

How To Handle Betrayal

Psalm 54/55

Michael Felkins

Grand Avenue Baptist Church

Ames, Iowa

October 4, 2026

Have you ever watched the reality TV show *Survivor*? It has been on for 51 seasons. That is absolutely amazing. When I was a youth minister, I remember hearing our high schoolers talk about it, and I thought it was dumb. Then I decided to watch it and got hooked for a few seasons. It's one of those TV shows now that has a cult following.

If you don't know the show, here's what happens. The producers select a group of people from video auditions, then drop them off on a secluded island. They are usually split into two tribes, but in reality it is every man for himself. They form alliances, betray one another, and vote each other off the show at the tribal council. At the tribal council, when they vote someone off the show, the host, Jeff Probst, says, "*(Name of the contestant), the tribe has spoken. It's time for you to go.*" Then he puts out their torch that represents their life on the show. Then he says, "*The rest of you can head back to camp.*" Then the jockeying for position starts all over again.

Survivor, like many reality TV shows, is about betrayal. People just love seeing someone getting stabbed in the back unless it is themselves.

Unfortunately, betrayal is not confined to reality TV. Sadly, it occurs too often in life: Friends betray one another to gain an advantage, kids/teens betray one another to establish a pecking order for popularity, coworkers betray one another to get someone fired, family members betray one another, and spouses betray one another through infidelity. These are just a few examples.

Perhaps you have experienced betrayal. I have. It is a very painful experience, and I don't ever want to go through it again. If you've been betrayed or someone close to you has been betrayed, then you know what I am talking about. You know the incredible pain that it caused. You know the scars that it left in your life and on your heart. Perhaps it left you not trusting others. So, as a result, you won't let people get close to you. You keep your relationships at arm's length and very surface level.

Psalms 54 and 55 are about the painful experience of betrayal. As I said last Sunday, Psalms 52, 53, 54, and 55 form a mini collection of Psalms. Psalms 54 and 55 connect to Psalm 52 through betrayal. Remember how, in Psalm 52, Doeg the Edomite betrayed David, even though he was not a friend. He betrayed him to King Saul. Then, Saul sent Doeg and his soldiers to the city of Nob to kill Ahimelech and all the priests. Ahimelech's son, Abiathar, escaped and found David in the wilderness. He told him what Doeg did. In 1 Samuel 22, David told Abiathar to stay with him, and he would protect him.

Psalm 54 picks up with David still on the run from King Saul. The Lord has told him that the citizens of the Judean city of Keilah would hand him over to Saul if he stayed there, so he and his men fled to the hills of Ziph. The people who lived in those hills were Jewish people called the Ziphites. Look at the superscription for Psalm 54:

TO THE CHOIRMASTER: WITH STRINGED INSTRUMENTS. A MASKIL OF DAVID,
WHEN THE ZIPHITES WENT AND TOLD SAUL, "IS NOT DAVID HIDING AMONG
US?"

As soon as he got to the village of Horesh, the Ziphites told Saul he was there. David left Horesh and eventually reached Hakilah in the southern wilderness, but the Ziphites betrayed him again and told Saul he was there. The betrayal by these fellow Israelites led him to write Psalm 54. It hurt for him to be betrayed by his people. He thought they were his allies, but they were not.

Psalm 55 describes an even more painful betrayal. After David became king, his most trusted advisor, Ahithophel, joined David's son Absalom in rebellion against him. David was so broken over Ahithophel's betrayal that he wrote Psalm 55. Verses 13-14 describe David's shock and anguish of this betrayal:

*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.*

These two Psalms are for anyone who feels abandoned, rejected, or betrayed. Perhaps a spouse has abandoned or betrayed you. Perhaps your children have rejected you. Perhaps someone you thought was a close friend or ally has publicly attacked and embarrassed you. Perhaps a family member or friend abandoned you, and it felt like no one was on your side or even cared. In these two Psalms, David shows us what to do and how to turn to God in these situations. They teach us how to handle betrayal.

