

PSALMS

Chapter 55

Give ear to my prayer, O God, and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy! ² Attend to me, and answer me; I am restless in my complaint and I moan, ³ 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. 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, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; ⁷ yes, I would wander far away; I would lodge in the wilderness; *Selah* ⁸ I would hurry to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest.” ⁹ Destroy, O Lord, divide their tongues; 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 marketplace. 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. ¹³ But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. ¹⁴ We used to take sweet counsel together; within God's house we walked in the throng. ¹⁵ Let death steal over them; let them go down to Sheol alive; for evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart. ¹⁶ But I call to God, and the LORD will save me. ¹⁷ Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice. ¹⁸ He redeems my soul in safety from the battle that I wage, for many are arrayed against me. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ My companion stretched out his hand against his friends; he violated his covenant. ²¹ His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords. 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 pit of destruction; men of blood and treachery shall not live out half their days. But I will trust in you.

Ps 55 A prayer for God's help when threatened by a powerful conspiracy in Jerusalem under the leadership of a former friend. The situation described is like that of Absalom's conspiracy against the king (see 2Sa 15–17): The city is in turmoil; danger is everywhere; there is uncertainty as to who can be trusted; rumors, false reports and slander are circulating freely. Under such circumstances David longs for a quiet retreat to escape it all (vv. 6–8). That being out of the question, he casts his cares on the Lord, whom he knows he can trust. In its structure, the prayer is framed by a plea for help (v. 1) and a simple confession of faith: “I trust in you” (v. 23). (CSB)

Author asks God for help because he finds himself in a dangerous city, betrayed by a close friend, and in great peril. He shares his situation in order to teach wisdom. Some have seen in this psalm a reference to Ahithophel's betrayal of David (2Sm 16:20–23) during the revolt led by David's son Absalom (2Sm 15–17). Due to a lack of specific reference in the psalm, no certain identification of the historical context is possible. (TLSB)

Format: Vv 1–3, appeal for God to hear; vv 4–8, terror; vv 9–11, violence in the city; vv 12–15, betrayal by a friend; vv 16–19, call on the Redeemer; vv 20–21, deception by a companion; vv 22–23, God treats the righteous and the wicked in different ways. (TLSB)

A number of psalms use curses and express themselves so violently that modern readers find them shocking and even wonder how they could appear in the Sacred Scriptures. When the psalmist's emotions spill over into violence, it is important to understand why. (TLSB p. 879)

Christians should understand that the violent outbursts in these psalms are not prescriptions for the behavior of God's people but illustrations of emotion that God's people will indeed experience. Christians today who lose loved ones to war or to violent criminals will have these same feelings of anger and revenge. Praying the imprecatory psalms can help God's people express their anguish before God rather than act out their feelings in an unjust way. Imprecatory psalms prayed with psalms of repentance and hope can guide trouble hearts through the feelings they cannot escape. (TLSB – 879)

The curses contained in these psalms are often shocking to modern readers, but such prayers are in accordance with God's curse against sin. (PBC)

The Lutheran Study Bible lists the following psalms as imprecatory: 35; 55; 59; 79; 109; 137.

Some psalms include vivid curses which ask God to punish our enemies, as He protects and defends us from evil. In light of Jesus' teaching to love our enemies, these prayers may seem improper and un-Christian. However, in each one the psalmist cries out for God to take revenge. The imprecatory psalms put the psalmist squarely on the side of God who hates injustice and who does indeed rescue His abused children. While we leave vengeance to the Lord, and while we yearn for the ungodly to turn from sin to the Savior, we still hate wickedness and evil. Ultimately, Satan instigates all injustice, and the imprecatory psalms find their true target as we pray them against the kingdom of darkness. (LL)

No section of the Psalter causes us greater difficulty today than the so-called imprecatory psalms. With shocking frequency their thoughts penetrate the entire Psalter (5, 7, 9, 10, 13, 16, 21, 23, 28, 31, 35, 36, 40, 41, 44, 52, 54, 55, 58, 59, 68, 69, 70, 71, 137, and others). Every attempt to pray these psalms seems doomed to failure. They seem to be an example of what people think of as the religious first stage toward the NT. Christ on the cross prays for his enemies and teaches us to do the same. How can we still, with these Psalms, call for the wrath of God against our enemies? The question is therefore: Can the imprecatory psalms be understood as God's word for us and as the prayer of Jesus Christ? Can the Christian pray these psalms? Note carefully again that we do not ask about possible motives, which we can never fathom anyway, but rather about the content of the prayer. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

