

Psalm 3

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[0 : 0 0] Have you ever been let down? As I posed the question just in preparing the sermon, it immediately struck me in a way what a silly question that is, because I can be pretty sure, if not certain, that we all have been let down. Hence, the question is superfluous. In one way another, we know what it is to be let down, as of course we know what it is to let others down.

One of life's earlier and recurring discoveries, if you can have recurring discoveries, is that people so often are not to be trusted. We are let down. We are deceived. We are lied to.

And who are these people behaving badly? It might be comforting to think that it's, well, the usual culprits, politicians who lie to us and let us down, maybe our bosses at work or neighbors from hell, if that language is appropriate. But sadly, the list of those who let us down often includes parents, a husband or a wife, sons and daughters, ministers and elders, friends.

In fact, if we're going to write a list of those who let others down, then the best place we could start would be by looking in the mirror. And there we would find the very first candidate for that list.

What to do when we are let down? To whom can we turn? Can anybody be trusted? These are some of the questions I want to explore with the help of the psalmist and his experiences as they are related to us in the third psalm. And if you open your Bibles to Psalm 3, and we'll read the psalm, and then having read the psalm, spend some time considering it this evening, Psalm 3, and we'll read the whole psalm.

[2 : 2 4] And notice how the psalm is introduced and how this ties in with the reading earlier in the service. We read there, a psalm of David, when he fled from his son Absalom.

O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, God will not deliver him. 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. 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.

Arise, O Lord! Deliver me, O 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!

As we think of this psalm and what it teaches us in this matter of being let down and how to respond when we are let down, I want to divide our thoughts following the four sections of the psalm, if that's one way of dividing this psalm. And notice that in these four sections, David is, first of all, let down, or at least he relates to us the manner in which he was let down. But then we notice how David is lifted up. We notice further that he then lies down. And then finally, and more intriguingly or even disturbingly, he lashes out. Well, we'll consider whether that's the appropriate way to describe what he does in that final section. But for the purposes of ensuring I had four L's, that was the best I could come up with. So, he's let down, he's lifted up, he lies down, and then he lashes out. First of all, let's think of what David says concerning how he was let down.

[4 : 38] They had in the first two verses of the psalm, O Lord, how many are my foes, how many rise up against me? Many are saying of me, God will not deliver him. David is in a bad place. He's hemmed in by enemies and finding refuge in caves and caverns. Now, that a king should have enemies is, I suppose, par for the course. It goes with the territory. But when we consider who his enemies are, the whole panorama becomes so much more poignant and so much more tragic. We've noticed the historical introduction that this psalm provides for us, when he fled from his son, Absalom. When he fled from his son, Absalom. And we read earlier in the service the passage that speaks of this very tragic occasion. His arch enemy, the one that he is fleeing from, is not Goliath or some other dastardly Philistine. It's his own son. It's Absalom. And it probably doesn't require for us to give further thought on how tragic that must have been for David. It goes without saying, really, that

Absalom was a son loved passionately by David. We can imagine what it was like for David when Absalom was first born, what joy there was in the household at the safe arrival of this welcomed son. We can imagine how David celebrated the first smile of his child. We can imagine what pride swelled up in David when Absalom pronounced his first words. We can imagine how proud he was of his son when he gave his first steps, like any other dad. David loved Absalom. He loved him deeply. But, of course, that's not all.

We can also, with great confidence, assert that Absalom loved David. He loved his father. His father was his hero. I don't know if there were playgrounds where Absalom played, but if there were, then in the playground one-upmanship, Absalom could really say to his fellow friends, my dad is stronger than your dad, and my dad is richer than your dad, and my dad is smarter than your dad. And, of course, if he did speak in those ways, it was all true. He thought his dad was the best. David was, I am sure, for the young boy as he grew up, not only a father figure, but a hero figure. But as he grew into a young man, things started to go wrong, and they started to go badly wrong. We don't know all the ins and outs, the whys and the wherefores, but somewhere along the road, self-centeredness, ambition, and pride began to take center stage in Absalom's life. He begins to use his considerable charm and charisma, inherited, no doubt, in large measure from his father for very base and Machiavellian purposes. We've read the passage there in 2 Samuel, how deviously, how wickedly he uses his charm to gain the loyalty and the support of the men of Israel, and always with the intention of, in due course, being able to seize power from his own father.

And I imagine, and certainly the evidence would suggest, that as this was going on, David suspected nothing. Ought he to have realized what was going on? Ought he to have been more careful in seeing what his son, seeing what his son was up to, perhaps. But who could have thought? How could David have imagined that his own son would be up to no good in this manner? Even when the extent of Absalom's rebellion surfaced, David continued to love Absalom. Let down so terribly.

Devastated by his son's behavior, but he continued to love his son. And evidence of that we have even on the tragic occasion when his son ultimately chased death in the midst of his rebellion. And we're told the manner in which David responded to that tragic death. In 2 Samuel, in chapter 18, and in verse 33, we read, the king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. 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!

[10 : 20] David never stopped loving Absalom, even in the midst of Absalom's wicked rebellion against him.

This, then, is the enemy. This is the one that David is fleeing from. This is the one who has been enlisting others to join his rebel army, and among them trusted advisors, among them lifelong friends of David. This is the one who has been in the midst of David. This is the one who is forcing David to flee for his life, the one who is encouraging others in a cruel cocktail of pity and scorn to taunt David.

There is no help for you in God. God will not deliver you. Many are saying of me, David records for us there in verse 2, God will not deliver him.

Who is behind all of this wickedness? It's David's own son. I wonder, as David heard the taunts that God would not deliver him, I wonder if David, perhaps just for a moment, started to believe them, began to wonder if that was actually so, that such was his circumstance, such was the depth to which he had been dragged down, that there was no deliverance for him, and that his accusers and his taunters were indeed saying that which was true. I wonder if perhaps he was tempted to believe that it was so.

