

Trusting Jesus in Tribulation

Psalm 3

Michael Felkins

Grand Avenue Baptist Church

Ames, Iowa

July 20, 2023

What is it that threatens to overwhelm you today? What is the issue, situation, or circumstance that consumes much of your thoughts? What is the problem that keeps you awake at night, and is the first thing you think of when you wake up in the morning, and seems to have your undivided attention twenty-four-seven?

Sure, there are times when life is smooth sailing and the problems are manageable. However, there are times when we are caught off guard by problems that take us by surprise and simply flatten us like we have been hit by a truck. Perhaps a relationship that you thought was good all of a sudden is on the rocks. Perhaps you show up for work only to find out that you no longer have a job. Perhaps you experience an unexpected illness that incapacitates you or a loved one for an extended period. Perhaps it's a death in the family that has created stress and anxiety that just dominates your thoughts. You get the picture. I'm not talking about minor problems.

Problems, trials, and tribulations are not uncommon in life. We may experience small ones that are annoyances every day, but sometimes there are problems that are dark storms. Metaphorically, we call them storms and for good reason. They can cause significant harm to our lives and livelihoods.

Think about a storm in life this way: One of life's greatest blessings is to have a group of people who surround you with love and support. These may be friends or family members who are in the foxhole with you. They stand with you and guard you when the hailstorm of fire hits.

However, one of life's crushing blows is when those you thought had your back are actually the ones who stab you in the back. You feel the pain only to turn and see that the one you trusted is the one holding the knife. There are hardly any words to describe the pain of abandonment and betrayal.¹

You may have had a similar experience in life. If you haven't, I hope you never do. I don't want to be the bearer of bad news, but many of us here this morning will be hit with a tidal wave of stress, anxiety, fear, and betrayal due to a painful storm in our lives. We may even face betrayal and abandonment. None of it is fun, but the Lord is faithful and He will not abandon you in these storms.

This morning, we will work our way through Psalm 3. This is a Psalm written by King David. In it, we will see that King David was overwhelmed with a particular problem that simply wrecked him. David had experienced many difficult situations in his life, but this particular one was not only a political problem for him; it was also a family crisis. Your Bible should indicate that this Psalm was written when King David fled Jerusalem to escape his son, Absalom. Absalom was trying to kill his father and take the throne.

2 Samuel 15-18 records these events, but I will give you the short version of the story. David's son, Absalom, betrayed him, and that broke his heart. 2 Samuel tells us that Absalom was a handsome and remarkable man. 2 Samuel 14:25 says, "*He did not have a single flaw.*" He exhibited outstanding promise and was loved by his father, David. However, Absalom wasn't a good man. He murdered his half-brother, Amnon, for raping their sister Tamar. David forgave him and eventually began to trust Absalom again. Yet, Absalom had evil in his heart. He secretly carried out a plan to turn the people of Israel against David and steal the throne and the Kingdom. Eventually, he led a palace coup against his father and drove him from Jerusalem. David wept bitterly as he left the city. To show his grief, he walked barefoot as he fled. At one point, a man named Shimei came out and cursed David and pelted him with rocks.²

¹ J. Josh Smith and Daniel L Akin, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Psalms 1-50*, 23.

² Ibid, 24.

David was running for his life, and being the King, wealthy, famous, and powerful didn't insulate him from this kind of storm. It was in this moment that he poured out his heart to God and penned the lament we now call Psalm 3.

When we consider the circumstances in which David wrote this Psalm, we can begin to get our minds around the battles he was fighting. The overwhelming battle he faced was fear, which gave birth to other kinds of struggles in his heart and mind. Let's make some quick observations of Psalm 3 to identify his struggles. Perhaps you can identify with some of his experiences.

First, he feared for his life: Verses 1 and 6 tell us that there were thousands of people organized against David. They didn't just oppose him; they wanted to kill him, not the least of whom was his son Absalom.

Second, his fear gave birth to insomnia: Verse 5 says that David was grateful for sleep. Most likely, he had experienced some sleepless nights due to the stress and pressure he was under. Insomnia always magnifies our problems because we lie awake at night with our minds racing and replaying every detail of the problem.

Third, his fear made him feel isolated and abandoned: Remember, thousands of people were out to get him, and although he had some supporters with him as he fled, whom could he trust?

Fourth, his fears were fueled by the lies told against him and God: In v. 2, we see the lie they were proclaiming, *"There is no salvation for him in God."* Their goal was to isolate David and drive him to despair. It almost worked.

Finally, his fear gave birth to doubt, so that he might question his faith. In v. 7, we hear David's words, *"Arise, O LORD! Save me, O my God."* He couldn't fight anymore, so he did the only thing he could: He called on the LORD to fight his battle. David's faith was his only weapon.

As a result of David's experience, we have this lament to help us when tragedy, trials, and tribulations strike in our lives in deeply painful ways.

So, what should we do when tragedy strikes? What can we do when it is so dark that we can't see because the shadow of death hangs over us? Hopefully, you do the only thing you can do. When we are in the midst of the darkest trials of our lives, we turn to the Lord in absolute trust and confidence, knowing that by faith in Jesus, God will sustain us.

