



THE ONE WHO LIFTS MY HEAD

SERIES: GIVE ME AN AUTHENTIC VOICE

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Psalm 3

Seventh Message

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In Psalm 51 we saw David at his poetic best. Following his terrible sins of adultery and murder, and facing certain death, he became a creative genius, pushing the envelope of God's grace as no one before him ever had done. The prophets would pick up his radical requests and turn them into promises which God's people could count on in a New Covenant. David not only wanted to be forgiven, but to be fully restored and become the man of faith he once had been. To do that required the remaking of a contrite and compassionate heart.

What follows is the answer to David's prayer, what I call the road to restoration. Though David was forgiven of his sins, he still had to take that terrible journey through sin's consequences. In the process he had to watch his sons do in public what he had done in private. Before it was all over he would grieve the death of four sons, but that grief would be the tool that reshaped and made his heart whole once again. The road to restoration is much more complex than the act of merely being forgiven. But David is a man after God's own heart, and by faith he will embrace sorrow and humiliation for the sake of restoration. The text is a wonderful example of how we can count on God even when we are forced into an exile of our own making.

The journey begins when David's sons start to imitate their father's behavior in the royal court. Overcome by lust, Amnon rapes his half-sister, Tamar, and David is made an unwitting accomplice. The act is a painful mirror to David of how God viewed his adultery with Bathsheba. David was furious at the news but, compromised by his own past, he could do nothing about it. Tamar's brother, Absalom, enraged by his father's passivity, takes matters into his own hands, and for two years methodically plots the revenge of his sister. At the opportune time, during the sheep-shearing festival, he orchestrates Amnon's murder. The murder is a deafening echo of what his father had done to Uriah, and again David is made an unwitting accomplice. The king, who once turned a blind eye to his crimes, is now used and manipulated by his own sons. The outraged king wants to march out and kill his son, but Absalom seeks asylum in his mother's country of Geshur, east of Jordan, in Syria. Temporarily restrained, David lives paralyzed by a sorrow so deep he cannot sort it out. One son is dead, a second banished in perpetual exile.

David's general, Joab, attempts to intervene to untie the Gordian knot and force a reconciliation between father and son. Like Nathan had done earlier, he conjures

up a court case designed to unlock the king's compassion in order to save a widow's sole surviving son. The plot works, and the king pronounces a verdict of mercy in the form of an oath:

"As surely as the LORD lives, not one hair of your son's head will fall to the ground." (2 Sam 14:11, NIV)

Condemned by his own ruling, David is forced to summon Absalom back to Jerusalem, but in a cold act of pride, refuses to see his face. He would rather nurse his rage than forgive his son. For two full years Absalom lives in Jerusalem but never once sees his father's face. It is difficult to imagine a greater humiliation for a son. Finally, Joab forces the two to reconcile. But when they come face-to-face, only perfunctory gestures of reconciliation are made; no words of warmth are exchanged. Absalom, now an embittered son, sows the seeds of discontent within the populace of Israel, offering to settle their legal disputes favorably. After four years, at the appropriate time, in a manner reminiscent of the battle of Jericho, Absalom sounds trumpets throughout Israel, proclaiming himself as Israel's self-appointed king. As the trumpet blasts reverberate throughout all of Israel, David feels the tremor in Jerusalem, and for a second time he is forced into exile.

Earlier, David had given voice to his grief in Psalm 57. That was the time when Saul, the rebellious king, had cornered him in a cave. Now once more he is cornered by a rebellious king (his own son!), which magnifies his sorrow exponentially.

Psalm 3 opens with the superscription:

A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom.

David had many flaws, but what supremely draws me to him is his capacity to worship and pray in every conceivable circumstance. One would think that with an army advancing on Jerusalem he would make haste and flee, taking the quickest escape route. Yet he does exactly the opposite, taking the slowest route and the one most conducive to reflection and worship. He exits his palace, descends down to the valley of the Kidron, ascends up the Mount of Olives, and then descends into the desert.

