

In sync with life, the juxtaposition of psalms of affliction and psalms of adoration make perfect sense. Many of the Lament psalms contain both elements: despair finds resolution in praise and grief ends in gratitude. The Psalms counter two American spiritual ideals: optimism and denial. Praise “does not spring from a delusion that things are better than they are,” but in the hope of the sovereign, saving power of God that overcomes evil.<sup>1</sup> Like the tide flowing in and out, praise and pain, joy and sorrow, ebb and flow. God-centric realism brings together the melodic and melancholic in worship.

The truth of Psalm 3 is summed up in a name, *Absalom*, which means in Hebrew, “my father’s peace” (*abba /shalom*). Under extreme threat from his son Absalom, David called out to the Lord for protection and the Lord gave him such a deep sense of peace and assurance that he was able to sleep. He arose in the morning with a renewed sense of confidence in God’s protection and deliverance. The uprising that drove the king from his throne in Jerusalem is countered by the rise of Yahweh from whom alone comes lasting deliverance.

The psalmist’s focus on Yahweh rather than the enemy shifts the emotional center of the psalm from lament to confidence. The superscription links Psalm 3 to the time when David “fled from Absalom his son.” David reflects his unwavering trust and confidence in Yahweh in the midst of mounting opposition orchestrated by his son. Augustine wrote, “Absalom [is] called ‘father’s peace,’ because his father had the peace, which he had not.”<sup>2</sup>

Yahweh is enthroned in heaven in Psalm 2, but in Psalm 3 King David is on the run and in need of deliverance. “Symbolically, the king is driven from social-political order (his palace) to social disorder (the wilderness). Nevertheless, though the anointed king’s ‘landscape’ is in disarray, faith in God orders his spiritual ‘inscape.’ His faith expresses itself in Psalm 3 and serves as a model prayer that turns an upside-down world right-side up.”<sup>3</sup>

Ultimate sovereignty is juxtaposed with life-threatening vulnerability. Worshipers move from the realm of God’s ultimate sovereignty in Psalm 2 to a “boots on the ground” struggle with foes who do not “serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling” (Ps 2:11). Worship shifts from the cosmic to the personal; from the eschatological victory to a good night’s sleep. We need the hope of the big picture and the reality of daily reliance on the moment-by-moment protecting power of the Lord.

Patrick Reardon draws attention to the “progressive scheme of images” in the first three psalms as “a tripod on which the whole Psalter stands.”<sup>4</sup> The Son of Man embodies the description of the righteous person in Psalm 1. The exalted Son of God is celebrated in Psalm 2. And the Suffering Servant is the objective correlative of David’s experience in Psalm 3.

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Norris, “Why the Psalms Scare Us,” *Christianity Today* (July 15, 1996), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *The Psalms*, Ps III, sect. 1, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 194.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, xiv.

### *The Back Story*

The Samuel narrative (2 Samuel 13-18) describes the messy moral chaos of David's reign after his murderous affair with Bathsheba. His family unravels. Lust, rape, murder, conspiracy, and insurrection fill a narrative that climaxes in Absalom's covert power play for the throne. A messenger came and told David, "The hearts of the people of Israel are with Absalom." David immediately called together all his officials and said, "Come! We must flee, or none of us will escape from Absalom. We must leave immediately, or he will move quickly to overtake us and bring ruin on us and put the city to the sword" (2 Sam 15:13-14).

The tragic history of Absalom's coup and David's flight from Jerusalem lie behind this inspired psalm. The narrative describes a poignant scene that serves as a type for events yet to come for the ultimate Son of David: "The whole countryside wept aloud as all the people passed by. The king also crossed the Kidron Valley, and all the people moved on toward the wilderness" (2 Sam 15:23). David fled but he had not given up nor abdicated the throne. He prayed to Yahweh and set in motion strategies that would help overcome Absalom's betrayal. As a sign of his faith in Yahweh he insisted that the ark of God remain in Jerusalem. He told Zadok the priest, "Take the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the Lord's eyes, he will bring me back and let me see it and his dwelling place again. But if he says, 'I am not pleased with you,' then I am ready; let him do to me whatever seems good to him" (2 Sam 15:25-26).

