

Series: “Learning from the Psalms: How to Put God at the Center of Life”

Main Idea: David wrote Psalm 3 when his son Absalom was trying to kill him. In the psalm David shares with us what he prayed in this unthinkable time in his life. He describes four experiences and in so doing shows us how to pray when we’re being attacked.

- I. Experiencing trouble (1-2)
 - A. People were opposing him.
 - B. People were saying that God wouldn’t save him.
- II. Experiencing God’s protection (3-4)
 - A. God is a shield.
 - B. God allows His people to share His glory.
 1. We live roller-coaster lives when we live for people’s approval.
 2. We live confidently when we live to please the Lord.
 - C. God hears the cries of His people.
 1. We must acknowledge God’s holiness.
 2. We must become holy.
- III. Experiencing sleep (5-6)
 - A. He didn’t find rest in his circumstances.
 - B. He found rest in the Lord.
- IV. Experiencing God’s deliverance (7-8)
 - A. He prayed with God’s reputation in mind.
 - B. He prayed with God’s people in mind.
 1. God doesn’t save the strong.
 2. God saves those who admit their need.

The Bottom Line: The real Christian is the person who really trusts in the real God.

We’re starting a new series today in the Psalms. We need the Book of Psalms. The Psalms show us how to make God the gravitational center of our lives. They show us how to process life when times are hard (and good), how to not merely know about God, but actually experience Him and glorify Him in our experiences. I encourage you to read the psalms as a part of your daily time with the Lord. Here’s a tentative look at what’s coming.

- Psalm 13 - When the Pain Will Not Leave*
 - Psalm 23 – When the Lord is Your Shepherd*
 - Psalm 51 – When You Have Sinned*
 - Psalm 52 – When You’ve Been Betrayed*
 - Psalm 56 – When You’re Afraid*
- And more! Today we’ll begin with Psalm 3.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 3

“Come to Jesus! Your problems will go away. Life will be sweet.”

Sounds good, doesn’t it? An offer like that goes out again and again from pulpits across America and around the world. And listeners buy it hook, line, and sinker. It sounds so good.

The problem is, it simply isn’t true. Come to Jesus and life will be sweet? No, come to Jesus and you’ll get a cross. Your problems will go away? No, according to Jesus the world will hate you.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see WBC 8/26/07.

Should a person come to Jesus? Absolutely! There is no other way to God, said Jesus (John 14:6). He alone offers the guarantee of life beyond the grave, eternal life in the presence of God. He alone offers forgiveness for sin, peace that never passes, and joy that the world cannot take away.

But a problem free life? No, that's not His offer. Help for the problems, yes! But elimination of problems? Not in this life.

One of the things you discover when you read the Bible is that it's full of stories of *real* people who *really* believed in God and yet had *real* problems. That's one of the reasons I love the Psalms. The book of Psalms shows us what real people prayed when they faced the kinds of challenges we face.

Such is the case in Psalm 3. Note the heading and you'll discover that Psalm 3 is *A psalm of David*. The Hebrew word for 'psalm' (*mizmour*) means "a song, a melody with words."² It's actually a different word than the one used for the title of the entire book of Psalms (*tehillim*) which means 'praises.' King David, Israel's greatest king and a man after God's own heart, penned the words in this prayer-song. But when? The heading indicates that when David wrote this psalm there was trouble on the home front. He wrote it...

When he fled from his son Absalom. David faced many hard times in his life. Goliath told him he was going to feed him to the birds. His father-in-law, Saul fired spears at him twice and hunted him like he was a dangerous criminal for years. He lost his first wife due to Saul's unjust treatment. The Ziphites betrayed him. The Amalekites once kidnapped his wives and children. For sure, David was no stranger to hardship.

But this may well have been the lowest point in David's life. His son, Absalom, perhaps his *favorite* son, not only broke his heart but tried to take his life.

What do we know about Absalom? He was David's third-born son whose mother was a princess, the daughter of Talmai king of Geshur (2 Sam. 3:3). He was a handsome fellow with a head of hair like none other. In fact, we're told that in all Israel there was not a man so highly praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. 2 Samuel 14:25 says, "From the top of his head to the sole of his foot there was no blemish in him." His sister, Tamar, is referred to as "the beautiful sister of Absalom" in 2 Samuel 13:1. 2 Samuel 14:27 says that Absalom had three sons and a daughter, that the daughter's name was the same as her aunt, Tamar, and that "she became a beautiful woman."³

Sadly, Absalom's sister, Tamar, was raped by their half-brother, Amnon, David's first-born (13:1). To get revenge, Absalom took matters in his own hands, killed Amnon, then fled for his life and lived in exile for three years (13:38). Finally, after burning Joab's barley field, Absalom maneuvered his way back into public life and his father's favor (14:31, 33).

