

Great Comfort - Real Christianity is a Continuous Shield

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our Bibles and to our reading this morning. We're back in Psalm 3 for the second week, and you'll find that on page 448, if you have one of the church visitors' Bibles.

Find that, and then if you'd like to turn up 2 Samuel 15, page 267, you can, or just listen. I'm going to read a few verses from there, which give us the background to this Psalm that we are studying this week, as we studied last week.

And 2 Samuel 15, if you look it up, will tell you that it's all about the conspiracy of Absalom, the son of David. Absalom rounded up a whole lot of men, turned the whole nation and its institutions against David, the Lord's anointed king, so that the heading there says David had to flee Jerusalem.

And in 2 Samuel 15, verse 30, we read that David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went, barefoot and with his head covered.

And all the people who were with him covered their heads, that is, in mourning. And they went up, weeping as they went. And it was told David, Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom.

[1 : 18] And David said, Oh Lord, please turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness. And then down in chapter 16, at verse 5, when King David came to Bahurim, there came out a man of the family of the house of Saul, whose name was Shimei, the son of Gerah.

And as he came, he cursed continually. And he threw stones at David and all the servants of King David and all the people and all the mighty men who were on his right hand and on his left.

And Shimei said, as he cursed, Get out, get out, you man of blood, you worthless man. The Lord has avenged on you all the blood of the house of Saul in whose place you've reigned.

And the Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, your evil is on you, for you are a man of blood. And Abishai, the son of Zeruiah, said to the king, Why should this dead dog curse my Lord, the king?

Let me go over and take off his head. But the king said, What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? If he is cursing because the Lord has said to him, Curse David, who then shall say, Why have you done so?

[2 : 31] And David said to Abishai and to all his servants, Behold, my own son seeks my life. How much more now may this Benjamite.

Leave him alone. Let him curse. For the Lord has told him to. We'll turn over then to Psalm number three and we'll read the 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 and I woke again for the Lord sustained me. I will not be afraid. Many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around.

[3 : 37] 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. Amen. And may God bless to us his word. What would you turn with me to the Psalm that we read, Psalm three, which if you have one of the visitor's Bibles, I think it's page 448.

And we're spending a few weeks looking at this Psalm under the title of Real Christianity, Three Studies in Faith and Not Fantasy.

Now, Psalm three, verse three, I think is surely one of the loveliest verses in the Psalter, indeed even in the whole Bible. But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head.

What a wonderful expression of the great truth that real Christianity is a great comfort. Indeed, it is the great comfort in life and in death.

[4 : 59] It gives to every Christian believer a continuous shield. And that shield is not an inanimate object.

Notice, that shield is the living God himself. So the true Christian believer, as we've seen in verses one and two of this Psalm, the true Christian believer must live with real foes in this fallen world.

And therefore, our struggle is constant. We saw that last time. But the true Christian believer does also live in real fellowship with the living God.

And therefore, our shield is continuous also. We saw last time that Psalm three is about the real life of faith. And we saw how immediately verses one and two just blow right out of the water, don't they?

That idea that Christian faith is just some kind of a crutch. It's some kind of fantasy playing let's pretend to tell us that, you know, life is really rosy.

[6 : 04] Life is really all wonderful. Well, in reality, life is nothing of the sort. No, no, no, no. Far from it. Look at verses one and two. The real life of faith is one of facing constant foes.

Enemies without and enemies within. Oh 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.

Our foes are many, says the psalmist. Well, why is that? Well, it's because God's foes are many in this world. Psalm one and two make that so clear, don't they?

Right at the very beginning of this book of Psalms, we're in no doubt. The world and the world's people, says Psalm two, are set against the Lord and his anointed. And therefore, they are set against the people of the Lord and his anointed.

That's just what the Lord Jesus Christ himself tells us so plainly. If the world hates you, he says, know that it hated me first. John 15, verse 18.

[7 : 09] So we will always have many foes. And also, remember, those foes are mocking foes, says the psalmist.

Alas, so often our foes, and especially our great enemy, the devil, they get a foothold against us, don't they? Because, like David, the truth is that we are sinners.

And so our foes taunt us. And they say, oh, there's no salvation for you in this God of yours. That's just a fantasy. That's a delusion. And worse, voices within us so often say, don't they?

Even if God were real, how could God accept you? Look at you. Your life's a mess. Your life's a disgrace. That's a very great assault on us, isn't it, as people of faith?

All the time. Because we know that those sorts of accusations contain a lot of truth. When we're being really honest with ourselves, and as Christians, we have to be honest, don't we?