### *The Melody*

*Lord, how many are my foes!  
How many rise up against me!  
Many are saying of me,  
"God will not deliver him." Psalm 3:1-2*

If Psalms 1 and 2 form the prologue to the Church's prayer book, Psalm 3 is the opening hymn. It is the first piece identified as song. Waltke writes, "A *psalm* (Heb. *mizmôr*) refers to a song that is sung to the pizzicato (plucking rather than bowing) of a stringed instrument. The psalmist takes the cacophony of his situation and composes harmony with music and song. There is a melody in Scripture."<sup>5</sup>

The literary and poetic nature of the psalms may be so familiar to us that we forget the theological and aesthetic effort that went into composing these psalms. We can read the Samuel narrative and be overwhelmed by all the evil. We can marvel that David is able to take a deplorable and depressing situation and write a prayer – compose a song – to Yahweh. The spiritual and devotional discipline necessary for this work of worship, ought to inspire us to do the same, or at least to diligently study and pray the psalms.

Evil is best summed up succinctly. When our concern is the evil against us rather than the evil within us, it is generally better to sum up what needs to be said succinctly and move on. David

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<sup>5</sup> Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 195.

refuses to belabor the details of an ugly story, the opposition's story of intrigue, conspiracy and rebellion. He also refused to dwell on his own sins which undoubtedly played a role in provoking Absalom. David's neglect of his son Absalom and his refusal to see Absalom for two years (2 Sam 14:28) appears to have been a form of passive aggressive punishment against Absalom for his murder of Amnon.

David leaves the details of the story to the narrator and refuses to cater to any fascination we may have with evil. Simone Weil warned, "Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvelous, intoxicating."<sup>6</sup> David summed up a tragic situation in just a few lines to be sung with musical accompaniment. If only we could be as mentally and spiritually disciplined. The psalmist underscores the intensity of the situation by repeating "many" three times. David has many foes and many are rising up against him and many are saying of me, 'God will not deliver him.'" The situation is intense, but instead of dwelling on the situation, David quickly turns to God. Yahweh is addressed directly and the struggle is framed as a testimony to Yahweh's faithfulness. The lament is brief and the psalmist quickly transitions to confidence in Yahweh's protection and deliverance.

*But you, Lord, are a shield around me,  
my glory, the One who lifts my head high.  
I call out to the Lord,  
and he answers me from his holy mountain. Psalm 3:3*

The psalmist focuses not on the evil that threatens him but on the Lord who delivers him with protection, glory, and honor. The three-fold description of the enemy ("many, many, many") is answered in the three-fold description of Yahweh's provision. First, the metaphor of the shield stands for the Lord's complete protection and recalls the full armor of God described in Ephesians 6. Second, the image of "my glory" is provocative because David fled the palace like a fugitive. However his weakness and vulnerability did not define him. Even though his royal luster was gone, he is defined by the Lord's weight of glory. The third figure, "the One who lifts my head high," was especially poignant. Shimei, a relative of Saul, called down curses on David as he retreated from Jerusalem. David and his special guard ducked and dodged as Shimei hurled stones and curses, shouting, "Get out, get out, you murderer, you scoundrel! The Lord has repaid you for the all the blood you shed. . . .The Lord has given the kingdom into the hands of your son Absalom. You have come to ruin because you are a murderer!" Abishai was ready to cut off Shimei's head, but David refused. "If he is cursing because the Lord said to him, 'Curse David,' who can ask, 'Why do you do this?'" Then David said, "My son, my own flesh and blood, is trying to kill me. 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 look upon my misery and restore to me his covenant blessing instead of his curse today" (2 Sam 16:5-12).

