

TAKING A SLEEP OF FAITH

PSALM 3 JANUARY 1, 2023

On April 28, 1789, honorary midshipman Ned Young slept while mutineers took control of the *HMS Bounty*. The violence and commotion roused every other sleeping sailor from their berth, but not Ned.¹ He only woke up *after* the mutiny was over. Seeing that the captain and his loyalists were adrift in the South Pacific, Ned “soon announced that he fully supported the mutineers.”² They decided they would settle on a small island, south of Tahiti. Conflict arose and, when a battle broke out between the mutineers and locals, Ned slept through that battle as well.³

In Psalm 3, we find David asleep during a mutiny. Now, David was no narcoleptic midshipman. He was a seasoned warrior who knew tactics, knew battle, and knew the danger he was in. The mutiny was against *him*, after all. His night of sleep was not accidental or coincidental. David’s slept because, in the midst of the worst crisis of his life, he was able to draw upon the spiritual rest provided by God.

Psalm 3 is a good Psalm for the new year. Many scholars consider Psalms 1 and 2 to be an introduction to the Psalter.⁴ One commentator explains Psalms 1 and 2 as providing the theological undergirding for the the rest that follow.⁵ After showing us the way of the righteous and then the dominion of the Messiah, we get to Psalm 3 - the first Psalm that’s *called* a Psalm, and the first song that is from man’s perspective to God - a prayer being sung out loud as an act of faith.

In this short prayer, David gets right to the point and says, “Lord, I need help!” We know why - this is the first Psalm that has a historical marker. We’re told David wrote this song “when he fled from his son Absalom.” This mutiny in the later part of David’s reign was sudden and widespread. David had to quickly run for his life with no provisions, no plan, and no safe-haven in mind. Absalom’s intent was to take the throne and kill his father. In *that* context, David produced Psalm 3.

But what’s remarkable is that the song isn’t just about asking for help. After the ask, David then writes line after line with absolute confidence that God knows, hears, and will answer with all the help that he needed. He was so confident that he decided to make camp, bed down, and get a good night’s rest. *That’s* how much he trusted the Lord. In fact, one scholar noticed that David’s declaration of trust is *twice* as long as his cry for help.⁶

This morning, there is a wide range of circumstances represented among us. Some of you are in a period of abundance and enjoyment. Some of you are, in a sense, running for your lives. Some disease is after you. Some uncertainty looms over your future. No matter our circumstances, Psalm 3 is for us because *all* of us need help from the Lord and want the strength and the rest and the

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mutiny_on_the_Bounty#Mutiny

² *Bounty Museum*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ See *Jerome, Aquinas, C.Hassell Bullock Psalms Volume 1: Psalms 1-72*

⁵ John Goldingay *Psalms Volume 1: Psalms 1-41*

⁶ *ibid.*

hope demonstrated by David in these words. And remember: These words were inspired and delivered and recorded and preserved because God knows *we need them*. These are the songs the Lord has provided so that we can sing and pray them back to Him.

Our text begins above verse one, in what is called the title or superscript.

Psalm 3:Superscript - A psalm of David when he fled from his son Absalom.

Some academics discount the superscripts, but these titles *are* in the canonical text of the Hebrew Bible.⁷ More importantly, Jesus references one of these superscripts in Matthew 22:45.

Right away we're reminded of an important truth that is easy to forget: Every day, every season, every circumstance has a spiritual component. There is no experience we face that is separate from God's commands and intentions for us or from His potential to use us. In the most hectic crisis of his life, David was used by God to write something that would help people for thousands of years.

Psalm 3:1 - ¹Lord, how my foes increase! There are many who attack me.

It wasn't just Absalom - David had lost the nation. The army was with his son. Some of his staff had switched sides. Other long-time haters came out of the woodwork against the king. Their attacks came in a variety of forms. Absalom's was the most direct - "I'm going to kill you." But then there was Ahithophel who had been a personal adviser who was now using his skill against David. There was Shimei, who had hated David ever since he took Saul's place as king. He wasn't a conspirator, but he made it his business to harass and insult David as he left Jerusalem. He screamed curses and threw stones at the king. And then there was Ziba. Ziba used David's situation to better his own career by lying. He pretended to help but was selfishly profiteering.

Under this immense strain, the first word out of David's lips is, "Yahweh!" He'll call on that name 6 times in these verses - at least once in every section.

David's desire was to be in the place God has called him - to be in his city, near the house of the Lord, in the position of service God had given him. All of that had been disrupted. And so David comes to the Lord and tells the Lord something He already knows.

