

A life of continuous fellowship

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[0 : 00] Gracious God, these words bring great encouragement and comfort and cheer into the middle of this our day. To know that our lives are safe with Christ on high.

With Christ who is our Saviour and our God. What a blessing, Lord, to be your people. To know that this is true. To know that whatever enemies we face, whatever accusations they bring, whatever anxiety and fear and real guilt and shame may from time to time grip our hearts.

Yet there is great safety and security in you. So, Father, we thank you for your constant reminders of that to us.

And especially for the words in this psalm that we'll study now. So, Lord, be with us, we pray, as we read these words, as we study them together. May they speak to us as powerfully and as plainly as the day they first spoke to the psalmist in his heart.

As he wrote them down and used them on his lips in praise to you. Grant us, we pray, the same sense of you, the living God, in our midst.

[1 : 26] For we dare to ask this through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen. Well, we're back in Psalm number 3, which you'll find in the church scribbles on page 448.

And if you'd like to turn that up, we'll read the psalm together. Psalm of David. Remember, when he fled from Absalom, his son.

That terrible period in David's life when everything seemed to fall apart. And even his own son raised up an army against him to depose him. And David said, 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, you are a shield about me.

My glory and the lifter of my head. I cried aloud to the Lord, and he answered me from his holy hill. I lay down and slept.

[2 : 34] I woke 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. And your blessing be upon your people.

Well, do keep that open in front of you. As we look at it together. Psalm 3 is all about real faith. It's all about the real Christian life.

And last time we saw how immediately, in the first two verses of this psalm, it blows absolutely out of the water, once and for all, all those ideas that Christianity and Christian faith is simply a crutch. It's simply a fantasy that prays, let's pretend. Let's pretend life is rosy and wonderful, when in fact the reality is nothing of the sort. No, far from it.

[3 : 39] Verses 1 and 2 are very plain. The real Christian life, we learned, is a life lived facing constant foes. Enemies without and enemies within.

O Lord, says the psalmist, how many are my foes? That's his cry. And in the Christian life our foes are many. Why is that? Well, it's because God's foes are many in the world.

And we saw that Psalm 1 and 2, the beginning of the Psalter, start the book with that great reality. It tells us that the world and the world's people are set against the Lord, for the most part, and his anointed.

And therefore they are set also against the people of the Lord and his anointed. And that's just what Jesus tells us very plainly, isn't it, in the New Testament. If the world hates you, he says, know that it hated me first.

And so we have many foes. And also mocking foes. Alas, so often our foes, especially our great enemy, the devil, he has a foothold against us.

[4 : 47] Because, just like David, we also are sinners and we know it. And so our foes taunt us. And they say, there's no salvation for you in that God of yours. That's a fantasy, that's a delusion.

And worse, sometimes they say, well, even if God were real, how could he possibly accept somebody like you? Look at you. Look at the mess of your life.

You're a disgrace. If God's accepting anybody in this world, it's not going to be you. And that's a very great assault, isn't it, on people of faith. Because we know that when that kind of accusation comes from outside or from inside our own hearts, we know that those kind of accusations do contain truth.

When we are most honest about ourselves, often that's when we're most vulnerable, because we feel the weight of our own sin, don't we? We know that there's truth in those allegations.

And feelings like that can destroy us and would destroy us, but for the wonderful reality that despite being a life of constant foes, the real Christian life is also at the same time a life of continuous fellowship with God himself.

[6 : 07] As Christians, we have a real relationship with God. We have an unbroken relationship with God, even in the midst of constant foes. And that's what verse 3 tells us.

In the midst of the foes, the psalmist cries, but you, O Lord, are a shield around about me. But God. And God is the great circumstance that changes all other circumstances.

Don't you thank God often for those great butt gods of the Bible? There's so many of them, aren't there? I'm very thankful, by the way, that I'm not American, so there's no confusion about that word. You know the story, don't you, of the Scottish preacher who went to America and he stood up in the congregation and said, in my sermon today I want to examine with you some of the most beautiful butts in the Bible.

And he couldn't understand why half the congregation looked puce with rage and the other half were falling about laughing. So just in case there's any Americans here, this is butts with one T, B-U-T. But you, O Lord, says the psalmist, you are near me, you are with me, and that changes everything.

