

1. When Enemies Circle Around

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[0 : 00] Now let's pray. The soul that in Jesus has found its repose, he will not, he cannot desert to its foes.

Father, we thank you for the confidence given in your word. Our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. And so we come to you, a great God, the great King, and yet one who cares for us, one who understands us better than we understand ourselves.

We are amazed at the majesty and the wonder of the universe you have created, of the stars and galaxies far beyond the reach of the human eye, and even beyond the reach of our most powerful telescopes, for the mystery and the vastness of space, for the wonder of the created world with its rivers and mountains and fields and lakes, for its cities and its towns, and for the huge variety of people, of every type of language, every type of situation.

We are amazed at all that you have done. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the people and those who live in it. And yet we are also aware that this is a broken and fallen world.

There is beauty. There is also ugliness. There is some joy. But there is also suffering. There is hope.

[1 : 35] There is also despair. There is life. But there is also death. And so we come to you in our need. Wherever we may be, whether we are Christian or not Christian, we believe it is the same message for each of us, that the God of the universe, who made heaven and earth, the Lord of history, came into this world, became one of us.

Jesus Christ, one with you, became one of us, and is one of us still. That through believing in him, through knowing him, we can know salvation from our sins.

We can know his company in the present and the hope of the world to come, the hope of glory. And we know this is true of the whole world.

The whole world is full of problems, vast, perplexing ones, problems of commerce and economics, problems of people trying to find subsistence, problems of war, problems of politics.

Problems to which there are no simple answers, but problems which you understand and you care for. So open our minds, Lord, open our hearts, so that we may indeed see wonderful things out of your law.

[2 : 57] We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, the first of the Psalms we'll be looking at is Psalm 3, which is on page 448.

So we're going to be looking at four Psalms, not four consecutive Psalms, but four Psalms from different parts of the Psalter, two of them by David and two of them anonymous, but all Psalms which are raising the big problems, looking at the world and its perplexities and looking at God and his goodness.

So Psalm 3, a Psalm of 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.

I cried aloud to the Lord and he answered me from his holy hill. I lay down and slept. I woke again for the Lord sustained me.

[4 : 08] 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. This is the word of God and may he indeed bless it to our hearts and minds.

If you had been in London in the middle of last century, you would have had quite a galaxy of distinguished preachers you could go and listen to. And one of those was the great Methodist Dr.

Sangster, W.E. Sangster.

And he was a man who understood not just scripture but understood life. And one day he was visiting a home which had been bereaved, tragically bereaved.

A much-loved child had died. And he came away feeling utterly desolate, feeling that nothing he had said, nothing he was able to do, had given any help to that grieving family.

[5 : 24] As he came out of their house and crossed the road, there was, he was facing a church which had on it what he calls a chirpy wayside pulpit sign.

Cheer up, it may never happen. And he shouted to the amazement of the passers-by, but it has happened. Well, that family I've just visited, it has happened.

For David, in Psalm 3, it had happened. And the worst things possible. Driven from his throne and his life threatened by his son Absalom.

Purely in his life, and he might have expected to be secure and enjoy a comfortable old age, it had happened. And his feelings were bitter indeed.

Bitter because it was his own son who was the foe who had risen against him. Bitter because he felt, no doubt, his own sense of sinfulness and guilt over Uriah and Bathsheba.

[6 : 31] And bitter too, probably, because he felt, surely I got rid of this many years ago when Saul was pursuing me round the Judean hills. Now, we are not David.

but, there are times in our life when we would say this, it has happened. Now, what do we do? Now, the psalm develops in three movements and I want to look at these briefly with you.

First of all, in verses 1 and 2, David is saying hardship is inevitable. It has happened, if you like.

That's what Jesus says, in the world, you will have tribulation.

You will have trouble, you will have disappointment, you will have difficulties. I often think a good representation of the Christian life would be Steven Spielberg's film, Indiana Jones.

