

PSALM 3

- THE RIGHTEOUS MAY HAVE CONFIDENCE THAT THE LORD
DELIVERS FROM ALL ENEMIES -

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Introduction

Psalm 3 picks up on themes from Psalms 1 and 2, i.e. the concerns and topics of the first two psalms are developed and furthered in Psalm 3. It is the first Psalm one encounters after entering the gateway (Psalms 1 and 2) to the Psalter. The third psalm's inscription introduces it as a psalm of David, linking it to the events in 2 Samuel 15-18. A number of dissimilarities between Psalm 3 and the narrative in 2 Samuel should remind us that the primary context of Psalm 3 is the book of Psalms as a whole and its placement immediately following Psalm 2. Indeed, Psalm 3 must be read in the light of the psalm(s) preceding it, as Psalm 2 is read in the light of Psalm 1. The meaning of Psalm 3 comes into sharp focus when we note the themes of Psalm 2 expanded in Psalm 3. Note both the blessings that are promised and the theme of the royal priest conquering his enemies while he protects his people! The historical narrative of David in 2 Samuel illustrates this.

What is clear from the Psalm is that living according to the law/Word of God (Hebr: thora) – living a pious life of faith – and taking part in the worship service is nothing less than a holy war! Singing this Psalm (which is what the church should do!) is part of taking our place in this holy war and singing in joy about the victory of God through his anointed king. This Psalm is the prayer of a king (David) who is facing enemies, many of them! Here is a rejected king (cf. the theme of Psalm 2

where the anointed king of the Lord is rejected and his rule disregarded) fleeing those who reject him as king. The only hope of the rejected king is that of *Yahweh's warfare* against his enemies. This introduces an important theme in the history of salvation. In this Psalm (cf. Psalms 3-14), the righteous as the oppressed stand central. The righteous one is not granted freedom to live in peace; David does not even enjoy rest from his own son Absalom.

Throughout the Psalm we note the military overtures in expressions like “foes”, “rise up”, “enemies”, “victory” (3:3,8), God who functions as a “shield” (3:4), people are “deployed”, “rise up” and “victory”.

Psalms Book 1: Psalms 3 - 41

The formation/compilation of the Psalter did not occur in a haphazard way. Different poets and singers' work have been brought together. It is not possible for us today to trace this process and the steps through which it had gone. From the Book of Psalms we can identify collections of Psalms of David (Psalms 3-41; 51-70; 138-145), Psalms of Asaph (Psalms 73-83), Psalms of the Sons of Korah – the temple musicians (Psalms 42-49; 84-88) and the Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134).

The final editor(s) of the Psalter structured the whole collection into five so-called “books”: Book I: Psalms 3-41 (following the introductory two Psalms) ; Book II: Psalms 42-72; Book III: Psalms 73-89; Book IV: Psalms 90-106; Book V: 107-150. Psalm 3 therefore stands at the beginning of Book I.

Form and structure

Psalm titles

A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom.

A total of 116 Psalms are provided with titles. These titles are not the addition of a later translator, but form part of the canonical text as we find it in Hebrew. These titles are “*frequently of more importance for understanding the role of particular psalms in the context of the Psalter and in the*

context of Israel's worship than they are for understanding the original meaning and context of the individual Psalms.”¹

The composition of this Psalm can further be reflected as follows:

- ❖ Verses 1-2: it starts with a protest or lament.
- ❖ Verses 3-6: the protest is followed by a declaration of trust.
- ❖ Verses 7-8: a prayer that consists of a plea for help founded on an assurance of the deliverance by Yahweh.

Exposition

Verses 1-2:

¹ *LORD, how many are my foes!*

How many rise up against me!

² *Many are saying of me,*

“God will not deliver him.”