The enemies referred to here are enemies of the cause of God, who lays hands on us for the sake of God. It is therefore nowhere a matter of personal conflict. Nowhere does the one who prays these psalms want to take revenge into his own hands. He calls for the wrath of God alone (cf. Romans 12:19). Therefore he must dismiss from his own mind all thought of personal revenge; he must be free from his own thirst for revenge. Otherwise, the vengeance would not be seriously commanded from God. This means that only the one who is himself innocent in relation to his enemy can leave the vengeance to God. The prayer for the vengeance of God is the prayer for the execution of his righteousness in the judgment of sin. This judgment must be made public if God is to stand by his word. It must also be promulgated among those whom it concerns. I myself, with my sin, belong under this judgment. I have no right to want to hinder this judgment. It must be fulfilled for God's sake and it has been fulfilled, certainly, in wonderful ways. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

God's vengeance did not strike the sinners, but the one sinless man who stood in the sinner's place, namely God's own Son. Jesus Christ bore the wrath of God, for the execution of which the psalm prays. He stilled God's wrath toward sin and prayed in the hour of the execution of the divine judgment: "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do!" No other than he, who himself bore the wrath of God, could pray in this way. That was the end of all phony thoughts about the love of God which do not take sin seriously. God hates and redirects his enemies to the only righteous one, and this one asks forgiveness for them. Only in the cross of Jesus Christ is the love of God to be found. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Thus the imprecatory psalm leads to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God which forgives enemies. I cannot forgive the enemies of God out of my own resources. Only the crucified Christ can do that, and I through him. Thus to carrying out of vengeance becomes grace for all men in Jesus Christ. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Certainly it is important to distinguish in relation to these psalms whether I stand in the time of promise or in the time of fulfillment, but this distinction is true for all psalms. I pray the imprecatory psalms in the certainty of their marvelous fulfillment. I leave the vengeance to God and ask him to execute his righteousness to all his enemies, knowing that God has remained true to himself and has himself secured justice in his wrathful judgment on the cross, and that this wrath has become grace and joy for us. Jesus Christ himself requests the execution of the wrath of God on his body, and thus he leads me back daily to the gravity and the grace of his cross for me and all enemies of God. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Even today I can believe the love of God and forgive my enemies only by going back to the cross of Christ, to the carrying out of the wrath of God. (*We need to remember that Bonhoeffer was being persecuted by the Nazi's.*) The cross of Jesus is valid for all men. Whoever opposes him, whoever corrupts the word of the cross of Jesus on which God's wrath must be executed, must bear the cruse of God some or another. The NT speaks with great clarity concerning this and does not distinguish itself at all in this respect from the OT, but it also speaks of the joy of the church in that day on which the God will execute his final judgment (Gal. 1:8f; 1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 18; 19; 20:11). In this way the crucified Jesus teaches us to pray the imprecatory psalms correctly. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

55:1–3 Initial appeal for God to hear. – It is as though a man began to pray but found his situation so overpowering that he had first to unburden his heart of the grief that was upon him. (Leupold)

55:1 *hide not* – Translated as “ignore” in Dt 22:4. A vivid way of asking for help. (TLSB)

55:2 *I am restless* – The psalmist is clearly troubled and unsettled as he pours out his complaint to God.

I moan – Has the sense of “I must moan” – his troubles have this much effect on him. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

55:3 *drop trouble on me* – His enemies are like clouds that rain down trouble and affliction upon him. In 140:10, David turns the figure of speech around, wishing that hot coals would fall upon his enemies. (TLSB)

inn anger they bear a grudge – This underscores the severity of their animosity. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

55:4–8 His heart’s anguish. (CSB)

55:4–5 Danger is everywhere (see 31:13), a danger so great that it is as if death itself were stalking him (see 18:4–5; 116:3). (CSB)

55:4 *terrors of death* – Psalmist finds himself in such great peril that his life is clearly in jeopardy. The dread of death and the grave weigh heavily on his heart. (TLSB)

He piles up words for his fear and anguish in a literary manner in order to expose how great and deeply rooted his fear and anguish is. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

55:5 *fear...trembling...horror* – This completely covers him, meaning he is overwhelmed with terrifying fear. So all these expressions stress the grave impact of the enemies’ oppressive attacks on him – he was terrified to say the least. And his immediate instinct was to flee. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

55:6–8 He longs for a quiet retreat, away from treacherous and conniving people (see similarly Jer 9:2–6). (CSB)

55:6 *I would fly away* – This feeling contrasts sharply with Psalm 11, in which David rejects such advice to flee. During Absalom’s conspiracy David fled from the city. 2 Samuel 15:14 makes it clear that concern to avoid needless bloodshed in Jerusalem was the key factor in David’s decision to flee the city. The desire to flee does not reflect despair so much as grief at being betrayed by a son and a friend. It is not so much a desire to hide in the wilderness, as a wish to take refuge in God. The urge to flee from trouble is always a danger for a Christian. Elijah gave into it (1 Kings 19). Jeremiah battled against it (Jeremiah 9:2 and 10:17). We need guidance from God when that urge comes. (PBC)

