

“Praying and Praising When Betrayed”
Psalm 54
Pastor Jason Van Bommel

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments. A Maskil of David, when the Ziphites went and told Saul, “Is not David hiding among us?”

*O God, save me by your name,
and vindicate me by your might.*

*² O God, hear my prayer;
give ear to the words of my mouth.*

*³ For strangers have risen against me;
ruthless men seek my life;
they do not set God before themselves. Selah*

*⁴ Behold, God is my helper;
the Lord is the upholder of my life.*

*⁵ He will return the evil to my enemies;
in your faithfulness put an end to them.*

*⁶ With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;
I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.*

*⁷ For he has delivered me from every trouble,
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.*

Introduction: Have You Ever Been Betrayed?

Betrayal serves as a central feature of many of our most popular stories, because it makes for a compelling plot device. The Star Wars saga turns on the betrayal of Anakin Skywalker, who kills Mace Windu and turns to serve Darth Sidious before slaughtering the innocents at the Jedi Temple and then fighting his former mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi. Betrayal can work the other way, too. Harry Potter thinks Professor Snape has betrayed Dumbledore to return to Voldemort, only to discover in the end that it is Voldemort whom Snape has betrayed, serving as a spy on the dark lord in service to Dumbledore.

Have you ever been betrayed? If you have, then you know that betrayal might make for compelling fiction, but it is deeply painful in real life. Maybe you entrusted a secret to someone, something private and personal, and they repeated it to others. Maybe you told someone how you really felt about another person and they went and told that other person everything you said. Maybe you thought you had the support of a colleague at work, only to discover that they abandoned you when you needed them the most.

Being betrayed is a deeper hurt than being slandered or even being attacked by an obvious enemy, because betrayal involves someone you trusted, someone from whom you had come to expect support, loyalty and trust.

A. Betrayed by His Own People: David & Christ

The title of today's psalm tells us David wrote it when the Ziphites told Saul, "Is not David hiding among us?" The Ziphites were the inhabitants of Ziph, in the tribe of Judah. This makes this psalm even more deeply painful, because here David is being betrayed by his own kinsman. Earlier, we studied psalms which David wrote when he was slandered by Cush the Benjaminite and last week when Doeg the Edomite told Saul that David was with Ahimelech the priest. These men – Cush and Doeg – were loyal henchmen of King Saul and they were from a different tribe and a different country than David, so the fact that they would slander or report on David is not surprising. But here we have people from the tribe of Judah betraying one of their own.

David was actually betrayed by the Ziphites twice, in 1 Samuel 23 and 26. In 1 Samuel 23, David, having left the cave stronghold of Adullam (where I believe he wrote Psalm 57), rescued the Judahite city of Keilah from the Philistines. Saul learned that David was in Keilah and he sent his troops to get David. David learned that the inhabitants of Keilah would betray him to Saul, even though he had just rescued them from the Philistines, and so he fled to the hill country near Ziph. While David was in the hills around Ziph, the Ziphites sent word to Saul, telling him where David was. When Saul came looking for David, David was able to escape and flee to the more secure mountain caves of Engedi (where I believe he wrote Psalm 142).

David escaped from Saul in Engedi when Saul came into the cave to relieve himself and David cut off a corner of his robe in the dark. David used this piece of Saul's robe to demonstrate his innocence and Saul left David alone – for a while. Later, David was in the hill country around Ziph again, in 1 Samuel 26, and the Ziphites again betrayed him, sending word to King Saul, telling him David's whereabouts. I believe David wrote Psalm 54 after this second betrayal, because I believe it was this second betrayal, in 1 Samuel 26, that let David know that the Ziphites must have betrayed him. It seems unlikely that David would have returned to this area if he knew that the Ziphites had betrayed him the first time. However, the fact that Saul was able to find him again had to be clear evidence to David that the people of Ziph had betrayed him.

The people of David's own tribe, who by now had to know that David had been anointed as king, betrayed him to a ruthless and vindictive king from another tribe.

