

August 2, 2020

TRUSTING GOD WHEN OUR TROUBLES ARE MANY

Psalm 3

(3 of 8 in a series of selected Psalms)

In a middle section of the book of 2 Samuel we have a narrative that focuses on Absalom. Absalom is one of David's sons that extremely handsome. The Scripture tells us that he cut his hair once a year, and his hair was so thick that what he cut off in his annual trip to the barber actually weighed about five pounds (if I've done my shekels to pounds conversion correctly). But his appearance isn't necessarily the most important detail in Absalom's story, and really Absalom's story doesn't start with Absalom at all. It starts with his brother Amnon.

Amnon was another of David's sons who loved his sister Tamar. Tamar was described as a beautiful woman in the Scripture, and so one day Amnon raped her. It's a painful story to read. And to make matters worse, the Scripture doesn't tell us of David doing anything about it. It's as if a great tragedy has unfolded before David's eyes, and he decided to turn and look the other way. But Absalom didn't. As soon as he heard about this act of sin by his brother, he not only took his sister into his home to care for her, but he began to plot a way to kill his brother. And he pulled it off, inviting Amnon to a party and then having his servants kill him at his most vulnerable moment.

After this act, Absalom fled. He no doubt feared that his father David would retaliate for the murder. But the reality is that David's heart longed for Absalom, and part of him was even comforted by Amnon's death (2 Sam 13:39). So ultimately David gets word to Absalom that he is welcome to come back to Jerusalem, and so Absalom returns. But you'd be wrong to think at this moment that everything was fine. Absalom was still quite bitter in his heart toward his father, for doing nothing about Amnon after his rape of Tamar. So Absalom went back to plotting evil—this time against David. Absalom devised a way to take out his father and claim his throne.

As Absalom returned to Jerusalem, he positioned himself daily at the city gate, and when any man came to Jerusalem concerning a dispute that needed to be heard and decided on by the king, Absalom would ask him about his dispute, show sympathy for his struggle, and share his desire to be king so that he might rule in favor of each person who came. This had the effect of winning over the hearts of all of those who came to Jerusalem throughout all of Israel. After a while, a great number loved the idea of Absalom—rather than David—being their king. Then, after four years of this, the day finally came for Absalom to take advantage of his years of groundwork in overthrowing his father. He sent men throughout Israel saying, "As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, say that Absalom is king" (2 Sam 15:10), and once this happened and word got to David, David fled Jerusalem. He knew that there was going to be war and that his son wouldn't stop until he killed or David was dead.

Now, this would end with Absalom being killed, David mourning his son's death, and David coming back to Jerusalem and continuing his reign. However, it appears that during that time that David fled Jerusalem and before the matter was resolved, David sat down and wrote a psalm—the very psalm we're looking at this morning—Psalm 3. You can see the prefatory note in your Bible above the psalm that tells us that this is "A Psalm of David when he fled from Absalom his son."

As we look at the psalm this morning, you'll see that it's a psalm of lament—as David expresses the difficulty he is facing—and it is a psalm of confident hope in God—as David expresses that he will not be afraid of many thousands who set themselves against him. But I want us to note a few lessons from this psalm about how we need to think and act and pray and walk during times of difficulties in our own lives. And let me start with the obvious point that we need to realize that believers aren't exempt from times of difficulty.

Realize that believers aren't exempt from times of difficulty

There are 150 psalms. And though I don't know why each particular psalm appears where it does in the psalter, there is an obvious order. Psalms 1-2 are obviously placed there intentionally. Psalm 1 tells the reader to anchor his life in obedience to God's Word, and Psalm 2 tells us that the Lord has installed his king (Jesus) over the earth, his enemies are judged, and those who are united with him will find refuge. Similarly, Psalms 146-150 are placed at the end of the psalter intentionally. Each of these psalms begins with the line, "Praise the Lord!" until they reach a crescendo in Psalm 150 where everyone is told to employ everything in worship to the Lord. And I believe those psalms are placed at the end of the psalter to remind us that human history is moving toward the exaltation and praise of Jesus Christ. One day every knee will bow and declare that he is Lord.

So if that is true, then Psalm 3 is placed right after these introductory psalms as if the psalter is saying, "Now let's look at what the Christian's experience of life is like as we walk through this world and look toward that day when Christ is rightly recognized as Lord and praised by all," and the very first words we hear are, "O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying of my soul, 'There is no salvation for him in God'" (vv. 1-2).

