

A life of constant foes

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Date: 14 July 2010

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[0 : 00] Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have called us to follow with constancy our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, that you've given us the great promise, the great hope that we shall at the end inherit eternal life.

And we praise you, Lord, that as we keep that great and certain hope before us, so indeed we do not need to fear what anyone might say to us, what enemies might whisper to us without or within, that we know that what we have in Christ Jesus is sure and certain and that you are trustworthy to keep the promise that you've given to us right until the day of your coming.

Yet, Heavenly Father, we know and we acknowledge that this is a pilgrimage which often does bring discouragement, which often does seem to sap us of our strength and our might and our confidence and assurance in you.

We're so conscious, Lord, of the many hard and difficult days that we often face as followers of the Lord Jesus and the need that we have for encouragement from you and for strengthening.

So we pray, Lord, as we come to your scripture now and as we read this psalm before us these few weeks, that you would indeed give us words of great encouragement and strength to fit us for that fight and to keep our feet firmly on the path until the day of your great grace arrives.

[1 : 45] So open our eyes, Lord, and open our hearts now, we pray, as we come to your word, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, if you turn with me to Psalm number 3, it's page 448 in our Bibles, page 448.

And we're going to look at this psalm, it's just a short psalm, but we're going to look at it for the next three weeks because actually there's so much in it once we begin to think about it.

So we'll read this morning the full psalm. Psalm 3, a psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son. That's not just a title, that's part of the psalm.

It tells us what it's all about, really. So David, when he fled from Absalom his son, 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. But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head.

[2 : 51] I cried aloud to the Lord, and he answered me from his holy hill. I lay down and slept. I work again, for the Lord sustained me. I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around.

Arise, O Lord, save me, O my God. For you strike all my enemies on the cheek. You break the teeth of the wicked. Salvation belongs to the Lord.

Your blessing be on your people. Well, now, keep that open in front of you, and it'll help us as we study this together.

For many people, the Christian faith is seen as just a crutch. It's an escapist fantasy. It's a let's pretend. Let's pretend things are other than they really are, and it'll all make us feel better.

That's what Karl Marx thought. He described religion, or religion, as the opium of the people. That's what Richard Dawkins tells us today. It's all one big God delusion.

[3 : 59] It's nothing that cuts the ice with real, down-to-earth, sensible people. Now, I have to say that people like Richard Dawkins and Karl Marx and others have got some justification in saying something like that, because fantasy does abound in religious life.

Some brands of Christianity are sheer fantasy, promising happiness and health and wealth and so on for all who come to Jesus.

The largest churches in the world today, the largest churches in the UK today, are prosperity gospel churches. And it's fantasy.

But even in much, what we might call, mainstream evangelical Christianity today, there is much of that kind of celebration culture. It's all about being happy all the time.

So that if you come to church and you feel sad, you actually feel a bit guilty that you can feel happy. It's very hard to sing happy songs, isn't it, when you're not in that frame of mind.

[5 : 09] How do you sing many of the happy, happy, happy songs that there are around in the church today in Rothbury, after those terrible instances last week of those murders and the gunmen on the loose, or in Whitehaven after those terrible massacres just last month?

Now, fantasy faith like that does have absolutely nothing to offer amid the harsh realities and the pains of our lives. But the fact is that that kind of fantasy religion is actually a hundred million miles away from what the Bible is in fact rooted in and what the Bible constantly expresses to us.

And no more is that more obvious than in the Psalms. The Psalms give us theology in the raw. And that's what these songs, deep songs of the heart, are all about. They're songs that teach us about reality, about the real God, about real life, and about real faith.

Psalms 3, if you look at it, is the first psalm in the Bible that has a title, that bit that we read in capitals. It's actually part of the Hebrew text. The bold bits above in our Bibles, those aren't part of the text, those are just somebody's ideas.

But the capital bits are, it's a psalm of David, when he fled from his son Absalom. And the first book of Psalms, there's five books of Psalms, the first book of Psalms is Psalms 1 to 41, and they're all ascribed after Psalm 1 and 2 of David, or to David.

