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Psalms 54 "The Unkindest Cut Of All" May 6, 2018

All right. Let's open our Bibles this morning to Psalm 54.

It's a short Psalm written by David and it has a subject that was borne out of his life, and so we learn the lesson this morning, a lesson about betrayal; not just once, not just by folks he had risked his life to save, but then again by his own countryman, by his own family.

There are things I think -- few things in life more hurtful to you than betrayal. It happened to Julius Caesar at a time when all of Rome was in his grasp. He was loved by just about everyone. All of the commoners certainly looked up to him. He seemed to be a good guy as far as the culture went. The Roman senate, however, and the aristocracy didn't appreciate the political reforms that he had brought into power. It kind of undermined some of their authority and they didn't appreciate it. Over time the men got together with a conspiracy to have Julius Caesar killed. Someone had convinced the senate that he was out to make himself king. He was not, at least not historically so. Nearly

all of the conspirators who showed up to kill him that day were indebted to him one way or the other. Especially Brutus, who was his favorite. It was his Timothy to Paul. It was a guy that he had taken under his wings and promoted and worked with. The conspirators agreed that they would all stab him as to share responsibility in his death. Plutarch, who is a writer of the day, said that Julius Caesar tried to fend off all of the stab wounds from all of the people that had gathered, until he got to Brutus, who then, you know, immortalized his statement, "Et tu, Brute?" Are you also a part of the group? Shakespeare took and immortalized the words and the confrontation. Mark Antony in his soliloquy heard Julius Caesar say of Brutus and his stabbing, it was the unkindest cut of all. Pretty poetic, but pretty insightful.

The betrayal of someone can indeed be the unkindest cut of all. Maybe a friend who you trusted in, an employee that you depended upon, a family member that you loved, someone to whom you have opened your heart, and they have turned against you without warning. The unkindest cut of all. And that's exactly what David is writing from here.

I don't know if you've ever been abandoned by someone.

If you haven't, just wait. It'll happen eventually. It's just the way life goes. It's the way sin works. And whether it's a spouse that wasn't faithful to your marriage, or a child who isolates himself from his parents, whether there's a good friend that you used to share things with or an ally that you thought that you could call upon or confide in. When you are betrayed, it leaves you feeling alone, and if you have it happen enough, very cynical. You will say to yourself, I will never trust anyone again. But that's where David finds himself, and in so doing, in seven verses he addresses how God would have you and I handle betrayal, because as unfaithful as people can be, God is always faithful. And you learn that even clearer, I think, when you have to rely upon Him when everyone else has turned against you.

We read here as the occasion for the Psalm in the introduction there that this was a contemplation of David when the Ziphites went and said to Saul, "Isn't David hiding among us?" The word for contemplation is the Hebrew word "maskil." I'm glad I grew up in Holland, I can say "maskil." But it literally is a word that means to put to song a lesson, or a lesson written to music or set to music. And the betrayal of these children of Ziph of David prompted this lesson.

You might remember if you've been with us for the last several months that we did a study in Psalm 34 a couple of months ago that was written by David when David first found out that Saul wanted to kill him. He had run to the priests, to Abimelech. He had gotten food from him, gotten the sword of Goliath, and then he and his merry men, the guys that had joined him, ran off. They didn't know where to go. David was in panic mode. Saul was trying to kill him. He ran to Gath. Gath was one of the Philistine strongholds. It happened to also be Goliath's hometown. So he shows up in Goliath's hometown, the guy he had killed, with his sword. Not a good move, but running from the Lord isn't a good move anyway. And so David is arrested. He pretends to be crazy. He spits up on himself, he runs up against the wall. And it worked. The king lets him go.

But on the way back to Israel David is just so convicted. He's been a bad witness to these men who have joined him. He's let the Lord down. His faith certainly has failed him. And by the time he comes back into the land and then he sits down there in the caves, he writes Psalm 34 and he says to the Lord, "I will never do this again. I will never turn against the Lord again. I swear, Lord,

I'm going to rely upon You from now on." And in the Adullam Caves, which are in the proper of Israel, he makes a vow to the Lord, not only for himself, but to the men that he's leading.