My goal is that when we finish these two Psalms, you know how to lament the anguish of your betrayal. Here's the big idea of the sermon: *Cast your anguish of betrayal on the Savior who was betrayed for sinners.* I have four application points that will teach us how to lament betrayal.

I. Confess Your Faith in God (Ps. 54:1-4; Ps. 55:1-8)

David begins his lament by confessing his faith in God. By the way, this lament is a prayer. David brings his anguish to God in prayer. Yet, here's what I want you to notice. His confession of faith is in the context of the details of his anguish over betrayal. Listen to what he says in Psalm 54:1-4,

*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.*

In Psalm 55:1-2, David begins this prayer in similar fashion:

*Give ear to my prayer, O God,
and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy!
² Attend to me, and answer me.*

I remember when my kids were little, and they wanted my attention, but I was distracted. They would crawl up in my lap, grab my face, turn it to theirs, and say, "Daddy, listen to me!" Mac was especially good at this. At this point, he or the girls had my attention. This is kind of what David is doing to the Lord in his confession of faith. It is like he is grabbing hold of God's face and saying,

"Lord, listen to me!"

Notice what he says next. He does not begin by pretending everything is fine. He doesn't minimize the danger that is before him. He realizes he is in danger and readily admits it. Neither does he suppress his fear in his prayer.

That is one of the more important lessons in these psalms. Biblical faith does not mean that we never experience fear, grief, anger, confusion, anxiety, or sorrow. Biblical faith means bringing those things to the Lord's

attention (although he already knows). David's faith in His faithful God becomes the foundation of his prayer. Look at what he says in Psalm 54:1,

"Save me by your name."

Listen: God's name represents who God is—His character, His nature, His covenant faithfulness, His reputation, and His glory. David is essentially saying,

"God, I am trusting you to be God for me in this situation."

Think about what he doesn't say. He doesn't say, *"Save me because I am king"* or *"Save me because I deserve it"* or *"Save me because I've been faithful."* This is key: David presses into the only hope that he has – the name of the Lord. His request to be saved through God's name is gospel language. Friends, we must look to Jesus and His name for salvation.

On this side of the cross, the name is known as Elohim and Yahweh. These are the names we find in Psalms 54 and 55.

But the fullness of God's name is seen in Jesus Christ. Just before Jesus was crucified, Philip asked Jesus to show him and his fellow disciples the Father, and Jesus replied to Philip:

"Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

Then, Apostle Peter in his very first sermon said in Acts 4:12,

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

So, our faith rests in God through Christ's work on the cross for us. He is our salvation and the source of our hope in our anguish of betrayal. The name in which we are saved and find hope in the pain of our betrayal is Jesus Christ.

Next, notice how David identifies his source of pain while also confessing his faith. In Psalm 54:3, he says:

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

The strangers in Psalm 54 are the Ziphites. They were Israelites who were loyal to King Saul. Although David had done nothing wrong to them, they betrayed him to Saul. *This betrayal was painful, but not nearly as painful as what we see in Psalm 55.* Look in vv. 4-8:

*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."*

The pain of this betrayal is doubled because it involves his son Absalom and his trusted counselor, Ahithophel. The anguish is doubled. The terror that lodges in his heart is doubled. The danger is doubled. David's heart is breaking, and he has no fight left in him, so he wants to take flight like a dove and escape to the cliffs of the mountains in the wilderness until it has all passed over.

Have you ever been there? Has the pain ever been so bad that all you want to do is check out? You just want to go and hide until it all blows over. Picture it like this: You pull out your phone, open the Weather Channel app, and see the storm coming. It's going to be a bad one. All you want to do is hide in the storm shelter or basement until it passes. Then you can come out and see the sunshine. But you know you can't. You're going to have to go through it. You'll have to persevere through it.

So, David does the only thing that he can do. He goes to the Lord, confesses his trust in God, and lays out the pain in his heart. Here's what we need to do: We need to remember who God is for us in Christ. We pray as if we are grabbing Jesus by the face and ask Him to listen to us. We confess our trust in Christ but also explain to the Lord in detail the pain that the betrayal has caused in our hearts and lives.