[8 : 13] That's when we're very vulnerable to those things. Because we, more than other people, we know the truth about sin, and we feel the weight of our sins.

And so those kind of feelings can easily destroy Christian believers, can't they? And they would destroy us, but for the wonderful reality that despite our life being full of constant foes, real Christian life is, nevertheless, a life of continuous fellowship with God himself.

As Christians, we have real relationship with God that is unbroken, even in the midst of all of these constant foes. Verse 3, but you, Lord, you are a shield about me.

But God. God is the great circumstance that changes all other circumstances in our lives. Don't you find yourself thanking God for the great but-gods that we find all the way through the Bible?

I'm glad that we're not American, so there's no confusion about that word but. You know the story, don't you, of the Scottish preacher who went to preach in America. And he stood up for his first Sunday, and he said, I'd like for us in this first sermon to examine together some of the most beautiful buts of the Bible.

[9 : 35] And he couldn't understand where half the congregation looked absolutely outraged, and the other half fell about laughing. But this is very clearly a but with one T, B-U-T. Let's be clear. Verse 3, but you, O Lord, you are near me.

He says, you are with me. And that, that is what changes everything. Even when the mockery of all these foes are joined by that knowledge in my own heart that condemns me perhaps even more than all the rest.

You are my shield even then, even in the midst of the most desolate shame that I could experience. I think I've said to you before, I think perhaps my, my favorite verse in the whole Bible is 1 John 3, verse 20.

For whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. You see, he knows everything. He knows all about me, all the truth, all the sin that would condemn me and should condemn me.

But he is greater even than my heart, and your heart, when likewise it's full of sin and shame.

[10 : 52] And you see, that's what verses 3 to 6 in this psalm are speaking all about. About the reality of a fellowship with God that is greater than anything that can ever, ever assail us.

No matter what befall us, the real Christian has a life of continuous fellowship with God himself. We have the great comfort of him who is our continuous shield.

And David describes this, I think, as possession of two things. He knows both the beauty of God's presence, and also therefore the bounty of God's provision.

First, look at verse 3. He's telling us that the real believer knows the beauty of God's presence around him. The real Christian knows God personally, is what he's saying.

These verses describe, don't they? They describe a fellowship with God that is deeply personal. Even in the midst of all of these foes, all this calamity, he has continuous fellowship with the Lord himself.

[11 : 57] And it's the Lord's presence that is his salvation. But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, the lifter of my head.

See, there's nothing presumptuous about the Bible's view of the Christian life. Because real confidence, real assurance, comes only from a living knowledge of the living God.

Because God is not just the provider of our salvation. He is himself our salvation. That's so important for us to grasp, isn't it?

That salvation is not just some sort of abstract idea. Salvation isn't just sort of a thing that we get from knowing about God. No, no, no. It's the experience that we have in him through knowing him.

That's the Bible's message from the beginning to the very end. Remember when we studied Deuteronomy. Those wonderful words of Moses back in Deuteronomy 30. Hold fast to him, to the Lord.

[13 : 01] He is your life. So the psalmist cries out, for example, in Psalm 27. The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Yes, I am the way and the truth and the life, says the Lord Jesus. My words are spirit and life. I am the bread of life.

And so if you come to me, you'll never hunger. And if you believe in me, you'll never thirst. I am the resurrection and the life. He's not just a giver of salvation and life.

He is our salvation and life. That's why the apostle Paul says it's Christ himself in us who is the hope of glory.

That's why he says it's him that we proclaim that we may present everyone mature in life. Not just things about him and information about him. See, our task as Christian believers isn't just to teach ourselves and to teach other people about Jesus Christ.

[14 : 06] It's to lead other people consistently to the Lord Jesus Christ, to know him personally. To know the beauty of his presence with us.

And that's so important, you see, because when we're surrounded by enemies, enemies without, and perhaps above all enemies within, we can have no assurance of our salvation from looking in at ourselves.

Looking at ourselves, it leads only to despair, doesn't it? That's why, you know, some of the Puritans, particularly in the later Puritan period, they ran into all kinds of difficulties and a lack of assurance of faith because they became terribly introspective.

Soul-searching, constantly bemoaning their sins, bemoaning their corruptions, and so on. Looking inwards to see just how bad they were. No, there's no real assurance for looking in at ourselves.

The great assurance comes from looking out and looking up to the Lord. He is our salvation. He is our complete salvation. He is the shield round about us.

[15 : 18] That's what it says in verse 3. You alone are my shield, Lord. The Lord himself, the psalmist is saying, is his refuge. He is the protection. From all the arrows of the enemy, both the real ones and the metaphorical ones.

