

Trusting in Trials

Psalm 3

Studies in the Psalms #3

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“**Y**EA though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil” (Ps. 23:4). It’s so poetic, so beautiful, and so easy, right? The reality is that it’s really really hard to trust the Lord when you’re sunk down so low in that valley; when it’s so dark you don’t even know which way is up or down; and when it feels like death is just around the corner. The valley of the shadow of death comes in many forms: a miscarriage, a medical diagnosis, too many bills with too little money, but especially as Christians, it comes in the form of persecution. How do we trust God in trials?

We’re all going to have them: “Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you” (1 Peter 4:12); “In the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33). How do we face them? Enter Psalm 3. Note how it’s the first Psalm with an author—David—and with a title: **When he fled from Absalom his son.**¹ And it comes right after we read of the Lord’s enthronement of his King in Psalm 2; then the first thing we read about in

¹ It is the first of fourteen that reference a particular historical circumstance, and all these are in reference to David (Pss. 3; 7; 18; 30; 34; 51; 52; 54; 56; 57; 59; 60; 63; 142).

the very next Psalm is Absalom trying to unseat his dad, King David! Even anointed kings we not guaranteed a life of health, wealth, and prosperity as Absalom killed David's other son, Amnon, stole the hearts of Israel, and caused David to flee Jerusalem through the Kidron Valley (2 Sam. 15).

And the blessing for us as New Covenant believers is that we can face trials like David because a great David says to us, "But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).² He too had to cross the Kidron Valley (John 18:1); he too fled from one of his closest companions—Judas; he too was surrounded by his enemies; he was condemned by his own countrymen; he too was mocked:

And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him (Matt. 27:39-43).

But he too also experienced a lifting of his head—but a greater one as he was lifted up out of the sleep of death in triumphant resurrection! And so as we are united to our Lord Jesus Christ by faith, we can learn from Psalm 3 how we are to flesh out our trust in him amidst our many trials and tribulations.

² On the Christology of this Psalm, see Augustine, 76-81.

Praying to God (vv. 1–2)

Absalom is in hot pursuit. And David complains, **how many are my foes! Many are rising against me** (v. 1). But what’s the first thing he says? **O LORD** (v. 1). As Absalom is running after David and David is running from Absalom, David runs to the Lord! How do I trust God in trials? First, by *praying to God*. I know for me I need this reminder. I so often go to everything else but God. But God’s Word says, “I am the one who can help.”

And it’s so important to be in conversation with God because the world around us is constantly bringing the accusation: **many are saying of my soul, “there is no salvation for him in God”** (v. 2). Genuine prayer is born out of the womb of trials. It’s when our hearts feel broken that we need to bend our knees.

Now for David there were literal enemies like Absalom and his army. But they had a spiritual affect on David. Who are our enemies? In the New Testament there are three: the world (everything opposed to Jesus Christ), the flesh (our sin nature), and the devil. “We do not wrestle against flesh and blood,” for example (Eph. 6:12). And these rise up in practical and surprising ways. What’s that particular sin you struggle with? Then an old friend calls you and invites you over. There you are at work and the conversation is

going on and you are lured in: “Come on, it’s fun.” The remedy is prayer. And “David...teaches us by his own example, that although the whole world, with one voice, should attempt to drive us to despair, instead of listening to it, we ought rather to give ear to God alone, and always cherish within us the hope of the salvation which he hath promised.”³

Knowing this God (vv. 3-4)

While prayer is the remedy, I recognize that just saying, “pray,” can be hollow. We hear so often, “Prayer changes things,” or, “Our thoughts and prayers are with you.” What we have to insist on is to whom are we praying? This is the second thing we learn about trusting God in trials: *knowing this God*. Notice how in his circumstances of all these enemies rising up against him, David makes this emphatic transition: **But you, O LORD!** (v. 3) David knows that God is only help. Notice how he describes the Lord.

First, God is our shield: **you...are a shield about** [that is, “around”] **me**. This is a metaphor—a comparison of two things that are not literally alike. God is an uncreated, eternal Spirit; a shield is a created, finite piece of matter. But the Lord *is* a shield because he protects us from the assaults of

³ Calvin, 4:29-30.

our enemies. Shields protect from frontal assault; and the Lord is called here a *magen*, an ancient word for a little shield. But the Lord is unlike any shield the world has ever known! He is **about** or “around” **me**.

