

“When I Find Myself in Times of Trouble”

Psalm 3; Matthew 5
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INTRODUCTION

Today we come to Psalm 3 in our sermon study series on the Psalms. Psalm 1 is a Wisdom psalm. Psalm 8 is a praise hymn. And Psalm 23 is a Song of Trust. All the psalms can be classified in terms of categories. Just like we have different types of prayer: intercessory, praise, thanksgiving, supplication. So with the psalms. There are Thanksgiving psalms, Hymns of Praise, Salvation-history psalms, Psalms of Celebration and Laments. Psalm 3 is the first **lament** in the Book of Psalms.

A **lament**, biblically speaking, is a prayer that presupposes a deep trust in God yet expresses one’s struggle, suffering, disappointment or loss. Laments constitute the largest group of psalms in the Psalter. There are more than 60, including individual and corporate laments. They express with a deep, honest, fervor the distress that God’s covenant people experienced. In the OT, Jeremiah especially is associated with expressing grief in a lament. He wrote the Book of Lamentations, expressing deep sorrow over the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians.

Examples: singing **the blues** (*When I find...; Nobody knows the trouble*)

There is one more preliminary matter that is important for understanding Psalm 3. The psalm is introduced by a phrase, a superscription that reads *A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son*. Do you recall that story? Absalom ignited a palace coup and King David had to flee for his life into the wilderness. Civil war followed with father fighting son and the son rebelling against his father. David won back his throne at a terrible cost—the death of Absalom his son, whom he loved and then mourned. Cf. 2Sam17.

David’s life was full of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Of course, everyone’s life has ups and downs. Everybody’s life journey runs into rough places and low spots. Not a palace coup probably, and not the treachery of a son, hopefully, but moments of conflict and anxiety, failure and fear, sickness and death, loss and salvation.

Psalm 3, we are told, is prayed in the midst of a **story**. All prayer is prayed in the midst of a story by somebody who is in that story.

Eugene Peterson puts it like this: “*Story is to prayer what the body is to the soul, the circumstances in which it takes place. And prayer is to story what the soul is to the body, the life without which it would be a corpse.*”

Every life is a **story**. We might not see it that way—life might seem more like a to-do list, or maybe we feel like we are going through the motions as a piece of someone else’s story. **No**, your life is a story that matters to God and by faith, our individual stories fit into God’s grand narrative that runs from *Creation* and *Fall* through *Redemption* and on to *Consummation*.

Most of the psalms have an introductory phrase or sentence that connect them to a story. Only 34 (out of 150) do not. The editor(s) of the Book of Psalms, not only gives us historical references with these tag lines; they remind us that prayers are not spiritualized exercises removed from life. Genuine prayer is neither Gnostic nor escapist—prayer is tied to actual people living out their stories in various details. And many of the story details are inconvenient and irregular.

The most common tie is to David (73 psalms are so identified with David). Not surprisingly, we know more about David than any other person in the OT—maybe the NT too. His youth, adulthood and old age are chronicled—in his seasons of life we learn of his triumphs and his tragedies, his faithfulness and his waywardness... But here is something instructive. The person in Scripture who is the most prominent in story also is shown to be the most active at prayer. The *outside* of his life is told in story and the *inside* is told in prayer. The Books of Samuel and Chronicles provide the plot to David’s story and the Psalms show us his heart and passion.

Of the 73 psalms linked to David and his story, 13 refer to specific incidents in his life. Each incident is about a time of *trouble*. David had troubles and sorrows and enemies. And his prayer often began in trouble. There is plenty of praise in his prayers but it seems that *trouble* got him started in *prayer*. We can relate to that, yes? There are no atheists in a foxhole!

Read PSALM 3 again!

Psalm 3 follows the classic OT lament form—with six elements.

1. **Address** (to the Lord. This is the cry to the Lord in v. 1. The address need not be elaborate.
2. **Complaint**. This is the rest of v. 1 and all of v. 2. David describes his foes (enemies can represent misery or trouble in the psalms) and he tells how bleak his situation seems to him. Again, any difficulty can be expressed this way.

3. **Trust.** Verses 3-6 express trust in the Lord. Who God is, how he answers prayer, how He keeps his people secure even when the situation seems hopeless—this is evidence of God’s trustworthiness.
4. **Deliverance.** In v. 7a David expresses his/our plea for help. Notice that the request for help is held until here—after the expression of trust. The order is not required but is the usual one in the psalms. There is a balance struck in the psalm-prayers between asking and praising—this, of course, should instruct us.
5. **Assurance.** The remainder of v. 7 is the statement of assurance. You may wonder how the request for hurting your enemy is an assurance. First, the language is *metaphorical* not literal. David trusts that God will deliver him from his problems—He will knock them out. There is no promise for a trouble-free life but a reassuring sense that God in his time and in his way will care for his people.
6. **Praise.** Verse 8 praises God for his faithfulness. He is declared as deliverer; the request for blessing deems Him as the one who blesses.

So what can we learn from this prayer, this prayer of lament?

1. **The importance of balanced prayer.**
-complaint and confidence both expressed
2. **Honesty in prayer is the best policy.**
-in prayer we need not flatter God but say what we think! Our words need not be polished. Recall Sermon on the Mount—the Pharisees!
3. **The psalms give us words when we are at a loss for words;**
-the psalm gives voice to us when we are discouraged, or afraid, at wit’s end and cannot find our own voice... Cf. Romans 8:26-27.

*I have given several new Christians this lesson on praying the psalms when they did not know what to say when praying!

CONCLUSION

Notice one more aspect of David’s prayer-lament. What David finds especially devastating is what people are saying about him and his religious situation, namely, that God will not deliver him and that God will not save him. Now this David is the man that scripture describes as “*a man after God’s own heart.*”

The hostility David has encountered includes this assault on his relationship with God. Even in his pain and distress he is concerned and zealous about God's honor.

Maybe these enemies were saying that David's situation was hopeless—that not even God could save him this time. Or maybe they taunted David with the scornful comment that David's God was of no use and no help. Or that David had no right to appeal to God—God could help but David was somehow disqualified from calling on Him.

Such an accusation finds support in every niche of doubt, anxiety and guilt in the human heart. You know those accusing feelings. *“You aren't good enough to call on God. You are so bad God will not hear you. Your cause is unjust. Why should God bother with **you** and **your** troubles?”*

Do you have reason to lament? To pray about enemies or troubles? Are you weighed down and do you need someone to be *“a shield around you and the lifter of your head”*? I love that image. Your head hangs down because your spirit is low. You are lamenting about your circumstances, about a loss—you are lamenting and weeping over—even your own sin.

Or you cry out and lament for **others** (for Haiti)!

In such moments of anxiety and uncertainty, God is exactly whom we need. David calls on Him. You and I can call on Him too. The doctrine of God the Deliverer reminds the distressed that no trouble is beyond help and no human hostility can limit God's watch-care over us. *“From the Lord comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people.”*

When you find yourself in times of trouble—here is a prayer for you!