Now we know why David is saying this. At the time he wrote the psalm he literally had many foes—perhaps thousands—who wanted him removed from the throne or even killed. But the psalms aren't written simply so that we might understand the situation and struggles of the psalmist himself. They're given to us—the readers—as vehicles to express our pain or praise, joy or tears. So as we look at David's struggles in Psalm 3 it's simply a reminder to us that the experience of a believer is not one where we are exempted from pain, disappointment, loss, struggle, discouragement, and attack. In some ways, being a Christian may well invite *more* of this into our lives. After all, Jesus told us that if the world was against him, then it would be against us as well.

And this reality that the believer isn't exempt from times of difficulty is important for us to recognize. One reason it's so important is because going through difficulty, challenges, and suffering can often feel like a crushing reality. You can be tempted to lose hope when the situation drags on (think of how many times the psalmist will ask the Lord, "How Long?"). All kinds of doubts can creep in. And I could go on and on. But if you don't understand that suffering and difficulty is simply part of the Christian's normal, expected experience in this life then on top of all of those difficulties I've just named—and more!—you'll also begin to think that this must be happening because you've done something wrong, the Lord is against you, and/or you're being punished. But, brothers and sisters, suffering and challenges and difficulties are simply part (indeed, a *promised* part) of the Christian life.

Psalm 3 is written by David—a man whom the Lord himself described a one after his own heart—and David's first life situation recorded in this book of Psalms is one where he speaks of having many foes who are not only against him but mocking him for trusting in the Lord. Suffering and trials are simply the normal expected road for the Christian. We may go through the suffering of watching our children walk astray, of having people attack us, of battling terrible illness, and of feeling the assault of Satan, sin, and death against us. But if you're walking in the midst of those now, nothing about your situation suggests that you don't know the Lord or that he is against you. Rather, it shows that you're experiencing one of the many hardships that are common and expected in the life of a believer. Again, after the introduction to the psalter in Psalm 1-2, the first words written are Psalm 3:1-2. Could the Lord send us any clearer message on the presence of struggles and hardships in the life of a believer?

Now, the question naturally arises, then, what do we do as believers when we find ourselves walking through times of adversity, suffering, and struggle—even as David faced in this psalm? Well, there's much we could say there, but drawing on this psalm, let me point out a few things.

Recognize that God is for you

As David saw his many foes mounting against him, the starting point of his response was to recognize that God was for him. After noting that his enemies were saying there is no salvation for him in God, he responds by writing in verse 3, "But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head." He knew that God was for him.

Now, we might be tempted to say, "Well, that's easy for David. The Lord had made clear that David was God's chosen king to reign over Israel. He'd made a promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 that he wouldn't remove him from the throne, etc." In other words, our temptation might be to think that we can't pray like David did here, because we can't be expected to have the assurance he does before God that God would care for him and uphold him. But consider—if nothing else—the text we read to begin this service (Rom 8:28-39). Our Lord wanted us to know such assurance that he reveals to us that he foreknew us (that is, before time set his affection on us), then predestined us to be conformed to the image of his Son, then called us to himself, then justified us, and will glorify us. He's told us that if he's justified us, there is none to condemn, that nothing shall separate us from his love for us, and that if he is for us, then there is none to

be against us. Brothers and sisters, our footing when we stand to pray is no less sure than David's. In the midst of your struggles, the first thing you can pray to your Father is, "I know you are with me and for me, even as I walk through these struggles." So, first, recognize that God is for you. Second, recognize the presence of God's grace in your life.

Recognize the presence of God's grace in your life

This is what David does next. He writes in verses 4-5, "I cried aloud to the LORD, and he answered me from his holy hill. I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me." David is able to acknowledge that he has prayed and seen the Lord's answers to his prayers. But it's not as if there must be parting of the Red Sea kinds of events for David to recognize God's provision and grace. He simply notes that his lying down, being able to sleep, and waking are all possible because of the Lord's sustaining grace.

I've shared the story a few times of a man who took his family to the mission field, got cancer, had to come home, went through repeated surgeries where eventually most of his intestines were removed, and finally got the cancer behind him only for his wife to get cancer, die, and leave him to raise their young children. The reason I've shared that story a few times is to note that as he spoke to a church soon after all of that, he spoke and for a hour gave thanks to the Lord for all the blessings in his life—the time he got to spend on the mission field, his wife of several years, his children, and on and on.