[7 : 19] Even when the mockery of my foes is joined by the knowledge in my own heart that condemns me as well. You are my shield when that happens. And sometimes it is our own heart, isn't it?

That we need to be shielded against. I think perhaps my favourite, certainly one of my favourite verses in the whole Bible is 1 John 3, verse 20. For whenever our heart condemns us, it says, God is greater than our hearts.

And he knows everything. He knows it all. He knows it all about me, and the truth about my life, and all the things that make me deeply ashamed. All the things that would condemn me.

All the things that should condemn me. But God is greater than my heart. He's a shield around about me. And that's what verses 3 to 6 of this psalm is speaking about.

It's speaking about the reality of a relationship with God that is greater than anything, anything that can ever assail us. No matter what befalls us, the real Christian life is a life of continuous fellowship with God.

[8 : 32] And David describes it here, I think, as a continuous possession of two things. He knows the beauty of God's presence, and he knows also the bounty of God's provision.

Look at verse 3. First of all, he's telling us that the real believer knows the beauty of God's presence. You see, to be a real Christian is to know God personally. And these verses describe a relationship with God that's deeply personal.

Even in the midst of his foes, he has continuous fellowship with the Lord himself. And it is the Lord himself, the Lord's presence, that is his salvation.

But you, O Lord, are a shield about me. You, O Lord, are my glory, and the lifter of my head. Now, there's nothing at all presumptuous about the Bible's view of the Christian life.

What he's saying is that real confidence, real assurance, comes only from a living relationship with God himself. Because God isn't just the provider of salvation.

[9 : 37] God himself is our salvation. That's so important, you see, because when we're surrounded by enemies, enemies within, and perhaps enemies without, we will find no assurance about our salvation from looking inwards at ourselves.

That's actually what leads us to despair, isn't it? You look in on your own heart, and there's no assurance there that God could possibly accept you. But real assurance comes not from looking

inwards, but from looking outwards and upwards to the Lord himself.

The Lord himself is our salvation and our complete salvation. That's what verse 3 is telling us. You, O Lord, are my shield, he says.

The Lord is himself David's refuge. He's the protector from the arrows of the enemy. Both the real ones, he's in a real situation of war, and the metaphorical ones.

The fiery darts of accusations that ignite the fires of fear in our hearts and tempt us to despair because they keep telling us all the time of that guilt that is within.

[10:52] You know what that feels like, don't you? But he is a shield around about. He's a refuge of safety regardless of whatever direction those arrows are coming from.

He, the Lord himself, is our hiding place, as another of the Psalms says, to preserve us, to shelter us from the great storms of doubt and despair.

You remember the last verse of Psalm 2 says, Blessed are all who take refuge in him. He is our refuge himself. The shield that we need in the face of the enemy's darts.

And then he is our righteousness, says the Psalmist, in the face of our own sin and shame. Lord, you are my glory. He is our glory.

He is our dignity and our identity. He is everything that gives us worth and value in the sight of man, but much more importantly, in the sight of God. He is not only our refuge against the struggles and the storms of the present, he is the answer to our, well, our sins and disasters and failures in the past.

[12:08] All the things that have left us feeling ashamed. The things that have left us feeling worthless and hopeless. Having no glory, no worth, no value.

glory. But you are my glory, says the Psalmist. And again, that's so important, isn't it? When your self-esteem is in the dust because you've screwed up horribly and you know you've screwed up horribly and you know that it's all your fault what's happened.

Well, it's just no good, is it? It doesn't work to go to a therapist to try and help you get over it, to just help you to have a more positive view of yourself. It doesn't work when you have a right view of yourself because you're right but you've messed up and it's all your fault.

You can't deceive yourself. Your view of yourself isn't unhealthy and pathological. It's healthy and right because it's real. You haven't covered yourself with glory.

You've covered yourself with shame. You have no glory. You see, the Gospel says to us, you, Lord, in that situation of utter disaster, you are my glory.

[13:27] All the glory that I need. You are my righteousness that I don't have. It's what we sung. God the just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me.

He is our glory. Behold him there, the risen Lamb. my perfect, spotless righteousness, my glory. And you see, even in the face of the deepest shame, the real Christian can say, you, Lord, are my glory.

That's the beauty of his presence with us. And so third, he himself, in verse 3, is our restorer from the depths of disaster.

