

Psalm 3

Introduction

The last three weeks have all been introduction, setting the stage, laying the foundation for the Psalms. Now, in a sense, we're ready to "begin" with chapter three.

Psalm 1 described the blessedness of the one who takes pleasure in Yahweh's *torah*, and murmurs His instruction day and night. Psalm 2 describes God's response to the kings and nations of the earth who, instead of murmuring His instruction, are actually murmuring rebellion against Him: "As for Me, I have set My King on Zion, My holy hill." Together, Psalms 1 and 2 call us to a confident, hope filled obedience and trust in Yahweh and in His Anointed. Yes, there are the wicked, and the sinners, and the scoffers in chapter one, but they are "like the chaff that the wind drives away." Yes, there are the plotting nations and peoples, and kings and rulers of the earth in chapter two, but they will be broken with a rod of iron and dashed in pieces like a potter's vessel. So if Psalm one calls us to murmur Yahweh's *torah*, Psalm 2 calls us to add to our murmuring, laughter. "Why do the nations rage and the peoples murmur in vain? ... He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision." Together, Psalms 1 and 2 call us to a confident, hope filled obedience and trust in Yahweh and in His Anointed King.

And so now we're ready to, in a sense, *begin* Book I of the Psalms. Books I and II of the Psalms (1-72) are very uniquely the books of David. Starting with chapter three, basically every Psalm in Book I is connected with David. In Book II, the majority of the Psalms are connected with David. Book II ends with these words: "The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended." (72:20) Now who *is* David? He's Yahweh's anointed king! So Books I and II of the Psalms are uniquely the murmurings of the Lord's anointed king. They're the prayers and meditations of the one we just read about in chapter 2 – the one whom Yahweh has set on His holy hill and to whom Yahweh has said: "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." It's in light of all this, then, that the opening verses of chapter three may come as something of a "jolt."

I. "O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying to my soul, there is no salvation for him in God. Selah"

The one who in chapter two was joyfully telling of the decree of Yahweh is now crying out to Yahweh in distress. "**Many** are my foes!" "**Many** are rising against me." "**Many** are saying to my soul, there is no salvation for him in God." There's an obvious feeling here of being overwhelmed. Not only are David's foes "many," but the idea of the Hebrew form in verse 1 is that they're constantly increasing and multiplying and growing in number (cf. NASB). The title of this psalm tells us that it was written against the backdrop of David's flight from Absalom, his son. Absalom had won over the hearts of the people of Israel with the intent of usurping the throne of his own father. 2 Samuel 15:12 tells us:

- ✓ 2 Samuel 15:12 — The conspiracy grew strong, and the people with Absalom *kept increasing*.

And so David was forced to flee from Jerusalem. The Psalmist's situation was truly desperate. In and of itself, it would lead any normal person to despair. 2 Samuel 15:30 describes the scene as David fled.

- ✓ 2 Samuel 15:30 — David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went, barefoot and with his head covered. And all the people who were with him covered their heads, and they went up, weeping as they went.

But even worse than the forced *exile* and the constantly increasing *numbers* of the psalmist's enemies was their brutal attack on his faith. Even worse than their swords was their tongue. The psalmist cries out: "Many are saying to ^{*} my soul, there is no salvation for him in God." As one commentator says, these words are "calculated to... demoralize the psalmist at the very core of his being... As the many enemies of the psalmist rush together to snuff out his life, their cry is intended to shake him to the very roots—to leave him naked and vulnerable to their attack: "God will not deliver him." (Wilson) And why not? Because God takes no pleasure in him. Because God has withdrawn his favor and blessing from him. Because the steadfast love of God has departed from him. As David was fleeing from Jerusalem, a man named Shimei met him on the way, and no doubt he spoke for all of David's enemies:

- ✓ 2 Samuel 16:5–8 — As he came he cursed continually... And Shimei said as he cursed, "Get out, get out, you man of blood, you worthless man! The LORD has avenged on you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned, and the LORD has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, your evil is on you, for you are a man of blood."

What does one do in the face of an attack like this? How easy it would be to sink into self-pity and despair! How often does the enemy say to our own souls: "God no longer delights in you. God has withdrawn His steadfast love from you. There is no salvation for you in God." What are we to do in the face of an attack like this? – An attack far more deadly than any other kind there is. Do we revile and lash back? Do we try to comfort ourselves with our own worthiness? Do we despair? How did the psalmist respond?