Jesus tells us to pray this way. Do you remember the parable of the man who went to his friend at midnight and pleaded with his friend to give him some bread? He annoyed his friend until he got up and helped him. Jesus calls us to pray like this. We are to seek and keep on seeking, to knock and keep on knocking. We pray this way knowing that our God is a good Father who wants to give to those who ask.

Here's the good news and power of our prayers. The gospel teaches us that the salvation we long for ultimately rests outside ourselves. Here's what I mean. Jesus obeyed when we wouldn't and couldn't. Jesus suffered for our sins where we deserved to suffer for them. Jesus died in our place and for our sins. Jesus rose from the dead on the third day in victory over death.

So, here's the good news! Listen to me because this is the bottom line. When a Christian cries, "*God, save me,*" that prayer rests not on the power of his prayer or on the power of his work, but on the finished work of Jesus Christ. "*God, save me*" rests on the fact that Jesus rose from the dead and can save all who call on His "Name." "*God, save me by Your name, and that name is – Jesus Christ.*"

I hope you can make this confession of faith in Jesus this morning; if you can't, please talk to me after the service. I want to help you with what it means to call on the name of Jesus to save you.

II. Call on the Lord to Judge Injustice (Ps. 54:5; Ps. 55:9-11, 15, 23)

Here's where a prayer of lament usually makes faithful Christians uncomfortable. Look at Psalm 54:5,

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

This is what theologians call *imprecatory prayers*. It is when the psalmist asks the Lord to bring judgment and destruction on his enemies. In Psalm 55, we see them in vv. 9-11, 15, and 23:

*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.*

¹⁵ *Let death steal over them;
let them go down to Sheol alive;
for evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart.*

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.*

If we're honest, for Christians, it feels a bit uncomfortable to ask for God to annihilate our enemies. Perhaps you are like me; when you read prayers like these, they kind of bother you a bit. I mean, after all, didn't Jesus command us to "*Love our enemies and pray for those who persecute [us]?*"

One key to holding these two seemingly contradictory truths together (*loving our enemies and praying for their destruction*) is what we find in v. 5: God's faithfulness to who He is.

The preposition "*in*" that begins the clause in v. 5 says,
"*in your faithfulness.*"

This little preposition tells us that God's faithfulness is the truth that defines and characterizes who He is. David is asking God to act according to His nature and character. Here's what this means: God's nature and character suggest that He acts not only on behalf of His children to help them, but He also acts toward those who oppose them.

Here's what we need to understand about Psalm 54:5 and the imprecatory verses in Psalm 55. Praying for God to bring justice and judgment is actually *gospel-praying*.

God is a God of justice. He will judge, and He will set everything right. He will vindicate the righteous and punish the wicked. Dr. Jim Shaddix is the preaching professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and here is what he said about these imprecatory verses:

*"[God] wasn't kidding when he said all that stuff about fire and brimstone, eternal condemnation, and the wicked being damned to hell. So, anytime you pray for his kingdom to come and his will to be done, you're actually praying for him to destroy the wicked."*¹

The ultimate key to hold these two seemingly contradictory truths of *loving our enemies and praying for their destruction* is the cross of Christ. The cross pictures God's faithfulness to apply justice and judgment. The cross means God did not say, "*The sin doesn't matter.*" He said, in effect, "*Sin matters so much that it must be judged.*" No one gets away with their sin. The cross means God takes sin seriously.

Here's the bottom line: God's faithful judgment and justice mean sinners will pay for their sin under God's wrath for all eternity in Hell, or they must turn to Jesus and repent of their sin so that the justice and judgment they deserve for their sin falls on Jesus Christ. Jesus is the substitute for sinners. Jesus died in our place and for our sins. The question is: Have you turned to Jesus in faith and repented of your sins?

