

GAMMA 12

BIBLE STUDY

Answers from Tim Keller guide

Psalm 3: Praying our Fears

INTRODUCTION

So far, we have looked at two kinds of prayer by looking at two classifications of psalms. First, we looked at *meditation* and studied psalms that were themselves meditations on the person and work of God. Psalm 1 is a meditation on meditation itself! Next, we looked at *repentance* (or what is called “affective prayer”) and studied psalms of contrition and confession of sin.

Now we come to a third major classification of the Psalms that corresponds to a specific kind of prayer. The “Laments” are one of the largest categories of psalms. There are three basic sources of lamentation or grieving in the Psalms. The psalmist may be troubled by (1) his own heart and actions, (2) the hostile, unjust actions of others, and/or (3) the action (or inaction) of God himself. If the main problem is #1, we call it a penitential psalm. But most of the Laments by far are combinations of all three, and quite often there is no confession of sin because the speaker has not brought the troubles on himself at all. In the Laments, we have emotionally realistic and brutally honest wrestlings with the pain and misery of life. The psalmists question God directly on why he is allowing suffering. They struggle mightily with bitterness, paralyzing fear, and despair.

The skill of “praying our troubles” and sorrows is often overlooked as such. When we think of the essential forms of prayer, we think of adoration (and its close cousin, thanksgiving), repenting, and petitioning. Praying our suffering is not a different form of prayer that parallels these. But praising, petitioning, and repenting *in the midst of* suffering is so critical for spiritual growth (and survival!) that it should be considered as a subject on its own. Most of us just stop praying when we are suffering, or put up nothing but the occasional, brief petition asking for relief. But the Lament Psalms show that the right thing to do is to *process* our suffering through sustained prayer.

Psalm 3: Praying our fears

Introduction

This is the first psalm with a title that links it to David’s life. Second Samuel 15- 18 tells the story of David’s son, Absalom, who led a coup to overthrow him as king and kill him.

1. Give a name to each of the following sermon sections: verses 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8. What progression do you see through each section? How does the last section give us "tests" by which we can tell we have "triumphed" over suffering, even if we are still grieving?

The first section has to do with the troubles and sorrows David is facing. You could name it "The Troubles" or "Many Are My Troubles." ("Many" is a triple refrain.)

The second section is an immediate statement of confidence in what God can do. You could call it "Divine Protection" or "But God Will Answer Me."

The third section is a description of the *result* of God's protection and strength. David says that despite enormous troubles (vv. 1-2), the certainty of God's willing power (vv. 3-4) leads to "Inner Peace." Or you could keep it first person and call it "So I Can Sleep."

The fourth section is a call for action from God. You could call it "Arise, O Lord."

The progression of the psalm is one of increasing confidence and buoyancy. The first section is a plaintive cry for help. The second section progresses to a certainty of *future* refuge and safety only. In this section he remembers that God is sovereign and in control, that he is a prayer-hearing God. Therefore, David does not need to fear for his life. The third section progresses from being assured of future help and protection to asserting *present* peace. Though the deliverance has not yet happened, David experiences "the peace that passes understanding" right now. He sleeps deeply and untroubled.

Finally, the fourth section moves beyond a mere request for personal and individual safety to a call for victory over injustice (v. 7) and a passion for the good and blessing of David's people (v. 8). We have not really triumphed over suffering if we only deal with it psychologically. Suffering makes us very self-absorbed and keeps us from giving ourselves for others in our community. For David, this new concern for justice and community recaptures his calling as king. Kidner writes, "For David, called to kingship... [personal] refuge is not enough. To settle for less than victory would be virtual abdication; hence the uncompromising terms of verse 7." ¹ Though we are not kings like David, we can see that we have not rebounded from suffering until we have become re-involved in ministry to others and re-involved in community. We should at least notice that David has begun to think this way before his suffering is over. This is one way we come up out of the depths and triumph over grief and trouble. In summary, David is "praying himself confident." His heart's progression from fear to peace to boldness to ministry and community is evident.

2. Verses 1-2. What are the two basic ways David's enemies were opposing him? (If you wish, read about Absalom's rebellion in 2 Samuel 15-18.) How are the troubles you face similar to David's?

What are the two basic ways the enemy opposed David?