So, let's work through Psalm 3 and see how it helps us when we are at our lowest point in life. These eight verses break down into four stanzas that give us four applications.

I. Christians should expect extremely difficult hardships in life (vv. 1-2)

O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; ² many are saying of my soul, "There is no salvation for him in God." Selah

The first words of this Psalm are David's cry to his covenant LORD – Yahweh! David's lament hinges on the word *"many."* He had *many foes; many rose against him, and many* sought to destroy his hope in God and ultimately kill him. David felt attacked from every side. Everywhere he looked, he saw his enemy. Even his son had him in his crosshairs. Escape seems impossible for him.

When his *many foes and attackers* began their attack, they attacked his trust in God. They wanted to make him question God's love and faithfulness. Shemi, who cursed David when he fled Jerusalem, called him a man of blood and a murderer, and it was true. While David was a good King, he had committed some grievous sins. God had forgiven him, but his enemies threw it in his face. It was as if they were saying,

"Why would God save you because you are a man of blood, a murderer, and a covenant breaker. God will never keep His covenant with you. He will not save you, nor does He love you."

His adversaries wanted to destroy his hope in God. This had to be the worst stroke of all against him. Think about it: What do you do when you are told even God has abandoned you? Friends, when our sins become apparent

to us and to all, it is easy to believe that God wants nothing more to do with us. This is the very definition of hopelessness. David's enemies taunted him by throwing his sins in his face and telling him God had abandoned him.

Consider this: It would have been easy for him to conclude that God had abandoned him. Think about it: Before David became King, he knew God had abandoned King Saul because of his sin. Perhaps his initial thought was that God had finally abandoned him because of his sin.

However, what did David do? What would you do if you were in David's shoes? David took his complaint to God, if we can call it a complaint. I call it an honest confession and assessment of the situation when he said:

O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; ² many are saying of my soul, "There is no salvation for him in God." Selah

Verse 2 ends with the Hebrew word "*Selah*." This is the first time we see this word in Psalms, but it will be used seventy-one times in the book. The meaning of the word is unclear, but it is most likely a musical term that refers to pausing to consider what has just been read or sung. We are to think deeply about what we have just read by meditating on every word to help us move to the next passage and discover how they are connected.

So, brothers and sisters, when your life is hit with the crushing force of a tidal wave of destruction, how do you respond? Do you take your complaint to God? Do you lose all hope? Being a Christian doesn't insulate us from the storms of life. Often, God's people are hit harder than most.

Consider what happened to Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14 after they preached the gospel in the city of Lystra. The men of the city gathered together and stoned the Apostle Paul, and then, believing he was dead, they threw him out of the city. After he woke up from the beating, he challenged those on his mission team, saying:

Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

Both David and Paul remind us that Christians should expect trials and tribulations in this life. The question is: *How do we respond?* Friends, when the storm hits, we can do what vv. 1-2 tell us. We can make an honest assessment of the situation and take our complaint, our pain, and our fears to the Lord. Then we should do what vv. 3-4 says. II. Christians can claim the King's promises (vv. 3-4)

But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. ⁴ I cried aloud to the LORD, and he answered me from his holy hill. Selah

As King David reflected on his honest complaint and confession, his heart began to change. David moves from a hopeless complaint to a confident confession of faith in God when he says,

But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head.

David provides three descriptors of how his hope is rooted in God. He says Yahweh is "*a shield about me*." In that day, a shield was a defensive tool used in battle to protect the upper body. Here, David tells us that the shield of God is much more than that. It is a shield that completely guards him. God's shield sets David in a place of complete safety.

Next, he says that Yahweh is his "*glory*." David doesn't proclaim his righteousness, nor does he take any honor for himself. Instead, he humbles himself before the Lord of Glory and places himself in the Lord's hands.

Finally, he tells us that Yahweh is the One who "*lifts his head*." He is confident that Yahweh will restore his dignity and position as king. He may look defeated, but in time, God will restore him.

All of these promises David experienced are fulfilled in the life of Jesus. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus trusted that God would be His shield as He drank the cup of God's wrath against sin and sinners. He wasn't forced to drink it; instead, He drank it willingly for those He loved. He was confident that the Lord would restore His glory and that one day every eye will see and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. Finally, after Jesus bowed His head in humility and submission to God's plan to save sinners, God restored Jesus to His Kingly position and dignity when He raised Him from the dead. Now, because of what Jesus, the True and Greater David, has done, we can claim the promises of Psalm 3.

Here's what we need to understand. David's promise was fulfilled in his lifetime. He was restored as king. However, vv. 3-4 are ultimately fulfilled in Christ. Because of what Jesus has done, vv. 3-4 can be true for us.

The Apostle Paul expresses the promise of vv. 3-4 as it is fulfilled in Christ for us this way in Romans 8:35-39,

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The question for us is: Do we pray this way? Do we express an honest assessment of the circumstances and then pray in confidence to Christ that no matter what happens, we will not be separated from God? Because of what Jesus has done for you on the cross, do you realize He is your shield? Again, these two verses end with *Selah*. David continues to call us to reflection on God's faithfulness.