[6 : 36] They're all about David, God's anointed king of his kingdom. And here's the thing, nearly every single one of them is a lament. Isn't that striking? More than half of all the Psalms of the 150 in the Psalter, the official hymn book of the Old Testament church, more than half of them are laments, to be sung individually by believers, to be sung together in the congregation as God's people.

And don't you say, oh, well that was the Old Testament, what is the most quoted book from the Old Testament in the New Testament by Jesus and the apostles? Yes, the Psalms. We need to take that seriously today, don't we?

The Psalms are not to be relegated to the very edge of the church. The Psalms are to be very much part of the collective life and worship of God's people. What modern songs can you sing after a Whitehaven massacre, or after a terrorist incident, or after you've just lost a loved one, or in the week that you've been diagnosed with cancer?

There are some, but there are not very many. But open the book of Psalms and you'll find almost on every page there are Psalms that will express the deepest agonies and struggles of your life.

Suddenly it resonates with our lives in all of the complicated reality that we face. There is no fantasy, there is no let's pretend in the book of Psalms. And here's Psalm 3, I think is a psalm that I'm sure some of us here could sing with feeling.

[8 : 13] Right now it is a real song about real Christian life. There's no pretense, no fantasy, no hiding from the truth, and yet it is a psalm of great hope and great encouragement as we'll see over these next few weeks together.

It's important to notice, first of all, by the way, that it's not Psalm 1 or Psalm 2. It comes after those two very important psalms. Psalms 1 and 2 are the gateway to the book of Psalms and they set, if you like, the framework in which we understand the world that we live in and therefore these songs of real belief.

So Psalm 1, as you know, tells us that it's God's word that rules all human life. It tells us that true happiness, therefore, is found in turning away from the words and the actions and the thinking of the world and delighting in God's word.

Blessed is the man, it says, whose delight is not in the counsel of the wicked, not in the way of the sinners, not in the seat of scoffers, but in the law of the Lord, the instruction of the Lord.

And then Psalm 2 tells us that God's Son rules the world and rules time and eternity. And therefore, refuge is found not with those who are gathered against him, but in the Son himself.

[9 : 31] Verse 12 of Psalm 2, kiss the Son, blessed are those who take refuge in him. But neither of those two Psalms pretends that there is no present struggle.

In fact, it's quite the opposite. For the present, what we see is a man of faith surrounded by the pressures of the world and by the powers of the world united against God and his Son.

And so in Psalm 3, what we have here is immediately the reality on the ground of what that means in the life of an individual faithful believer. It's what it means to live life as people of the word in amongst people of the world, people of the king, surrounded by the people of the enemy.

And a very striking first thing that is abundantly clear in this Psalm is that the real believer, the real Christian, faces the reality of constant foes.

There are real enemies of God abounding in this world and therefore those who are siding with God will likewise face constant foes.

[10 : 43] Enemies without and enemies within. And the constant assault of these enemies is on the very heart of our faith.

It's seeking to destroy the assurance and the consciousness of salvation that we have in God's salvation. Look at verses 1 and 2 again. O Lord, how many are my foes!

Many are rising against me! Many are saying of my soul, what? There is no salvation for him in God. Notice the agony and the intensity of that cry three times.

It's many foes, many against me. Many. See how personal it is. They're against me. They're against my soul, he says.

It's the very core of my being. The many foes are mocking foes. There's no salvation for him, they say. It's all a fantasy. It's just a God delusion.

[11 : 44] Now what would bring about that kind of lament? Well, it's the agonized cry, isn't it, of somebody whose outward circumstances in life suggests that God has deserted him.

And that conclusion is in fact reinforced by his inner thoughts that tells him about the real sin and failure in his life and that that must surely mean that indeed God has deserted him.

that God has been driven away from him because of what he's done and that in fact he only has himself to blame. Now that was the situation of David, the psalmist in this psalm.