The topography of David's route mirrors what is happening within his soul. The opening descent depicts his public humiliation. The king exits his palace, the highest point in the city, and walks the entire length of the

city wall to the lowest point in the city, where he stops at the last house, the one that is furthest from his house. Rabbi Ari Cartun writes: "David had to endure the dual punishments of descending the full length of the city under the humiliating stares of the population and of gazing upon the whole of his beloved capital from which he would soon be exiled."¹

David's choice of crossing at the "furthest house" is also deeply symbolic. Cartun continues: "If the sewer system of that time was anything like that of subsequent Jerusalems, the sewage probably flowed out of the city through the lowest gate, which would have been the farthest from the palace. Thus, David's first humiliation is completed by his exiting the city with the refuse."² David doesn't run away in secret. He leaves his home under the scrutiny of the public eye, on foot yet without royal escort, chariots or entourage. He carefully chooses his point of exit at the end of that steep descent, at that lowest, most shameful place, now an apt symbol and confession for his life.

From that low place David then ascends to the top of the Mount of Olives, where he worships God, and then descends into the dreaded wilderness. Along the way he has five significant encounters, three of which demonstrate amazing loyalty to him (on the ascent), while the final two hurl abuse upon him (on the descent). These encounters become spiritual tools that force him into a deep reflection that nurtures his faith and strengthens his trust. The experience was so significant that he composed not just one, but two poems (Psalms 3 and 63), memorializing his exit of humiliation and trust. Might this suggest that we are to become reflective during times of exile?

Psalm 3 opens with a woeful cry of inadequacy.

I. David's Lament (3:1-2)

O LORD, how many are my foes!

How many rise up against me!

Many are saying of me,

"God will not deliver him." *Selah* (Ps 3:1-2 NIV)

After years of surviving the wilderness and ascending the heights of Israel's monarchy, David is right back to that place of spiritual bankruptcy. He calls out to the Lord with that same trust as he did in his youth. Once again, facing insurmountable odds, he cries out that his enemies are too much for him. The NIV captures well the threefold cry of "many, many, many" (*rabbu, rabbim, rabbim*), expressing how outnumbered he feels.

David's *many* enemies include the thousands in Absalom's army. But even more significant is the news that David received during his flight. His most trusted and brilliant advisor, Ahithophel, had betrayed him and joined the conspiracy (2 Sam 15:31). Ahithophel's participation in the revolt may reveal a deep level of discontent with David's rule, even within the inner circle of his cabinet. The fact that Ahithophel may also have

been Bathsheba's grandfather (1 Chr 3:5) would have stung David all the more.

Then, adding insult to injury, as David continued his perilous descent down from the Mount of Olives, an old man, Shimei, appears to confront him. This Benjamite creates great commotion as he comes out, ranting and raving, swearing at the top of his lungs. Then, to the utter amazement of all, he starts pelting stones at David and his officials.

"Get out, get out, you man of blood, you scoundrel! The LORD has repaid you for all the blood you shed in the household of Saul, in whose place you have reigned. The LORD has handed the kingdom over to your son Absalom. You have come to ruin because you are a man of blood!" (2 Sam 16:7-8)

David's exit from Jerusalem gives Shimei occasion to vent a poisonous rage he has harbored since David was anointed king in place of Saul. The old man rejoices in David's misfortune. He believes that "God will not deliver him" (3:1), for he is confident that God does not hear David's prayers. The fact that this self appointed critic attacked the one area of David's innocence must have burned deeply into the soul of the king. As my friend David Roper put it, "Criticism often comes when you least deserve it, from those least qualified to give it, and in a form least helpful to receive it!"³ David's right hand man, Abishai, immediately offers to kill "this dead dog" (a verbal echo from the Goliath story), but David will have none of it. He rebukes his friend with keen spiritual insight:

"My son, who is of my own flesh, is trying to take my life. How much more, then, this Benjamite! Leave him alone; let him curse, for the LORD has told him to. It may be that the LORD will see my distress and repay me with good for the cursing I am receiving today." (2 Sam 16:11-12)

David's enemies overwhelm him so that he cannot cope, yet he resolves not to retaliate. Instead, he prays and cries out to God. It is important to keep in mind that the enemies mentioned in the Psalms (47 out of 50 lament psalms mention the enemy⁴) are resisting the rule of God as expressed through his representative king. They are not merely personal enemies. If God does not deliver his king, the kingdom of God is at risk. The psalms are first and foremost then a prayer book to advance God's rule on earth through the mantle of his anointed king. Thus Psalm 3 became a tool to train Jesus how to cope during his darkest hour.