Well, that historically is found in I Samuel 21 and 22. The background for this Psalm is the next chapter, I Samuel 23. And there are really two chapters there: One, how you deal with betrayal, chapter 23; chapter 24, how you deal with revenge. And David is betrayed on the one hand and has to trust the Lord, and then he gets Saul in a cave by himself, could have killed him and didn't, which gives David a chance to teach us, can you really love your enemies and those who seek to hurt you and leave the vengeance or the settling of the score with the Lord? David had been broken, I think, in his running and he learned that God could handle things.

So here's the background. And we'll spend 10 minutes in the Psalm and 20 minutes in the background, because this is the only way you're going to learn the story. In I Samuel 23 David gets note or news of the fact that the Philistines have begun to attack a place called Keilah. It's a lowland city in Judah. It's a bit north and west of Hebron. It was a walled city. The people, they

threshed their wheat on the hills surrounding the city. The Philistines, certainly the greatest enemies of God's people in that day, used a lot of guerilla-like tactics to come in and take people's food, and they were doing that to those folks in Keilah.

Now, David remembers running for his life. He's young in this deal. And yet you find something in David you don't find in Saul. Saul's entire ambition for the next seven and a half years is to kill David, kill David, kill David. That's all he cared about. Kill David. David, even though he is on the run and his life is in jeopardy, has within his heart a concern for God's people. He is back with the Lord. He had learned about that there in Gath. He had promised the Lord he would do better, and yet when he got news that the people were suffering, he immediately in verse 2 of I Samuel 23 said, "Lord, should I go fight?" You know, "Should I go defend your people?"

And the Lord in speaking to him through Abiathar, who is the priest who had escaped the slaughter of all the priests where David had stopped -- because one of the consequences when David had gone there is Saul finding out, destroyed an entire town just because they helped David out. He wanted no one to help David out. But this

fellow Abiathar, a son, had escaped. He brought the ephod with him whereby you could, as a priest, inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to David, "Go, and I will deliver the Philistines in your hand. Go save the city of Keilah."

And David turned to what were now 600 men that were with him, who had come from all walks of life, and they were going to learn about the God of Israel. But they were young too. They said to David, we're terrified here in Judah. We're going to be in worse shape if we get into the countryside and we're fighting and Saul comes barreling at us from one side, and the Philistines, who want to destroy us, are on the other. We shouldn't go. And David said this to these men: "Let's go pray together." And he was willing to go back and really seek the Lord again. They were worried that they didn't want to risk their neck for a Jewish settlement, when Saul, the king, was negligent of protecting them anyway, and now he wanted them dead.

And so David went back to the priest. He asks the same question. The Lord spoke again, "God has delivered them into your hands. Go, and I will give you victory." And the guys with David, to their credit, heard the word of

the Lord through the priest and said, all right. Then let's go. And off they went.

It is good to pray before you act because it will save you from presumptuous sins, it will save you from impulse, it'll save you from emotional responses. It's a good thing to have the heart of God in the thing. And David was willing to pray and to wait upon the Lord, but David has a shepherd's heart. He loves the people. Their life was more precious to him than his own. Absolutely not true for Saul, but absolutely true for David. So David goes off after having re-inquired of the Lord. Everybody's eyes are on him. And off they go to fight.

Now, while they are fighting and defending and defeating the Philistines -- in fact, they protect the people's wheat -- they actually take the Philistines' cattle. The people end up with more than they started with. God richly blessed David. But while they were there news came to Saul that David had ended up in Keilah. Someone told him. In his deluded sense of right and wrong, Saul exclaimed, "Well, bless the Lord, who has boxed David in a city with walls and gates. That's the Lord." And he sets off with an army of people. In fact, you read there

in I Samuel 23 that he got everyone that could fight to go. And they went to put an end to this kind of embarrassment of David once and for all. And so Saul goes and he says to the people, "This is the Lord." Be careful how you interpret what God does in your life. And I'll tell you this from just a Biblical standpoint: If you're not walking with God, you can easily misread the circumstances in your life. It is only when God is first, when He's on the throne, that you can with all honesty look at what comes your way and say, well, the Lord's in this, one way or the other, because I've given Him my life. But Saul he's living on another planet, and he's far away from the Lord.