But I think it's a frequent of experience, a frequent experience of many of God's people, many Christian believers today. Later on, when you go home, read the story of this.

You'll find it in 2 Samuel chapter 12 and all the following chapters. But let me just remind you, after David's glorious accession to the throne in Israel, the great high point, it immediately all starts to go wrong.

[12 : 49] And his own sin leads to terrible consequences for his own life, for his family and indeed for the whole of the nation of Israel. He nearly, very nearly lost his whole kingdom and caused total disaster for the people of God.

What happened? Do you remember? It was that fateful word. At the time when kings go out to war, David didn't go out to war. He stayed at home at leisure.

And what did he do? He amused himself, didn't he, by sitting on his rooftop and watching his neighbour's wife having a bath on the roof. David was a real man.

He was not a sort of fictional asexual being. Of course, he was attracted by a beautiful woman washing herself on the roof. It was very alluring, no doubt. Let me tell you this.

When I was in India just last year, we were visiting a place, quite a rural place, and we were standing on the roof chatting and we looked across the road and here on the roof, just in the house across from where we were, was the most beautiful woman standing on the roof brushing her long, dark hair.

[13 : 53] It was a very alluring sight. It was quite captivating. Unfortunately, she had all her clothes on. But Bathsheba, of course, didn't.

And no doubt it was a very erotic scene. A very lovely scene in many ways, but not for him. It wasn't his wife. It was somebody else's wife.

And David was just tempted by what all of us, all of us, are so easily tempted by. The beauty, yes, the beauty of rightly sexual and erotic things, but removed from their beautiful place within marriage and becoming therefore ugly and worse than that, dangerous.

Now, we do it today. I'm principally talking about us men, I suppose, via computers, via adult films in hotels that we shouldn't be watching. But David had a live show right in front of him within his grasp.

And because he was a very powerful man, he was in extra danger, wasn't he? Because he was in a position to get what he wanted. And he thought that he could do that with no consequences. That's what powerful people always think, isn't it?

[15 : 07] Our sports stars today, our businessmen. Power brings great danger. And so David, the most powerful man in the whole land, took what he wanted.

He took another man's wife and he committed adultery with her. And then, of course, he faced just exactly the same crisis that so many have faced ever since.

David, I'm pregnant. And as so often, one thing leads to another and to even worse sin, to murder. That's what the news has all been about last week, isn't it?

And that terrible gunman down south. Sex, broken relationships, leading to murder. It still happens today all around when that statement is made, oh, I'm pregnant.

Often it leads to murder today, murder of the unborn baby. All the help from Mary Stopes and the NHS and euphemisms like terminating a pregnancy.

[16 : 08] For David, it led to very real murder of a different kind, taking the innocent blood of this woman's husband, Uriah, and taking her then as his wife. But you know the story because God confronts David and punishes him and alas, the child that is born dies and God warns David that having set up on this course, the consequences for his life cannot be erased.

Violence will not depart from your household, God tells him. And what you have done, he says, will rebound on you, David. Your own wives will be taken by somebody else and you will be humiliated publicly in front of others.

And that is exactly what happened to David. God forgave David's sin but the mess that David had created could not be undone.

Because life is not like that, is it? You know that and so do I. You just can't turn back the clock. You can't undo the mess that you have created.

David. That's a very real warning to us, isn't it? Just a little innocent bit of voyeurism there but look where it ended up for David.

[17 : 24] And look where it ends up for many folk today. Don't be naive. David, we're told in the Bible, was a man after God's own heart but the thing is his glands were just as powerful as yours and mine.

And we've got to be careful especially if like David you're in a position of power over other people. Maybe in your office or in work or whatever it is. And especially since the world all around about us today just says take what you want, take what you can get.

That's normal. No, it's not. Nor is it right. Don't be deceived. It will all unravel just as it did with David.

I promise you. And David's story makes very grim reading. You read on in the story you'll find that sexual dysfunction multiplies in his family as so often it does today.

