

It doesn't take long for the people of God to figure out that the Lord's way runs counter to the ways of the world. Nietzsche got it right when he described the essence of the world as the will to power. He contended, "In real life it is only a matter of *strong* and *weak* wills."¹ Nietzsche argued that the Christian Faith was a myth created out of fear of "an incurable pessimism;" the avoidance of a deep down unteachable, unyielding spiritual fate that "life itself is the will to power."² "The cardinal instinct of an organic being," Nietzsche reasoned was self-preservation. All talk of motive, purpose, freedom, and morality is meaningless. "I shall repeat a hundred times; we really ought to free ourselves from the seduction of words!"³

To be "kept in the holy name of God" requires commitments to be made that lie "outside the comprehension of the world."⁴ "If the Church does not rest on a point outside the world it has no leverage with the world." Missionary statesman Lesslie Newbigin continues, "The Church is marked off from the world by the fact that it has received and must witness to the word of God which is the truth and which calls in question all the so-called axioms, absolutes, and self-evident propositions which are the stock-in-trade of the world's life."⁵

In the upper room on the night he was betrayed, Jesus insisted on preparing his disciples for the animosity of the world. We pray Psalm 55 retrospectively in the light of Jesus' warning and challenge. He told the disciples that "if the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first" (John 15:18). He gave the disciples' a heads-up so they would not be blind-sided by persecution. "All this I have told you so that you will not fall away" (John 16:1). As he walked through the city of Jerusalem with his disciples down into the Kidron Valley and up to the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane, he reassured them that in spite of the world's hate "the prince of this world now stands condemned" (John 16:11). "In this world you will have trouble," he warned. "But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). The apostle Peter echoed a similar warning when he wrote, "Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Pet 4:12).

It is helpful to keep this perspective in mind as we pray Psalm 55. This sequence of "save me" psalms (Ps 51-64) in Book II is similar to King David's passion narrative in Psalms 3-7 in Book I. To pray these psalms is to be reminded of the antagonism that exists between the way of the world and the way of Christ. The people of God unintentionally provoke the animosity of the world and become vulnerable to malice, betrayal, abuse, and contempt. The faithful stand in desperate need of deliverance. We should not be surprised that so many psalms are dedicated to passionate pleas for divine intervention. Psalm 55 is a sober reminder that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12).

¹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 23, 221.

² *Ibid.*, sec. 13, 211.

³ *Ibid.*, sec. 16, 213.

⁴ Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, 231

⁵ *Ibid.*

Culture of Evil

*Listen to my prayer, O God,
do not ignore my plea;
hear me and answer me.
My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught
because of what my enemy is saying,
because of the threats of the wicked;
for they bring down suffering on me
and assail me in their anger.*

*My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death have fallen on me.
Fear and trembling have beset me;
horror has overwhelmed me.
I said, "Oh, that I had wings of a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest.
I would flee far away
and stay in the desert;
I would hurry to my place of shelter,
far from the tempest and storm."*

*Lord, confuse the wicked, confound their words,
for I see violence and strife in the city.
Day and night they prowl about on its walls;
malice and abuse are within it.
Destructive forces are at work in the city;
threats and lies never leave its streets.*

Psalm 55:1-11

Prayer is where the faithful begin, not with cut-flower prayers intoned in obsequious piety, but with unfiltered raw edged psalms that expose the truth. The psalmist admits to being agitated and upset, restless and distraught. He feels compelled to moan. He pleads with God not to hide from his plea or ignore his prayer. The law commanded Israelites to watch out for his neighbor. "If you see your fellow Israelite's ox or sheep straying, do not ignore it but be sure to take it back to its owner" (Deut 22:1). The psalmist draws on that same language when he appeals to God not to hide from his prayer.⁶ He has reached a breaking point. He feels crushed under the weight of "my" enemy's insults, anger, and threats. It is as if the psalmist has run out of verbs to describe his confrontation with evil. He is enveloped by terror, beset by fear, overwhelmed by horror, assailed by anger, and overcome by suffering. It is hard to imagine any situation that could be more terrifying than the one he finds himself in. But here is where we discover the power of the psalms to articulate our fears and feelings. The psalmist gives us a vocabulary of lament that meets our need no matter how dire our situation may be.

⁶ Kidner, Psalms, 199.

Psalm 55 can be prayed by the woman who has been raped, because the psalm expresses the utter horror of this violent act and the deep dread that it instills. The child raised in an abusive family and living in constant fear can identify with the psalmist's plea. The divorcee who has been abandoned by a callous and heartless spouse can find words that do justice to the shame and sorrow she feels. The psalmist gives us words to express our emotions, and when these words are combined with the Spirit's wordless groans (Rom 8:26) we are reassured that God is listening to our plea.

