

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Psalm 3 – A Song of Powerful Deliverance

Psalms 1 and 2 can be seen as the two gateposts of the Psalms; they provide the way in to the whole book, so that we read all the Psalms that follow in the light of these opening two.

Psalm 1 is a song of two ways: it describes the way of the righteous person and the way of the wicked person. The righteous person is one whose delight is in the law of the Lord, who meditates on God's instruction day and night, who is like a tree planted near streams of water which is fruitful and leafy and prosperous. Such a person is not like the wicked who are like chaff which the wind blows away, and who will be judged.

Then, Psalm 2 is a song of victorious coronation. It celebrates the Lord's kingship over the nations, and the fact that the Lord himself appoints David or an anointed king in David's line as ruler, calling on the nations as well as the people of God to serve him.

So, the first two psalms are clear and confident: the righteous prosper and the wicked are blown away; God is in charge of the world, and all the nations will serve him and his messiah. Is that right? Well... yes... but it doesn't always feel that way, does it? In fact, we have already learned in Psalm 2 that all is not well with the world; there are people who plot against God and against his king. Psalm 2 ends by saying that those who take refuge in God's son will be blessed, but why would people need to be seeking refuge?

In fact, however, the need for Psalms 1 and 2 becomes clear with the first verses of Psalm 3 (see 3:1-2).

It's important that Psalms 1 and 2 come first. Many of the psalms are written out of the experience of being attacked, of feeling ashamed, of feeling isolated, of feeling abandoned, of wondering why the wicked prosper when the righteous seem to suffer. But the book as a whole begins by promising us

that the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, that he really does rule over the nations, and that those who take refuge in him will be blessed. Both Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 encourage readers that it is possible to stand firm. Even if what we know at the moment is trouble and suffering, and frustration and persecution, and sickness and death, the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, the Lord rules the nations, and will finally reign supreme over all.

With Psalms 1 and 2 in mind, then, we can come to Psalm 3, which is a song of powerful deliverance.

(Before we look at it, we should mention that the word 'selah' is used at the end of verses 2, 4 and 8. This is the first time the word is used in the Psalms. It's not absolutely clear what it means, though it's most likely that it's a musical term. It's related to the word for 'rise', and may have indicated when the worshippers were to increase the loudness of the music or to 'lift up' their voices.)

We should also notice from the heading that not only are we told that this is a psalm of David, but we are also told he wrote it when he fled from his son Absalom, a story which is told in 2 Samuel 15-18.

While David was a good military man, his family life was fairly hopeless, and on this occasion it had led to a national crisis with Absalom trying to take over the country. Absalom, by all sorts of devious tricks, began to win the hearts of the people, and declared civil war against his father. Absalom's army marched on Jerusalem, and David had to flee from the city, humiliated and in shame, with people cursing him and throwing dirt at him.

The title suggests that at some point during this experience, or maybe afterwards, David wrote this psalm, which captures something of his different feelings. As we look at it, we'll see

that there are four stages in the psalm: peril, prayer, peace, and protection.

1. Peril (3:1-2)

David begins by lamenting his situation (3:1-2). He uses the word 'many' three times: his attackers are many, many, many...

And they were saying things about him which struck to the core of his being. They were not saying that God does not act; they were saying that God does not act *for David*. God will not deliver him. They consider David to be cast aside by God, good for nothing, a failure, defeated. We sometimes say that 'sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me'. But that's not the case, is it? Words *do* hurt. These words were designed to inflict hurt, to shake him up, to make him feel insecure. And it worked. He felt in peril.

Today, of course, in many parts of the world, Christians suffer verbal abuse and hostility and persecution. Or there are those occasions when, not necessarily of persecution, but for all sorts of reasons, *we* feel hemmed in and overwhelmed, and maybe even we start to hear the whispers that God has forgotten us, or left us to our own devices, and our confidence in God is undermined. Ever felt like that? It's no surprise if we have felt like that, because Scripture recognises that we may suffer that way sometimes, just as David did. We don't need to deny how we feel; we can admit that we are overwhelmed, and call out to the Lord for help.

So, first of all, we see David in peril. But then, secondly, we see David at prayer.

2. Prayer (3:3-4)

Here is David; he doesn't know whether he will live another day; most of his friends have cursed him and left him; his own son has declared war on him. But where does his heart go? Look at verses 3 and 4. His heart goes to the Lord. When trouble breaks into our lives, where does our heart go?

Actually, the prayer has been going since verse 1, but here the focus of the prayer shifts. He turns from his enemies to his God. That's a

good strategy, isn't it? We acknowledge the peril; we say we feel hemmed in on every side; but we don't carry on focusing on our problems, allowing our enemies to grow out of all proportion.