David hears that Saul is coming and again he goes to pray. And he says, "Lord, I hear Saul is coming. Is he coming? And when he comes, will the people here in Keilah protect us or hand us over? Or betray us?" And the Lord very clearly says to David, "They are going to hand you over. They're going to betray you, David." And it must have hurt the heart of David to realize he'd brought 600 men who had risked their lives to serve the people and now in the city they weren't safe, they wouldn't be protected, and when Saul and his army arrived, the people would just roll over and hand David

over to the enemy.

And so David, with his heart I'm sure downcast, heads out of town. He heads away to the Judean wilderness. It is hot, it is inhospitable. It is a rugged place. It is like Death Valley in the summer. There are lots of caves there. It is below the sea level. The Caves of Engedi are there. In fact, David would write Psalm 63 as he got here. Don't know if we'll stop there or not, but you can write that in your notes and look at it yourself. But they go about 15 miles or so south and east of Hebron, if you happen to have an Israel map in your head. The important thing is, it is now within the boundaries of Judah, which is David's home tribe. And he hides himself in the woods. It is called the Woods of Ziph. Ziph was a national park, if you will. It was a place that people had picnics and it was beautiful. And David went there thinking, well, I'm home. I'm safe. I'm within family and all. And he feels pretty comfortable being there. I mean, he's on the run. It's going to be a seven year-plus experience, but for now he feels comfortable and he feels good.

Jonathan, his friend and Saul's son, comes to David knowing he is there and he says to David, "Look, you

don't need to be afraid of my dad. And you certainly don't need to fear what he can do to you. I know that God is going to make you the next king. He knows it as well. So don't worry. I know it doesn't look good, but you're going to be fine." And Jonathan leaves.

As David is finding a place to hide, somebody in the group there in the area, the Ziphites, send word to Saul who is now in Gibeah, not too far away, and they say, "Isn't David hiding with us?" The exact same thing that we read here at the beginning of this Psalm. Then they say, he's just south of here by Jeshimon, the little inhabitant place. Come, king, and do whatever your soul desires to him, and we'll do our part. We'll hand him over to you.

Saul can't be happier. He's still in his stupor. "Oh, the Lord is blessing me again. You guys, be blessed to the Lord, oh, God. Isn't He so great?" And then he says this: "I hear he's a kind of crafty, sneaky guy, so I've been embarrassed once showing up. I'd like you to find out where he is, kind of mark the places he's hiding, and when I get there, we'll grab him and we'll take him and I'll bless you guys." And they said, done. And so here comes Saul, coming his way.

David's men, who are stationed in various places, come back to David and said, "David, someone told Saul we're hiding here, somebody from town. Not safe here anymore." And David hears of it and he gets his guys together and he flees. And he's on the run and Saul is right behind him, and man, it gets close. In fact, the way it's described in Samuel, Saul goes around one side of the mountain, goes around the other side of the mountain, and David is just about ready to get caught and trapped. When news came of a huge attack by the Philistines on one of Saul's cities, and Saul gives up chasing David, and for the time being runs away before in chapter 24 returning to continue the hunt. David's now been betrayed twice: First by people he risked his life for, distant relatives, if you will, countrymen; and secondly, by his own family, those that were closest to him. And just from a notes standpoint, in chapter 26 of 1 Samuel, the Ziphites do it again. They are not exactly the kind of family you want. But David learned something: Don't trust man, trust in the Lord.

You see, we're going to get to this Psalm. Look at us. We're here already. David begins with prayer. "Save me, O, God, by Your name, and vindicate me by Your strength."

If you've been betrayed, start with this: Pray. In the Old Testament God reveals himself to men by many names so that you might know Him well. The most often used name is Jehovah, or Yahweh. It is a title God uses to refer to Himself as the God of making covenants or promises, one that keeps His Word. The second most often title or name of the Lord is the title Elohim. It refers to the God of creation or the one who brought everything into being. And the third one that is most often used in the Old Testament is the word Lord Adonai, which literally means that, He's the Lord and you are not. To remember them in order you can think of three words: He's the mediator, he's the maker, and he's the master.