First, they are *attacking* him. Verse 1 says they "rise up against me." As we know from 2 Samuel 15-18, a large portion of the populace was literally seeking to kill him. This was not just a small conspiracy (see v. 1a, "how many are my foes"; v. 6a, "tens of thousands drawn up against me"). Second, they were *accusing* him. Verse 2 says that many "are saying of me, 'God will not deliver him.'" It was widely rumored that God

had abandoned David and thus he no longer could be king (v. 2). It is likely that the accusations went something like this: "Think of all the terrible things David did: the affair with Bathsheba, the killing of Uriah. No wonder God is fed up with him! He can't be our king any longer." Absalom's supporters would have thought this kind of talk necessary in order to de-legitimize David as king of Israel. So not only were they after his life, but also his reputation and his right to be king. They were attacking his faith and his record, claiming that God had withdrawn from him.

How are your troubles similar?

At first glance, David's troubles seem pretty remote from anything we would face (unless you're the potentate of a small Near Eastern nation!). Today, in the U. S., we are not so likely to have anyone seeking to literally kill us. However, it is quite possible and normal to attract enemies who want to damage our reputation or our standing in the workplace or in the eyes of others. We live in an increasingly mobile and competitive society, where relationships are not based on kinship and tradition but on associations for mutual profit. More than ever, your success can immediately attract jealousy and efforts (overt and covert) to undermine your influence, your power, or your prosperity. You may find very quickly that people you thought were friends have pulled away from you and are poisoning others' opinions of you.

There is a second way in which the general outline of David's two-fold trouble is very, very common to us all. All believers have to deal with *the* Accuser himself — Satan. The name "Satan" means "prosecutor" or "accuser." His job is to accuse Christians — to make them doubt that God can love or care for them. Revelation 12:10 and Zechariah 3:1-6 are examples of Satan's accusations; so is Job 1. Satan may use human beings to shake your confidence in God's commitment to you, or he may attack you directly, psychologically, inflaming your conscience with inappropriate guilt or unrealistic standards, so that you look weak and foolish in your own eyes. In this sense, all Christians *always* have a formidable enemy who is seeking every day to say to us in some way, "God's salvation is not for (or adequate for) you" (i.e., "God will not deliver/save you")

Just as spiritual accusation accompanies the physical attack in David's life, so an assault on your belief in the gospel normally accompanies troubles when they come into your life. It is quite normal to have some major setback in your life and find that it is accompanied by severe doubts about God's love for you or about the legitimacy of your hopes for his care and commitment.

In summary, almost *all* suffering has these same two dimensions to it — the attack and the accusation. On the outside, we have to deal with the trouble itself, which causes worry, anger, or fear. On the inside, we have to renew our faith in the gospel and its message that we are given unmerited, free grace.

3. Verses 3-4. How does David find assurance and confidence in the face of physical attacks? Are we to believe that God will never let anything "really bad" happen to a believer?

The first sentence of verse 3 uses the metaphor of a shield: "But you are a shield around me, O LORD." The preposition the New International Version translates as "around" is very strong, and it can also be translated, "You are a shield that completely covers me." This is not one of the little shields a soldier used in hand to hand combat. It was a full-length shield the size of a door, used to ward off arrows. A

soldier held it in front of him as he walked toward a fortress. Literally nothing could get past it to harm the bearer of the shield. Therefore, David has assurance even in the face of literal hordes of attacking enemies.

But what does this promise — that God is a shield around us — really promise? This does not promise that no one will ever be able to do anything to cause us pain or damage. That would not correspond to the history of the saints in the Bible, and especially not with the career of Jesus himself. This cannot be a promise that no one will ever be able to rob us or cheat us or put a weapon to our flesh. What this does promise is that any pain that *does* get through God's protection will only be part of his long-term defense of us. God is always shielding us, whatever happens to us. If we suffer here, it is only to shield us from something far more damaging elsewhere. If we lose something now, it is only to shield us from losing something greater much later. Thus many Christians can testify that an episode of severe suffering led them to see flaws, sins, and a need for God that almost literally saved their spiritual lives.

Perhaps the most vivid example is Job. Satan attacked Job, hoping to destroy Job spiritually as well as materially. God, however, only let as much suffering into Job's life as he needed to grow into the great servant of God Satan wanted to prevent. Another vivid illustration is Joseph (Gen. 37-50). His brothers did what they could to destroy Joseph, and he did suffer greatly. But looking back on his life, Joseph could insist, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). In Joseph's case, God was shielding Joseph and his

brothers *with* the suffering, not just *from* the suffering. Genesis 50:20 is just another way to say, "You, O Lord, in all my suffering, were a shield about me."