The psalmist's impulse to escape, to fly away like a bird, and find refuge in the wilderness far from trouble is not necessarily a bad option or a wrong action. The most responsible thing a person can do may be to get out of the situation. No one should feel consigned to an abusive marriage or trapped in a life-threatening situation. In cases of chronic abuse, permission to divorce is as valid as if the abuser is an adulterer or an unbeliever who insists on a divorce. Adultery, abandonment and abuse qualify as acts of marital unfaithfulness and the freedom to fly away ought to be respected.⁷

This doesn't mean that escape is a viable option in every dire situation, but seeking refuge "far from the tempest and storm" may be a sensible course of action and the psalmist is casting no aspersions against it. But the ultimate solution lies not in escape but in the Lord confusing and confounding the ways of the wicked. The psalmist quickly turns from contemplating flight to praying against the evil. In broad strokes he describes the violence and strife of the city. Social injustice runs rampant. No one is safe from malice and abuse. Intimidation and lies are how the world operates. The psalmist sketches a culture of evil that is undermining the moral order of the city.

A friend pastors a church less than ten miles from my home, but it might as well be in a developing country overseas. His church has been around for one hundred and twenty-nine years, but the old manufacturing jobs have long since left town leaving an economically depressed community. His parishioners hear gunfire throughout the night and he routinely conducts funerals for young men killed in drive-by-shootings. In his neighborhood, sitting on your front porch can be as dangerous as being on the front line in a combat zone. Parishioners in their 50s and 60s are living on fixed incomes and facing the challenge of raising grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The parents of these children are working minimum wage jobs and struggling to make it from pay check to pay check. In situations where there are no grandparents some children as young as five or six have to fend for themselves. Many of the young women in his congregation go from one relationship to another looking for a soul mate only to be disappointed over and over again by men who are only interested in their body. Both young men and young women long for a relationship with their father who has long since abandoned the family and he is either dead, in jail, or he started another family. Young men are discouraged from excelling in school because it is not cool to be smart. They are expected to prove their manhood by being sexually active, selling drugs and packing a gun. Young women become pregnant and perpetuate the cycle of poverty and ignorance. The sins of the city permeate my friend's church community even though he faithfully preaches the gospel and works tirelessly to lead his people in Christ.

⁷ Webster, Soulcraft, 202.

Psalm 55 describes how my pastor friend feels as he cries out to God. He is overwhelmed by the horror and the terror of his community and he has experienced the impulse to flee. But he remains where he is, preaching, teaching, and calling attention to the destructive forces at work in the city. Along with the psalmist he prays asking the Lord to confuse the wicked and confound the forces of evil.

Betrayal

*If an enemy were insulting me,
I could endure it;
if a foe were rising against me,
I could hide.
But it is you, a man like myself,
my companion, my close friend,
with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship
at the house of God,
as we walked about
among the worshipers.*

*Let death take my enemies by surprise;
let them go down alive to the realm of the dead,
for evil finds lodging among them.
As for me, I call to God,
and the Lord saves me.
Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress,
and he hears my voice.
He rescues me unharmed
from the battle waged against me,
even though many oppose me.
God, who is enthroned from of old,
who does not change –
he will hear them and humble them,
because they have no fear of God.*

*My companion attacks his friends;
he violates his covenant.
His talk is smooth as butter,
yet war is in his heart;
his words are more soothing than oil,
yet they are drawn swords.*

Psalm 55:12-21

Scholars favor a broad application of the Psalm 55 to situations of betrayal and conflict. Yet there are hints in the psalm that point to Absalom's rebellion. One of David's most trusted counselors, Ahithophel, betrayed David and conspired with Absalom (2 Sam 15). It is conceivable that David

had either Absalom or Ahithophel in mind as he described a person whom he considered to be his equal, a close companion, a trusted and intimate friend, a counselor, and a fellow worshiper. The close association of Psalm 51 with these “save me” Psalms (51-64) may also imply a connection with Ahithophel’s betrayal. As we said in Book I, the Samuel narrative (2 Samuel 13-18) describes the messy moral chaos of David’s reign after his murderous affair with Bathsheba. David’s family unravels and the evil consequences impact the moral order of the city. Lust, rape, murder, conspiracy, and insurrection fill a narrative that climaxes in Absalom’s covert power play for the throne. Once again, as in the case of Psalms 3-7, the tragic history of Absalom’s coup and David’s flight from Jerusalem may lie behind Psalm 55.