- ❖ [Vs. 1] The adversaries are *many*. This is the emphasis of this first section. Three times in the first two verses we hear how “many” the enemies are. This emphasises the *military* terminology we noted earlier that are so typical of this Psalm. A war is raging here; a holy war; a spiritual war! This is a war between the forces of evil and unbelief against the Lord and his anointed (cf. Psalm 2).
- ❖ [Vs. 2] The character of the enmity is expressed as the climax of this verse. Their enmity is expressed *verbally*. Their attack is aimed at the hope and trust of the righteous that the Lord is a real helper in this world. The enemies actually take aim at the Lord's faithful promise that he will bless and keep the righteous. Wicked attacks are launched at *faith in the Lord's truthfulness*. In reality the enemies are attacking the salvation the Lord promised his people. They are saying God deserted those who trust in him. The unrighteous say that

¹ Craigie, Peter C. Word Biblical Commentary Volume 19 – Psalms 1-50. Word Books: Waco, 1983, p. 31-32.

there is no real God that can help. Life in the human arena is empty of any divine intervention. Life as a human being is a life devoid of the Lord's involvement. The decisive factor in this life is what *man* does. Here we have the brute evil of the wicked in action; they attack the powerless righteous at their "weakest" point. Characteristic of the righteous is that they trust in the Lord to guide and protect their lives. In the eyes of the wicked this is weakness; they see it as plain stupidity to give your life over to an invisible God. To hope for deliverance, specifically when you have sinned, is even more absurd, according to the wicked. However, the believer does not fight his own battles, but trusts in the reality of the Lord's victory.

Verses 3-6:

³ *But you, LORD, are a shield around me,
my glory, the One who lifts my head high.*

⁴ *I call out to the LORD,
and he answers me from his holy mountain.*

⁵ *I lie down and sleep;
I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.*

⁶ *I will not fear though tens of thousands
assail me on every side.*

- ❖ [Vs. 3] How do the righteous react to the attacks of the wicked? The attacks lead to nothing but a renewed confession of faith. Faith sees what no eye can see. Where the liars, the wicked, mockers and evil ones see nothing, the faithful, the believer, the righteous "sees" a shield; the *Lord who is the shield!* The defenceless confesses trust in the Lord! The one that trust in the Lord may have confidence that God can and will answer the prayer of those that expect everything of the Lord. He will absorb and protect against the fiery darts of evil. This is the level on which *the true battle* rages; the battle between the mocker and the confessor! The way the Lord gives victory is by lifting up the head of the confessor; *giving faith to persevere in trust in the Lord's willingness and ability to help those who rely on the Lord.*
- ❖ "Lifting up my head" is an expression that reflects restoration and exaltation over shame and mockery. It is a movement from despair to hope. It is a restoration of honour that can be expected!

- ❖ [Vs. 4] How does the Lord “lift my head high”? He reveals himself to be a God who answers prayers. The believer calls out to the Lord...and He answers...! He does that from his holy mountain, the place of coronation (cf. Ps. 2:6). It is the place from where the Lord’s anointed reigns as king over his enemies. Help is to be expected from where God anointed his Messiah-King...Zion!
- ❖ [Vs. 5] The helplessness of the righteous one is demonstrated in the imagery of somebody who can go to sleep in the face of real danger and rise again in safety. When the going gets tough, the helpless can just as well go to sleep. Why? Their safety is secured by the Lord who sustains. The real battle of the weak, the humble, the righteous and the sincere is to rely on the Lord in such a steadfast manner that it will allow them to go to sleep in the midst of the battle, knowing they will rise in safety. The Lord guarantees a new day in his (protecting) presence.
- ❖ [Vs. 6] The first two verses emphasized the many (possible) enemies. Here they surface again; they may even be tens of thousands! They may come from all sides and in innumerable numbers. Their words are nothing less than an assaillment. We should not think here in the first place of physical harm. The aggression lies in the first place in the denial of the reality of the Lord’s help and presence. The shield of armour, which is the Lord, will protect against whoever the enemy is and however large their numbers may be. *I will not fear*, because of the Lord’s trustworthiness.

Verses 7-8:

⁷ *Arise, LORD!*

Deliver me, my God!

Strike all my enemies on the jaw;

break the teeth of the wicked.

⁸ *From the LORD comes deliverance.*

May your blessing be on your people.