David uses all three of those names for the Lord in seven verses, but he started with the word Elohim. "Save me, Elohim, by Your name." David was sure that the Lord who created all things could certainly handle the betraying of men. Exercise Your power on my behalf, vindicate me. In other words, prove that there is no cause in me for this kind of persecution. It is awful hard to pray for God to deliver you when much of the trouble you have is of your own doing, but David hadn't done anything. He'd been as gracious and kind to Saul as you could ever hope to be, except God had called him.

Notice in verse 2 that David lays his needs before the Lord. "Hear my prayer, O, God; give ear to the words of my mouth." He was driven to his knees by the sheer pressure of the circumstance, and especially so since he had been betrayed now twice. Remember, he had just come away from that spitting on yourself experience in Achish's castle. He had said to the Lord, I'm not going to do this anymore on my own, and he wasn't. But notice that God gets our most full attention when we most fully need Him. That's always the case. The rough spots in your life I think are designed to keep you close. Without them, you might not stick around. Or you just might presume all is well. Pressure gets you praying, and that's what God, I think, desires. "So help me, Lord."

And then he says in verse 3, "My enemies have risen up against me, my oppressors have sought after my life; they have not sought God before them." It must have been difficult for David to say to the Lord about his tribesmen from Judah, his family, they're strangers. To him it was unthinkable that he could be treated like this by people that were that close to him. But he had shown them kindness. Imagine laying your life down for someone

else and then they turn on you, or your family turning on you. He called them oppressors. The word, it literally translates ruthless individuals. It suggests that they were people who stood together rubbing their hands in anticipation of the favor that they would get from Saul in response to the betrayal. "Come and do whatever your heart, your soul desire." That's what it says in I Samuel 23, I think it's verse 20. Come and do whatever you want. We'll do our part. Do you your part. Let's take this guy out. Let's make a deal. I mean, that smells pretty bad.

Saul's desire was cold blooded murder of a man he felt threatened by. David had always treated Saul with respect. But notice these Ziphites, these members of his family, they had no -- total disregard for David, total disregard for the Lord and His will. They preferred shaking hands with a guy like Saul. Now, here's David's understanding and it's important you get it. He says, "They have not set God before their eyes." In other words, he understood that their behavior was driven in many ways by the fact that their relationship with God was nonexistent. He couldn't have expected them to do any better when God didn't move their hearts. He viewed their betrayers as men who were devoid of God's

relationship. He wasn't guiding their lives. It was common knowledge, if you read through those historical books, that God had chosen David to be king. Saul will admit to it in a few chapters there in Samuel. Jonathan said so in the chapter, we know that God has called you to be king. Even though for the first seven and a half years very few of the tribes, one and a half to be exact, were even going to acknowledge him -- it was too dangerous to stand with him -- everyone knew. Everyone understood. And so David said of their behavior, the Ziphites, they're seeking not the blessings of God, but the blessings of a man.

So David prays in the name of the Lord. He prays out of his need. It is because of the nature of his enemies. And prayer should always be your first response. But I love at the end of verse 3 that word "selah," that musical note. We've pointed it out to you several times in Psalms. It literally means "what do you think about that?" They aren't walking with God. They don't have Him in view. And this is why I think that they behave this way. What they've done to me, it's a sadness, but I understand the cause. It comes -- betrayal is usually from lives that aren't walking with God. They're people you can't depend upon or rest in their honesty.

So David prays. And then in the rest of the Psalm, four verses, he turns from supplication, praying, to sermonizing, and he gives us a couple of things to think about in terms of how we handle betrayers, whether they are distant countrymen or near friends and family that should have treated him like that, but here's what he says, and I want you to remember what he says. They're pretty short little truisms, if you will. Verse 4, he says this: I have a reliable God. "Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is with those who uphold my life."

One thing for sure, when people fail you, God will not. He has never failed you. He has always been there. And even when you betray His love, He won't betray you. David had just betrayed the Lord. He had that "look it, I'm nuts" incident. He had come back in the previous chapter saying I don't want to ever live like this anymore. No, no, no. The Lord is reliable. He'll be my helper. He can always be found amongst those who are loyal to His will. I mean, David now has 600 guys who called him captain. The Lord is my helper. Adonai, the Sovereign One, the One in charge of all things. He's going to help me.