David was not the only one to know betrayal by those who should have welcomed him as their anointed king. King Jesus "came to his own and his own people did not receive him (John 1:11)." Jesus was betrayed on every level, having experienced all that David experienced and more. Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, born in Bethlehem, David's city. He rescued people from oppression by demons and from sickness, blindness, lameness and hunger. He showed himself unmistakably to be the anointed one, the true and rightful king of His people. But the religious leaders, the experts in the very Scriptures that foretold His coming, conspired together with foreign occupiers to put Him to death.

Think about some of these parallels:

1. David was hated by Doeg the Edomite, who led an unjust slaughter of innocent people in pursuit of David. Jesus was hated by Herod the Great, who was also an Edomite, and who led the slaughter of the innocent baby boys in Bethlehem in pursuit of Jesus.
2. David was welcomed by the inhabitants of Keilah as their deliverer only to have them turn their backs and be ready to hand him over to Saul. Jesus was welcomed by the inhabitants of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday as their deliverer, only to have them betray Him and turn Him over to Pontius Pilate.
3. David was slandered, falsely accused of disloyalty to the king and of leading an insurrection. The Jewish leaders slandered Jesus to Pilate, accusing him of threatening the authority of Rome and challenging Caesar and Pilate's rule.

4. David was betrayed twice by members of his own tribe. Jesus' own betrayal was worse, as one of His closest followers sold Him for money and betrayed Him with a kiss, a sign of their close friendship.

B. Praying to God in the Pain

So, how does David respond to being betrayed? Well, he prays earnestly to God:

*O God, save me by your name,
and vindicate me by your might.*

² *O God, hear my prayer;
give ear to the words of my mouth.*

³ *For strangers have risen against me;
ruthless men seek my life;
they do not set God before themselves. Selah*

Verse 3 says “strangers,” but the ESV footnote says that it could be “insolent men.” Some of the manuscripts read “insolent men” while others read “strangers.” One very small letter change is all that’s required in Hebrew to change this word from “strangers” to “insolent men.” If David did say “strangers” or “foreigners” instead of “insolent men,” then he’s being ironic, saying that his own tribesmen are acting as if they were strangers to him. If it is actually “insolent men,” then it matches Psalm 86:14 perfectly, which was also written by David:

*O God, insolent men have risen up against me;
a band of ruthless men seeks my life,
and they do not set you before them.*

Given the options, I think “insolent men” is more likely, matching the language of Psalm 86.

Notice how straightforward and earnest David’s prayer is. He asks God for three things – save me, vindicate me, and hear me. David is prompted to these urgent pleas by a brutal set of facts: He is being betrayed by insolent/arrogant men and pursued by ruthless men who do not fear God.

I. Save me

In David’s opening plea – “O God, save me by your name” - he calls God “Elohim,” the mighty one, referring to God’s strength and power. But He asks the mighty God to “Save me by your name,” asking God to save him, not just according to His power and strength but according to His character, His promise, His covenantal faithfulness and unfailing, unchanging nature.

When we cry out to God for salvation, we need to know that He alone is God, the almighty and all-powerful. But we also need to know His name, to know His character, to trust His unchanging and unfailing covenant-keeping character of absolute faithfulness.

Jesus also prayed for God to save Him. He pleaded to His Father in the Garden, and Hebrews tells us Jesus asked God the Father to save Him from death. *“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.”* – Hebrews 5:7

2. Vindicate me

But David cries not just for salvation from the danger but also for vindication – “*vindicate me by Your might.*” This is a plea for justice, for a just decision by God. David’s life was not just threatened, but his reputation had also been smeared in the mud.

God does answer David’s prayer for vindication in a direct and powerful way. David is again given an opportunity to take Saul’s life. David and his men find out where Saul and his troops are camped. David sneaks into the camp, which is unguarded. (Arrogant men often fail to be watchful.) This time, Abishai, Joab’s brother, is ready to pin Saul to the ground. David restrains him. Instead, they take Saul’s spear and his jar of water, which were lying next to his head, and they sneak back out of the camp and then David calls back from a safe distance:

17 Saul recognized David's voice and said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" And David said, "It is my voice, my lord, O king." 18 And he said, "Why does my lord pursue after his servant? For what have I done? What evil is on my hands? 19 Now therefore let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If it is the LORD who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering, but if it is men, may they be cursed before the LORD, for they have driven me out this day that I should have no share in the heritage of the LORD, saying, 'Go, serve other gods.' 20 Now therefore, let not my blood fall to the earth away from the presence of the LORD, for the king of Israel has come out to seek a single flea like one who hunts a partridge in the mountains."