That's what we find, isn't it? Those who are abusers very often in their background have been abused themselves. And what happens in David's family is it descends into a story of incest and rape and even murder.

[18 : 33] And then Absalom, David's own son, Absalom rises up and conspires against him and leads a rebellion and a coup d'etat and employs mercenaries to install him in place of his father as the king of Israel.

Just the sort of thing that happens today. We hear about it, don't we? Despotism and then some of their family rise up, bring in mercenaries and pop them off. And so as the title of Psalm 3 says, David fled from Absalom his son with a bedraggled band of supporters.

You read in 2 Samuel, the people cried out, the hearts of the men of Israel have gone after Absalom. That's very grim. People are cursing David, they're throwing stones at him, they're spitting at him, they're cursing him.

God's anointed king, the one whom God had said his son, his descendants would reign forever and ever and would bring all God's purposes to fulfillment for his people. Now, he's rejected by absolutely everybody, even his own family.

And apparently, rejected by God himself. Facing real enemies. Enemies without. Absalom, his son, look at the pain of that.

[19 : 50] And the soldiers and the priests and the prophets, the world and the church together saying there's no salvation for him, no God with him, not anymore. Enemies without everywhere, but I suspect even worse, enemies within.

Because David knew in his own heart that there was truth in their accusations, didn't he? He knew he was a sinner. He knew that he had brought this disaster on his household and his nation.

He knew that when he looked within in his own heart, there could be no grounds for assurance of God's acceptance of him. In fact, the opposite.

He knew that he deserved for God to totally desert him. And so, when Shimei, the man we read of, cursing him, it really cuts home.

You man of blood, he said, you worthless man, see, your evil is on you for you are a man of blood. And David knew that that was true. He said, let him curse.

[20 : 55] Maybe God sent him to say these very things because it's all true. And David was in real despair. That's why he's crying out, oh Lord, how many are my foes? Now, of course, David is a unique figure in history.

He's the anointed king over Israel. None of us is quite like David. And yet, in another way, David is also just like us. Because he was a man chosen by God's grace for God's greater purpose of glory.

He was chosen not for his own merits, but he was a sinner like everybody else, adopted to be God's son. And he had enemies precisely because he represented God in the world.

For all his faults, he stood as the representative of God. He stood for God and he spoke for God, just like every Christian believer stands for God and speaks for God despite all of our faults.

Because the son too says the whole world is united against God and his son and therefore the whole world is united against God's people. And all of us as God's people, all of us are united to his king.

[22 : 08] In fact, the Bible tells us that all of us are adopted to reign as kings with the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is why, friends, you and I also will face enemies, constant foes.

Enemies without and constant foes within. We face the very same kind of deep and bitter struggles because we too are sinful people.

We're forgiven people, yes we are, like David, and yet at the same time we have to live, don't we, with the consequences of our sin, with the consequence of the mess that we've made in our lives, in our families and all around us.

And that makes us very vulnerable. Very vulnerable to the assault on our faith and our assurance and our confidence from our real enemy.

Now that's life, isn't it? Real enemies without. We face people, don't we, who mock us. There's no salvation in that God delusion. That's old-fashioned ridiculous nonsense. God's dead.

[23 : 16] Look at the church, it's in decline, it's all old people. How can you possibly give any time to that rubbish? How do you think your faith is unique when there are all these other religions in the world? They're all just the same.

They're all just a delusion. In some parts of the world today we face, as believers, our brothers and sisters, exactly the real physical dangers that David faced there.

Countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan and Nigeria, Iraq and places like that. Real rage, violence, rape, murder of Christians. Where's your God to save you?

They say. As your village has been burned and people have been killed. Where's your God to save you? It's a delusion. Or even like David, for us sometimes it's true, isn't it, that it happens closer to home in our family.

Some of us face scorn. Perhaps this is you. From a wife or a husband or parents or children who despise your Christian faith, who mock you because of it.

