

Psalm 3 NIV

A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom.

1 LORD, how many are my foes!

How many rise up against me!

2 Many are saying of me,

“God will not deliver him.” *selah*

3 But you, LORD, are a shield around me,

my glory, the One who lifts my head high.

4 I call out to the LORD,

and he answers me from his holy mountain. *selah*

5 I lie down and sleep;

I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.

6 I will not fear though tens of thousands

assail me on every side.

7 Arise, LORD!

Deliver me, my God!

Strike all my enemies on the jaw;

break the teeth of the wicked.

8 From the LORD comes deliverance.

May your blessing be on your people. *selah*

I expect that most people viewing this video are seeing it either in the church building or via the Tregear Church ZOOM link. You might also be viewing it on the Tregear church website, or listening to the audio file.

It's quite possible you're listening or watching in a way that is different to the way you would have expected or planned. I know most of those in the building would have been expecting to see me - not a video of me!

When I put my hand up to preach on the 10th of January, I had planned to be at Tregear to speak. A lot has happened since then. A lot of plans have been made and scrapped. Things have not happened as I expected or would have wanted.

I was chatting with a friend just this week and we reflected on how 2020 has been a year of making and of scrapping plans. COVID-19 has overturned so many plans. We planned for so many activities, so many changes and possibilities, and very often the plans we made were obsolete almost as soon as we had made them.

Starting a new calendar has not ended this. 2021 will continue to take a lot of planning and will continue to frustrate our plans - my plans, your plans, our church's plans, the plans and procedures of governments and nations... As I record this on Thursday morning I'm hearing about armed protests in Washington DC. A lot may have changed by Sunday morning. A lot of plans developed, enacted, overturned, frustrated...

Some 600 years ago a fellow called Thomas a Kempis, in "The Imitation of Christ", had words of wisdom for us - it's a saying you might have heard quoted - I'll put it in context:

"...the resolutions of the just depend rather on the grace of God than on their own wisdom; and in Him they always put their trust, whatever they take in hand.

For man proposes, but God disposes; neither is the way of man in his own hands".

Thomas a Kempis, The Imitation of Christ, Chapter 19, book 1.

We learn this too in the Biblical proverbs:

Proverbs 16:9 NIV

In their hearts humans plan their course,
but the Lord establishes their steps.

Jeremiah prayed with the same humble wisdom:

Jeremiah 10:23 NIV

Lord, I know that people's lives are not their own;
it is not for them to direct their steps.

And so I go forward with a different plan, and I'm reading this sermon from a screen into a camera to create a video for you all.

Maybe this is how it should be - because things were definitely not going to plan for the writer of Psalm 3. The Psalm is attributed to David at a time when things were going very badly for him.

Following the opening Psalms 1 and 2, Psalm 3 is the first Psalm with an introductory description. This Psalm opens up for us some big themes in the Psalms - calling out to God in times of trouble - declaring confidence and dependence on God - resting in God's protection - trusting God to defeat enemies - and declaring to others that God is faithful.

Psalm 3 is often described as a "morning Psalm" with Psalm 4 labelled "the evening Psalm". If we read these two Psalms together we can certainly see parallel themes and lessons.

This is also a Psalm which seems to work well poetically, even in translation. We can see the use of parallel phrases that say similar things in different ways; the use of metaphors and repetition; the way the ideas form into stanzas.

We could read this Psalm as a separate piece of literature. This would be okay - it is an individual creative work and we can find lessons from it in isolation. But the compilers of Psalms who put in the explanatory heading would have expected the readers to know about David and Absalom - so let's get the back-story before we delve into the Psalm.

We learn about Absalom in the book of 2 Samuel. Chapters 13 to 19 tell the sorry tale from the time of King David in Israel.

David, the King of Israel, had many wives. This was permitted for the people of Israel, but I cannot think of any examples where it was particularly harmonious or helpful. In David's case, it caused a great deal of trouble - the accounts of this trouble begin after David had sinned against Bathsheba and her husband Uriah.

As I said, King David had many wives and many children who were siblings and half-siblings. Absalom was one of David's sons - his name means "Father of Peace". It did not turn out to be a very good name for him. He was known as being rather good looking with an impressive head of hair.

Absalom had a full-sister named Tamar. They had a half-brother called Amnon.