It can feel silly to pray to the Lord about things He's already aware of - but that's *everything!* So why pray? Prayer is a tool God has given us so that we can develop closeness with Him and proper calibration for our hearts. In prayer we're able to remind ourselves of Who God is and what He does. We're reminded of what He has said in regard to our lives and His plans for us. In prayer we are able to relinquish ourselves to the Lord and invite Him to do what *He* wants to do in our lives. Prayer is one of the ways God gives us strength.⁸ And prayer is a relational act. God is a Person and desires close, communicative friendship with us.

⁷ James Montgomery Boice *Psalms Volume 1: Psalms 1-41*

⁸ Matthew 26:41

Psalm 3:2 - ²Many say about me, "There is no help for him in God." *Selah*

Not only were there actual attacks, there was also the head-shaking gossips around David - people who said that he had it coming. They were saying that he had forfeited any right he had to divine help after all he'd done.⁹ And, maybe they had a point. David had lied and stolen, cheated and murdered. He allowed one of his best friends to be slaughtered to cover up an affair. He broke the Law in moving the Ark of the Covenant, and because of him 85 priests and their families were butchered by Saul because they gave David a few loaves of bread.

But God's help isn't reserved for those who *deserve* it. Thank goodness, because *none* of us are worthy of God's help. No, God's grace is not about merit or payback or being good enough. In 1 John we're told that it's because of God's great *love* that He helps us and brings us into His family. We don't earn it, we receive it as a free gift.

John 1:12 - ¹²But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in his name

Many said of David, "God's not going to take your calls." But David didn't believe that. Rolf Jacobson writes, "*The quotation of the enemies' speech...establishes the central theological issue of the Psalm - [will] God help the psalmist?*"¹⁰ That's an important question for us to settle.

The verse ends with that word, *selah* (the first use in the Psalms). Scholars can't agree on what it means. Some believe it was a musical direction - something like "make a crescendo."¹¹ John Phillips suggests that the word may mean: "*There, what do you think of that!*" That may be a more helpful thought since we are *readers* of the Psalms, rather than singers like in David's time.

Psalm 3:3 - ³But you, Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head.

David wasn't alone in his flight. He had his mighty men with him. There were some soldiers and even 600 Philistines who came in support. But he recognized that *they* weren't the answer. They weren't his shield, *the Lord was!* And not just a little wooden shield that David would have to hold up under his own strength, blocking an arrow or two that might come from one direction. David said, "You, Lord, are a shield *all around* me." Covering on every side.

David's words here are tender and moving. In the short term, David needed a shield, or we might say a parachute. But he recognized that God was so much more. This Hebrew word for shield has a

⁹ John Phillips *Exploring Psalms: An Expository Commentary Volume 1*

¹⁰ Rolf A. Jacobson *The Book Of Psalms*

¹¹ Phillips

bunch of derivatives, one of which is the term used for the Garden of Eden.¹² That special, God-designed place, protected by a hedge all around and full of life and communion with the Lord.

Next, David says, "God isn't just my shield, He's my *glory*." How was there *glory* in running for your life? How was their honor in this experience? David reveals that his self-worth wasn't tied to a palace or a throne or his royal robes or the sword of Goliath. The *Lord* was his splendor. *No one* could take that splendor, that honor, that glory from him. And then he takes even another step into the tender kindness of God and says, "You're the One who lifts up my head."

We're told in 2 Samuel that, as David fled the city, he went up the Mount of Olives barefoot and weeping. David recognized that the Lord was with him there, in his suffering, taking David's head in His hands and lifting it up, as if to look him in the face and remind David of His love and presence. What a wonderful reminder of our Lord's *own* visit to the Mount of Olives, where He went and suffered so that you and I could be rescued from our enemies of sin and death.

Psalm 3:4 - ⁴I cry aloud to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy mountain. Selah

David's prayer was delivered out loud for everyone to hear. Of course, God *could've* heard it from the silence of his heart, but God's people are *commanded* to sing aloud. Colossians 3, Ephesians 5. Singing our praises and prayers out loud is one of the best ways for us to make the most of these evil days. We're told that, as we sing with and to one another, we are spiritually enriched.¹³

David cried aloud. He wasn't ashamed for anyone around him to know about his dependance on the Lord. He wasn't trying to hide his troubles. In fact, linguists tell us that the phrase could be translated, "Whenever I cry aloud, He answers me."¹⁴ This is how God consistently operates. Since He was faithful to David, we can be sure He will be faithful to us. His faithful love endures forever.

Psalm 3:5 - ⁵I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.

David cried out for rescue, he said, "I know the Lord will answer me," but then he doesn't wait for the response! He goes to bed! If someone broke into your house, would you call 911 and say, "I need some help," and then go back to sleep?