You've probably not thought of that as a representation of the Christian life. The Christian life, indeed life, can often be like this. You escape from poisonous snakes, then you're attacked by hostile tribes, then you're in danger from fire, in danger from flood.

[7 : 42] So much of living in this world and so much of Christian living can be like that. There are two particular elements here. First of all, there is human hostility.

How many are my foes? Many are rising against you. David was not paranoid. They actually were out to get him. That is the point.

And if you read the story in 2 Samuel 16, you'll discover that very vividly. You see, David must have had this sinking feeling. I committed this sin with Bathsheba and Uriah.

God has forgiven me, but I'm surrounded by bitter and hostile people who will never forgive and will never forget. The overwhelming sense of isolation in a hostile world.

I, a stranger and afraid in a world I never made. that's the first element of the inevitable hardship. But the second element is more, is harder to bear.

[8 : 45] Many are saying of my soul there is no salvation for him in God. But God has become hostile. That is what's terrifying the Samus.

This is, this is hard to bear. How, how does this fit in with God's promises? Remember, God had promised to David, you will sit on the throne after you there will be your descendants who will also sit on the throne.

What is it going to happen now? So, beside human hostility, there is the apparent hostility of God. The silence of heaven.

Why isn't God doing something? So, hardship is inevitable. You'll notice the word but in verse three. A hugely important word.

What do we put against the hardship? But, he says, and the point of the second section in verses three and four is that prayer is indispensable.

[9 : 50] Hardship is inevitable. And in these situations, prayer is indispensable. This is clearly, this is, this is clearly a morning, Sam, I lay down and slept, I woke again.

Perhaps this is waking thoughts rush back. These thoughts, I'm surrounded by enemies, God has turned his back on me, but you, O Lord, are a shield about me.

In his despair, he refuses to let go of God. That's something you'll find in all the Lament Psalms.

The psalmist wrestles with God, like Jacob in that vivid story, wrestling with the stranger, I will not let you go unless you bless me.

Realism had seen the enemies. David is not saying, the enemies are not there, of course they're there, but beyond that he sees God. One of the things the Psalms do is teach us how to pray. If you find your prayer life is going stale and dull, and if you're at all like me, that will be a regular experience, then use the Psalms. These Psalms are prayers, and indeed if you look at the structure of the Psalms, Psalm 1 tells us how to begin praying, meditating on the word of God.

[11 : 10] That's how we begin praying. Meditating isn't some mystical experience. Meditating is reading and thinking about what we read. That's such an important point.

If we don't think about what we read, we might as well not read it. So meditating on God's word, obeying, and then to the celebration of Psalm 150, through all the changing scenes of life, praise the Lord.

Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. So as David turns to prayer, there are two particular things I want you to notice. Notice in verse one, he said, O Lord, how many are my foes?

And then verse three, O Lord, you are a shield about me. This is the covenant name of God, who has committed to his people by promises that he cannot and will not break.

And David is echoing the words of an earlier scripture. David is in the desert. Read about that in 2 Samuel 16 and so on. Probably out in the open air, in the desert, sleeping, nervous, perhaps sleeping under his shield, the large shield which protected him.

[12 : 27] there's much more to it than that. David's thoughts, I'm sure, are going back to a thousand years before this, when another wanderer had prayed in that same desert.

And what did the Lord say to him? Don't be afraid, Abraham, I am your shield. Sure, these are the words that David is thinking about, because if you look at that in Genesis 15, you'll find that Abraham likewise is surrounded by enemies.

Abraham is afraid about the future. Abraham, I am your shield. David says, Lord, you did that for Abraham, I believe you can do that through my glory.

Glory means essentially that you're the most real thing in the universe. The word glory, the Hebrew word glory, means utter reality and solidity.

You're more real than the enemies. And glory also means the light of God. Then your light can see things clearly and the lifter up of my head. In other words, you're going to get me out of this situation.

