Betrayal

Psalm 55

This most bitter betrayal comes from one who is most trusted. While we don't know for certain the circumstances of Psalm 55, Ahithophel was David's trusted friend and advisor who helped Absalom steal the throne and try to kill him. Like all psalms, this one finds its fulfillment in Jesus who was betrayed by many, including His friend and disciple Judas. The Lord gives us this song so we would trust in our savior in our darkest hour and know what we've been saved from.

Structure & Summary

Psalm 55 chiastically highlights the treachery David experiences and bookends ends it with faith over fear:

A 1-3 Prayer
  B 4-8 Pain & fear
    C 9-11 Cry for justice
      D 12-15 The betrayer
    C' 16-19 Faith in God
  B' 20-21 Deceitful hypocrisy
A' 22-23 Prayer and confidence

David asks God to hear his prayer as he moans loudly (vv. 1-2). The voice, oppression, trouble, hatred, and wrath of the enemy is upon him and his heart aches in the terror of death (vv. 3-4). He is totally overwhelmed and would love to fly like a dove far into the wilderness to rest, *Selah*, out of the storm and tempest (vv. 5-8). He asks the Lord to destroy and divide their tongues; he has seen them day and night pursuing violence in the city (vv. 9-11). Had it been an enemy, he could bear it, but it was a trusted companion with whom he took counsel and went to worship (vv. 12-14). He asks for death to take hold on them while he calls upon God who will save him (vv. 15-16). In the evening, morning, and at noon he'll pray to the one who redeemed him from battle (vv. 17-18). His enemies won't change and therefore do not fear God (v. 19). They have smooth words but bladed hearts (vv. 20-21). He exhorts himself and others to cast cares on Yahweh who will sustain and establish the righteous but bring the bloodthirsty down to destruction (vv. 22-23).

Transparent Prayer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wondered how we went from using the psalms as songs to sing to God, to merely reading them as God's words to us. We've lost a lot as a result—not just how to sing, but how to pray. David audibly moans, can't rest, and suffers pains in his heart from the terror of death (vv. 2-4). We would not be surprised to learn that he sinned during this suffering, but mark that we're not told he did. This is the way to pray in deep distress. Godly prayer includes asking God to show up during the dark night of the soul (vv. 1, 5). To not pray this way is to isolate yourself from God and His hope.

Fear & Faith

David Dickson: "It is not a thing inconsistent with godliness to be much moved with fear in time of danger; natural affections are not taken away in conversion, but sanctified and moderated."
Stoicism has been making a comeback, a reaction to a soft and entitled generation. But David is a warrior and a poet, a giant-slayer and a man after God's own heart. He is impossible to pigeonhole, terrified in this psalm. James Hamilton comments, "David's anxiety is caused by men, but he knows that the answer he needs is from God." Fear is not inconsistent with godliness so long as it doesn't crush faithfulness. Moses was terrified to confront Pharaoh probably because he saw too much growing up in his house. But he overcame it. Courage

does what the Lord requires in the face of fear, and without fear no courage is actually possible. The Christian life is scary. "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13). Terror came upon Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. He prayed to God "with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear" (Heb. 5:7).

Unfaithful Wounds

There may be no greater fear and devastation than that which comes from betrayal. This has weight because we lose what we invested and cherished so deeply in the most valuable thing outside of God Himself: a person. It's not that all pain in relationships is bad. The good kind occurs when someone says or does something corrective to make you better: "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.... As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend" (Prov. 27:6, 17). Even the honest blows of an enemy can be well-received, but no one welcomes the deceit of a friend: "For it is not an enemy who reproaches me; then I could bear it. Nor is it one who hates me who has exalted himself against me; then I could hide from him" (v. 12). Ahithophel was likely Bathsheba's grandfather and may have been motivated by revenge for David's adultery with her or for taking more wives after her (cf. 2 Samuel 23:34, 2 Sam. 11:3). Ahithophel counseled Absalom to sleep with David's concubines before all Israel and gave him strategic advice to attack David with an army of twelve thousand while he was weary and weak (2 Sam. 16:21-22, 17:2). David prayed that God would turn his counsel into foolishness (2 Sam. 15:31), and had Absalom listened to Ahithophel instead of Hushai the Archite, David's spy, he would have killed David. When Ahithophel saw his counsel was rejected, he "put his household in order, and hanged himself, and died" (2 Sam. 17:23). Ahithophel the betrayer may have felt betrayed. Apart from the mind-righting power of the gospel, this is what sin does. Perpetrators become victims in their minds. David writes about the pain of being betrayed when it was his betrayal of Uriah the Hittite that led to Ahithophel's betrayal. Through Nathan the prophet, the Lord told David He would raise up adversity against him from his own house because he despised Him and give his wives to his neighbor: "For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, before the sun" (2 Sam. 12:12).

Casting Burdens

Jerome called this psalm "the voice of Christ against the leaders of the Jews and the betrayer Judas." Andrew Bonar said, "We may read these strains as expressing David's feeling in some peculiar seasons of distress, and as the experience of Christ's Church in every age.... Yet still, it is in Jesus, the man of sorrows, that the psalm finds its fullest illustration. He was the soul that was stirred to its lowest depth by scenes such as are described here." Jesus loved and trusted Judas, which is why He was troubled: "When Jesus had said these things, He was troubled in spirit, and testified and said, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me.' Then the disciples looked at one another, perplexed about whom He spoke" (Jn. 13:21-22). He was betrayed by Judas, His leaders, and His people. But it was our sin He bore on the cross. We come to God, as David did, to be forgiven for our betrayal (Ps. 51:4). Only this way can we deal with the betrayals against us and not be lost, and we know we will experience betrayal because Jesus said He came to bring a sword: "Brother will deliver brother over to death and the father, his child....and a man's enemies will be those of his own household" (Matt. 10:21, 36). Peter quotes verse 22, exhorting a suffering church to humble themselves, "casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7).