When we turn to Jesus for forgiveness and salvation, we can let go of our desire for retribution and vindictive revenge for those who have sinned against us. We understand that God takes all sin seriously, and He will give His righteous judgment and justice in His time and His way.

Listen, vindication for sin is never our assignment. David's words are clear in Psalm 54:5,
"*Because of your faithfulness, [you] annihilate them.*"

David wasn't asking for God to give him permission to do it himself, and we shouldn't either. Retribution is never our task or responsibility. It's God's. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 12:17-21,

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is

¹ Jim Shaddix, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Psalms 51-100*, 39.

written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

As Christians, we cry out to God to judge the injustice done to us through betrayal. We can ask Him to vindicate us in His way and in His time.²

The justice He may bring is that He breaks the hearts of those who carried out the betrayal and brings them to true faith in Christ. This means the judgment stored up for them fell on Christ on the cross. Our role in this is to pray and ask God to work and bring justice. We are to walk in the steps of our Savior, loving, praying, and perhaps even serving our enemies. The means of justice and judgment are not in our hands. That belongs to the LORD God.

III. Confess Your Pain and Confusion of Betrayal (Ps. 55:12-14)

We see David's pain and confusion in Psalm 55:12-14,

*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.*

In v. 3 of Psalm 54 we learned that the betrayer was within the covenant family of Israel. However, Psalm 55:12-14 shows that the pain runs even deeper when a friend becomes an enemy. A stranger is painful, but the betrayal of a friend is devastating.

David tells us that it's not an enemy who taunts him, but his companion with whom he spent many hours in sweet fellowship, seeking wisdom, receiving godly counsel, and even worshipping the Lord together. David is referring to Ahithophel's betrayal. It broke his heart.

But Ahithophel's betrayal points beyond his betrayal of King David. It points to the betrayal of King Jesus. These two Psalms clearly find their fulfillment in Christ. I don't know how we can read about David's experience in Psalm 55 and not think of Jesus.

Think about it this way: Jesus was opposed and betrayed by those who should have been on His side. For example, the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders, opposed Jesus and eventually became His enemies. The Pharisees were part of Israel's covenant community and should have been on Jesus' side, but they weren't. This was bad but not nearly as bad as the betrayal by a close friend.

Jesus was betrayed by one of His closest disciples, Judas. Judas was not just some follower in the larger body of followers. He was one of the twelve who spent countless hours with Jesus. He learned directly from Jesus and even received a commission from Him. He witnessed Jesus' miracles and shared sweet fellowship with Him. Then, at the end, after Jesus had washed his feet in the Upper Room, Judas still betrayed Him.

So when we read Psalms 54 and, in particular, Psalm 55, we should hear an echo of Christ's anguish of betrayal. David says, in effect: *"The person who should have been beside me turned against me."* Now, hear Jesus' words in John 13:18. Jesus identified His betrayer with these words:

He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.

² Jim Shaddix, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Psalms 51-100*, 37-40.

Jesus experienced betrayal in an even greater way, for it truly led to His death. Here is where the person and work of Jesus move beyond David.

Picture this: David is the suffering king who needs salvation. Jesus is the suffering King who accomplishes salvation. David cried out for deliverance, but Jesus entered death itself to deliver His people. Jesus is the Hero of Psalm 54 and 55. He was betrayed to death, yet He rose from the dead to destroy death so that He can help us live through the pain of betrayal.

Friends, when we have been attacked, rejected, condemned, or betrayed, we need to remember that we have a Savior who sympathizes with us and can identify with our experience. Isaiah 53:3 says Jesus was despised and rejected by men. And as a result of Him being attacked, rejected, betrayed, and condemned to death on the cross, Hebrews 4:14-16 tells us:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Jesus invites us to draw near to Him and pour out the anguish in our hearts. Let me help you with how to bring that anguish to Christ. The temptation is to get down on your knees in prayer and begin to pour out your pain to Jesus.

