

# Psalm 3: The Cry

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[ 0 : 00 ] To be a Christian is really to have the greatest joy in the world. Knowing Christ means that we are, of all people, the most blessed. We have the strongest reason of all to be happy, content, and full of rejoicing.

So what happens when that's not what we feel? Are we failures when we plumb the depths of depression? Are we really following Christ if we so often feel broken and despairing?

Are we letting God down when we find living to be a struggle? The answer to all these questions is a resounding no. But why does it sometimes feel as if we can't or shouldn't feel like that?

Much of what Christians sing is upbeat and joyful, and rightly so. In Christ there is much to be joyful about. But what can miserable Christians sing? For all the wonderful songs that have been written by Christians for our collective worship, there's a real gap in the market.

There's nothing much written for Christians who feel like they are drowning in their circumstances. There's not much there for miserable Christians. And this is one reason why I am so glad that we sing the Psalms.

[ 1 : 18 ] And this is possibly the reason that the Psalms aren't sung so much across the wider church. The Psalms are alarmingly raw and honest about the challenges of living and the struggles of following God.

Throughout the book of Psalms, we've already mentioned this in our service, there's a sub-genre called a Psalm of Lament. A song where struggle and sadness are the central theme.

Now, we always say that we can bring our struggles to God in prayer. Correctly so. But we can also bring our struggles to him in song.

And more than that, we can bring our struggles to him in song together. And the Psalms of Lament give us a language with which to do it. And that's why I'm really excited to work through the first Psalm of Lament this afternoon, and that is Psalm 3.

Because I want us to see that not only is struggle an expected part of following Jesus, but we also have a musical language for expressing our struggle when it comes.

[ 2 : 26 ] Following Jesus, well, is not found in always feeling happy. It's found in crying to him in faith when the time of trouble inevitably comes.

King David is our model here for approaching the days of darkness. This is his psalm. And we're going to follow the contours of his experience as he conveys it through the lyrics of Psalm 3, with the hope that we can learn to struggle well when the struggle comes.

The contours are these. Firstly, the struggle of the Christian, which we must acknowledge with frankness. Secondly, the cry of confidence, which is the response that we want to strive for together.

And lastly, the hope of salvation, which keeps us going in the dark time. So the struggle of the Christian. We want to be clear that all Christians struggle.

Our struggles are all going to look very different, and some may struggle more than others. But none of us will be exempt. I think there's something really freeing about recognising this.

[ 3 : 29 ] We don't need to pretend that we've got it all together. We won't, and we don't. The great King David's life is a picture of this. At best, he was the ideal king of Israel, a shepherd king after God's own heart, and an image of what the world could expect when Jesus, the true Messiah, eventually came.

But at worst, he was an adulterer, a murderer, a liar. He was violent, foolish, and weak-willed. And he was everything in between. David really encompasses the wide spectrum from holiness to sinfulness, from faithfulness to failure.

And in his Psalms, he never shies away from the harsh realities of life that he's going through. Now, David, here, he's on the run.

He actually spends a lot of his life on the run. He spent years as a younger man on the run from King Saul. And when he wrote Psalm 3, he was on the run again. Now, this time, he was much older, and he was on the run from his son, Absalom.

The full story can be found in 2 Samuel, chapters 13 to 19, which I very much encourage you to read later today or throughout the week. It would be very beneficial. But to summarize the story briefly, Absalom had deep grievances about his father.

[ 4 : 52 ] David had left a cruel act of incestual rape within the family go unpunished. And Absalom was enraged. He took matters into his own hands, and he killed the perpetrator, his half-brother Amnon.

And then Absalom began a campaign against his father. Eventually, he proclaimed himself as king, and huge swathes of Israel flocked to follow him.

And David was forced out of Jerusalem and was on the run as a civil war between father and son engulfed Israel. So, things aren't looking great.