So the promise here is not "God won't let me suffer." The promise is, "Even if I suffer, God is shielding me from the intentions of all my enemies and of Satan himself." See how this leads to peaceful sleep (v. 6)! It is the assurance that "no one can really and truly harm me." It is the assurance that "all things work together for good for those who love God" (Rom. 8:28 KJV). If, however, we read Psalm 3:3a as a guarantee that bad things can't happen to us, the very promise intended to give us peace in all circumstances will be a cause (eventually) for despair and deep anger at God.

4. Verses 3-4, 8. How does David find assurance and confidence in the face of accusation? What makes him think that God will not finally forsake him? How can we know God won't forsake us? (Hint: Read verse 3 from a Christ-centered perspective.)

What gives David confidence that God won't forsake him?

The second sentence of verse 3 uses a different metaphor: "You bestow glory on me and lift up my head." Even without the first clause, the second clause shows that God is giving David dignity and unashamed boldness. To walk with "head held high" even today is a metaphor for healthy pride, a clear conscience, and confidence. This is critical for us when we are accused, as we saw above. Almost always, when we experience a setback, we are shaken in our faith that God really loves us. Our head is down; our eyes are cast down. This doubt may come in one of two ways (and sometimes both). We may feel, "I'm really unworthy. This proves it. God has cast me off and I deserve it." On the other hand, we may feel, "I did my part, but God has abandoned me. He is not committed to me. This isn't fair." The attack leads to accusations of ourselves, God, or both.

But David is confident that God will not and has not forsaken him. He says that God “lifts up his head.” But how? The first clause tells us, even though it is a bit difficult to grasp in the NIV, which says, “But... you bestow glory on me and lift up my head.” The older King James Version was more literal: “But thou, O LORD, art... my glory, and the lifter up of mine head.” Kidner writes, “‘My glory’ is an expression to ponder: it indicates... the comparative unimportance of earthly esteem.”² David realizes that he has allowed his people’s approval and praise to bolster his self-esteem. He walked with head held high because of his acclaim and popularity. Now he asserts the theological truth that God is his only glory. Having God as my King, my Shepherd, and Friend is the only honor that matters. David was downcast because he had made something else his glory besides his relationship with God and God’s love for him.

This is enormously important as we learn how to “process” our suffering. When something is taken from us, our suffering is real and valid. But often, inside, we are disproportionately cast down because the suffering is shaking out of our grasp something we allowed to become more than just a good thing to us. It had become too important spiritually and emotionally. We looked at it as our honor and glory, the reason we could walk with our heads up. We may have told others that “Jesus is my Savior. His approval, and his opinion of me, and his service are all that matter.” But functionally, we got our self-worth from something else. In suffering these “something else” get shaken. In David’s case, most of his suffering was perfectly valid. To be falsely accused and lose the love of your son and your people brought searing pain. But he also realized that he had let popular opinion and “earthly esteem” become too important to him. By recommitting himself to finding God as his “glory” — something that can only be done in prayer, through repentance and adoration — we see him growing into buoyancy and courage.

[**Note:** It is possible to read verse 3 as adoration based in repentance. To fill it out, David is saying, “But *you* are a shield around me, O LORD — not any other thing! And *you* are my glory and the lifter of my head — not these others! Not my record or political power or even my son’s love or my people’s acclaim — only you!” That is praise, but grounded in repentance.]

How does God become our glory? The NIV indicates the answer when it uses the word “bestow.” Our relationship with God is a gift; it is bestowed. The only answer to the Accuser is the gospel of free grace. If we hear the accusation, “God will not save *him*; he is unworthy,” the only answer is that salvation is not for the worthy, but for the humble — those who *admit* they are unworthy. This is directly stated in verse 8: “From the LORD comes deliverance (salvation).” This is identical to the famous declaration of Jonah: “Salvation is of the LORD” (Jonah 2:9). We do not save ourselves — it is unmerited. Therefore, God’s grace will not abandon us.

David had an intuitive grasp that we are saved by grace. He realized that no lasting glory or salvation comes through earthly accomplishments. If we look to them for salvation, we will be disappointed, for “from the *LORD* comes salvation.” He reoriented himself to the freeness of grace, and realized that God’s support was not ultimately based on his accomplishments.

How can we know that God won’t forsake us?

If we read verse 3 from a Christ-centered perspective, we see that we have a much more specific way to deal with accusation than did David.

First, in Christ, we see how the Lord becomes very literally “our shield.” A shield protects us by taking the blows that would have fallen upon us and destroyed us. It protects us through *substitution*. Jesus, of course, stood in our place and took the punishment we deserved. This is why Satan’s accusations

are overcome by the blood of Christ. (See Revelation 12:10-11.) We know God won’t forsake us because he forsook *Jesus* for our sin. Jesus cried out, “My God — why have you forsaken me?” as he was punished for us. God cannot get two payments for your sin. Therefore, he cannot forsake you.