Now, there is nothing wrong with that, but let me offer an even more *gospel-centered* way. First, in prayer, rehearse the gospel. Remind yourself of all that Jesus suffered when He was attacked, despised, rejected, betrayed, and condemned to death. Second, thank God for all that Jesus went through for you and thank Jesus that He can sympathize with you. Finally, now pour out the anguish in your heart to Him in light of our Savior's suffering on the cross.

IV. Cast Your Burden of Betrayal on the Lord (Ps. 54:6-7; Ps. 55:16-19, 22)

Psalm 54:6-7 and Psalm 55:22 converge here. Psalm 54 ends with David remembering God's deliverance. In v. 7 he says:

"He has delivered me from every trouble."

Then Psalm 55 reaches its climax in v. 22, so we will give our attention to this verse. Psalm 55:22 is the heart of both Psalms. Now, King David charges the people of God to:

*Cast your burden on the LORD,
and he will sustain you;
he will never permit
the righteous to be moved.*

How we respond to being betrayed is an issue of worship. Will we go down the rabbit hole of bitterness, or will we lift our eyes to heaven and see where our help comes from? King David doesn't call us to carry our burden but to cast our burden on the LORD. This isn't about willpower or picking ourselves up by our bootstraps, but about laying our burden of betrayal at the feet of the Lord Jesus.

The Apostle Peter picks up on Psalm 55:22 when he says in 1 Peter 5:6-7,

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

How do we know He cares for us in our pain? How do we know He will sustain us? How do we know He will never let the righteous fall? How do we know God will one day judge the wicked who torment God's people? This is where Psalm 54 and 55 must look forward to the cross, and where 1 Peter 5:6-7 looks back at the cross.

Listen to me because here's the truth most Christians skip over when we wrestle with the pain of our betrayal and the burden it creates. Brothers and sisters, God has already taken your greatest burden upon Himself. On the cross, Jesus bore our sin (of our betrayal of others), our guilt, our condemnation, our shame, and our judgment. Listen, the burden we could never carry was placed upon Christ. Therefore, the invitation of Psalm 55:22 and 1 Peter 5:7 is grounded in the gospel.

Are you ready? Here's how we apply the gospel to our betrayal. Cast your burden on Jesus because He has already shown Himself willing to bear your burden of sin. If He can take care of your sin, He is more than willing and able to bear your burden of pain and anguish from betrayal.

So, how are you doing with the burden of the pain and anguish of your betrayal? Picture it like this: You're stuffing the pain and anguish of your betrayal into a backpack, throwing it on your shoulders, and carrying it around in life. From time to time, you pull out the contents of your backpack and stare at them. You're angry over it. You weep over how heavy and painful it is. This is not what our Savior wants us to do. He invites us to cast our burden and pain on Him. Jesus told us in Matthew 11:28-30,

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Now, I know the burden Jesus is talking about here is the legalistic burden the Pharisees laid on the people. However, the principle is the same. Don't we come up with our own little legalistic ways to deal with the burden of our pain and anguish of betrayal, like venting, escapism, blaming others, psychological techniques, and man-centered principles?

We want to do anything except deal with the contents of our hearts. Often we want to hold onto the pain of betrayal because we feel justified in hating the other person. We will gladly do anything except rest in Christ's finished work on our behalf. Why will we do that? Because we don't want to take the backpack of betrayal off, cast it at the foot of the Savior's cross, and allow Him to heal us. Often, we don't trust Him to bring justice and judgment in His time because we want to do it ourselves. Is this you this morning? Let me invite you to take off the backpack of your betrayal that is filled with your anger, pain, shame, and desire for retribution and lay it at the Savior's feet today, tomorrow, and most likely you need to keep laying it every day for a long time until you finally never pick it up again.

Here's the path that we can walk down as we deal with the pain and anguish of betrayal. First, confess your trust in God. Second, call on the Lord to judge injustice. Third, confess your confusion of betrayal. Fourth, cast your burden on the Lord.

As I just said, this is not a one-time prayer, and you're done. This is a prayer that you will need to pray over and over.