Sadly, beauty often leads to conceit. It did in Absalom's life. He became a proud, self-absorbed young man, who turned into a shrewd, blame-shifting kingdom seeker who flattered the crowds and stole the heart of the nation (15:5-6).

The day came when he threw away pretense, sounded the trumpet, and brashly usurped his father's throne, proclaiming himself Israel's king. Absalom set up a tent and lay with his father's concubines in public view.

² *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semitic Domains*

³ It's interesting how the Bible specifically points out the physical beauty in Absalom's family.

David, in order to escape his son's wrath, had no choice but to flee Jerusalem, barefoot, weeping, and head covered as he left (2 Sam. 15:30). That's when, according to David, he wrote Psalm 3.

To make matters worse, David knew he wasn't innocent in this matter. According to 1 Kings 1:6, he'd been a passive dad who instead of confronting sin in his boys' developmental years, let it slide. And although David was a godly man *most* of his life, there were days when he strayed, one in particular when he committed adultery.

What do you say to God when your son is trying to kill you? You may never face that situation—I hope not—but all of us will face hard times in life, some brought on by our own foolish decisions. What can we say to our Maker in such times? The Holy Spirit gave us Psalm 3 to show us.⁴

In Psalm 3 David describes four experiences and in so doing shows us how to pray when we're being attacked.

I. Experiencing trouble (1-2)

“O LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, ‘God will not deliver him.’ *Selah*”

Notice how David begins. *LORD!* he says (there is no “O” in the Hebrew text). David begins by uttering God's personal, covenant name *Yahweh*. “In the language of prayer in the OT, this address has the same connotation as ‘Abba, Father’ in the NT,” says Willem VanGemenen.⁵ The term speaks of the deep spiritual intimacy he knows with God.

David has called on Yahweh thousands of times in his life, none with more desperation than in this prayer. Death is staring him in the face, a shameful death, a death that would dishonor the God who has been so good to him, and surely God's reputation would be marred severely if David was killed by his own son.

David here mentions two aspects of his trouble.

A. People were opposing him. What people? 2 Samuel 7:1 indicates that under David's leadership Israel defeated the surrounding nations and came to experience an era of international peace. So what people is David talking about here? Who are his ‘foes’? Not the surrounding nations but fellow Israelites. The enemy is now *within* Israel.⁶

His son has become his enemy. So has his trusted counselor and friend, Ahithophel (Bathsheba's grandfather), who betrayed him. So had a large portion of his generals and soldiers who deserted him to follow Absalom. Men who had previously fought for him in battle are now lined up against him, intent on taking his life.

Three times David uses the word *many* in verses 1-2. “O LORD, how **many** are my foes! How **many** rise up against me! **Many** are saying of me, ‘God will not deliver him.’” He gives a number in verse 6, saying there are “tens of thousands” drawn up against him on every side.⁷

⁴ Commentators suggest that Psalm 3 and Psalm 4 are parallel and can be read together. Some conclude that Psalm 3 is a morning psalm and Psalm 4 an evening psalm. Willem VanGemenen, p. 72. Although Peter Craigie argues that Psalm 3 may be an evening hymn.

⁵ Willem VanGemenen, p. 74.

⁶ Observation by Willem VanGemenen, p. 74.

⁷ According to 2 Samuel 13, when David fled he had 600 men with him, but Absalom was considering sending 12,000 men in pursuit.

Again, to complicate matters, David knows he is at least partly responsible. Shimei was right. Do you remember Shimei? He's the guy who pelted David with rocks as he was fleeing Jerusalem, and cursed David in 2 Samuel 16:7-8, saying, "Get out, get out, you man of blood, you scoundrel! The LORD has repaid you for all the blood you shed in the household of Saul, in whose place you have reigned. The LORD has handed the kingdom over to your son Absalom. You have come to ruin because you are a man of blood!"

And David knew Shimei, though out of line, was at least partly right. He did have blood on his hands, having dishonored God and his calling by sleeping with Bathsheba and ordering her husband's death.

Furthermore, David well knew that God predicted this, when after his adultery with Bathsheba, Nathan the prophet gave him this sobering prophecy in 2 Samuel 12:11, "This is what the LORD says: 'Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you...'"

So people were opposing him. But worse than that...