21 Then Saul said, "I have sinned. Return, my son David, for I will no more do you harm, because my life was precious in your eyes this day. Behold, I have acted foolishly, and have made a great mistake." 22 And David answered and said, "Here is the spear, O king! Let one of the young men come over and take it. 23 The LORD rewards every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness, for the LORD gave you into my hand today, and I would not put out my hand against the LORD's anointed. 24 Behold, as your life was precious this day in my sight, so may my life be precious in the sight of the LORD, and may he deliver me out of all tribulation." 25 Then Saul said to David, "Blessed be you, my son David! You will do many things and will succeed in them." So David went his way, and Saul returned to his place.

When Jesus was betrayed by Judas, handed over to Pilate by the Jewish religious leaders, condemned by the riotous shouts of the mob crying, “Crucify Him!” and then nailed to a shameful cross, it would have been easy to see Him as a failure. The Jewish people had seen many failed would-be Messiahs, and they would see more. God immediately began vindicating His Son, even as He died. God sent darkness over the whole land for three hours. He sent an earthquake. These signs were powerful enough that the Roman centurion supervising the crucifixion cried out, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”

The resurrection of Jesus was further vindication. In the resurrection, God the Father raised Jesus “*by the power of His might.*” God exalted Jesus, not only raising Him from the dead but exalting Him to the right hand of the majesty on high. The same power that raised and exalted Jesus, that vindicated Him, is now at work in us, to save and to vindicate us from the attacks of our ruthless enemy.

Of course, often our enemy attacks us most viciously when we are not innocent, hurling shame and condemnation at us. We need God to save us and to vindicate us, but how can God vindicate us when we are not innocent? God can justly vindicate us on the basis of the innocence of Jesus, who was condemned for us, who took the just punishment we deserve upon Himself, and who gives us His perfect righteousness instead. So, we can cry out to God for vindication from our enemy’s accusations, not based on our own righteousness, but on the perfect righteousness of Christ our substitute and mediator, our redeemer and our head.

3. Hear me

David's third petition is for God to hear his prayer –

*O God, hear my prayer;
give ear to the words of my mouth.*

On the cross, Jesus prayed, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me,” and this is the first line of Psalm 22, which goes on to say, “Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.” So, when Jesus is crying out, He is asking God to hear Him, to answer Him.

When we cry out to God in distress, we need Him to save us and to vindicate us. We need to plead with urgency, but we also need to know that God hears us. I John 5:13-15 gives us this confidence –

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. ¹⁴ And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

How can we know if we're praying according to His will? Well, learning to pray like David and like Jesus, like the patterns of prayer given to us in the Psalms, is a great place to start if we're eager to pray according to God's will and we long for that assurance that He hears us and will answer us.

C. Praising God in the Pain

After David pours out His heart in earnest prayer, he takes a break – *Selah* – and then, having presented His need, he praises God:

⁴ *Behold, God is my helper;*

the Lord is the upholder of my life.

⁵ *He will return the evil to my enemies;*

in your faithfulness put an end to them.

⁶ *With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;*

I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.

⁷ *For he has delivered me from every trouble,*

and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.

Notice here that David has reversed the common order of petition and praise. Based on the Lord's Prayer and other Biblical patterns for prayer and worship, we gather together on the Lord's Day to praise God's name and repent of our sins before we petition Him. In private prayer, you have may been taught the A.C.T.S. pattern – Adoration (Praise), Confession, Thanksgiving and then Supplication. This is a good and helpful pattern. But David shows us repeatedly in the Psalms that when our distress is deep and our need is urgent, we often cry out to God for help and salvation first, presenting our needs immediately. But David stays on his knees until his prayer for help is turned into praise of His helper!

I. For who God is

David's praise of God begins with who God is – “God is my helper.”