All the fiery darts, the accusations that ignite the fires of fear inside our hearts. They begin to tempt us to despair because they tell us over and over, as the hymn says, of the guilt that is within us.

And we know that guilt's real, don't we? But he, the Lord, is a shield round about us. Therefore, he is our refuge and our safety, regardless of wherever these arrows may come from.

The Lord himself is our hiding place, our shelter to hide us, to preserve us, to protect us. From all the greatest storms of doubt, all the storms of despair in our lives.

That's why the last verse of Psalm 2, as we saw, says, Blessed are those who take refuge in him. He is our refuge, our shield in the face of all the enemy's arrows.

[16 : 31] And he is our righteousness in the face of all our sin and our shame. You, Lord, are my glory, you see. He alone is our glory.

He's our dignity. He's our identity. He is the one alone that gives us value and worth in the sight of men, but much more importantly, in the sight of God himself. He's not only our refuge against the storms and the struggles of the present.

He's the answer to all our past failures and disasters and distress. The things that have left us feeling ashamed. The things that have left us feeling worthless and hopeless.

He alone is my glory, says David. Whose inglorious behavior and his own sin was the very thing that had got him into all of this trouble in the first place.

That's so important too, isn't it? Because when your self-esteem is in the dust, when you have screwed up really badly, made a terrible mess, and when you know it's all your fault, it's a devastating thing, isn't it?

[17 : 37] When a relationship has been wrecked and destroyed, and you know it's your fault, perhaps in your family, with your children, or with your parents, or with your spouse.

Or you've damaged the friendship, perhaps, because of your words and your deeds, and you know the mess is your fault. Or you've done something, perhaps, that you're just deeply ashamed of, and it's eating away, casting you down.

See, when you're in that sort of situation, it is no good, is it, to go and find some kind of a therapist who will help you get over it, who will help you have a more positive view of yourself.

Because as a Christian, you can't deceive yourself, can you? And you know that your view of yourself and these feelings that you have isn't unhealthy and wrong.

It's quite right. Because you haven't covered yourself with glory. You have brought shame upon yourself. And no amount of positive thinking can change that. But the gospel says to us, You, Lord, you are my glory.

[18 : 48] You are my righteousness. When that is the truth about me. And God the just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me.

And the great hymn says to us, Behold him there, the risen lamb, my perfect, spotless righteousness. You see, in the face of the deepest shame and guilt, the real Christian can say, You, Lord, are my glory.

You're my righteousness. That's the beauty of God's presence with us, isn't it? And so, you see, he himself also is our restorer from the depths of disaster.

His presence with us is what makes all things new. What gives us, once again, a future. You, Lord, are the lifter of my head. Well, we saw it, didn't we, in 2 Samuel 15 when David wrote this psalm.

He was fleeing from Jerusalem. He was weeping. He was barefoot. His head was covered and he was bowed. He was in abject despair and dejection. I wonder if you've yourself felt like that at times.

[20 : 05] I'm sure you have. So weighed down that it seems really like your chin is dragging against the ground. Well, the Lord is the great lifter of our head.

I can still remember when I was a little child. And I would be in situations like that, crying in misery perhaps, looking down, chin on chest. And my father would come with his finger and lift up my head.

And all the fathers here will know that. But it's more, you see, than just a comfort, although it is great comfort. This word speaks of restoration, of vindication.

Lifting up your head. Remember the story of Joseph back in Genesis. And Joseph was in prison and he met the king's cup bearer. Do you remember? And he prophesied the future that he was going to be restored.

And what did Joseph say to the king's cup bearer? Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office. And you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand as formerly.

[21 : 17] You see, he's the one who says to us, Despite all the mess, behold, I make all things new. Despite all that's happened, I will lift you up again.

See, that's the reality of what real fellowship with our God means. To know him is to know that beauty of his presence. To know him as a constant refuge, a shield in all our present struggles.

To know him as our righteousness, as the glory that covers all our past shame. And to know him as our restorer, as a lifter up our head who renews a future for us once again.

That's the beauty of his presence with us. And there's nothing pretend about that. Real Christianity means the great comfort of his continuous shield.

David's throwing all that he has on God himself. He's saying to him, Lord, in the face of all this calamity, I depend totally, utterly on you and you alone for refuge, for righteousness, and for restoration.

[22 : 25] If you want me to remain as your servant, as your chosen king, as your holy son, it must all come from you. From you alone. That's just what the Bible means by faith, isn't it?