We can imagine Jesus praying this psalm in Gethsemane as so many enemies rose up against him. The threefold "many" consisted of the Jewish leadership that plotted his death, the Roman cohort that would carry it out, and Judas (his Ahithophel) who would betray him. And, like David's enemies, they spoke with disdain: "God will not deliver him." The saying would sting even more when, after his crucifixion, the rulers sneered at him, "He saved others; let him save himself

if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One" (Luke 23:35). In like manner, Paul says that our enemies (the world, the flesh, and the devil) are mighty. We are no match for them, but through faith in Christ and dependent prayer, they can and will be defeated (Eph 6:10-13; 2 Cor 10:3-4).

By articulating his lament, David gains a confidence that solidifies his trust.

II. David's Confidence (3:3-6)

**But you are a shield around me, O LORD ;
you bestow glory on me and lift up my head.
To the LORD I cry aloud,
and he answers me from his holy hill. Selah
(Ps 3:3-4)**

As David gives voice to his inadequacy, a mysterious confidence comes over him. In sharp contrast to the threefold "*many*" enemies of verse 1, he finds solace in three attributes of God's character, and focusing on them helps him break the hypnotic power of the enemy. First, God is a "shield around" him: God alone is the supreme protector of his soul, and defends him from every side. Secondly, God is the one who bestows glory on him. In this expression David is clinging to his identity. He knows who he is. God had anointed him as king. This was the glory given to him as a gift of God. Therefore, he had no need to defend who he was; that was God's responsibility, even now in the light of his recent sins. This is why he did not have to retaliate against Shimei, or even answer him with a word. He could walk away in silent trust. He didn't have to reclaim his glory; that was God's responsibility. Such was the faith of our Lord: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pet 2:23).

Thirdly, David sees God as the one who lifts up his head – a metaphor for public vindication. This is an especially powerful metaphor when we interpret it alongside David's flight from Jerusalem. As the king was ascending the Mount of Olives, the narrator describes the pathos of the whole nation identifying with his humiliation.

But David continued up the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went; his head was covered and he was barefoot. All the people with him covered their heads too and were weeping as they went up. (2 Sam 15:30)

It is one thing to identify with your king in his victory but quite another to embrace his shame. But that is what David's loyal followers did. Then, just after David heard the news that Ahithophel had betrayed him, he prayed to God that he would thwart the counsel of Ahithophel. No sooner had those words left his lips than "God answered from his holy hill." As David came to the summit of the Mount of Olives, he found a sympathetic friend.

When David arrived at the summit [lit. "*the head*"], where people used to worship God, Hushai the Arkite was there to meet him, his robe torn and dust on his head. (2 Sam 15:32)

Ari Cartun captures the literary beauty of the scene.

The appearance of a man with dirt on his head furthers the irony in the scene. That is, on the 'head' (summit) of the mount, the head of state, who is fleeing a pretender to the crown, is met by a man whose head is crowned with dirt, yet who will be instrumental in ensuring that the crown stays on David's head... And, in this vein, it is significant that it is the Mount of Olives that David ascends to the head of, for it is the oil of the olive that anoints the head of the kingdom.⁵

David sees Hushai as the divine gift of God that lifts up his head. He asks Hushai to demonstrate his loyalty by risking his life to act as a mole (spy) within Absalom's palace to thwart the counsel of Ahithophel. In this way God lifts his head, instantly providing David with the very means to overthrow his enemies. This suggests that dependence on God is not contrary to the use of "means." If you are diagnosed with cancer, it is just as much a miracle for God to heal you through the "means" of good medicine as choosing to do it directly, without human intervention. David's faith is not opposed to seeing the gift of God in the resources he has placed right in front of him. By the grace of God he is able to set up a spy network from Jerusalem to the wilderness by means of several loyal friends.

As David experiences God lifting up his head, he then exercises the supreme act of trust by laying down his head and going to sleep.

**I lie down and sleep;
I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.
I will not fear the tens of thousands
drawn up against me on every side. (Ps 3:5-6)**

In light of his newfound confidence, David makes it his resolve to go to sleep. God's presence has completely removed any sense of fear, so there is no need for wine or pills to quell his stress, merely an act of faith to lie down in the full confidence that he will safely awake in the morning.