Now Amnon was obsessed with his half-sister Tamar. He made a plan, deceived his father the king and his sister Tamar, then assaulted, mistreated and despised her.

David heard about this and was angered, but he did nothing about it. Tamar bore the disgrace and Amnon went unpunished.

Absalom took his disgraced sister Tamar into his household and waited two years. He was filled with hate for his half-brother Amnon but demonstrated the saying "revenge is a dish best served cold".

After two years, Absalom tricked King David, trapped his half-brother Amnon at a feast and had him killed. Absalom then fled from the land to escape his father.

What did David do? He mourned for Absalom, he even longed to see him, but he did nothing to bring him back and forgive him or punish him for killing his brother.

Eventually David was persuaded to allow Absalom to return to the capital Jerusalem, but then two more years passed before David saw him again.

During this time there was another motivation arising in Absalom. He was David's oldest son and the obvious heir to the throne. I expect he had come to despise his father for the way he had been dealing with Amnon, Tamar and Absalom.

So Absalom worked to gain popularity and support - he was a young, strong, decisive, good looking, politically savvy heir to the throne, and David was ageing and compromised by sins and indecision.

When he was ready, Absalom tricked his father once again, set out to Hebron, the city where David had been anointed king, and had himself declared King. Most of the people of Israel supported Absalom, and David fled for his life with a band of loyal supporters.

The story goes on... eventually Absalom is defeated, and David is restored as King - but I'll leave you to read about that for yourselves. It's dramatic, it's intriguing, it's definitely not for children. You'll find it in 2 Samuel chapters 13 to 19.

This is the background to Psalm 3. With this in mind, let's delve into the Psalm - then we'll think about how we might understand it for ourselves.

1 Lord, how many are my foes!

How many rise up against me!

2 Many are saying of me,

"God will not deliver him."

In these opening verses, David brought his predicament before God. There were two aspects to his troubles - Firstly, he had lots of enemies - in parallel phrases he bemoaned their number.

And these enemies had a specific attack that was cutting more deeply than any other - that God would not deliver him - there was no salvation for him in God. If God was not with him, then David was truly helpless before his enemies.

Why would they think God would not save the king? Perhaps it was because they were reading into the events - they saw that David had fled and they concluded that God was not with him. Perhaps they were thinking of David's sins and failures and were concluding that God had abandoned him.

Perhaps they knew of the words of Nathan the prophet - words that must have been ringing in David's own ears:

Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own. (2 Samuel 12:10)

David was facing the very things that Nathan prophesied. What hope could he have? We see in 2 Samuel 16 that David did not retaliate when one of the former King Saul's family cursed him and pelted him with stones. He accepted it as a curse from God for his sins. Yet this resignation was not a loss of faith - it was not despair.

Despite his situation, despite the very prophecy of God against him, David did not give up his hope in God. He looked to God for protection and deliverance.

3 But you, Lord, are a shield around me,
my glory, the One who lifts my head high.
4 I call out to the Lord,
and he answers me from his holy mountain.

God was his safety; God was his honour; God was his joy and deliverance. In the middle of his troubles, these words sound like words of rejoicing, not fear and despair.

I don't know what it's like for you - sometimes I find it hard to sleep. I find my mind racing, going over things that have happened, or sorting ideas and concerns, dwelling on mistakes or misunderstandings, planning solutions or rehearsing explanations. I might be tired, but sleep becomes impossible.

I've never faced the problems and stresses that David was facing. Yet we read these words:

5 I lie down and sleep;

I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.

6 I will not fear though tens of thousands

assail me on every side.

Such was the confidence that David found in God that he was able to sleep - not the sleep of an exhausted fugitive, but the sleep of one who rests in God.

David was not speaking as one who has already been delivered. In fact, the Psalm takes a turn from the calm confidence of verse six to a strong, even violent call to God in verse seven. It's like a dramatic climax in the poem.

7 Arise, Lord!

Deliver me, my God!

Strike all my enemies on the jaw;

break the teeth of the wicked.

Now some translations word this slightly differently, in ways that seem a little less enthusiastically violent:

For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;
you break the teeth of the wicked. ESV

You punish all my enemies
and leave them powerless to harm me. GNT

Either way, the Psalmist was depending on God to take down his enemies.

King David faced the curse of God, and even accepted it with patience - yet he still trusted in God, rested in God, depended on God for deliverance - and called upon the people of God to do the same.