And David begins the psalm, Lord, how many are my foes? How many rise up against me? Now, at this point in his life, David has faced down hundreds of thousands of enemies.

But this time, it's personal. The enemies that surround him are his own flesh and blood, his son and his people. That must have cut him right to the bone. All these people who once loved him and supported him, and whom he had loved in return, are now turned against him and want him dead.

[ 6 : 04 ] And the number seems to keep growing. Notice the repetition in those first two verses. How many, how many, many. It's the same word. He's outnumbered. And what are they saying?

Verse two. Many are saying of me, God will not deliver him. God has always been David's help and deliverer.

David is his king, despite all his failings. But the people see Absalom ascendant and conclude that David has lost his touch. God's not going to get him out of this one this time.

This is maybe one scrape too many. And you get the sense, as this psalm begins, that David's maybe tempted to believe them. Perhaps they're right and God has abandoned him.

Maybe my God has forsaken me and deliverance won't come this time. Now, looking at David's circumstances and our own, there are some crucial distinctions.

[ 7 : 02 ] David is a king, a messiah figure even. We are not. He was on the run and in the middle of a civil war. We are not. And the salvation that he's here singing for is probably focused more on the physical situation he's in than on his eternal hope in God.

However, this psalm has been included in the book of Psalms because it is something that we can sing. This is an individual lament which is to be used for communal worship.

Therefore, the compilers of the Psalms saw that though this psalm is focused on David's experience, it's something that actually we can and should sing together.

We can bring before God our own struggles as we sing it, which may seem small in comparison, though God cares about them just as much. And we can bring our own hopes, which are actually bigger in comparison, because we know the hope that Jesus has brought.

So this psalm is for us to sing. It's for you and for me. That's why we've already sang from it. Because following Christ is not easy.

[ 8 : 14 ] David was following him in the days before his incarnation. We follow him in the days after. In both periods of time, following Christ has been filled with trials, temptations, and challenges.

And God allows us to face these. Listen to James. He writes, blessed is the one who perseveres under trial. Because having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Trials are part and parcel of following Jesus, awful though they may be. As is temptation. Paul reminds us that no temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind.

And God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. That's some comfort.

Though it doesn't make the reality of temptation that we all face every day any easier. And we do have enemies and foes. Paul tells us our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

[ 9 : 31 ] So the Christian has enemies. Those enemies are not people, but spiritual forces who can often work through people. When we're in Christ, we're part of a spiritual struggle that's going to continue until we die or Christ returns.

And here's the thing that we learn from the Psalms of lament. We're allowed to find these things difficult. Trials, temptations, the reality of the spiritual warfare we're engaged in.

We can find these hard. And we are allowed to cry out to God in pain when it all feels too much. And so what we can do is really lean into the emotional depths of the Psalms, which give us a language and a theology of pain and struggle.

They guide us as we sing, pray, and wrestle with the hard realities of following Jesus. Because it is tough, isn't it? And sometimes it can just feel too much for us.

And that's okay. We've been given these songs of struggle to help us cry out to God because he knows that we need them. And actually, being free to lament and struggle really marks out following Jesus from other religions.

[ 10 : 55 ] It also differentiates following him from other ways of life. We have someone who listens to our pain. And not only that, has felt it.

Jesus knows intimately the pain of living in a fallen world and going against the grain. He's been there. And we have something else.

With a psalm like this, it's not just about coming to terms with our pain and our trauma. It actually gives us a hope of escaping it. Hope is at the heart of the Christian's cry.

Because we don't cry into an empty void. No, we cry to a God who is there. And for this reason, the Christian's cry is the cry of confidence.

David says, But you, Lord, are a shield around me. My glory, the one who lifts my head high. David recognizes as he cries out to God who God is in relation to him.

[ 11 : 59 ] In the middle of this civil war, he knows that God is his shield, his protector, his defense. He recognizes that God is his glory or his honor.