With God on our side it matters little how "*many*" the enemy has. With God we will always abide in the majority (2 Kgs 6:16-17). Martin Luther's hymn *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, expresses it well:

And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us:
The Prince of Darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
for lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

Have you ever considered sleep as a supreme act of trust? In the face of fear, that is what sleep is (Mark

4:38). This was the ultimate act of trust for our Lord, who gave himself over to sleep, the sleep of death, trusting in a God who would resurrect him (Luke 23:46).

Working his way from lament through confidence, David now gives voice to his request.

III. David's Petition (3:7)

Arise, O LORD!

Deliver me, O my God!

Strike all my enemies on the jaw;

break the teeth of the wicked. (Ps 3:7)

With his confidence renewed, David now petitions God to vindicate him through his deliverance, and to subsequently punish his enemies. The two metaphors he uses to describe his desire for his enemies speak of humiliation and impotency. When one is struck on the jaw, he has no defenses left; he has been humiliated. The second metaphor, "break the teeth of the wicked," suggests that David's enemies are like voracious animals which tear their prey from limb to limb. But without teeth, these wild animals are rendered impotent. (The NIV translates these verbs as imperatives, while the NASB translates them as completed action, giving expression to a renewed confidence: "For You have smitten all my enemies on the cheek; You have shattered the teeth of the wicked"). No matter which translation is to be preferred, David's longing is just. It finds its application in our spiritual enemies, whom we long to be rendered powerless. When Jesus taught us to forgive our enemies, it was because he had intensified the battle by defeating the ultimate enemy, the devil. We must never forget there is still a fierce battle raging. Thus we pray that God would take the "bite" out of the demons that surround us, and humiliate the idols of the world as impotent imposters. And in the destruction of evil around us, we as the Church are declared to be the true sons of the living God.

David's concludes his prayer with praise.

IV. David's Praise and Benediction (3:8)

From the LORD comes deliverance.

May your blessing be on your people. Selah (Ps 3:8)

The confidence that buoyed him through the hurtful accusations now settles him in a perfect peace. The psalm ends in the full assurance of deliverance. The deliverance and restoration of Israel's king will have an incredible impact on God's people, resulting in infinite blessings.

The three uses of the term "deliverance" make it the theme word that ties the psalm together. Each use has a different tone, and taken together, reveal the spiritual progress that David makes in his soul through prayer.

The word is first used in the lament section (v 2), when David articulated his enemies' mocking cry that "there is no *deliverance* for him in God." From that stinging accusation David has to refortify his trust by reminding himself of the many reasons that their claim is not true. Even in the aftermath of his sin, God has not abandoned his chosen one. After having his confidence stabilized and renewed, David is then able to pray, in verse 7, "Deliver me, O my God." The petition once expressed is bolstered with such assurance that the third and final time the term is used it lands in quiet praise, in verse 8: "from the LORD comes *deliverance*." The Hebrew term "*deliverance*" carries with it not only the idea of God's intervening rescue but, as John Sawyer points out, also the sense of "because it is right."⁶ Thus God's king can count on God's rescue, because justice demands it. As Waltke writes, "It is not right that Satan should hold nations in his sway, nor that the world with its phony value system should have dominion over God's people, nor that death should have the last word. Therefore, we are to pray confidently to God for deliverance, really expecting to see Him to do so."⁷ "*Deliverance*" (*yeshu'a*) is also the word from which the name Jesus is derived. It reminds us in the threefold repetition of the term that Jesus "will *save* his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21).

Perhaps this theme of deliverance is the reason the editors of the book of Psalms placed Psalm 3 as the first in the Psalter (Psalms 1 and 2 serve as an introduction), and that for centuries it was used as a morning prayer (3:6). It certainly reminds us that we cannot be naïve about the forces we face; and though we are promised certain victory through faith and prayer in Christ, the victory is hard won. We shall indeed crush the serpent under our feet, but not without our heel being bruised (Gen 3:15).

1. Ari Mark Cartun, "Topography as a Template for David's Fortunes During His Flight Before Avshalom," *Journal of Reformed Judaism*, Spring 1991, 21.

2. Cartun, "Topography," 21.

3. David Roper, *A Man to Match the Mountain* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1996), 211.

4. I am indebted to Bruce Waltke for this insight.

5. Cartun, "Topography," 25.

6. John Sawyer, *Vetus Testamentum*, 1965. Quoted from Bruce Waltke, *Night Sermon, 1985 Day of Prayer*, Regent College.

7. Waltke, *Night Sermon*.