

Psalm 55

Prayer during the Day Wednesday Week 2
Office of Readings Friday Week 4

The psalmist is clearly terrified. Anarchy rules in the city. If he could run away from it all he would, but he cannot. Even his closest friend has turned against him. There is only one to whom he can turn, and that is YHWH, to whom he pleads throughout, and, in the final verse, he asserts his trust in his God. As we listen to the psalmist's plea we might reflect upon Jesus in his agony. The title reads: 'To the leader: with stringed instruments. A Maskil* of David'.

After a conventional opening supplication, the psalmist tells how troubled he is by his enemies.

Aggression from outside is bad enough. Here the psalmist expresses the anguish that he experiences within.

The heart knows its own bitterness.
– Proverbs 14:10

As Christians we reflect on the anguish suffered by Jesus:

Now my soul is troubled.
– John 12:27

Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.'
– John 13:21

Jesus took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.'
– Matthew 26:37-38

In his anguish Jesus prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.
– Luke 22:44

¹Hear my prayer, O God, do not shut yourself away from my pleading.

²Attend to me and respond. With my cares, I cannot rest.

^{3a}I tremble at the clamour of the enemy, at the cries of the wicked.

^{3b}Calamities press down on me and overwhelm me; furies attack me.

⁴My heart* is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me.

⁵Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.

Wanting to escape pain

**⁶I think: 'If only I had the wings of a dove, I could fly away and find rest.
⁷I would escape far away and take refuge in the wilderness.**

[Selah*]

**⁸I would hurry to find a shelter from the raging wind and devouring tempest,
⁹from the raging torrent of their lying tongues, O Lord.**

**^{9b}for I see VIOLENCE
and STRIFE in the city.
¹⁰Day and night they patrol,
high on the city walls,
while CRIME and
INJUSTICE flourish inside;
¹¹RUIN is in its midst;
CRUELTY and FRAUD
are present wherever you go.**

¹²If it were one of my enemies who was insulting me, I could bear it. If it were an opponent who was behaving insolently towards me, I could walk away.

**¹³But it is you, my own companion, my intimate friend –
¹⁴how close was the friendship between us. We walked together in harmony in the house of God.**

The psalmist wishes he could escape from the outer and inner pain. We think of Jesus in his agony and on the cross when there was no escape. We think also of the times when Jesus did escape those who were attempting to silence him:

They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

– Luke 4:29-30

They tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come.

– John 7:30 (see 7:44)

They picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

– John 8:59

They tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands.

– John 10:39

The sevenfold description of evil is symbolic of the complete anarchy that is reigning in the city. We think of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem:

If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.

– Luke 19:41-44

Trust and friendship have been poisoned. Even a trusted friend has betrayed him.

Is not a sorrow like that for death itself when a dear friend turns into an enemy?

– Sirach 37:2; 6:8-12

Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.'

– John 13:21

Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?

– Luke 22:48

In the heart of the psalmist arises a violent desire to see his enemies wiped out. He sees no other way to have peace or justice. He may have been thinking of what happened to those who opposed Moses:

Moses continued: 'If YHWH creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up, with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised YHWH.' As soon as Moses finished speaking all these words, the ground under them was split apart ... So they with all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol; the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly.

– Numbers 16:30-31,33

The psalmist trusts that YHWH will hear and save him.

'Me' in verse eighteen translates the Hebrew *nepeš*. The psalmist is speaking of his whole self, the self that clings to life. See the article 'Being' in the Introduction.

Though he trusts in God, he cannot get the thought of his enemies out of his mind.

Like the glaze covering an earthen vessel are smooth lips with an evil heart. An enemy dissembles in speaking while harbouring deceit within; when an enemy speaks graciously, do not believe it, for there are seven abominations concealed within; though hatred is covered with guile, the enemy's wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.

– Proverbs 26:23-26

¹⁵Let death catch them by surprise; let them go down alive to Sheol; for evil dwells in their homes and in their hearts*.

¹⁶As for me, I call upon God, and YHWH* will save* me.

¹⁷Evening, morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, that he may hear my appeal:

¹⁸'Redeem me* unharmed from the battle that I wage, for many are arrayed against me.'

**¹⁹God, who is enthroned from of old, will hear me,
[Selah*]**

and will bring them down, because they do not amend their ways, nor do they fear* God.

²⁰They raised their hand against one who was bound to them by covenant*, thus violating their pledge.

²¹Their speech was softer than butter, but their heart* was set on war. Their words sounded smoother than oil, but were naked swords.

Trust in YHWH

**²²Cast your burden on YHWH,
and he will sustain you;
he will never permit the just
to fall.**

**²³You, O God, will cast them
down into the lowest pit;
the bloodthirsty and treacher-
ous shall not live out half their
days.**

But I will trust in you.

Verse twenty-two may be an oracle pronounced during the cult, or it may be the psalmist's own heart speaking to him. It is echoed in Peter:

Cast all your anxiety on God, because he cares for you.

1Peter 5:7

In verse twenty-three we see that the psalmist is still struggling. He concludes by saying that he trusts God, but only after he lashes out once more against his enemies.

As a reflection on the psalm we might read Lamentations chapter three.

Jesus is so different. His trust always leads him to forgiveness, even in situations that are brought about by people who obstinately refuse to do God's will.

The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me. I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!

– John 16:32-33

Reflections on carrying one's daily cross

Hard work was created for everyone and a heavy yoke was laid on the human race from the day they came forth from their mother's womb until the day when they return to the mother of all the living.

Perplexities and fear of heart are theirs, and anxious thought of the day of their death. From the one who sits on a splendid throne to the one who grovels in dust and ashes, from the one who wears purple and a crown to the one who is clothed in rags, there is anger and envy and trouble and unrest, and fear of death and fury and strife.

– Sirach 40:1-5

Even in laughter the heart is sad, and the end of joy is grief.

– Proverbs 14:13

Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

– 1Peter 4:13

In the Hebrew Scriptures suffering carries with it an extra burden, as it was assumed that God controls the world and that as a consequence whatever happens must be willed by God. Since it was axiomatic that God is just, suffering was understood to be a divine punishment for sin. Examples of this recur throughout the Scriptures. See Psalm 22:15; Psalm 44:22; Psalm 74:19; Psalm 88:6-8,16,18; and Psalm 89:38-40,42,44-45. See also Job 9:22; 10:3,8,9; 12:9; 13:24; 16:11; 19:9.

Of course sin does have its own terrible effects, but Jesus freed us from seeing suffering as caused by God.

Further reflections on the passion of Jesus from the psalms

1. General - Psalm 22; 35:11-25
2. Persecution - Psalm 17:8-12; 31:13,18; 38:12,19-20; 42:10;
- Psalm 54:1-3; 59:3-4; 64:1-6; 86:14; 140:1-5; 143:3
3. Abuse of law - Psalm 94:20-21
4. Insult - Psalm 44:15-16; 69:19-21
5. Mockery - Psalm 31:11; 35:21; 44:13-16; 79:4; 109:25; 123:3-4
6. Torture - Psalm 62:3; 69:26; 143:3-4
7. Being abandoned - Psalm 38:11; 88:8,18; 142:4
8. Being betrayed - Psalm 41:9; 55:12-14
9. Desecration of the body, God's temple - Psalm 74:3,7; 89:40-41
10. Violent death - 88:1-7,16-17