In the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross of Calvary, Jesus never forgot who God was as His Father. In the Garden, He prayed, “*My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.*” (Matt. 26:39) Even in the darkest moment on the cross, when Jesus prays, “My God, my God, who have You forsaken Me?” He still confesses that God is His God. Then, later, He prays, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” and finally, “Into Your hands, I commit my Spirit.” Jesus’ prayer life was characterized by a strong confidence in who God was to Him – His Father, His God, the One into Whose hands He could entrust His spirit.

We need to have this same confidence. We’re told to have this same confidence in Hebrews 13:5-6 –

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” ⁶ So we can confidently say,

*“The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?”*

We cling to money and power, to our worldly reputations and our own resources because we do not know and trust who God is. He is our helper. He has promised that He will never leave us nor forsake us.

For what God has promised

This is where we see David go next, from who God is to what God has promised:

⁵ *He will return the evil to my enemies;
in your faithfulness put an end to them.*

David knows God will rescue Him from His enemies. God had made precious promises to David when Samuel anointed him as king, and so He prays and praises God for His promises.

Jesus trusted in the promises of God. 1 Peter 2:23 tells us of Jesus: “*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.*” (ESV) Pilate was frustrated by Jesus’ silence. When Pilate challenged Jesus and said, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” ¹¹ Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.” He knew that everything was unfolding according to God the Father’s plan and promise, and so He trusted His Father.

God has not just made promises to David and to Jesus, but He has also made great and precious promises to us, if we belong to Jesus by faith. He has promised to complete the work He has begun in us. He has promised us that one day, we, too, will look in triumph on our enemies. He has even said that He has already glorified us in His eternal and secure purposes.

2. Giving thanks by faith

So, we, too, can conclude our prayers the way David concludes His prayer, by giving thanks by faith –

⁶ *With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;
I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.*

⁷ *For he has delivered me from every trouble,
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.*

David knows God will deliver him and he vows that he will offer a freewill sacrifice and give thanks to God.

Jesus also had confidence. He died in this confidence, which is how His dying prayer could be, “*Into Your hands I commit my spirit.*” Jesus’ confidence was firm to the end and it was not misplaced, which is what the resurrection of Jesus shows us.

We, too, can live by faith and give thanks. We can give thanks for what God had already done for us, and we can give thanks by faith for what He is going to do for us.

What kind of freewill offering can we sacrifice to the Lord? Hebrews 13 tells us –

For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.¹⁵ Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (vv. 14-16, ESV)

So does Romans 12:1-2 –

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (ESV)

We can give thanks, we can praise His name, we can do good to all and offer our lives to do the will of God – not as a sacrifice that would earn us salvation, but as a freewill offering of thanksgiving for what has already been purchased for us and given to us by grace!

Will You Pray and Praise Like David and Jesus?

Life in this world is not easy. The Bible never pretends that it is. We do enjoy many good days and many wonderful blessings. But life is hard. We must walk by faith and not by sight. We will stumble and fall by our own sinful choices. We will be slandered even when we are innocent. We will be betrayed by others. Satan will harass us until the day we die. As we have followed David through these trials and turmoil, we have seen him consistently pray to God, praise God, and seek to glorify God.

Jesus had a harder life than David. He was truly innocent, absolutely perfect. Every word ever said against Him was slanderously false and every action taken against Him was ruthlessly evil and unfounded. Yet He prayed to His Father and praised His name at all times.

David was a man after God’s own heart, but Jesus was THE man after God’s own heart, the perfect embodiment of what David strove to be but never could quite achieve. And Jesus lived His life in perfect obedience, prayer, faith and

worship of His Father not just as an example for us, that we should do as He did, but He did it for us, in our place, to save us, to be the perfection for us that we could never be.

Will we pray and praise like David and Jesus? We can only do that if the Holy Spirit unites us to Jesus, so that He lives His life in us and through us. We can only do that by the power of God working in us, both to will and to do according to His good pleasure. But as Christ is in us, as the Spirit works in us, we can pray to God in times of deep distress, asking Him to save us and vindicate us and hear us, and we can praise God at all times, for who He is and for what He has promised, giving thanks to God the Father through Jesus.