[13 : 38] And notice two verse, for I cried aloud to the Lord. He is, David is serious about this, and he answered me from his holy hill.

The holy hill, of course, is Zion, the city of our God, the city of David. So if David is saying, Lord, I'm out of Zion at the moment, but I'm not out of your presence, I believe you're still in Zion, because you're still in Zion, your promises will be fulfilled.

So, hardship is inevitable. You will not live without hardship, the kind of hardship that comes from being human, illness, disappointment, bereavement, all these kind of things.

And also, if you're a believer, the hardships that come from being a Christian, and when God seems not to be keeping his promises. In those circumstances, prayer is indispensable.

Keep holding on to God. He'll keep holding on to you. That's the important thing. It's not our faith, it's his faithfulness. If it depended on my faith, the kingdom wouldn't come, and if it did, it wouldn't last the minute.

[14 : 51] We need to depend on God's faith. That's what prayer is about, isn't it? Lord, I can't cope. We can cope. Of course, you don't pray. But this leads on to the third and final part of the sermon, verses 7 and 8.

And the theme here is victory is secure. If you want another in, we can have inevitable, we've already used that, so we don't need another eye anyway.

Victory is secure. Arise, O Lord. This is often used of the Exodus. See how David's mind is soaked in the history of his people and earlier scripture.

And so often in the Psalms, the people call on the God of creation, the God of the Exodus. See, refuge is not enough. The psalmist wants victory.

Churchill said in one of his great speeches, without victory, there is no survival. This is what the psalmist feels as well. Now, two things need to be said. First of all, David is angry here.

[15 : 59] You strike all my enemies on the cheek, you break the teeth of the wicked. One of the good things the psalms do is they give us opportunities to express that anger, to express that emotion in powerful words.

rather than in bullying actions. We must be honest with God. If we're feeling angry, we must tell him, and we must express it.

And of course, you strike all my enemies on the cheek, you break the teeth of the wicked. David isn't just saying, get rid of the enemies, the people I don't like.

David is thinking of the enemies of God himself, the enemies of the covenant of God, those who want to destroy the anointed king. Absalom wanted to get rid of the anointed king, place himself on the throne in Jerusalem.

No, David says he is behaving like an enemy of God. And remember when you're reading the psalms, behind all the human enemies, there is a more sinister figure, the enemy himself, the devil. [17:16] And when you read some of the more bruising and grisly attacks on the enemies in the psalm, remember that. Paul says we're not fighting against flesh and blood, we're fighting against principalities and powers.

You break the teeth of the wicked. Very real, very palpable enemies. That's the negative side, if you like.

Negatively, get rid of the enemies. Remove the hindrances to your purpose. But positively, salvation belongs to the Lord.

And salvation is a bigger word in the Bible than we tend to use it. Salvation means the whole plan of God by which he will bring peace, justice, harmony and righteousness to the whole earth, indeed the whole universe.

And once again it's an exodus word. It's a word of a comprehensive word, meaning the complete fulfilling of his purpose. Your blessing be on your people, because only when salvation happens, only when the new creation comes, can that fully be realized.

[18:30] So, in this psalm then, we have, I'm trying to remember what I call this, yes, when enemies circle around, that's the title I gave it, and we are going to feel that way many times in our lives.

When we feel that way, we need to remember that we need to pray, and that we need to trust.

These are the two things that David did. We're not David, we don't have the same place in God's kingdom as he did, but the principles here are tremendously powerful.

Salvation, says the psalmist, belongs to the Lord. That means we can safely leave his purpose in his own hands. Amen.

Let's pray. Amen. Lord God, how we praise you that you are greater than our circumstances, that you are greater than our feelings and emotions, that you alone are the Lord, that you will have the last word, that one day indeed Christ will reign and all his enemies will be put under his feet.

So help us now, Father, as we go back to our normal business. Give to us faith and hope and courage. Help us to rejoice in your name. Amen.