[24 : 19] And friends, the New Testament is equally realistic. The life of Christian faith will be a life facing constant foes. That's what the Bible tells us. Right till the end.

It's through many tribulations, says Paul, to the church that we must enter the kingdom of God. In fact, we're clearly told that there'll be terrible times in the last days.

That's why Paul says to those who'll be Christian leaders, endure suffering. That's why he says to everyone who'll live a godly life in Christ Jesus that you will be persecuted. There will be constant foes without in the Christian life.

But also, and often worse, there will be constant foes within. And that's because just like David, you and I, we look at ourselves and we know that we have made mistakes and that we are sinful and that we have fallen again and again and again.

And it might be like David with sexual sin that's left a legacy of mess in your life and your family. It might be things like addiction or just anger or just having abdicated your responsibility as a father or as a mother or as a friend that's led to mess in relationships with your marriage, with your children.

[25 : 41] And we look inside and we know that there's guilt that would lead us to despair. And we have an enemy, says the Bible, who tempts us to despair and tells us of the guilt within and says, see, there's no salvation for you in God.

Look at the mess you've made of your Christian life. How could God possibly still be with you? Haven't you felt that sometimes? I've felt that often.

Because we face a constant foe deep within our own sin, but sin that is stirred up and trumpeted and placarded before us by our great adversary who seeks to devour us, by our accuser, who points to things that we know are true in our own life and says, they're right, those people who say God's abandoned you.

And it's true what your heart says about you as well. There can't possibly be salvation for you. You can't possibly be a real Christian. And that's when we cry out with agony like the psalmist.

How many are my foes? They mock me and I fear it's all true. Sometimes people think that they have themselves committed an unpardonable sin.

[26 : 58] That your life is beyond all forgiveness, beyond all hope. But listen, just listen in this agony how this psalm begins. Look at those first words. Oh Lord, cries the psalmist.

That's a cry, isn't it, to the personal covenant name of God. That's the cry of a real believer who does know God and who's calling out God's name in the midst of his deep distress.

distress. Just as a child instinctively cries out, Dad, or Mum. That's the mark of a real believer. Just as it's the mark of a real believer that he has real enemies, constant foes, outside and inside.

I'll never tire of telling people that the very, very first description of a real believer in the Bible is in Genesis 3.15. It's one in whom God has placed enmity, struggle against the evil one.

A real believer is somebody that God has put into a struggle with enemies. You need to understand that. You need to understand that the reason you cry, Oh Lord, many are my foes.

[28 : 08] The reason that you say, Oh my life is a constant battle, is not primarily because of the sin within you, though you have sin within you. It's primarily because of God's seed within you.

It's that God has placed you in that battle by uniting you to his Son. That's why you have enemies. And that's why you have struggles within.

These things are evidence, not that you're lost, but that you're his. These things are the family hallmarks of real faith, not false faith.

Just as we close, look at verse 2 again. The mocking of enemies. Where in the Bible do you see that more vividly than anywhere else? Well, you see it, don't you, around the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

They mocked him. Many mocked him. God won't deliver him, they said. He's not the Son of God. How could he possibly be under a curse like this if he was? But he was, and he was for us so that we might be his forever.

[29 : 20] And friends, the mark of a real believer is that because you are his, you also will face constant foes just as he did.

His enemies will be your enemies until your life's end. Now there's a lot more than just that in this psalm. It begins with the great but of verse 3 and we'll look at that next week.

But for this week, just take that thought and meditate on it. The real Christian life is the life that knows the scars of real battles.

Foes without and foes within. That's not failure. That's real faith. So be encouraged that verses 1 and 2 seem to be your prayer at the moment.

And listen to Jesus. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account, whether from without or within.

[30 : 24] Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven. It's the real Christian who faces constant foes, not the fake one.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that we stand close to you and that we know your enemies as ours.

Thank you, Lord, that even in our deep distress we have the assurance that we are yours and you are ours forever. May that encourage us today and for the rest of this week we ask for Jesus' sake.

Amen.