David longs to escape his predicament but, for whatever reason, cannot flee. Jerome records this verse used as an early Christian prayer when facing death: “When the pain which she [Paula] bore with such wonderful patience darted through her, as if she saw the heavens opened she would say: ‘Oh that I had wings like a dove!’ ” (NPNF 2 6:196). (TLSB)

55:7 *lodge in the wilderness* – In the dry season the wilderness is bleak and dry, but in the rainy season it receives enough water to flourish. People would go to the wilderness for any one of a number of reasons, to find silence for meditation, to flee danger, to flee injustice or justice, or to attack travelers in deserted areas. The psalmist was familiar with the wilderness, and to him it would be a refuge. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

Selah – Hebrew; untranslatable. Mainly in the first two books of Psalms. Probably refers to the accompaniment of the harps during the psalm. (TLSB p. 993)

This often occurs in the middle of a psalm and which apparently signals an interlude. “The Sela indicates that one must be still and quickly think through the words of the psalm; for they demand a quiet and restful soul, which can grasp and hold to that which the Holy Spirit there presents and offers” (Luther). (Psalms – The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer p. 23)

Selah may be a musical notation. It could also be a point where a pause is desirable for the singer or reader of the psalm in order that the statement last made or the thought as a whole just developed may be reflected upon before the next turn of the thought appears. (Leupold)

55:8 *hurry to find shelter* – Literally, I would hasten my escape.” (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

raging wind and tempest – He is comparing his oppression by the enemy to a severe storm. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

55:9–11 Prayer for God to foil the plots of his enemies. (CSB)

55:9 *divide their minds* – Paralyze the conspirators with conflicting designs, as at Babel (Ge 11:5–9; see 2Sa 17:1–14) (CSB).

God divided the people of earth into different languages at Babel (Gn 11:5–9) in order to stop their plans to build together in pride and power. The psalmist asks God to do the same thing to his enemies who are conspiring against him. (TLSB)

the city – Jerusalem. (CSB)

55:10 *go around it on its walls* – Violence and strife (v 9) are described as guards that walk along their assigned routes on the city wall. (TLSB)

iniquity and trouble – Like watchmen on the walls (see 127:1; 130:6; SS 5:7). (CSB)

55:11 *oppress and fraud* – Like watchmen who patrol the city streets. (CSB)

The oppression would come from any number of social injustices. And the fraud is simply deception. The fact that these are said never to leave the marketplace indicates the level of fraud – in their normal business dealings the people are ruthless and dishonest. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

55:12–14 The insults and plots of an enemy can be endured—but those of a treacherous friend? (CSB)

The cruelest blow—a close friend, a man of equal social stature, and a companion in thick and thin, has betrayed him. (TLSB)

55:12 Note the sevenfold description of the city’s character: violence, strife (v 9); iniquity, trouble (v 10); ruin, oppression, fraud (v 11). Seven, as in all the days of the week, often symbolized fullness. (TLSB)

55:13 *a man my equal...my companion...familiar friend* – One who shared the king’s table—i.e., was an honored, as well as trusted, friend. (CSB)

55:14 *within God’s house* – Their ties of friendship had been a bond hallowed by common commitment to the Lord and sealed by its public display in the presence of God and the worshipers at the temple. (CSB)

Close fellowship he enjoyed with this (formerly) close friend extended even to matters of faith. Together, they had worshiped at God's house with the others who had gathered for feast days and holy assemblies. (TLSB)

55:15 Prayer for redress – Actually, these “imprecations” are not that at all; rather, they are appeals to God to redress wrongs perpetrated against the psalmists by imposing penalties commensurate with the violence done—in accordance also with normal judicial procedure in human courts. The psalmists knew that he who has been wronged is not to right that wrong by his own hand but is to leave redress to the Lord, who says, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay.” Therefore they appeal their cases to the divine Judge.). (CSB)

Let death steal over them – The conspirators were seeking his death. (CSB)

to Sheol alive – May they go to the grave before life has runs its normal course (see v. 23; Nu 16:29-33; Pr1 1:12; Is. 5:14). (CSB)

There may be an allusion here to the rebellion of Korah in Numbers 16:31ff., where the earth swallowed the rebels. The reason for all these petitions is that evil (s.v. Ps. 19:15) is in their dwelling-place, in their heart. They are intensely evil; their evil activities are intimately associated with them. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

Psalmist calls for swift judgment against his enemies, including his former friend. He wishes the earth would open and swallow his adversaries immediately, as it did the sons of Korah (cf Nu 16). (TLSB)