III. Christians can enjoy the King's rest (vv. 5-6)

I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me. ⁶ I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around.

Now, David, after his complaint in vv. 1-2 and his confident confession in vv. 3-4, we see how God answered his prayer. We see how David was able to sleep peacefully in the face of danger. As I mentioned earlier, he most likely was struggling to sleep. He probably had insomnia. Many people get insomnia when stress and problems are overwhelming.

Here are some key points to keep in mind as we study Psalm 3. First, remember, this Psalm was written much later in David's life. This Psalm may be the third Psalm in the book of Psalms, but chronologically, it is not an early Psalm by David. It was not a Psalm written by a young David. King David was older when he wrote this Psalm. He had already been through the meat grinder of suffering and tribulation, and he had learned some things about God.

One of the things he learned is that you cannot rest on past experiences and victories. He knew he must continue in a "*present-tense*" faith. He must live in the future grace of God. He looked back at God's past work and victories in his life, but knew that he was still susceptible to stumbling and falling.

Reflecting on God's faithfulness in the past can be very encouraging and can strengthen our faith as we move forward. However, we can't live in the past. We can't survive on past faith and past victories. We need a living hope that flourishes in the present face of suffering.

Here's the second thing to keep in mind regarding Psalm 3. This Psalm has a way of compressing time so that when we read it, we tend to believe the peaceful sleep that David experienced came instantly. It most likely didn't. David probably struggled in his faith and lamented his situation to God, but he did so in faith. He believed God would hear and answer his prayer in time. So, even as an older, wiser king, David had learned to wait on the Lord to give him peaceful sleep.

The danger is to read this as if the words are magic and all I need to do is repeat them, and all of a sudden, my insomnia over my situation will be cured, and I will sleep peacefully. Friends, it may happen that way, I hope it does for you. However, for most believers, we must fight the fight of faith by continually turning to the Lord. We must understand that He is doing work in our hearts. It usually takes time for us to learn the hard lessons from the circumstances. Yet, when we fight the of faith, God's peace and sleep will come.

IV. Christians should rejoice in the King's rescue (vv. 7-8)

Arise, O LORD! Save me, O my God! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked.³ Salvation belongs to the LORD; your blessing be on your people! Selah

In this last stanza of the Psalm, we hear David's confident cry for God's deliverance. David is so confident that Yahweh will deliver him that he writes this stanza in what is called "*a prophetic perfect*" tense. He writes as if salvation has already been accomplished.³

And God did deliver him! Yahweh did *arise* and fight David's battle. God caused David's son, Absalom, to listen to bad advice and fail to pursue and defeat David when he was at his weakest. Then, when the battle finally happened, David had gathered his strength, and he routed Absalom's army, and Absalom was killed in the battle.

The final verse of Psalm 3 is a confession of God's sovereignty in his deliverance. It says:

Salvation belongs to the LORD

Friends, we may obey the Lord in what we should do and experience deliverance from our difficult situation. However, it is God who worked that deliverance. We must recognize that.

Yet, this little sentence — "*Salvation belongs to the LORD*" — is about more than just physical deliverance. It points to spiritual salvation. Salvation from eternal death in hell and the wrath of God against sin is our greatest need. Ultimately, this is what we need to be saved from so that we may be saved to enjoy a glorious relationship with Jesus.

These kinds of storms that hit our lives are opportunities for us to evaluate our relationship with Jesus. Many times, it is a storm that wrecks your life that leads you to salvation. God uses the miseries of this world to lead us to Him. So, our dire circumstances may have been resolved, but it was the tribulation that led you to faith in Christ.

Conclusion: The beauty of this Psalm lies in its ability to take an event in David's life and demonstrate how faith in Jesus can meet a variety of difficult circumstances in our own lives.

So, let's end where we began. Remember the questions I asked at the beginning of the message? What is it that threatens to overwhelm you today? What is the issue, situation, or circumstance that consumes much of your thoughts? What is the problem that keeps you awake at night, and is it the first thing you think of when you wake up in the morning? What problem has your undivided attention right now?

Psalm 3 is a lament that teaches us the way to bring our fears and troubles honestly before God. This lament is a prayer that teaches us how to seek His help. It can even be a pattern of prayer for us. Remember, the words aren't magic, but they give us words when we don't know what to pray.

Yet, here's the bottom line for us. We have a greater source of help and peace than David did. In Jesus, we have One who didn't strike God's enemies on the cheek as v. 7 says. Instead, our Savior let Himself be struck on the cheek by God's enemies. Indeed, He was beaten, despised, and rejected by God's enemies. He was nailed to a cross and killed for the sins of His enemies. Jesus allowed Himself to be truly overwhelmed by His enemies. The glorious result is that He purchased our salvation. Believers can be confident that every overwhelming experience they face is from a loving Father to help them.⁴ We never face the darkest trials of our lives alone. Jesus faced His alone so that we would never be alone. We can rest in that.

³ Ibid, 27.

⁴ Dane C. Ortlund, *In The Lord I Take Refuge*, 16.