II. "But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. I cried aloud to the LORD, and he answered me from his holy hill. Selah"

There is no justifying of himself. There is no reviling and lashing back. In fact, we read in 2 Samuel of David's response to Shimei:

* The Hebrew can be translated either "of" (ESV; NASB) or "to" (NRSV; NASB marg.). If "of" is the correct translation, then "nephesh" has the more general sense of "life" and we should probably translate with the NIV: "Many are saying *of me*." However, it seems to me that the Psalmist has more in mind here than simply his physical life (cf. Psalm 11:1; 35:3). The words of his enemies are a threat *to* his very *soul* (cf. Goldingay; Wilson). The return to the third person in the quotation of the enemy's speech is simply an example of poetic fluidity. (cf. Goldingay)

- ✓ 2 Samuel 16:11–12 — David said... “Leave him alone, and let him curse, for the LORD has told him to. It may be that the LORD will look on the wrong done to me, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing today.”

But *neither* does the psalmist sink into self-pity or despair. If the enemy seeks to destroy his faith, then the psalmist will respond simply with the further exercise of faith! If the enemy seeks to attack his faith, then the psalmist will respond with a *renewed expression* of humble *faith* and confidence in Yahweh. If the enemy says: “There is no salvation for him in God,” then the Psalmist will contradict the enemy not by answering back, but by *praying to* the LORD: “**But you, O LORD...**” And so in these words, already, the real battle, the battle for the Psalmist’s soul, has already been won. In fact, one could say that the battle was already won from the moment the Psalmist began to pray in verse one: “O LORD.” When the enemy said that God had abandoned the Psalmist, to whom did the Psalmist turn? – *To* that *very God*. To that very God whom he had come to know personally not just as God (ELOHIM), but as **YAHWEH**, the faithful, merciful, covenant-keeping God. So verses 1-2 begin, “**O LORD**, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying to my soul, there is no salvation for him in God.” And then verse three follows, “**But you, O LORD...**”

“**But you, O LORD**, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head.” If the enemies are “many” (1-2) and “all around” (6), then the Psalmist knows that God is his shield – a shield that completely surrounds him. And God isn’t just his shield and defense, He’s also the one who *restores* him and gives him the *victory*. “You, O LORD are my glory and the *lifter of my head*.” Psalm 62:7 says:

- ✓ Psalm 62:7 — On God rests *my salvation* and *my glory*.

So the Psalmist’s salvation is one and the same with his glory. To be saved by God is to be exalted by God. I think of James 4:10 –

- ✓ James 4:10 (cf. 1 Pet. 5:7) — Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

And so we see that the LORD is the psalmist’s glory *because* He is the “lifter of his head.” When God lifts up one’s head, it’s a picture of being restored to a place of honor. It’s a picture of victory over one’s enemies.

- ✓ Genesis 40:13 — In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office... [as] cupbearer.
- ✓ Psalm 27:5–6 (cf. 110:7) — For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock. And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me.

In answer to his own threefold lament (“How many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying to my soul, there is no salvation for him in God”) the psalmist responds with a threefold confession of confidence in the faithfulness of YAHWEH: “But you, O LORD, are a *shield* about me, my *glory*, and the *lifter of my head*.” (cf. Jacobson) And then, in order to strengthen and shore up his faith, the psalmist reminds himself of God’s faithfulness in the past.

This is something that we very desperately need to spend more time doing, isn't it? "I cried aloud to the LORD, and he answered me from his holy hill." The psalmist is confident that as YAHWEH was yesterday, so He is today, and will be tomorrow. He is not more or less faithful from day to day. Instead, He never, ever, ever changes. So, "To you who say to my soul, 'there is no salvation for him in God,' I say, "God has ever been my salvation *in the past*, and so I know that he will be today, and He will also be my salvation tomorrow!"

Remember what God said in chapter two: "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." And now as the king *flees* from Zion, he knows that Zion is *still* the hill *of the LORD* – that *YAHWEH* has not been dethroned, nor *his* rule usurped. Even now, the exiled king can cry out to the LORD, and He will answer him *from* his holy hill. And so now we come to one of the most childlike, humble, simple, sincere, and radical expressions of trust and confidence that's ever been written down on paper:

III. "I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me. I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around."