But a heart that gives thanks to God after suffering as that man suffered is formed by living a life of recognizing God's grace in all things and thanking him for it. Let us pray that God will open our eyes so that we begin to see the world and ourselves in it as being constantly sustained by God's grace. And let us pray that we'll not only see it but allow it to breed within us a deep trust in the Lord. In the midst of our deepest sufferings we have an abundance of evidence of God's deep and sustaining grace in our lives. We just need to see it. David did, writing, "I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me." Third, in light of God's grace, trust him for all that tomorrow holds.

Trust him for all that tomorrow holds

Let's look at how this develops with David. He recognizes the abundance of grace the Lord has poured out on him in answers to prayers throughout his life and his sustaining grace even in acts of allowing him to lie down, sleep, and wake again. And in light of that, his trust in God is deepened, anchored, and sure, even as David contemplates greater struggles he's facing. After showing us how God had manifested grace in his life, David writes, "I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around" (v. 6).

Now, someone might say that this is a big leap for David. He looks at answered prayers in his past, specifically focuses on the fact that he was able to lie down, sleep, and wake up by God's grace, and now finds himself emboldened enough to proclaim that he'll not be afraid of thousands of people who have set themselves against him? But I think if this is our thought,

then it reveals that we're thinking too much that God is like us. Let me explain. For you and me, lifting a boulder requires much greater effort than lifting a small stone, but not so with God. He is almighty. So we can't judge whether we can trust God based on the degree of the challenge facing us. Nothing is difficult for the Lord. Even the nations are like dust on the scales to him. So whether being able to sleep when you should be gripped by anxiety or facing thousands in war, there is no difference in terms of God's ability. Neither of those is harder for him, for nothing is hard for him at all. All that matters is that we know God's heart toward us and who we are to him. And if we're his children and he is our God, then just as we can trust him through the easiest of circumstances, so we can trust him through the most difficult of circumstances. Do you see? The degree of difficulty from our perspective makes no difference on whether we can trust in God's sustaining grace. That's what David is showing here. We therefore trust him for all that tomorrow holds, as we recognize his sustaining grace yesterday and today. Finally, we make our requests, trusting him, and desiring his glory to be known.

Make your requests, trusting him and desiring his glory to be known

It's not until verse 7 that David actually makes a request in his prayer. All the previous verses have been necessary to get to this point. They've built a foundation on which he prays in confidence. He prays, "Arise, O LORD! Save me, O my God! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked" (v. 7).

Let me note a few things about this request. First, I think David is writing his request as if it's already happened, though it hasn't. In other words, he's asking God to do these things in the future, while using grammar that communicates as if it is already done. He's confident—most likely based on God's promise not to remove him from the throne in 2 Samuel 7—that God is not going to let this be an end to David's throne. Second, it's a violent request because that's often what salvation entails. When the Lord brought salvation to Israel in Egypt, it involved destroying Pharaoh and the Egyptian army in the sea. When God delivered Israel from Goliath, it involved David cutting off the giant's head. And when he brings salvation to his people in the end, it will mean that Satan and death itself will be thrown into a lake of fire. And in this case, delivering David will mean destroying his enemies in the coming war. David's prayer is simply for salvation.

But notice that part of what guides David's prayer is a desire for all of God's people to see his glory through this. He concludes, "Salvation belongs to the LORD; your blessing be on your people" (v. 8). David may be the one facing attack, but he longs for God's blessing to be poured out on all of his people. David is concerned with God glorifying his name.

This is helpful for us. Our God loves us and is for us, and so he invites us to make our requests known to him. Unlike David, we often don't have promises to bank on in specific circumstances. We can't know if God will remove the cancer or not, bring all of our children back around or not, or whatever the case may be. But we can ask boldly, knowing that our Almighty God loves us. And there is much that we can know. We do know that God wills that we are made more like Jesus in the midst of our struggles, that we trust him more, and that we know his love and love him more. We can pray those things with confidence.

And we can trust him as we pray. Paul prayed for a so-called thorn in his flesh to be removed. He prayed three times. The Lord didn't remove it. But the sustaining grace the Lord had shown Paul throughout his life, the Lord promised Paul would remain and would be sufficient. And this leads us to another element in our request. We can pray for God to use our lives—in the midst of our struggles—to glorify his name. Again, that's what we saw in David, and as we comprehend the love that our God has for us in sending his Son to live, die, and be raised for us, isn't it what you and I long for as well? We can pray that way.

The Christian life is one of struggles. But it is also one of knowing God's grace, trusting him to always do what is best, boldly making our requests in prayer, and watching him use us to glorify his name. David is a model of trust, but we have even more reason to trust. We know what our God had done for us in Jesus. So let's trust him and come to him now as we come to the table. Amen.