This mighty king understands that all his honor, all his glory and status has only ever come from the hand of God. God is the one from whom all glory and all blessings flow.

He recognizes, too, that it's God who's the one who lifts up his head. It's a Hebrew idiom that conveys the idea that God is the one who lifts up and casts down.

He will throw down the mighty and the proud. He will raise up and exalt the humble. And it's worth saying, too, that as David addresses God, he uses his name.

He is Yahweh, conveyed in English through the uppercase Lord. David uses the personal name of God, which reminds us of God's covenant and intimate, intimate love for his people.

[ 13 : 00 ] He's not distant. He is involved. When we take all these things together, we see why David cries to God. God's not absent.

He is in control and he is concerned for his children. One of the political slogans that was thrown about during the Brexit debates was, take back control.

Because people like a narrative where they feel like they are in control. But what happens when we lose control? What happens when events spiral so far beyond us that there's little hope of ever getting back?

The Christian doesn't need to take back control. The Christian can be confident that God is in control. He is our shield.

He is our glory. He is the one who lifts up our heads. That's why David and Christians today can call upon him. I call out to the Lord, says the poet king, and he answers me from his holy mountain.

[ 14 : 09 ] David may not be in Jerusalem anymore. He may be far from the temple where in the Old Testament God's presence dwelt. And yet he's confident that God is listening and God is answering him in his time of need.

The trouble we feel, whatever it might be, might not go away quickly. And in actuality, sometimes the troubles we face never actually go away at all.

David, he was restored to his kingship after this. But it doesn't follow that God is always going to restore us to where we were before, or even to where we'd like to be after we undergo a time of struggle or trial.

God didn't spare some of Jesus' own disciples from martyrdom. He didn't release Paul from his thorn in the flesh. He didn't spare Jesus, his only son, even as he cried out in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest.

And yet, none of these doubted that God was near them in their time of trouble. They knew he listened, and they knew he cared.

[ 15 : 20 ] And they trusted his answer and were faithful and confident right to the end. In relation to his thorn, Paul said, Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

So that's Paul, and I think David, in the midst of his struggle, not knowing what the outcome is going to be, and on the run, we must be displaying a similar show of faith and understanding.

For he says, I lie down and I sleep. I wake again, because the Lord sustains me. The future is uncertain. The present is painful.

[ 16 : 30 ] Yet David sleeps, and actually sleeps soundly. That's the force of him saying, I wake again, because he knows that he can cry to the Almighty God who is there.

God sustains him. In fact, more literally, the Lord supports him. The Lord is like his pillow. That's basically the image being conveyed, granting him sleep, and being an ever-present help through the darkness.

I will not fear, says David, though tens of thousands assail me on every side. Having cried to God, David is not afraid. Even against 10,000 enemies, he has no reason to fear, because God is there, and God is for him.

God is there, and God is for us. And so, we don't need to broadcast our trials and our difficulties onto social media in order to find validation and vindication, nor do we need to suffer in silence with a stiff upper lip.

We can cry with confidence to our covenant God, the God who calls us his children through Jesus. And we can do this alone, but we can also do this together.

[ 17 : 48 ] Paul says to the Galatians, carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ. We can carry one another's burdens by praying to God for one another, but also by singing out our cry to God together.

When we sing the Psalms of Lament as one body, we recognize that some of us amongst us probably are struggling, and we share their struggle as we join together in song, praying to God for help, comfort, and deliverance.

We belong to a family in Christ, don't we? And we're all united to the same Lord Jesus through his spirit. So it's right and appropriate that we sing our family struggles as well as our family joys.

And as we sing, we know that God listens to our cries. It goes beyond just the fact that God is there. David had a greater hope than that.

Paul, as he wrestled with his thorn, had a greater hope than that. In Christ, we find not just a relationship with the God who is there. We also have the hope of salvation.