It just means looking to him, our God and Savior, for everything. Everything. And knowing that everything that we can ever need is found simply in the beauty of his presence with us.

He is our shield, our glory, our righteousness, our restorer, the lifter of our heads. And to know him and to have him is to have all of these marvelous benefits.

And that's what verses 4 to 6 go on to illustrate further. Because, you see, to know the beauty of his presence with us means that we know the bounty of his provision for us.

To be a Christian, to know God personally, is to share in the fellowship that because it is so deeply personal, is so greatly privileged.

[23 : 30] See, the psalmist sums up this bountiful provision that this relationship brings. Three things. We've had three R's. Here's three P's. Three totally supernatural things that his presence with us provides for us.

The first is the miracle of prayer. Verse 4. I cried aloud to the Lord and he answered me. Prayer. Answering God is the response of our hearts, isn't it?

That's the primary mark of the life of God in the soul of man. Think of the story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus in the Damascus Road in Acts chapter 9.

And God says to Ananias, you need to go and see this man and restore his sight to him. You'll find him and behold, what are we told? He is praying. He's praying. And that says it all.

That man whose whole religious zealotry had never yet brought him into true contact with the living God. Now, through Jesus Christ, he's praying.

[24 : 33] And it's the same for every single believer, every new believer in the world today. To find that real fellowship of knowing God opens the door of real prayer.

And the wonderful provision of prayer. Open communication between our Heavenly Father and us. It brings such assurance to us, doesn't it? Especially in times of great distress. Because our God is the God who hears and answers.

And that's the very heart of biblical faith. Do you remember that great story of Elijah? On the top of Mount Carmel with all the priests of Baal. And Elijah makes his sacrifice and covers it with water.

And makes it as hard as possible for anything to happen. And all the priests of Baal are dancing and shouting and ballyhooing. And Elijah just says, the God who hears and answers.

He is the God. The only God. The true God. The Lord. And there's a resounding silence, of course. From all the pagan idols that are just in the imagination of man.

[25 : 42] But the Lord hears and answers prayer. And one of the great provisions of our Heavenly Father is that in every situation, especially in times of real distress, we can cry aloud to our God.

There's no need for us to bottle it all up and hide it from the Lord. But of course it's far, far more than just a cathartic exercise to make us feel better. We are praying to the one who really hears and really answers.

Verse 4. From his holy hill. The very place that it seemed that God had abandoned. Mount Zion, Jerusalem. The place of God's dwelling. Just as the world today, of course, says, oh, there's no God there anymore.

There's no God in heaven. There's no throne on high. But the real Christian knows that he has a life of constant fellowship with the great God who is on the throne in heaven.

And yet who draws near with his ear open to every one of his children here on earth to hear their prayers and to answer our prayers. That's one of the great blessings, isn't it, of the discipline that we have of meeting regularly together as a church to pray, to bring our requests and our petitions before the Lord.

[26 : 56] Because so often we have to acknowledge his answers to our prayers and we have to thank him for it. And that reminds us that our God is the God who hears and answers our prayers.

So we rejoice in the miracle of prayer. And verse 5, we know the miracle also of God's providence. Well, we saw in Psalm 1, didn't we, that the Lord knows the way of the righteous.

That is, he watches over them. The very hairs of their heads are numbered, says Jesus. So that despite all the evidence to the contrary, the real believer knows that all things, even all these terrible things around us just now, must work together for good to them that love God.

Now for David in this instance, it was real physical protection. Perhaps he was very surprised actually to wake up alive when there were so many around him seeking his life, seeking to destroy him. God doesn't always promise us that physical protection though, does he?

In fact, he tells us plainly that the glory to come, which he will preserve us for, will be often preceded by great suffering. And that means some of us will face hardship.

[28 : 22] Some of us will shape, face difficult, ghastly illnesses. Some of us will face calamities in our lives. Some of us will face untimely deaths.

But you see, for the real Christian, in all these things, we are more than conquerors. For the Lord does sustain us. He has us and he has the whole world, as the song says, in his hands.

And what an encouragement it is for us to see, especially an older saint sometimes, whom the Lord has sustained through many dangers, many toils and snares, to see them still going on strong with the Lord Jesus Christ, right into the twilight of their years.

And those of you who are here this morning, who are in that state, having known the prevailing hand of the Lord upon you, the sustaining of the Lord for many, many decades, keep going.

Because for those who are decades behind you to see that, they are seeing in the flesh the sustaining hand of the Lord. They are seeing the miracle of God's providence.