His presence is what makes everything new and what gives us a future. You, Lord, are the lifter of my head. Now, if you read the story of what's been going on with David in 2 Samuel 15, you'll read that as he fled Jerusalem, he was weeping, he was barefoot, his head was bowed, and it was covered with a cloth.

He was in abject despair and dejection. I wonder if you've felt like that at times, as though you were just so weighed down that your chin is dragging on the ground.

[14:48] Well, the Lord is the great headlifter. I remember sometimes when I was little, and it's very common of children, isn't it, when you're upset and crying and miserable and you're looking down and your chin's on your chest, and my father would sit me on his knee and put his finger under there and just lift it up, wipe away the eyes with tears.

He's the great headlifter. But it speaks of more than just comfort, although of course it is comfort, he's speaking of restoration and vindication here.

There's a lovely use of that exact language in Genesis chapter 40. Do you remember the story of Joseph when he's in prison? And he has that dream about the king's cupbearer and that he's going to be restored.

And these are Joseph's words to the cupbearer of the king who's in prison. Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office and you will place Pharaoh's cup in his hand as formerly.

You'll restore all things. And our God is the one who says, behold, I make all things new. And that's the reality, friends, of what a real relationship with this God means.

[16:05] To know him is to know the beauty of his presence in all of these ways. It's to know him as a constant refuge, as a shield all around about us from enemies. It's to know him as our righteousness, as the glory that we know we do not have, that covers all of our past shame.

And it's to know him as our restorer, as the lifter up of our head who renews all our future and gives us hope. That's the beauty of his presence with us.

There's nothing pretend about that. Nothing at all. It's real. And David is throwing all of his needs on God in this dire situation.

He's saying, Lord, in the face of all this calamity, I depend totally on you for refuge and for righteousness and for restoration. If you want me to remain as your chosen one, if you want me to remain as your holy son, then it's all going to have to come from you because I'm helpless.

That's what David's praying. That's just another way of saying what the Bible means by faith. It just means looking to God like that and to his presence for everything.

[17:20] and knowing that everything that we can ever need is found simply in the beauty of his presence. He is our shield of refuge, our glory, our righteousness, the restorer, the lifter of our head.

You see, just to know him and his presence is to have all of his benefits. And that's what verses 4 to 6 go on to illustrate further because you see, to know the beauty of his presence always also brings the bounty of his provision.

And to be a real Christian, to know God personally, is to share a relationship that because it is so deeply personal, is very greatly privileged. Look at how the psalmist sums up this bountiful provision of that relationship that God brings to him.

He's conscious of three things, isn't he? We've had three R's, now here's three P's. First thing he's conscious of, verse 4, is a miracle of prayer. I cried aloud, he says, and he answered me.

Now prayer, answering God with the response of our hearts, the cry of our hearts, that's one of the primary marks, isn't it, of the life of God in the soul of man. You remember in Acts chapter 9 when Saul of Tarsus is converted on the Damascus road and God calls Ananias to go and see him.

[18:41] He says, behold, he's praying. That was a mark of his newfound relationship with God. He really is truly communicating with him. That's often the same of a new Christian today.

I was speaking to somebody just yesterday telling me of somebody that they spoke to who said to them, I prayed, I think, for the very first time really, last Sunday. He was saying, well that's just an evidence there of new life in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And the wonderful provision of prayer of a truly open communication with God brings us great, great assurance, doesn't it? Especially in times of distress. Because our God is the God who hears and who answers prayer.

That's the very heart of biblical faith, isn't it? Remember Elijah on Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal? And what does Elijah say? The God who hears and answers by fire.

He is the God. The only God. The real God. And the God of Scripture hears and answers while the mounting noise and cacophony of all the prayers of the pagan priests of Baal are not heard and are not answered.

[19:57] And one of the great provisions of our Heavenly Father is that in every situation, especially in times of distress, we can cry aloud. We don't have to bottle up our emotions.

We don't have to have the proverbial stiff upper lip. And yet prayer, of course, is far, far more than just a kind of cathartic exercise to make us feel better.

We are praying, says the Bible, to the one who hears and answers prayer from his holy hill. Notice, by the way, that the holy hill was Jerusalem and David had just been kicked out of Jerusalem and it looked to all the world as though that was the place that God had deserted.

Just as it looks to all the world today that there's no God in heaven, that there's no throne on high, that there's no truth in Christian faith. But the real Christian has a life of constant fellowship with the God who is on the throne in heaven.