8 From the Lord comes deliverance.
May your blessing be on your people.

David was writing about himself, God's chosen king of Israel. That's not me or you. Yet the deliverance and blessing in the Psalm was not limited to David alone. The concluding line goes beyond the immediate situation to declare deep truths about our God - truths that God's people are called upon to trust.

I think we see even more of this wider application when we read Psalms 3 and 4 together. David exhorts all the people to fear God and trust God. While still centred on the king, Psalm 4 calls on all the people of God to search their hearts and put their trust in God.

The victory of David the king was to be a victory for all the faithful people of Israel.

How are we to understand this Psalm for ourselves today? Can we place ourselves in the position of David? What makes us think we can do this?

At this point, I have spoken for a bit over 15 minutes. There is so much more that could be said.

We might look at how this Psalm is reflected in other passages of Scripture. We can find parallels, for example, in the prayer of Jonah in the fish.

We might see how the church has used this Psalm - for example, in the Anglican book of Common Prayer this Psalm is scheduled to be read on the first morning of every month.

We might look to David as a pattern for how we face our challenges and troubles.

- To Confront the challenge we face in prayer before the Lord
- To Confess who God is - recognising the true character of God
- To be Convicted of God's promises in our lives
- To Claim God's promises and blessings in the face of our troubles.

We might pray the words of this Psalm in the face of the enemies we believe we face right now.

We might consider how commentators over the centuries have linked this Psalm to the Passion - the death and resurrection - of Christ. From Augustine of Hippo in the 4th and 5th century through to Charles Spurgeon in the 19th century, and even today, people have connected David's troubles with Jesus' trial and crucifixion, connected David's calling out to God with Jesus' prayers, connected David's lying down and rising with Jesus' death and resurrection, connected David's overcoming of his enemies with the victory of Christ. As I was reading these commentaries, *some of them* felt like a stretch - like turning the Psalm into an allegory of Christ - like reading the story of Jesus back into the Psalm.

I've just gone through a whole list of ways to apply this Psalm and I'm not actually recommending them - some are interesting and could be useful; some, I think, are quite misleading.

If I choose to pray this Psalm in the face of my enemies - what reason have I to think that those I consider enemies are also God's enemies - that the battles, threats and heroes I see are the ones that God sees?

I think of Christians who have looked to political leaders as somehow being “God’s king”. This is not a recent thing but it certainly continues today. Perhaps some of our brothers and sisters in the USA have been praying the words of Psalm 3 in expectation of a miraculous political outcome.

I think their expectations are not of God. May God have mercy on our brothers and sisters, and on us, and shatter our political idols, and deepen our faith in God alone.

Trying to apply God’s word to our personal situations is risky and disappointing if we pick and choose how we want it to fit. So how can we make a legitimate connection between David’s crisis, and his confidence, and our life and faith experiences?

The connection comes in remembering that Jesus is God’s chosen King and victorious Messiah - that David was a very shadowy foreshadowing of Christ.

The Psalm tells us to trust that David, God’s anointed King, would be delivered by God.

Jesus is the King of Israel - not some sin-stained foreshadowing but the real Messiah that David’s life and Kingship was just a preparation for.

When I think of this, I think about the words spoken to Jesus as He hung on the cross - words of scorn and mocking from those who thought they had defeated Him - those who were convinced that God would not save Him.

“He saved others... but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” Matthew 27:42-43

Psalm 3 declares that God will deliver His chosen King. The King will be delivered and blessing will come to the people.

And Jesus won the most unexpected victory. God brought deliverance to Jesus and blessing to us through His death and resurrection.

Because of Jesus' victory I can trust in God when I face my troubles and even when I face people who oppose me. The victory I can expect will not be the fulfilment of my plans. Everything I plan might fail.

The victory we trust in is our King's victory. Because Jesus is the risen, victorious king, defeater of all true enemies, defeater of death, we have confidence and can sleep the sleep of David.

Because Jesus won the victory, we can stand in confidence when our own sins and failings accuse us of hypocrisy and deceit. God kept His promise to David, a deeply sinful man. God has kept His promise to His perfect Son, our Messiah, and through Him we have confidence in all of God's promises for us.

Surely the greatest promise is this: that Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, is the victorious King, and we are the people of God. Let's rejoice in Christ's glory.