B. People were saying that God wouldn't save him. Verse 2—"Many are saying of me, 'God will not deliver him.'" God will not *save* him—that's the sense of the verb translated 'deliver' (Hebrew *yeshuah*).

That's a far cry from what people used to say about David. They used to sing a song about him, that became popular after he killed Goliath and the Philistines, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands (1 Sam. 18:7)."

A reputation is a fragile thing, isn't it? What takes a lifetime to build can be ruined in a moment. "There is no salvation for him in God." That's how the Young's Literal Translation renders what the people were saying of him.

Why were they saying *that*? Apparently because of Absalom. "The old man's past his prime. God's through with him. You need a new king, Israel, for a new day, and I'm the one."

David concludes verse 2 with 'selah,' apparently some sort of musical notation. Remember, this is a prayer that David sang, a *psalm* (*selah* appears some 71 times in the Psalms), and it's in the Psalter because David wants to help God's people who have their own troubles.

What should you do when you have trouble in your life? It's easy to just ignore it, or run from it, or blame others for it. Far better to do what David did. Talk to God about it. Honestly. Dependently. So ends the first movement of the psalm. Experiencing trouble.

II. Experiencing God's protection (3-4)

"But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head. To the LORD I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy hill. *Selah*"

Note how David changes his focus in verse 3. The cause of his trouble is still there, but David chooses to look at something else, at *someone* else. Peter Craigie remarks, "If one gazes too long upon the enemy and his might, the enemy grows in the mind's eye to gigantic proportions and his citadels reach up to the skies (Deut. 1:28). The hypnotic power of the enemy is broken when one turns one's gaze towards God, who is able to fight and grant victory."⁸

⁸ Peter Craigie, p. 73.

That's a good thing to do when you're overwhelmed by a big problem. Focus on something bigger. David affirms three truths about God.

A. God is a shield.⁹ "You are a shield," says David to Yahweh. David had used a lot of shields in his life. But this isn't your typical shield. It's not simply guarding his front-side, as his other shields had done. This one is *around* him. "You are a shield *around me*, O LORD," says David.

There is no chink in the armor when God is your shield. He protects His own on all sides. It matters not the size of the army in opposition, not one stray arrow can get through unless the Lord allows it, for He is a shield.

Then David affirms a second truth about God, at the end of verse 2.

B. God allows His people to share His glory. The ESV says, "But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head." "You bestow glory on me," says the NIV. "It indicates the honour of serving such a master," writes Derek Kidner.¹⁰ "You are...my glory," is how the NKJV puts it.

God is the glory of His people. David had been a great king for years, and here he acknowledges why. The Lord who alone is glorious gave him glory and lifted up his head.

When people are against you it's easy to drop your head, and with what people were saying about David, he sure felt like dropping his head. But God wouldn't let him. I love how the KJV puts it, "The lifter up of my head," that's what God was to David.

There's a lesson here for us, a vital lesson.

1. *We live roller-coaster lives when we live for people's approval.* Up and down, up and down. *Up* when people speak well of us, and *down* when they criticize us. Approval junkies live pendulum lives. But on the other hand...

2. *We live confidently when we live to please the Lord.* Living to please an audience of *one*, ought to be our motto in life. It was Paul's who said in 2 Corinthians 5:9, "We make it our aim to please Christ." Christ, the Savior who died for us. Christ, the Judge before whom we will give an account one day. It's Him we live to please, the One who has privileged us to share in His glory (2 Cor 3:18).

David affirms a third truth about God...

C. God hears the cries of His people. Verse 4, "To the LORD I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy hill. Selah." David was a man's man, fearless in battle, yet when you read his psalms you find him crying a lot. And out loud, too.

It's the direction of his crying that's significant. He cries *to the Lord*. That is, he takes his problems directly to the Lord.

And the Lord answers him, David says. Absalom took over the city for a brief time and declared that he was king, but David affirms it's not what Absalom says that carries weight. It's what *Yahweh* says. *He* answers me.

From where? That is, from where does the Lord hear and answer David? *From his holy hill*, says David. According to Psalm 2:6, God's 'holy hill' refers to Zion, the city of Jerusalem, the place where sacrifices were made for sin. In order to be heard by God...

1. *We must acknowledge God's holiness.* God is holy, that is, He is perfect and sinless. And God requires holiness, which creates a problem for people like David (and you and me) for we are not by nature *holy*. We are sinners. Is there hope for us? Yes...

⁹ The Hebrew word *magan* is elsewhere used to describe the scales of a crocodile.

¹⁰ Derek Kidner, p. 54.

