 2:36-37), <<*And now I stand here on trial on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors, a promise that our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship day and night. It is for this hope, your Excellency, that I am accused by Jews!*>> (Acts 26:6-7).

Iniquity and trouble are within it; ruin is in its midst. The instability and intrigue made the whole city unsafe.

Oppression and fraud do not depart from its market-place. This type of dishonest behaviour went directly against the commands of God: <<*You shall have only a full and honest weight; you shall have only a full and honest measure, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you*>> (Deuteronomy 25:15), and: <<*You shall have honest balances, an honest ephah, and an honest bath*>> (Ezekiel 45:10).

Psalm 55:12-15 - I Am Betrayed by My Own Friend!

Now the pain sharpens: it is not a nameless enemy or adversary who is seeking to harm the pious singer, but his companion, his familiar friend.

- 12 It is not enemies who taunt me –
I could bear that;
it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me –
I could hide from them.
- 13 But it is you, my equal,
my companion, my familiar friend,
- 14 with whom I kept pleasant company;
we walked in the house of God with the throng.

Psalm 55:12-14

It is not enemies who taunt me – I could bear that. David spoke of a specific person who spoke against him and taunts him. This was someone once aligned with David who nevertheless exalted himself against David.

But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. The unnamed man was a partner and friend to David. They helped each other with advice, i.e. with whom I kept pleasant company, and went to the house of God together, and it was he that let David down: <<*Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me*>> (Psalm 41:9). One such companion and friend springs immediately to mind: <<*While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, ‘Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?’*>> (Luke 22:47-48).

- 15 Let death come upon them;
let them go down alive to Sheol;
for evil is in their homes and in their hearts.

Psalm 55:15

Let death come upon them; let them go down alive to Sheol. This remarkably strong statement from David shows how dangerous the man was to the peace of God’s people and how deeply he had wounded David. It was a strong prayer, but it was a prayer that left vengeance to God and refused to take it himself.

The Scriptures frequently speak of such sudden and violent destruction of God's enemies, including: <<*But God will shoot his arrow at them; they will be wounded suddenly*>> (Psalm 64:7), <<*on such a one calamity will descend suddenly; in a moment, damage beyond repair*>> (Proverbs 6:15), <<*But the multitude of your foes shall be like fine dust, and the multitude of tyrants like flying chaff. And in an instant, suddenly, you will be visited by the Lord of hosts with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire*>> (Isaiah 29:5-6), and: <<*When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!*>> (1 Thessalonians 5:3).

Sheol is a proper name in Hebrew; sometimes it serves as a poetic name for the grave, to which all go, for example: <<*Like a rock that one breaks apart and shatters on the land, so shall their bones be strewn at the mouth of Sheol*>> (Psalm 141:7), and other times it names the dim destination to which the wicked go but not the faithful: <<*Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; straight to the grave they descend, and their form shall waste away; Sheol shall be their home. But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me*>> (Psalm 49:14-15). If it refers to the destination of the wicked here, the idea is that of a life of living torment in the absence of God. This living hell seems to be the destination for all those who do not commit themselves to God through Christ: <<*Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire*>> (Revelation 20:11-15).

For evil is in their homes and in their hearts. David called upon God to bring such a severe judgement because the wickedness was so deeply ingrained in them.

Psalm 55:16-19 - I Call to God and Trust He Will Hear Me

This section is similar to vv.1-3, except it is talking about praying, with God in the third person 'he' (v.17) and not second person, e.g. 'yourself' (v.1). The psalmist describes both desperation (v.17) and confidence (vv.18-19).

- 16 But I call upon God,
and the Lord will save me.
- 17 Evening and morning and at noon
I utter my complaint and moan,
and he will hear my voice.
- 18 He will redeem me unharmed
from the battle that I wage,
for many are arrayed against me.
- 19 God, who is enthroned from of old, Selah
will hear, and will humble them –
because they do not change,
and do not fear God.

Psalm 55:16-19

But I call upon God, and the Lord will save me. David abruptly switched from praying for destruction to declaring calm confidence in God. It is a further indication that he was able to leave his crisis, and his enemies, in the hands of the Lord, who would save him: <<*my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my saviour; you save me from violence*>> (2 Samuel 22:3).

Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan. David's confidence in God was rooted in sincere dependence on God, demonstrated by constant prayer. Together all this gave David the confidence towards God, he will hear my voice. Although David often complains about his situation, as do many others, he is also known for the great praise that he continually offered to God in recognition of all the things God did for him. This is a much better model for Christians to follow.

He will redeem me. Although the hope and trust was personal, David also had a deep concern for the blessing and welfare of God's people as a whole, not merely for himself. David knew God was Israel's saviour: <<*It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities*>> (Psalm 130:8). In later years it was hoped that Jesus would do so: <<*He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day*

since these things took place>> (Luke 24:19-21). They were right to hope in that way but had simply misunderstood what had happened at the time!

God, who is enthroned from of old, will hear, and will humble them. David was confident that the eternal God would hear and then answer his prayer.

Because they do not change, and do not fear God. The sense of 'they do not change' is somewhat obscure. It likely refers either to the idea that they do not change for the better, or they have not had to change because of adversity.

Psalm 55:20-21 - My Treacherous Friend

This section returns to describing a painful betrayal. This is not simply a friend who has let another down; he has planned destruction of those who had trusted him, all the while disguising his evil intent. David had sealed his friendship with a solemn obligation, as seen in: <<*Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul*>> (1 Samuel 18:3).

²⁰ My companion laid hands on a friend
and violated a covenant with me
²¹ with speech smoother than butter,
but with a heart set on war;
with words that were softer than oil,
but in fact were drawn swords.

Psalm 55:20-21

My companion laid hands on a friend and violated a covenant with me. David's unnamed enemy was also treacherous, breaking peaceful relationships and breaking agreements with others: <<*They utter lies to each other; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak*>> (Psalm 12:2).

With speech smoother than butter, but with a heart set on war. Using repletion, i.e. his enemy's total satisfaction at his fullness, and vivid images David showed how dishonourable his unnamed enemy was. In contrast, it shows how honourable David was in not specifically naming the man. This was not about 'naming and shaming' an individual, but about trusting in God to deal with the situation.

Psalm 55:22-23 - Cast Your Burden on the Lord

The singer addresses each of his fellow singers, i.e. 'your' (v.22), and then God 'you, O God' (v.23). The reason the faithful can cast their burden on the Lord is that he can be trusted to bring judgement upon the evildoers. The psalms do not say when God will cast them down; the faithful will wait for God's own good

timing: <<they cried out with a loud voice, ‘Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?’>> (Revelation 6:10).

- 22 Cast your burden on the Lord,
and he will sustain you;
he will never permit
the righteous to be moved.
- 23 But you, O God, will cast them down
into the lowest pit;
the bloodthirsty and treacherous
shall not live out half their days.
But I will trust in you.

Psalm 55:22-23

Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you. There are few greater burdens to bear than a one-time friend who becomes a treacherous and dangerous enemy. David knew that even this was a burden that God could and should bear. The Septuagint renders this ‘cast your anxieties,’ and 1 Peter 5:7 urges Christians to a similar faith in the face of persecution: <<**Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you**>>.

He will never permit the righteous to be moved. David had hope and confidence because he was persuaded that his fate did not rest in the hands of treacherous men. God was still Lord over all, and God had the final word on whether the righteous would be moved or not. Refer also to the comment made on Psalm 10:6.

But you, O God, will cast them down into the lowest pit. The faithful God would not only help and establish the righteous, he would also bring down those bloodthirsty and deceitful men who caused so much trouble among God’s people: <<**Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin**>> (Psalm 73:18), <<**But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit**>> (Isaiah 14:15), <<**They shall thrust you down to the Pit, and you shall die a violent death in the heart of the seas**>> (Ezekiel 28:8), and: <<**They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss**>> (Luke 8:31).

But I will trust in you. The psalm appropriately ended with David’s focus upon God, not his enemies. He would trust in him and not be disappointed: <<**O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me**>> (Psalm 25:2).