55:16–19 Assurance of being heard – A common feature in the prayers of the Psalter is a concluding expression of confidence that the prayer will be or has been heard.). (CSB)

God delivered his soul from the battle against him and gave him peace, that is, that full measure of blessings when one lacks nothing. (Leupold)

55:16 *I call tt God...Lord will save me* – With verse 16 we begin a section of confident praying. The pronoun at the beginning of the verse marks the strong break from the preceding section. And the pronoun at the end of the verse, now the direct object, echoes the emphasis. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

55:17 *Evening, morning and noon I cutter my complaint and moan* – Hours of sacrifice and prayer at the tabernacle. People in the OT considered evening to be the beginning of the new day (cf Gn 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, and 31). *noon*. Like Daniel (Dn 6:10), this psalmist offers prayer three times each day. He prays to the Lord from the beginning to the end of each day, entrusting his life to God's care. (TLSB)

55:18 *redeems* – Here a vivid synonym for “rescues” (see Isa 50:2; Jer 31:11). (CSB)

battle I wage – Author focuses on the physical danger and conflict he faces in the evil city, but his trust and confidence in God transcends every danger, physical or spiritual, that he may experience. (TLSB)

55:19 He who is the eternal King will deal with those who “never change” in their ways and show “no fear of God” – they take no account of his all-seeing eye, his righteous judgment and his power to deal with them; see also Ps 14; 53). (CSB)

Psalmist's enemies refuse to change their attitude toward him or repent of their sin before God. As a result, God will respond to them with discipline and judgment. (TLSB)

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55:20–21 Further sorrowful (or angry) reflection over the treachery of his former friend. (CSB)

55:20 *his friends*. Lit. “those at peace with him” (see 7:4). (CSB)

Traitor of vv 12–14 broke the bond (covenant) of peace not only with the psalmist but also with all his previous friends when he turned against him. (TLSB)

In this Ahithophel resembled Judas, who hypocritically concealed his treachery and then betrayed Jesus with a kiss of friendship. David's anguish in these circumstances gives us insight into Christ's anguish in circumstances that were even more painful. (PBC)

55:21 *speech smooth as butter* – The most frequent weapon used against the psalmists is the tongue. (CSB)

The psalmist repeats the point, but with a different simile: his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords. The comparison of words with swords simply means that everything he said was meant to cut, to be part of the plan to deliver a fatal blow. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

55:22–23 Once more, assurance of being heard. (CSB)

55:22 *cast your burden* – God does not promise to keep His people from all harm. He does promise, however, to be with His children and work all things together for their good (Rm 8:28). The psalmist reminds himself and us to give to the Lord all burdens, cares, and troubles because He faithfully keeps His promise (1Pt 5:7). (TLSB)

A testimony to all who are assembled at the temple. 1Pe 5:7 echoes this assurance. (CSB)

This verse is well known and often memorized because it is a general statement of God's care, which can be applied in almost any circumstances. (PBC)

righteous – One of several terms in the OT for God's people; it presents them as justified or declared righteous and hence living rightly. In every human relationship they faithfully fulfill the obligations that the relationship entails, remembering that power and authority (of whatever sort:

domestic, social, political, economic, religious, intellectual) are to be used to bless, not to exploit. (CSB)

be moved – Hbr construction expresses the certainty of the believer and the dependability of God when troubles come. (TLSB)

55:23 *pit of destruction* – The grave – The vivid imagery that associates distress with “the depths”—so expressive of universal human experience—is common in OT poetry. The depths are often linked, as here, with Sheol and “the pit” together with a cluster of related associations: silence.). (CSB)

Those who live by the sword will die by the sword (Mt 26:52), living out only part of their natural life span. (TLSB)

I trust in you – No matter how the current situation plays out, the author will confidently rely on God for his safety and security. (TLSB)

Confidence in the Lord God has always sustained him, and will sustain him in this very painful and difficult time. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

Ps 55 The author finds himself in a town full of wickedness and violence, betrayed by a trusted friend and colleague, with no one to help except God. He turns to the Lord in prayer, entrusting his life to God’s hand with confidence. When troubles press hard, we may find it easy to give in to our feelings and give up on God. The psalmist’s steadfastness challenges us to trust in God’s mercy. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, faced a city full of violence and plots against His life. Betrayed by Judas, He endured the cross, where He turned to the Father with confidence and gave His life as the ransom price for ours. • Lord, inscribe and keep Your promises in my heart. Hold me firm in faith and confidence, even if terror and distress befall me. In Christ, I am unafraid, and I look to You for help, for I know You will come and rescue me. Amen. (See AE 24:16.) (TLSB)