And yet he is the God whose ear is cocked and he's stooped to hear our prayers and to answer our prayers. So in the real Christian faith we rejoice in the miracle of prayer.

[21:10] And then verse 5, we know also the miracle of God's providence. I lay down and slept, says David. I woke again for the Lord sustained me. Psalm 1 verse 6 tells us that the Lord knows the way of the righteous.

He watches over them. Jesus tells us every hair on our heads is numbered. So that despite all apparent evidence to the contrary, the truth is that God's careful providential care over his people is so exact, so complete, so perfect, that the Bible tells us that all things must work together for the good of those that are in Christ.

And for David in this instance, it was a very real physical protection. He woke up the next morning. Perhaps he was surprised to have woken up and not been killed in his sleep by the enemies that were against him. But God doesn't always provide that specific physical protection.

But he tells us plainly in the Bible, doesn't he? That the glory that is to come, the glory that he certainly will preserve us for and work all things together towards, that that glory will be preceded inevitably by suffering.

And so some of us will face hardship. Some of us will struggle with long and difficult illnesses. All kinds of other calamities will face us in our lives.

[22 : 45] And yet, in all these things, we are more than conquerors. Why? Because the Lord sustains us. We know the miracle of his providence.

He has the whole world and he has us in the palm of his hands. And he will work out of that that is in the palm of his hands.

The ultimate glory and good of those that he loves. I don't know about you, but I find it a very, very great encouragement indeed.

just to see the faces in church of some of our oldest saints. Some of those that the Lord has sustained through not just many, many years of life, but the growing difficulty of life.

And some of them, if you knew their stories, extraordinary trials and agonies and pains of life. And yet, they are here today praising the name of the Lord Jesus Christ because the Lord has sustained them.

[23 : 49] That's the miracle of God's providence. His constant care for his people. And because fellowship with him brings such wonderful provisions as these, we also have what verse 6 speaks of.

We have the miracle of peace. I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around. The presence, you see, of our God banishes fear and gives supernatural peace.

And it is supernatural, isn't it? There's nothing pretend about this. Notice that. David is not saying, oh, everything's magicked away and everything is marvelous. Though it's perfectly clear there are many thousands of people still against him.

They're very much there. But, to know the presence of God, to know that he is near, truly does strengthen our feeble knees. And it gives us real and satisfying peace.

Even in the face of all of this, he says, I will not be afraid. Have you ever experienced that? In the midst of some very tough thing in your life?

[25 : 02] Psalm 56, verse 4 says, In God I trust, I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me? And because we know the Lord, and we have a life of constant fellowship with him, we can say that with utter confidence.

That's what the apostle says in Hebrews 13, 6, where he quotes those words from Psalm 56, For he has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you. We have his presence, and therefore we can have his peace.

Not fear, but peace. The peace of God, not of man. Peace that passes and transcends all human understanding, and keeps our minds and hearts in Jesus Christ.

The miracle of peace. We're not supernatural people, neither was David, but supernatural courage and peace in the midst of real and raging circumstances, yes, that is what the gospel brings to us. Remember Paul in 2 Timothy 4, when he was deserted by everybody, just as David was here, what did he say? But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me. The beauty of his presence.

[26 : 17] He will rescue me, says Paul, from every evil deed and bring me safe to his heavenly kingdom. The Lord sustained me.

He knew, just like David, the beauty of his presence. And so he knew, just like David, the bounty of his provision, even in darkest days.

And that means, friends, that so can you. Because that's the real life of faith. The real, genuine, hallmarked article of true Christianity.

A life of continuous fellowship with one who is our shield, our glory, the lifter of our head. He's our refuge, he's our righteousness, and he's our restorer. He hears our prayers. He sustains us by his providence. And he grants our hearts his peace. So next time when you find yourself praying, and it's right to pray it, oh Lord, how many are my foes?
[27 : 24] Don't stop. Remember, it goes on, but you, oh Lord. God, because it's his presence, it's his provision that makes all the difference.

That's the real Christian life. Let's pray. Lord, how we praise you for the beauty of your presence, and for the bounty of your great and wonderful provision for us. What a joy to be able to sing, you are our shield, you are our glory. You are the lifter of our heads. Help us to remember these words, and may they bring us great peace. For we ask it in Jesus Christ's name. Amen. Amen.