[29 : 29] Friends, when you are a youngster, and you know even then, with the insight of youth, which is minimal, when you know your own weaknesses and your own failures, isn't it a miracle to see some of those who are decades ahead of you still going strong with the Lord Jesus Christ?

That's the miracle of God's providence in the life of his people of faith, sustaining them through many enemies. His constant care for his people, whether asleep or awake, all the days of their lives.

A constant shield around about. And because fellowship with God brings that wonderful providence, you see, we also have what verse 6 speaks so eloquently of.

We also 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 of God, you see, banishes fear.

And gives us that supernatural peace. Now notice there's nothing false, nothing pretend about this. It's not make-believe. He's quite clear. Thousands of enemies are still very much there.

[30 : 42] But to know the presence of God, to know that God is near, that is what truly strengthens the feeble knees. That's what brings that real peace, that steadying peace.

Even in the face of all of this, he says, I will not be afraid. And that's true for you also. When you're facing that really tough encounter that you're dreading, perhaps this very week coming.

Or at times like when you're in the anesthetic room, waiting to go into theater, just about to go off to sleep. Or maybe even worse, when you're sitting outside the theater, waiting for a loved one to go in.

Or just when you're under attack for your faith in Christ. Or when you're struggling to stay faithful. But that's the great blessing of the gospel.

We have God's peace. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. So therefore, there's absolutely nothing else in this world that we need to fear.

[31 : 46] Psalm 56, the psalmist says, In God I trust, I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me? And we, you see, because we know the Lord, because we have a life of constant fellowship with Him, we too, we can say that with utter confidence.

Actually, that's what the apostle says in Hebrews chapter 13. He quotes those words from Psalm 56. And he says, For he has said, I will never leave you or forsake you. So we can have that, friends.

Not fear in the face of enemies, but peace. The peace of God that transcends all understanding. To guard our hearts, to guard our minds in Christ Jesus.

That's what Paul writes to the church. The miracle of peace. Notice, he's not saying we are supernatural people, but he's saying we can have supernatural courage and peace in the midst of real and even raging circumstances.

Like Paul could have in 2 Timothy 4, where he was imprisoned, where he was deserted by all the churches who wanted nothing to do with him. But he says, The Lord stood by me and strengthened me.

[33 : 02] And He will rescue me, he says, from every evil deed, and bring me safe to His heavenly kingdom. The Lord stood by me. See, like David, Paul is saying, he knows the beauty of His presence.

And so just like David, he also knew the bounty of His marvelous provision. Now, of course, none of us is David or Paul, for that matter.

We're not fighting military battles for the survival of God's kingdom on earth in those ancient days of promise. We live in these last days. We live in the days of fulfillment when the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ is spreading out to the very ends of the earth.

But just as David knew great conflict precisely because of his part and his place in serving that kingdom of Christ, and the great comfort and the great provision of His presence, well, so also the Lord Jesus tells us and His apostles tell us that we too shall share the same experience, won't we?

The same experience of all the faithful throughout the ages because we're still engaged in the same conflict and we will be until the very last day when the Lord Jesus comes again. David experienced it, Paul experienced it in his day, we experience it in our day.

[34 : 25] Why? Because all of us, David, Paul, us, every Christian in the world today, we belong to great David's greater son. We belong to Jesus the Messiah. We belong to the great Savior.

And so we will all share with Him, says Jesus, on the road to the cross. We will all share the bitterness of His persecutions.

But we will all also share in the beauty of His presence and in the bounty of His great provision. He will never leave you nor forsake you.

Friends, that is real Christianity. It's a life of great comfort, even amid great conflict. Because we have a life of continuous fellowship with the one who is a shield all about us.

The one who is our glory, who is lifter of our head. He Himself is our refuge and our righteousness and our restoration. We know the untold beauty of His presence.

[35 : 33] And so we will know the unceasing bounty of His provision. All our lives, He hears our prayers. He sustains us by His providence. And He grants to our hearts also peace.

So next time you find yourself crying out to the Lord or crying out to one another, Oh, how many are my foes? How great are the battles? Don't stop there. Go on to the next words.

But you, O Lord. But you, O Lord. Because it's His presence and it's His provision that makes all the difference.

Real Christianity is knowing that continuous shield of great comfort. Always. Always. Amen.

Well, let's pray together. Amen. Lord, You are our only refuge and righteousness. and restoration.

[36 : 39] You are our shield and our glory and the lifter of our heads. So turn our eyes and our hearts afresh. We pray too the beauty of Your presence day by day that we may know also the bounty of Your provision and so that we may rejoice and be glad all the days of our lives as we live for Jesus Christ, Your Son.

In His name we pray. Amen.