It is difficult to imagine Jesus praying Psalm 55 and not finding in the psalm a description of the religious and political opposition that was mounting against him. The Gospels depict the scribes and Pharisees venting their growing anger and plotting his death. Jesus’ words, “You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you?” (Matthew 17:17), correspond to the psalm. Like the prophet Jeremiah, Jesus found in Psalm 55 a description of the anguish of his heart (Jer 4:19), the impulse to flee to the desert (Jer 9:2), and in Judas he experienced the deception of a close friend (Jer 9:4).

In the upper room, Jesus used a common, ordinary gesture of friendship when he dipped the bread in the dish and gave it to Judas. “As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.” The implication is that this genuine act of friendship, was the decisive moment at which Judas yielded fully to the Tempter’s agenda. The way in which Jesus exposed his betrayer gave Judas every possible way out. At the table he could have confessed his sin and turned to Jesus for forgiveness. But Judas pushed past the point of repentance and confession. He steeled his will against Jesus’ friendship and pursued a course of action that ended in death. War was in his heart. A few hours later, Judas greeted Jesus in the garden with “Rabbi!” undoubtedly said with characteristic reverence and respect, but hidden behind his smooth words was a dagger to the heart. Judas used a gesture of intimate friendship when he give Jesus a kiss in the garden (Mark 14:45). Both gestures, the way Jesus gave Judas the bread and the way Judas greeted Jesus, were traditional signs of hospitality. At the table, Jesus preserved Judas’ secret, but in the garden, Judas greeted Jesus with a kiss to identify him for the arresting party. Jesus loved Judas and his betrayal was painful to endure, but he was able to process the treachery of a close friend with whom he once enjoyed sweet fellowship by praying Psalm 55 and Psalm 41.

God Cares for You

*Cast your cares on the Lord
and he will sustain you;
he will never let
the righteous be shaken.
But you, God, will bring down the wicked
into the pit of decay;
the bloodthirsty and deceitful
will not live out half their days.*

But as for me, I trust in you.
Psalm 55:22-23

The adventurers who climb Mount Everest hire Sherpas from the high mountainous region of Nepal to guide them up the mountain and carry their heavy packs. We must be clear, the Lord is not our burden bearer; he's not our Sherpa. We don't cast our burdens on the Lord so he can carry them for us. The Lord doesn't care about our burdens; he cares about us and "he will never let the righteous be shaken" (Ps 55:22). The word "burden" is drawn from the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint, LXX) and should be translated from the Hebrew as "whatever is given you, your appointed lot."⁸ In other words, "Throw onto Yhwh what is give you, and he—he will sustain you."⁹ The Lord promises his strength to the believer "to endure the opposition and by faith overcome it, because he will not let the righteous be moved."¹⁰

The apostle Peter quoted only a single line from the Septuagint version of Psalm 55:22 in his letter, but the entire context of his letter reflects the message of the psalm:

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble" (Prov 11:31). Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen. 1 Peter 5:5-11

Humility belongs to those who embrace their absolute dependence on the mercy and wisdom of God.¹¹ They are willing to cast everything on the Lord, knowing that God will lift them up in due time. The apostle Paul echoes the same conviction when he writes:

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:4-7).

God's answer to our prayers is calculated to bring joy – real joy, lasting joy, the kind of joy the

⁸ Kidner, Psalms, 202.

⁹ Goldingay, Psalms, 177.

¹⁰ Ross, Psalms, 256.

¹¹ Webster, Outposts of Hope: First Peter's Christ for Culture Strategy, 156-157.

world cannot take away. The psalmist is confident that the Lord will bring down the wicked. Those who seek to do others in will be done in. Their time will be cut short. David's bottom line: "But as for me, I trust in you." Goldingay draws out the pastoral application of Psalm 55. He "encourages people of prayer

- to throw onto God what God or other people throw onto us.
- to do this on behalf of churches in other parts of the world if we do not experience such attacks, as we enter into the trouble and harassment that they experience.
- to be open with God with the inner turmoil of our hearts and the outer turmoil that causes this.
- to be open with God about the way we could long to be away to the safety of some other place where we would not be subject to such experiences.
- to urge God to act directly to frustrate the plans of people who attack us and our sister churches.
- to draw God's attention to ways in which such malice characterizes the place where we live.
- to grieve before God at the way people who were members of our communities or churches are the people who are now attacking us.
- to ask God to punish our attackers rather than taking matters into our own hands.
- to trust God to do that and to protect us."¹²

¹² Goldingay, Psalms, 179.