And these prayers of trust do not begin with 'I', but with 'you'. Verse 3 is not a statement about David, or a statement about his trust, but a statement about the Lord. 'You are a shield around me, O Lord', says David. A normal shield doesn't have the effect of completely enclosing a person, but the Lord is a shield like that. We usually have a shield in front of us; but here the shield is all *around* him, just as the enemies are all around him. God will protect him from attack from whatever direction it comes. In the place of prayer, we see things we could never otherwise see. David recalls what God is to him. God had been his shield; God has looked after him. David does what we should do: he goes back over his life and thinks of the times and situations when God has protected him.

Verse 3 goes on to say: 'you bestow glory on me', which is literally 'You are my glory'. It is God who gives us our glory, honour, and reputation. David knows where his true dignity comes from. That's why he says that *God* lifts up his head. If you were a great king and had to run from an uprising by one of your own sons, you too would hang your head in shame. When we are dishonoured, we cannot lift up our heads, but in victory we hold our heads high. The lifting up of the head says that his shame will be removed. Again, he sees this in the place of prayer.

David recalls how he prays and how God answers him (3:4). The Lord answers from his holy hill, the place where he rules. David is many miles away from Jerusalem, but he is not many miles away from God, and the Lord hears him from his holy hill. David has just fled from the holy hill, the capital city, the place where God's holy presence with his people is signified by the ark of the covenant. Yet, he is confident that God will hear his prayers and answer him.

Because he is confident, he moves from peril to prayer to peace.

3. Peace (3:5-6)

What is the result of David's prayer? Peace. Look at verses 5 and 6. David finds that when he prays, he can lie down and sleep. David is on the run; he is humiliated; he is completely outnumbered; his enemies are planning to attack him. Yet, even so, David says he is able to lie down to sleep in peace and awaken secure and confident on a new day.

Perhaps you know what it's like not to be able to sleep because of worry. You lie there, tossing and turning, and you think of all the things that have happened that day, the things people said to you, the things you didn't manage to do, the things you have to do tomorrow or next week... and it's all just too much. Going to sleep is an act of faith in some ways, because we abandon ourselves; we trust we're going to go on breathing through the night, that we will be sustained until the morning. This is David's experience.

What happens when he wakes up? Have the enemies gone away? Has God removed all the problems? No! If anything, they're worse! *Tens* of thousands are now drawn up on every side! Very often, however, God does not remove the problem; he removes our problem with the problem. The problem itself might not change – whether it's an illness we're facing, or a situation we find ourselves in, or a task we have to do. What changes is our sense of dependence on God. He moves us from fear to faith, from peril to peace, from a place where we're saying 'How many...?' to a place where we're saying, 'I will not fear'.

When Paul writes to the Philippians, he says 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 4:6-7). We sometimes sing, 'Oh what peace we often forfeit; oh what needless pain we bear; all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.'

It's important we hear this, perhaps especially those of us who are the kind of people who want to be able to work everything out, to find

the solution, to feel empowered to make a difference in our own lives. But God will not always have us congratulating ourselves. If we have peace, it will be because of his promises and his power and his protection.

What situation have you got to face this week? What have you got to go home to later today? What have you got to wake up to tomorrow morning? Whatever it is, even if the enemies are still there, and still very real, may we know the peace of God which Jesus gives to us.

4. Protection (3:7-8)

So, the final note of the psalm is one of victory, of deliverance, of protection. Look at verse 7. The psalm began by speaking about people arising up against David, and now David asks the Lord to arise and come to his deliverance.

These are old words that David uses. The words 'arise O Lord' were used by the people of Israel at the time when the ark of the covenant was taken out in battle against the enemies of God's people (Numbers 10:35). David uses those words to call on the Lord to deliver him.

He asks God to humiliate and destroy his enemies (3:7b). The imagery is graphic and the actions may sound vindictive to us (and they are), but they are also symbolic. Striking someone on the jaw and breaking their teeth is a sign of humiliation. It is as much about shaming as it is about hurting; the picture is of his enemies being disempowered, no longer having 'teeth'.

The final verse emphasises deliverance, and concludes with a general blessing on God's people (3:8). Here we have an affirmation that God is the one who gives victory and deliverance; and then we have a prayer for God to bless his people. Even before the battle is won, David wants God to have mercy on the people of Israel.

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Of course, as with Psalm 2, we can look beyond David and see our Lord Jesus Christ. Just as David suffered hostility and mockery, so was hated and despised and rejected. It's no surprise, then, that when Jesus is crucified, he

takes some of David's words from the Psalms on to his own lips: 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?' 'Into your hands I commit my spirit.'

Ultimately, then, this is not just about David, or about us, but about Jesus. We may find the Psalm strangely appropriate for our own situations and our own prayers, but we do so above all through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 27 July 2008.