Jonathan said as much when he visited him there in the woods. Said to David that despite the hardships, he should know that God was still at work, that God wasn't going to fail him, that God wasn't going to fail of His Word. I know that you're going to be the king over Israel and I'll stand right next to you. And they made a covenant in the Lord, and David stayed in the woods and Jonathan went back to his house, and then Saul came with his army. I have a reliable God. Know that when you've been betrayed by someone else. God is reliable. Don't take what you have learned from others and apply it to your relationship with God. People will fail; He will not.

Second of all, he says in verse 5, I have a righteous God. "He will repay my enemies for their evil. And He will cut them off in his truth." You know, David was a warrior. I mean, if you read the stories, this guy was a fighter from the word fight. He was a fighter without fear. He wasn't ever hesitant, that I can find, to go into battle. There wasn't an army that could outnumber him that would have caused him to turn tail. But he determined he would never lift his hands against God's people, no matter how wicked or far away from the Lord they were. And he learned that early on and he would

prove that in the next chapter when he had a chance to kill Saul, and he got close to it and will say, I can't cross that line. The man that will fight anything that moves without fear will not lift a finger against God's own. Let God work that out. Let God do that. He'll repay. He'll cut off. He'll deal with you. I can't put myself in a position to do any of those things. I won't touch His anointed. I have a reliable God who won't fail me. He's faithful. And I have a righteous God who doesn't just look the other way. In His time as He sees fit, He'll take care of sin. But David was willing to just step away from what -- he could have easily went to the Keilah people and say give me back the cattle and now I'm going to take your food. He's a tough guy. He would not.

Instead, verse 6 and 7, he determined that he would sing to the Lord, freely offering to Him praise, knowing He had brought him through. His attitude would be, rather than one of being offended, he'll use the offense to turn around to understand the goodness of God and worship Him all the more. He says this in verse 6, "I will freely sacrifice to You; and I will praise Your name, O Lord, for it is good. He has delivered me from all of my trouble; my eyes have seen its desire upon my enemies."

No doubt a reference to the deliverance that came at the very last minute.

The free will offering in the Bible, in the Old Testament anyway, was designed to have anyone at any time for any reason come and have fellowship with God. It wasn't tied to sin or its forgiveness, it wasn't tied to a feast day or some kind of a holy day, if you will. It was available 24/7 to you. You could just come and hang out with the Lord. It was driven by the freedom of an expression of gratitude or love or worship. David would take the betrayal of the people of Keilah and the betrayal of his own country, the Ziphites, and instead of it being defeated by it, he would allow him -- it allowed him to turn around and say, but oh, Lord, you're so faithful. By comparison, You're the only One that can be trusted. You're the only One we should love. And he finds himself not bitter or embittered, but freely bringing his worship to the Lord, "For the Lord," he said, "For Yahweh, He's good. He's good. There is no one like You. I praise Your name, it is good. He has a good name."

We drive and strive to maintain a good name. God's is well established. He's trustworthy, always. No other

name like Jesus, right? No greater name given among men.

And notice in verse 7 that David, his motivation for worship is the past relationship that he's got -- had with the Lord and the faithfulness and trustworthiness that God has shown him.

For the next seven and a half years David would play tag with this guy. Up one hill, down the other. Close calls, plenty. And yet God has stepped in and would step in at every place, and the Lord will not allow -- you can even read that in I Samuel 23. There's a line in there that says, "The Lord would not hand David over." It looked like he was doomed, but God was not finished yet. So in the woods, as they are running, David sings aloud with 600 men, who would learn a valuable lesson of God's care.

Don't allow the betrayal of men, the unkindest cut of all, to turn your heart or your hope away from the Lord. Because when friends let you down, He will not. You can count on Him when everyone else fails. And don't allow the failures of others to turn you from God's joy, because God has remained faithful to you. Here's what you need to do: Just remain faithful to Him.

Told you we'd get done. Let's pray.