2. *We must become holy.* “Is that possible?” you ask. Yes, because of what happened on that holy hill. In David’s day lambs were sacrificed in the tabernacle on that hill to cover sins temporarily, but one thousand years later the final lamb was slain. God Himself became a man in the person of Jesus Christ and there on that holy hill, the Holy One died as a sin-bearer to make men holy. Hebrews 10:14 explains, “By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”

Those who believe in the risen Jesus and accept the sacrifice He made on the cross are *made perfect* by Jesus. What we couldn’t do for ourselves, He did. And by faith in His work we become holy. And as those made holy by Jesus, we too can cry out and be heard by God, just like David was.

God answers when sinners look to the holy hill. Is that where you are looking today? I want you to know that people who look there experience a dramatic change. David did. First, experiencing trouble. Selah. Second, experiencing God’s protection. Selah.

III. Experiencing sleep (5-6)

“I lie down and sleep [in the ESV it’s past tense, ‘I lay down and slept’]; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me. I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side.”

Remember, David’s not talking about sleeping in his soft bed in the palace. He’s talking about sleeping in some strange bed, if not on the ground in some field, while he’s running from Absalom.

That’s amazing. Humanly speaking, sleep is difficult if not impossible when someone is intent on killing you. Did you ever hear a noise in your house at night and have trouble sleeping, worrying that maybe some criminal was after you? For David, it wasn’t *maybe*, and it wasn’t *someone*. His life *was* in danger and *thousands* were after him.

Yet he slept. How do you explain that? It’s because two things were true of David.

A. He didn’t find rest in his circumstances. Rather...

B. He found rest in the Lord. William Plumer said it well, “Prayer is a good preparation for sleep.”¹¹

Beloved, sleep is a gift that comes from God, as is every other good thing in life. Actually, the Bible has a lot to say about *sleep*.

Psalm 4:8 “I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.” Psalm 127:2 “In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat— for he grants sleep to those he loves.” Psalm 121:4 “He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” That’s why we can sleep because God never sleeps!

And there’s more in the Bible about sleep, including: Prov. 3:21-26 (good sleep is a by-product of seeking wisdom); Prov. 20:13 (don’t love sleep); Jonah 1:5-6 (Jonah’s sleep was an expression of disobedience); Acts 20:9 (Eutycus slept in church); 2 Cor. 11:27 (Paul often went without sleep for the gospel ministry’s sake)

But here’s what we must not miss. We need the Lord for *everything*, from the ability to sleep at night, to the ability to put our feet on the floor in the morning. It’s all from God.

¹¹ William Plumer, *Psalms*, p. 57.

Notice that David’s circumstances hadn’t changed—people were still attacking him. But David had changed—he was sleeping and waking up refreshed. What produced the change? The Lord. *The Lord sustains me*, says David.

It’s easy to forget that every time we lay down, sleep, and then get up again, it’s because of the Lord. Do we acknowledge Him, and thank Him for His care?

E.g.—

David describes one more experience as he finishes Psalm 3. Experiencing trouble, experiencing God’s protection, experiencing sleep, and...

IV. Experiencing God’s deliverance (7-8)

“Arise, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked. From the LORD comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people. *Selah*”

David knows his problems are bigger than him, but not bigger than God. So he asks God for deliverance, fully expecting it to come. We’ve seen this word before in the psalm, haven’t we? In verse 2 people were saying this is what God wouldn’t do for David. “God will *not deliver* him.” But now in verse 7 David asks for it anyway, “Deliver me, O my God!” And in verse 8 he makes it clear why he’s asking God to deliver him. “From the LORD comes deliverance,” David affirms (AV, “Salvation belongeth unto the LORD”).

All three times David uses a form of the Hebrew word for salvation (*yasha*, the verb ‘save’; and *yeshua*, the noun ‘salvation’). If that word sounds familiar, there’s good reason. Someone’s name is linked to that word. “And you will call his name *Yeshua* for he will save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21).”

Listen to Charles Spurgeon’s comment: “Search Scripture through, and you must, if you read it with a candid mind, be persuaded that the doctrine of salvation by grace alone is the great doctrine of the word of God: ‘*Salvation belongeth unto the LORD.*’ This is a point concerning which we are daily fighting. Our opponents say, ‘Salvation belongeth to the free will of man; if not to man’s merit, yet at least to man’s will;’ but we hold and teach that salvation from first to last, in every iota of it, belongs to the Most High God. It is God that chooses His people. *He* calls them by his grace; *he* quickens them by his Spirit, and keeps them by his power. It is not of man, neither by man; ‘not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy.’”¹²

That’s why David asked the Lord to deliver him. David knew that deliverance comes from the Lord and nowhere else.