Second, God is sufficient: **my glory** (v. 3). **Glory** has the idea of heaviness, weightiness. David is saying the Lord is what is substantive in this life even when he loses his kingdom.⁴ Can you say with Job, “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD;” “Though he slay me, I will hope in him?” (Job 13:15)

Third, God is a restorer: **the lifter of my head** (v. 3). David is in despair; his head is drooped down; but the Lord renews him.

Resting in God (vv. 5–6)

And knowing this God to whom we pray has practical benefit. Notice in verses 5–6 that as we trust the Lord in trials there is a *resting in God*. I don’t want to go too far afield, but recent studies have shown that 40 million Americans suffer with some form of sleep problems. Perhaps you do, too. I know for me when I am in stressful situations about myself, my family, and you, my brothers and sisters, I cannot sleep. But what I’ve been working on

⁴ Davis, 41–42.

is taking those restless moments and praying, giving myself to God. Because he prayed to the Lord his shield, glory, and head-lifter, David **lay down and slept** in peace, knowing that Absalom was after him. That's confidence!

Before his battle with Darius III, Alexander the Great was found sleeping. After many attempts to wake him his men were confused. He awoke and said why not sleep; the enemy was coming to deliver him victory! How much more so we as believers in the King of kings? Thomas Watson once said, "A good conscience can sleep in the mouth of a cannon."⁵ And when he **woke again, for the LORD sustained** him (v. 5), he says, **I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around** (v. 6). When Luther was one his way to Worms, he was warned not to enter the city. His reply was that he would enter "even if there be as many Devils there as tiles on the roof."⁶

Expecting from God (vv. 7–8)

Finally, it's in this resting in who the Lord is as we pray to him that we trust him in our trials by *expecting from God*. David exclaims expectantly:

⁵ Thomas Watson, "The Beauty of Grace," in *A Body of Practical Divinity* (Philadelphia: T. Wardle, 1833), 760 col. 1.

⁶ Cited in Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989), 197.

Arise, O LORD! Save me, O my God! (v. 7) For God to arise is for him to take action. It might seem to us that God is asleep at the wheel, forgetting us. But David teaches us that while we rest in the God who is our shield, glory, and head-lifter we can expect him to shall arise for our deliverance.

And notice the graphic way David expresses this: **For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked** (v. 7). This is the first of the many imprecations in the Psalms. These are prayers that call upon God to repay his people's enemies. At some point I'll stop and explain in more detail, but note two important to see here: first, this shows us by example that God invites our most honest, emotion-laden, and raw prayers; and second, this shows us by example how to give our trials over to God and let vengeance belong to him.

Now what you can't see here is that these verbs—**you strike...you break**—are past tense verbs. They are translated here as having already been accomplished because what David is saying is that he so expects the Lord to act that he prays as if it's already happened!⁷ Let me give a faint illustration. On Friday, March 17, 1944, at a birthday celebration in Australia two years after retreating from The Philippines, Gen. Douglas MacArthur said,

⁷ Davis, 46.

Two years ago, when I landed on your soil, I said to the people of the Philippines, whence I came, 'I shall return.' Tonight I repeat those words. 'I shall return.' Nothing is more certain than our ultimate reconquest and liberation from the enemy of those adjacent lands.⁸

That's a human general speaking prospectively. How much more so do we have this confidence in Christ? As Paul says in Romans 8:30, "And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified *he also glorified*."

We can be so confident in God that while our enemies say, "**there is no salvation (*yeshu'ata*) for him in God**" (v. 2), we say, "**salvation (*yeshu'ah*) belongs to the LORD**" (v. 8).⁹ And despite being bruised all along the way of life by our enemies, we are blessed:¹⁰ **your blessing be on your people!** (v. 8)

It's hard to trust God when you're in that dark valley, isn't it? It's hard because we want to do something. But God says it's all about him: pray to me, know me, rest in me, and expect from me. Let's do that together...

⁸ Cited in MacArthur and the American Century: A Reader, ed. William M. Leary (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 157.

⁹ Of this verse, C. H. Spurgeon said, "This verse contains the sum and substance of Calvinistic doctrine." 1:27.

¹⁰ See Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes* (1660; 1971; repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1975), 34.