Now, David didn't do *that*, he was running, but we see the incredible peace and confidence that has flooded his heart. It's like when the angel finds Peter sleeping in his jail cell the night before he's supposed to be executed. Those men understood that life is not about circumstances, it's about communion with a loving God Who *sustains* His people. In this case, David had not received any patriot missiles or access to a secret fortress that Absalom couldn't find. Instead of immediate, tangible assistance, the Lord simply sustained David with *hope*.

¹² *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

¹³ Colossians 3:16

¹⁴ Gerald H. Wilson *The NIV Application Commentary: Psalms Volume 1*

This summer when I had my stroke there were two passages of Scripture that the Lord sent us that gave us hope when we didn't know what was going to happen. The first was John 11:4, where Jesus said of Lazarus, "This sickness will not end in death." The second was this Psalm. Night came, I had been admitted, and they told Kelly she couldn't stay. So, I was alone, wondering and worrying, and felt impressed to listen to this Psalm. Even though at the time we had no medical fixes or answers to some of our big questions, the Lord supported us with hope.

Absalom had every advantage: He had numbers and weapons and popular opinion and better tactical positioning. But the Lord doesn't need *earthly* power to sustain us. David knew it, so he got some rest. As Christians, we are invited to enter into *this* rest. Jesus said, "Come to Me and I will give you rest." Hebrews tells us to make every effort to enter into this rest as we walk with the Lord.

Psalm 3:6 - ⁶I will not be afraid of thousands of people who have taken their stand against me on every side.

He didn't have to be afraid because he had an all-powerful shield on every side. He was still in danger, but he knew the Lord was on the way.

Imagine you were playing poker and your opponent showed his hand: Four aces. That's the kind of hand that can clear the table. But, if they show four aces while you're holding a royal flush, it doesn't bother you at all. Their powerful hand has no chance against yours.

On the spiritual level, we've been dealt a royal flush. There is no better hand. God has dealt you His grace, His goodness, His attention, and affection. He's dealt you gifts and a spiritual family and special opportunities. Our part is to do what David did: *Believe!* He *believed* and *rested*.

Psalm 3:7 - ⁷Rise up, Lord! Save me, my God! You strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked.

These sort of lyrics don't usually make their way into our modern worship songs. There are a variety of Psalms that have this kind of language that scholars call "imprecatory prayer." We know that David was a prophet, but he wasn't in a vengeful mood. He showed almost unreasonable mercy to Shimei during this saga. And when it was time to fight he told his soldiers to "treat Absalom gently."

Verses like these remind us that God *is* going to avenge. He is going to bring a full and fierce judgment on His enemies that cannot be escaped. And it reminds us that wickedness really does need to be restrained. Job and Joel describe the wicked as monsters with fangs and that breaking those fangs meant the innocent would not be devoured but delivered. We're so used to seeing injustice and so used to the world calling evil good that we can be shocked by true justice.

Now we are on the other side of the cross. And on *this* side of the cross, Shimei isn't our enemy - Satan is. Christ has commanded us to pray for our human enemies and persecutors. We're to bless

them, not curse them. We're to understand that God loves those individuals just like He loves us and He wants to save them from the wrath they deserve just like He saved us.

God is a Warrior and He is going to repay the wicked for all that they do. It won't be a slap on the wrist - it will be everlasting death in the Lake of Fire. But God's hope (and ours should be too) is that all those enemies would repent and be saved rather than perish in their sin.

Psalm 3:8 - ⁸Salvation belongs to the Lord; may your blessing be on your people. Selah

David started in crisis. He ends in complete confidence not only for himself but for *all* God's people. Which would include, by the way, many who were *currently* involved in the rebellion against him. *That's* how powerful God's intervention can be. He can bring rebels back into the fold. Some of the people who drew the sword for Absalom would later sing *this* song in the Temple, recognizing that God not only helped David, He helped them, too.

You see, the help God offers is not just a payday loan or a Saturday night special. God is offering *salvation*. And He alone can offer it. What *is* His salvation? It's the same word that David used for "help" up in verse 2. This is one of those beautiful Bible moments. We discover that the word there is: *yeshua*. It's a noun and a name. When you bring the Hebrew name into Greek it becomes *Jesus!*

The help we need isn't a sword, it's a Savior. When we call out for help, God gives Jesus. He is our refuge. He is our stronghold. Jesus, Who gives us His strength and His comfort and His love, His mind and His heart. Jesus, Who changes every perspective and makes sense of every circumstance. Jesus, Who is the Rock on which we can build our lives, Who loves us with an unfailing, loyal, kind love. Jesus, Who speaks and it is done. Jesus, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, Who has invited us to rule and reign with Him. That's the help God has for those who call out to Him. He's listening for your call even now.