In the Hebrew, the "you" in verse 3 is emphatic, and now the "I" in verse 5 is also emphatic. The psalmist's point is simple: "In light of who *You* are ("a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head"), therefore *I*, for my part, will lay down and sleep. Exhausted and stretched to the limits, the Psalmist comes to the end of his day, still surrounded by enemies, still threatened on every side, and he lays down and sleeps. Not a restless sleep full of nightmares, and tossing and turning, but a quiet, restful sleep that is the result of his implicit trust in YAHWEH.

"I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me. I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around." The psalmist isn't minimizing the situation. He's not denying the very real and the very deadly dangers that surround him. He's not being presumptuous or complacent. Otherwise, there's no way to explain the loud cry and lament of verses 1-2 – "O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying to my soul, there is no salvation for him in God." Otherwise, there's no way to explain why the Psalmist goes on in verse 7 to cry aloud: "Arise, O LORD! Save me, O my God!" And yet in the midst of desperation, in the midst of this very clear and very present danger, there is *peace* and *complete confidence*! In the midst of lament, there is the certainty of hope. Can we say with the psalmist: "I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me. I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around." Certainly, if that means anything at all, it must mean that I will not ever be afraid – ever, period, at all.

But once again, this is no complacent, unfeeling, numbed state of existence. No! This is a peace, and calm, and fearlessness that exists side by side with a loud, even a desperate crying out and calling upon God. And so after the opening lament, and then the expressions of trust in the middle, now the lament and the trust, the desperation and the confidence are all combined together in these words:

IV. "Arise, O LORD! Save me, O my God! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked."

In verse 1, the Psalmist lamented: “Many are *rising* against me”! Now here in verse 7 the psalmist cries out: “*Arise*, O LORD!” In verse 2, the psalmist lamented: “Many are saying to my soul, there is no *salvation* for him in *God*.” Now here in verse 7 the psalmist cries out: “*Save* me, O my *God*.”

Six times in this psalm, the psalmist speaks of “YAHWEH” (“O LORD... (1), O LORD... (3), the LORD... (4), the LORD... (5), O LORD... (7), the LORD... (8)”) YAHWEH was that special name by which God revealed Himself to Israel as their faithful, covenant-keeping God. YAHWEH was a name that the psalmists usually didn’t like to put on the lips of the wicked. The wicked, after all, can’t know God as YAHWEH. When the wicked speak in verse 2, they say: “There is no salvation for him in God [ELOHIM].” But now, when the psalmist himself cries out for the salvation that the wicked say he’ll never see, look what he says: “Arise, O LORD! Save me, O *my God* [ELOHIM]!” This God that the wicked say will not save or deliver—This God is *my* God. I have come to know Him as YAHWEH. “Arise, O LORD [YAHWEH]! Save me, O *my God* [*my* ELOHIM]!” This God that the wicked say will not save or deliver—This God is the one who said to me: “You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

So it’s in light of all this that the psalmist can go on to pray in these words: “For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked.” We’ve already seen in Psalm 2 that the enemies of the *Lord’s anointed* are the enemies of the LORD *Himself*. The enemies of the king that *YAHWEH* has set on *His* holy hill are, of course, the enemies of *YAHWEH Himself*. If these enemies will not “kiss the son” that *YAHWEH* has begotten, but instead plot and conspire against Him, then, *of course*, *YAHWEH* will be “angry,” and they will “perish in the way.” So can you see how it’s only *right* for the psalmist to pray as he does? When he says, “You strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked,” this is a prayer that’s completely rooted in Yahweh’s zeal for *His* own glory, and for the recognition of *His* righteous rule in all the earth. In light of *YAHWEH*’s special relationship and covenant with *His anointed son*, therefore the *king* can cry out to the LORD with the utmost confidence: “Arise, *O LORD*! Save me, *O my God*! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked.”