*Willed Passivity*

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<sup>6</sup> Simone Weil

*I call out to the Lord,  
and he answers me from his holy mountain.  
I lie down and sleep;  
I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.  
I will not fear though tens of thousands  
assail me on every side. Psalm 3:4-6*

Abishai may have understood what David was doing, but I doubt it. Abishai was a warrior who was ready to fight for his king. He must have felt that David had given up. He did not realize that in that moment David showed remarkable courage and strength. Make no mistake, there was nothing passive about David's willed passivity. David was proactive in planting his confidant Hushai in Absalom's inner circle and quick to strategize a three-pronged counter attack against Absalom's army (2 Samuel 16:16-17:16; 18:1-3). David was not giving out or giving up or giving in. But at each step of the way he was conscious of yielding completely to the will of God.

Psalm 3 is prayed out action, a remarkable testimony to living by faith and living into faith, and putting our beliefs to work in real life:

*I call out to the Lord. . . .  
I lie down and sleep. . . .  
I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side.*

David is going back to his spiritual roots. Perhaps Shimei's curses remind him of Goliath's curses and he recalls his words to the giant Philistine: "You come against me with a sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty..." (1 Sam 17:45).

Picture David fleeing Jerusalem and ducking Shimei's stones and then picture our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ standing before an angry mob shouting "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Willed passivity is summed up beautifully in a single line from Jesus' prayer to the Father, "Not my will but your will be done" (Lk 22:42). Jesus' whole life has been an intentional act of willed passivity:

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Phil 2:4-8).

The principle of divine surrender is what Jesus lived out, and what he calls us to practice: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Lk 9:23-24).

Everything David did strategically depended upon Yahweh's response to his call. The most proactive thing David did was to cry for help. David prayed from the Jordanian rift, the lowest point on earth (1,385 ft. below sea level), to God on Mount Zion (2,500 feet above seal level). "In

prayer, the saint and God are united in spirit.”<sup>7</sup>

There is something impressive about a good night’s sleep and waking refreshed as a sign of faith and trust in Yahweh’s protection. David’s confidence is renewed. He refuses to be afraid. “I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side” (Ps 3:6). Regardless of how big the threat may prove to be David rests in the Lord’s deliverance. Long before the apostle Paul declared, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” David believed it (Rom 8:31).

David is bold to pray,

*Arise, Lord!  
Deliver me, my God!  
Strike all my enemies on the jaw;  
break the teeth of the wicked.  
From the Lord comes deliverance.  
May your blessing be on your people.* Psalm 3:7-8

David prays for total victory and vindication. He wants his wicked enemies vanquished, because they are a threat to the people of God. David knows, “It’s not about *me* and *my* people.” David’s benediction sums it up, “May *your* blessing be on *your* people.” There can be little doubt that David hoped Absalom would be included in that blessing. This is why David commanded his three generals in the hearing of all the troops not to harm Absalom, “Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake” (2 Sam 18:5).

David held out hope for reconciliation, but his hope was crushed by news that Absalom had been murdered. The messenger who delivered the news thought he was bringing good news, “May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up to harm you be like that young man.” But David was shaken to his core. He retreated to an upper room to weep but as he went he said: “O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you – O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam 18:33).

We cannot hear David’s cry without thinking of Jesus, the ultimate Son of David who gave up his life on the cross so that we might live. David’s love for Absalom – “If only I had died instead of you” – is a picture of our Heavenly Father who “did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32). What David wanted to do for his rebellious son is what God in Christ did for us. As the apostle Paul explained, “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:6-8).

David’s heart for Absalom is a sign of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In a world of evil and hostility, the gospel of Jesus Christ is an inclusive invitation to an exclusive Savior and Lord. We come as

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<sup>7</sup> Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 203.

we are but we do not remain as we were. We are new creations created in Christ Jesus. We have a new citizenship, a new family and an entirely new indwelling Spirit. The apostle Peter reminds us that the Lord is patient, “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

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