

June 26, 2020

A TIME TO MOURN

Psalm 3

(A Psalm of Lament)

On Thursday morning I decided to break away from the sermon card for reasons that are obvious to members of our congregation. For those who are not, we got news Wednesday evening that one of our precious families in the church lost their three-year-old in a drowning accident. The funeral will be Tuesday, but it felt callous and wrong to gather today and ignore that reality until the funeral on Tuesday. I very rarely let anything change the sermon card. I'm not swayed from things going on in the culture at large or holidays—whether national holidays or days marked as important in the church calendar. But this is different. This is about mourning that we as a church community are going through, and so I thought it good to return to a psalm we actually looked at just two years ago, Psalm 3.

And really I don't want to say anything different today than what I said two years ago when we looked at this psalm. In fact, one of the blessings of preaching a psalm like Psalm 3 when there's no obvious suffering going on is that it prepares and equips us for those moments when the darkness descends in our lives, our head is swirling, and we can't think straight. But in those moments, I find that what we've hidden in our hearts comes out. I heard of it just a few nights ago as Aaron shared with me that Lisa had said out loud as she realized she'd lost her youngest child, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord," quoting from Job 1. And I saw and heard it myself as she later lifted her arms toward heaven and cried out, "He will never leave me nor forsake me."

Therefore, what I want to do this morning as we are mourning together as a community is simply to remind us of some truths we know in the midst of our lament, some truths we looked at deeply as recently as two years ago, and some truths that I pray will minister to us now as we seek to mourn in faithfulness and hope before the Lord.

Now, I could walk through the background to Psalm 3. You can see that the superscript reads, "A Psalm of David when he fled from Absalom his Son." And I could tell you the whole history there. In fact, I did two years ago, so if you want to look at it, you can go look at that manuscript or watch or listen to that sermon. But as I've noted many times as we've looked at lament psalms, the setting of the psalm isn't crucial because the lament psalms are present not to help us figure out or master their historical context as much as vehicles for our lament and guidelines to help us know how to approach our Lord during times of pain, suffering, tragedy, and mourning. So, with that said, what does Psalm 3 tell us that can aid us in moments like these? First, it reminds us that believers aren't exempt from times of difficulty.

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 at the beginning 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 and ends 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, as I noted, I could tell you why David wrote this particularly. 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, as I've suggested, 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. Our Heavenly Father makes this clear to us—in texts like Psalm 3.

Psalm 3 is written by David—a man whom the Lord himself described as 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, of feeling the assault of Satan, or the death and loss of those whom we love so dearly. 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 his line 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 earlier in this service (Rom 8:28-39). Our Lord wanted us to know such assurance that he reveals to us 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 recognize that God is for you, and, next, remember the presence of God's grace in your life.

Remember 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 before the quote from Ray Ortlund that those in hell think that they deserve to be in heaven while those in heaven know that they deserve to be in hell. You and I know that on our own, apart from Christ, we've not merited his favor one bit. And yet, he's extended to us grace

after grace after grace in this life, hasn't he? We suffer loss only because he is the one who has first given us good gifts. So, remember all of God's graces toward you.

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 focusing 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 pray, asking him for all we need.

Pray, asking him for all you need

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 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. We can pray that he will continue to show himself faithful and present, let us know his love and comfort, and let us feel the love of the hundred-fold fathers, mothers, brother, and sisters he has given us in the church.

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.

But I don't want to act like we don't have enemies, like David. We do. I love for the day that Satan, sin, and death are thrown into a lake of fire and torment us no more. And that day is coming. And it's our Lord himself who told us to pray for that glorious day, telling us to pray, "Let your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

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 asking God to meet our needs 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. We mourn with hope, even in the face of death because we know that just as that Friday wasn't the last word for Jesus—as Sunday morning came—so it

isn't the last word for us. So let us trust him and come to him now as we come to the table.
Amen.