Second, in Christ we are “holy and blameless in his sight” (Col. 1:22), despite our spotty record. Christians, then, know that Christ is *literally* our glory and honor before the Father. If we have that, we are not overthrown by accusation. That is why an old hymn goes:

Well may the Accuser roar
Of sins that I have done.

I know them all, and thousands more — Jehovah knoweth none. ³

If I can remember how God sovereignly and providentially processes my suffering for my good (v. 3a, as “shield”) and if I can remember my imputed perfect righteousness in Christ (v. 3b, as “glory” and “lifter”), I will be able to sleep well anytime (v. 5)!

5. In what ways can a Christian pray against enemies as David does in verse 7? In what ways can we not do so? (Read Romans 12:17-21.)

In the introduction to this series, we spoke briefly about the prayers in the Psalter against enemies (the imprecatory psalms). It would be important to recap that here.

On the one hand, calls to God for justice in the world are absolutely right. They remind us how important God’s holiness and justice are. So we must not recoil and dismiss prayers like Psalm 3:7 as primitive and unworthy. We should long for justice to be done and for wrongdoers to be prevented from doing evil. This is a longing for social justice. In addition, we as Christians can also pray and rail against the “powers and principalities” that are evil forces behind many of the destructive and exploitative political, economic, cultural, and philosophical systems of the world.

However, on the other hand, we know that the psalmists did not understand fully the work of Christ on the cross. The cross reveals several things. First, if God brought judgment, he would count *all* sins (Ps. 130:3-4) and we would all be lost. But second, he poured out his judgment instead on Jesus Christ. This means, as Kidner notes, that we live in a time of greater mercy that will be followed by greater judgment. “The psalmists in their eagerness for judgment call on God to hasten it; the gospel by contrast shows God’s eagerness to save, but reveals new depths... of judgment [later] which are its corollary. ‘Now they have no excuse for their sin.’” ⁴ In other words, the gospel humbles us (showing us that we were only saved by grace) and leaves a period of grace in which people can repent of wrongdoing and find that same grace. However,

because evil must have a solution, there will still be a judgment day. On that day, either Christ’s work will be revealed as paying for our sins, or we will pay for our own.

Until that day, the gospel's logic compels us to pray for our enemies and wish them good, even if we are opposing their deeds. We cannot feel superior to them nor hope that they *personally* will pay for their sins, when we have only by grace been exempted from paying for our own. We also know that God, in the end, will not let evil prevail, whether people repent or not. Kidner writes:

We conclude, then, that it is not open to us to renounce or ignore the psalmists, part of whose function in God's economy was to make articulate the cry of "all the righteous blood shed on earth" (to borrow our Lord's phrase). But equally it is not open to us to simply occupy the same ground on which they stood. Between our day and theirs... stands the cross. We are ministers of reconciliation, and this is a day of good tidings... As men in need, who may yet be rescued, [our enemies] are to be loved and sought; as men who have injured us, they must be forgiven. But as men to follow... they are to be rejected utterly, as are the principalities and powers behind them. ⁵

6. What have you learned in this psalm that can help you "pray your difficulties" better?

Take time to consider which of the insights you received from this psalm were the most important and relevant to you.

Some of the principles you may have distilled include:

1. Suffering does not have to end in order for a person to regain his footing and confidence. David's circumstances have not changed by the time he reaches verse 8. Instead of waiting for our circumstances to improve, we need to "pray our difficulties." We need to process them by prayer.
2. One source of confidence and comfort in suffering is the promise that God in his sovereignty shields us in and even *with* our trouble. We must pray this concept "real" to ourselves to gain strength. We can meditate on examples of it (Gen. 50:20).
3. Another source of confidence and comfort in suffering is the assurance that God will not forsake us. Trouble always casts a shadow on our faith in God's love. We need to re-orient ourselves in prayer to the original graciousness of God's support. We can do this by praying, "Lord, I know you won't forsake me. You forsook Jesus and punished him for my sins so that you can stand with me now."
4. Another way to process our suffering is to recognize that some good earthly things may have become too important to us and have functioned as our "glory." Our identity is wrapped up in them. Suffering threatens them and gives us an opportunity to make Christ our *true* glory. In prayer, we look at such things and say, "I don't need you to survive if I have him."
5. We have not really dealt with suffering if we are only individually at peace. We are to come out of suffering more prepared than ever to minister to others and participate in community. Therefore, one way to process suffering is *not* to pull out of community during trouble.