- ❖ [Vs. 7] The petition to the Lord is very brief. God is called to arise. We should here imagine God’s symbolic seat on the Ark of the Covenant that represents the throne of the Lord. The call is to the Lord to arise against the many that “arise” against him (cf. 3:1). The call to the Lord to “rise” was the call given when the ark of the Covenant was sent out in battle, as a

prayer to the Lord to do battle against his enemies (cf. Num. 10:35-36). God “rising” was nothing less than God preparing to do battle! The great reality was that the Lord went out before his people, forming a shield when they went into battle.

- ❖ Perhaps this forms the background for what happens in Acts 7:55 where Stephen saw “*the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.*” In Acts we have the reality of Jesus Christ at the right ruling hand of God rising/standing (!) as his servant Stephen is attacked and surrounded by wicked men. Stephen entrusted himself to the care of the Lord Jesus, who became a shield to him (Acts 7:59-60) and us!
- ❖ To strike someone on the cheek was nothing less than a way to humiliate someone; it was an insult. This is the prayer of one who is grossly insulted by the wicked (Psalm 3:2). The prayer to the Lord is to silence the enemies. The breaking of the teeth will silence the foul mouths of the wicked who do not believe in the reality of the Lord’s salvation of those who call upon him.
- ❖ [Vs. 8] The Psalm concludes with the assurance of the blessing of Yahweh who blesses and keeps his people and makes his face shine upon them, giving them peace. Here is confidence in the reality of the deliverance of the Lord.

Application

- ❖ The main message and theme I have tried to summarize with these words: the righteous may have confidence that the Lord delivers from all enemies; their numbers and the multitude of ways of attack alter nothing in the Lord’s gracious presence!
- ❖ We tend to think of attacks by unbelievers as physical aggression; and surely that is a reality for many of us. However, the most cruel and dangerous attacks are those aiming at destroying our trust in the real presence and salvation of the Lord.
- ❖ The way to answer these attacks is vividly portrayed in this Psalm: the more our faith in God’s grace is challenged, the more we throw ourselves upon that very challenged grace and presence of Jesus Christ, giving ourselves over to his care. If we must die in the process, like Stephen we referred to earlier (cf. commentary at vs. 7), the risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ, the true anointed one of God, has arisen at the right hand of the Father to silence our enemies. We can give our spirit over to Jesus the Lord even as we die in his service.
- ❖ Our assurance and security do not lie in our unwavering faith, but in the unbreakable faithfulness of the Lord Jesus Christ. In that (him) do we trust.

- ❖ The Christian life is truly one of war; always and everywhere. Joined to the anointed One of God in faith will make us the targets of the scorn of Satan and his instruments.
- ❖ This Psalm again helps us to consider the nature and character of the gathering of a Christian congregation in a worship service. This song/Psalm was sung by the people of God (or it was sung to them by the priestly musicians) as and when they gathered in the temple. One aspect of the worship service that needs to be properly emphasised is the reminder that the life of faith is a life of warfare. It is a life where people are caught up in the battle between good and evil. The singing of this Psalm is nothing less than a cry to the eternal King to go forth in his battle for righteousness, knowing that those who trust in him may follow the victory march of their Shield and Protector. A worship service should therefore be a preparation for the congregation's participation in the reality of the holy war. At the same time the worship service is itself a partaking in that battle; coming to a worship service is suppose to be an act of faith through which we confess that our victory is not a matter of our might and strength, but the believer seeking to *live from and in the union with the Lord and his Anointed Messiah, Jesus Christ.*
- ❖ The reality of the scorn and pain is that the scorn may sometimes (more often than not!) come from those very close to us either within the community of faith and/or our own family members. The title of this Psalm directs our attention to the place from where the most evil (verbal) attacks must be expected. Here lies the true fight of faith!
- ❖ The Psalm teaches us much about prayer. The larger part of this prayer is nothing but a confession and expression of trust in the Lord. The petition is contained in one verse (vs.7). Too often prayer is seen as a long petition-list to be worked through. Prayer is rather a verbal expression of our trust in the Lord God (and those who pray with us!). Petition may and will form part of that faith, but is certainly not the focus of the prayer.
- ❖ Do we pray for evil in the lives of the wicked (cf. vs. 7)? In this Psalm we hear only the desire of the faithful that the evil deeds done against them will cease; the desire for the evil talk to be silenced.

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