But now we come to what seems like a tension. How can these be our words if they’re really just the words of the king? How can this be our prayer when it’s so uniquely and obviously the prayer of the anointed son of *YAHWEH* who alone has the right to subdue and conquer all his enemies?† *Verse 8 is the answer to that question!* We might have thought that verse 7 would be the end of the Psalm. Verses 1-2 and verse 7 are clearly the “bookends” of Psalm three with verses 3-6 “sandwiched” in between (see last page). So far, verses 1-7 have all read as a deeply

† Wilson’s comments are most unfortunate to say the least: “The psalm stands up on its own strength, and indeed, the attempt to spell out the specifics of the setting behind the distress of the psalmist and to identify the enemy precisely as Absalom often has the unfortunate effect of so fixing the historical reference that the reader is distanced even further from the psalm and hindered from appropriating its insights for personal application. If this is merely a psalm describing David’s response to a personal circumstance centuries even millennia ago, why ought I to assume that this psalm can influence the way I respond today to my own situations of distress?”

personal cry and prayer from the royal son (the Davidic king) to his royal Father (YAHWEH). And so if we're not careful, we could feel like we're on the outside looking in. We could feel like this prayer (along with *many* of the prayers in Psalms) is not ours to pray. But then we read verse eight:

V. "Salvation belongs to the LORD; your blessing be on your people! Selah"

The first half of the verse feels very much like the king is now speaking right to his people – to all of his loyal subjects." What the king has learned and experienced, he would have all his people know and be assured of beyond any shadow of a doubt – "Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

And *then* the king once again prays *to* the LORD: "Your *blessing* be on *your people!*" Now where did this come from? All of a sudden, what we thought was a deeply personal, and intimate, and private prayer has broadened out to include somehow all of God's people. But how? Why? What just happened?

When God appointed a king in Israel, from that moment on, the fortunes of the people were bound up with the fortunes of the king (cf. 2 Sam. 7:8, 10). The people are, in a sense, all wrapped up *with* the king. And so when the king comes to the end of this prayer, he affirms that any prayer for his own salvation is really a prayer for YAHWEH's blessing upon *all* of his people. It's as though here at the end, the king suddenly turns to the people and invites them to make his prayer their own in so far as they are all wrapped up with him. The king wants his people to understand that the God who saves him is the God who saves them. The king's lament is their lament. The king's expression of faith and trust is their expression of faith and trust. The king's cry for deliverance is their cry for deliverance. The king's experience of salvation is their experience of salvation. And so in this way we see that YAHWEH intended all along for the people to share in all that He had promised to their king (think of Psalm 2).

When we understand *this*, we'll be able to pray the Psalms with even more confidence, and assurance, and hope than ever before – knowing that they're all rooted in YAHWEH's covenant and promise *to His own anointed king and royal son*. When we understand *this*, we also learn that to pray the Psalms is to pray always with an eye to all of God's people – with an eye to all of those people who have been wrapped up together with the king. Yes, the Psalms are deeply personal, but at the same time, you can't read them aright without a heart that beats for the whole people of God.

So now we ask: Who *is* Yahweh's anointed King and royal Son – the one with whom we are now all wrapped up? In Psalm 22, David laments:

- ✓ Psalm 22:7–8 — All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; "He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!"

In Matthew, these same words are hurled at David's greater Son, our Lord Jesus Christ:

- ✓ Matthew 27:42-43 — 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. For he said, “I am the Son of God.”

The suffering and lament of the King is also the suffering and lament of His people. But suffering and lament aren't the only things we share with our King. The writer of Hebrews says:

- ✓ Hebrews 5:7-9 — In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

The salvation of the King means the salvation of His people. And so also the exaltation of the King means the exaltation of His people. Jesus Himself, the greater Son of David, takes the very words of YAHWEH's promise to Him, and turns them into a promise for us – who are now all wrapped up in Him:

- ✓ Revelation 2:26-27 — The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father.

Conclusion

When you are surrounded by difficulties and trials of every kind, when the enemy says to your soul, “there is no salvation for him in God;” when the enemy whispers that God takes no pleasure in you, that God has withdrawn His blessing and favor from you, that His steadfast love has departed from you – then you may pray with words that have been given to you by the Lord's anointed Himself. And you may know as you pray that if the LORD has not been unfaithful to His own anointed King – to Jesus Christ Himself – then He will not, indeed He cannot and would not, be unfaithful to you.

O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying to my soul, *there is no salvation for him in God*. Selah

But *you*, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. I cried aloud to the LORD, and he answered me from his holy hill. Selah

I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me. I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around.

Arise, O LORD! *Save me, O my God!* For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked.

Salvation belongs to the LORD; your blessing be on your people! Selah