[ 19 : 05 ] I feel like verse 7 of this Psalm really captures the Christian hope in a nutshell. Arise, Lord, deliver me, my God. In the context of the Psalm, it's clear that David is crying for deliverance from his present circumstances.

And we can and should cry for deliverance from our struggles when they come, just like David, just like Paul. And very often, God, in his mercy and kindness, does deliver us from these trials.

But as we've already said, sometimes he doesn't. We shouldn't doubt his love when this is the case. Or when deliverance comes, but doesn't come as fast as we should like.

And this is because when it comes to salvation and deliverance, well, we have a greater hope than David ever had. With the coming of Jesus, we know of a greater deliverance, a greater salvation that God gives to his people.

A salvation that will sustain us indefinitely. It's a salvation that David was aware of in part, but which we now know in full. And it's the salvation from sin, death, and all the spiritual enemies that march against us.

[ 20 : 24 ] Peter reminded the young and suffering churches that he was writing to that, though you have not seen Jesus, you love him. And even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

For you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. And this is the Christian hope. We can weather any storm and stand up to any army because we know what it means to have salvation in the name of Jesus.

We know what happens when the storms of life have finally abated and the horns of the battle grow silent. We know that victory is assured.

Strike all my enemies in the jaw, says David. Break the teeth of the wicked. David's hoping for victory against his human foes who've turned against him. And God did grant him victory, though the death of Absalom brought him great grief.

But we've already said that we are involved in a much greater battle, not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual enemies who hate the people of God.

[ 21 : 39 ] And indeed, it was spiritual enemies who ultimately stood behind Absalom and his rebellion. Against these, though we may suffer in many battles, the definitive victory is ours in the end.

Because though there are spiritual forces at work in the present, their power is very much temporary and will only last until Christ returns.

The victory over all evil has been won. They have no future. But we do. Listen to how the psalm ends.

From the Lord comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people. We began by thinking that we are, of all people, the most blessed. Paul even says to the Ephesians that God has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

What are these spiritual blessings we have? We've been chosen by him. We've been redeemed from sin by Jesus' death. We have forgiveness. We've been adopted into the family of God in Christ.

[ 22 : 49 ] We have a future and we have a hope. We have salvation. And one day, that salvation, which we experience now in part, we're going to experience that in full.

In a world free from sin and death. A world free from all those trials, suffering, struggles, pain and temptation that we might be going through just now.

And which we're almost certainly going to go through in the future. Suffering cannot take these gifts and these blessings away. You might be in the depths of despair, but you are still a child of God.

You might feel burdened with stress and anxiety. Jesus still loves you and you are still redeemed. You might be straining in anguish against temptation and sin.

You are still in Christ and his spirit remains in you. And one day, when you face the prospect that you might not be long for this world, you have eternal life in the name of Jesus.

[ 24 : 07 ] It's not for nothing that Jesus describes following him as taking up our cross. Life in a fallen world's pretty hard anyway. And following Jesus can make it in many ways harder still.

But if you know Jesus, you are definitively, truly blessed. Christ, it might not always feel like it, but it is a fact, a solid fact of being in Christ.

It is a reality that cannot be changed. And when we hold on to that, though the fiery trial, whatever it might be, might not abate, we will have strength and faith to push through because we know that the Lord is our salvation and we are truly blessed in him.

And all our suffering, ultimately, is but a prologue to a life that will never again know this kind of pain. And few people have captured this reality better than C.S. Lewis at the end of his novel, *The Last Battle*.

As the land of Narnia passes away and the world ends, Lewis says that this is the end of all the stories in Narnia. But for all the characters that the reader has followed, says Lewis, it was only the beginning of the real story.

[ 25 : 31 ] All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page. Now at last, they were beginning chapter one of the great story, which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before.

We have no promise of ease in this life. But, we do have a God that we can cry to. We are truly blessed by being in Christ.

And we do have his promise of salvation, a promise of entry into the great story, which goes on and on and on and is only going to get better and better and better.

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