But what about David’s other request here? *Strike my enemies on the jaw. Smash their teeth.* Isn’t David being a little vengeful here? After all, Jesus said we’re to turn the other cheek, didn’t He? Yes, Jesus said that and made it clear we’re not to retaliate against personal attacks. But this isn’t personal for David. This prayer request is about *God*. It’s a God-centered request. How so? In two ways...

A. He prayed with God’s reputation in mind. What happens to a person if someone smashes a fist into their jaw and breaks their teeth? That person’s going to have a hard time *talking*, right? Why would David want God to do something that would make it hard for his enemies to talk? Remember verse 2? What were they saying? Things about David but more importantly *about God* that were not true. Silence them,

¹² Charles Spurgeon, p. 24.

Lord! They're saying You won't save me. They're maligning Your grace and marring Your reputation. Make them be quiet, LORD, not for my sake, but for Yours!¹³

So this is a God-centered request, and we should learn from it, to pray with God's reputation in mind.

B. He prayed with God's people in mind. Notice how David finishes his prayer. "May your blessing be on your people." The enemy is still after him, but he's not thinking about himself, but about God's people. He's asking God to bless His people, all of them, and that would include, yes, the very people who took his throne and were trying to kill him.

You say, "I could never pray that prayer if my son did that to me!" David didn't pray it in his own strength, but God's. That's the point of the psalm.

1. *God doesn't save the strong.* To the contrary...

2. *God saves those who admit their need.* Admit it to themselves, to others, but most importantly, to Him. We need His deliverance.

We need His deliverance to enter His family. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23)." "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 6:23)." "But God demonstrated His love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8)." "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be *saved*.¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is *saved* (Rom 10:9-10)."

This is our greatest need, to be *saved*, for God to save us from sin's penalty and power, which He does by His grace when we put our trust in His Son. We experience God's deliverance.

But for saved people, experiencing God's deliverance is meant to be a way of life. "Without Me," said Jesus in John 15:5, "you can do nothing."

This is what we learn from the Psalms. We need the Lord, and the Psalms show us how to make Him the gravitational center of our lives, at all times, in every situation, even the unthinkable situation of having your own son try and kill you.

These are the experiences God extends to His people, by His grace. Experiencing trouble, experiencing His protection, experiencing sleep, and experiencing His deliverance.

E.g.—

By way of application, there's so much in this psalm to consider. In his commentary, William Plumer, who wrote a wonderful 1200 page commentary on the Psalms first published in 1867, shared twenty-three "doctrinal and practical remarks" regarding Psalm 3. I'd like to share some with you:

1. Every one had his own troubles. The king is as liable to the alternations of joy and sorrow as any of his subjects. Thus this whole Psalm teaches. At times David was perhaps the most afflicted man in Israel, v. 1. Perhaps too there is a much more equal distribution of happiness and misery than we are sometimes ready to admit. Before repining at our lot as peculiarly severe, let us look into the state of some around us, and we shall find a very reasonable demand for sympathy made on us both by those above us and by those below us in social position.

¹³ Peter Craigie observes, "The enemies had spoken wicked words, but mouths cluttered with shattered teeth could no longer voice their enmity." p. 75.

2. The best of parents may have the worst of children. David had his Absalom...Grace is not hereditary. God is sovereign...

6. God may greatly afflict his chosen even after they have truly repented of their sins, v. 2. It was so with David here. The Lord often sees it good for us to have the past in sad remembrance.

14. The calming power of piety is wonderful, v. 5...There is living a man who has lain down at the root of a tree in Africa, with a tiger near him on one side, and a jackal on the other. To flee from them was impossible. He left them to watch each other, committed himself to God, fell asleep, and awaked the next morning, finding the sun risen and both the beasts of prey gone. Leave all with God and fear nothing.

22. How strangely the Christian's blessings come to him. His strength comes out of weakness, his fulness out of emptiness, his joy out of sorrow, his life out of death.¹⁴

I invite you to take inventory as we leave Psalm 3 with this thought in mind. Any such thing as a problem free life? No, that's not what describes the person the Bible calls a Christian. But this is.

The Bottom Line: *The real Christian is the person who really trusts in the real God.* And the psalms show us how. Let's spend time this week in Psalm 3, and others. Let's grow in our ability to make the Lord the center of life in all we experience. He is worthy.

¹⁴ William Plumer, pp. 59-62.