David was let down. He was badly let down. But as we think of ourselves and our own circumstances, what about you, my friend? Who has let you down? Who perhaps is letting you down even today?

[12 : 24] And the more we love, the more it hurts, leaving deep and often open wounds. Well, David was let down. But is that the end of the story? Well, by no means. The psalm continues.

He was let down, but David also was lifted up. We read in verse 3, What do you think is the most exciting word in the Bible? Well, there are many candidates, no doubt.

The word but would seem to be an unlikely candidate for the most exciting word in the Bible, and yet, is it not the case that this little word but is so often a word pregnant with exciting possibilities?

And so it is on this occasion from the midst of a dark and seemingly hopeless panorama. Hope rears its glorious head by means of this glorious head by means of this little word but. But you. But you are a shield around me. All is not lost. There is hope, even in the face of such tragic circumstances.

And this hope that rears its beautiful face in the psalm before us. This hope is a person.

[14 : 03] But you. But you. And who is this you that David turns to? But you, O Lord. But you, O Lord, are a shield around me. Others may forsake me. Indeed, others have forsaken me. Others may abandon me.

Others have abandoned me. But you, O Lord, are different. Your love is constant. Your love is dependable. Your love is trustworthy. When David gives expression to his confidence in God, and in so doing, he describes God for us in a measure. And the description that he gives of this God who never lets him down is a description so clearly and evidently born of personal experience.

What does he say of his God, of this God that is our God also? He describes him as a shield around me. You are a shield around me. In contrast to David's own shield, David was a man of war, an accomplished soldier, an accomplished general, with a great CV of many victories. And yet, on this occasion, his shield provides him with no protection. But he turns to the one who is a shield around him. Not only is his own shield proving ineffective, but the reference here to this shield that God provides around him stands in contrast to the limited defense that would be provided by any shield. We can just picture the scene of somebody using a shield, and generally you've got the shield here up front. And in a measure, it can protect you from those who would come to you face to face. But what of the guy who's going to stab you in the back?

You see, your shield is of little help for that sneaky one who comes up behind you. But he's able to say, in these circumstances, having been the victim of that kind of attack, he's saying, but you, O Lord, you are a shield round about me. Your protection is absolute and permanent.

You are a shield around me. But what else does David say of his God? He says, you bestow glory on me.

[16 : 35] In actual fact, what David says here is much more succinct. He simply describes God as my glory. You are my glory. What does that mean? Well, what David is expressing is that which is most important to him, not his throne, not his palace, not his wealth, not his power, not his reputation, these are all passing and fragile as he is discovering, perhaps for the first time, God is his glory. Not even his own family can be or ought to be his glory.

As he is acutely discovering as he writes this psalm. God must be, and God is his glory. You are my glory, David is able to testify. And what about you, Christian friend? What or who do you glory in?

What or who is most important to you? Your glory is that which is most important to you. If it is anyone or anything other than God, then you are guilty of idolatry.

See, this is idolatry, to replace God with someone or something else that becomes your glory, the center of your glory. The center of your life, the most important thing in your life. Identify that, and you've identified your God. You've identified your glory. I wonder, and we don't know, but might it be that David's tragic circumstances concentrated his minds and affection regarding what really mattered?

Might it be that he was able to testify to God as his glory with greater conviction in a cave than in a palace?

[18 : 49] Might it be that in God's gracious providence, he allowed even such tragedy in David's life that he would be able to appreciate that which was and had to be his glory? You, O Lord, are my glory.

But David goes on. He speaks of God as the one who lifts up my head. We're thinking of this part of the psalm as describing David being lifted up. He was let down, but he's lifted up. And this is the language he uses here. You lift up my head. As David speaks of God in this way, he's not quoting from a textbook on theology. This is born of his experience of God. Indeed, we can safely suggest that it's his previous experience that provides him assurance in his present difficulties. David knew what it was to be cast down. He knew what it was to be incapable of looking up and forward in hope. He knew what it was to be submerged in a dark, dark, dark place. But he knew also what it was for God to lift up his head.

And notice, and this is, I think, very important, notice that this is what God does for him. It is God who lifts up his head. Now, as we think of ourselves and how this could apply to ourselves, we might imagine, and we might reasonably imagine, that to lift up our head when we are in trouble, when we are let down, surely to lift up our head, well, that's our responsibility. We lift up our head to God.

But David testifies other ones. Even the lifting up of his head is God's gracious doing in his life.

Is that to say that David could do nothing? Is that to say that we are to do nothing and simply wait on God to act on our behalf? Oh, by no means. What did David do? Well, we read what he did.

[20 : 57] To the Lord I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy hill. While his head was downcast, he was still able, perhaps lacking in faith, perhaps mumbling the words, but he was able to cry out to God for help, to cry aloud. He had done so before. He does so now, and he would do so again. He cries aloud, urgently, urgently, urgently, and passionately, and desperately. To whom else can he turn? And as he cries, so he is able to experience, and then to testify that the Lord answered him and lifted him up.

David was let down. David was lifted up. What about ourselves? What about you? Do you feel sometimes that you have nobody to turn to, nobody who is able or willing to help? No friends who can provide the help that you need in the circumstances you find yourself in? And while it is, of course, good that we cultivate, and indeed are grateful to God for those men and women who God does place in our paths to help us, and we are grateful for them. That our occasions, are there not, with David, when the only one we can call to, and the one that we must call to, is to cry out to the Lord. And so, I would urge you, as I hope I speak to myself, as I hope I speak to myself. Cry out to the Lord from whatever dark place you are in. To the Lord I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy hill. David was let down. David was lifted up, but as we continue to read the psalm, we find that David now lies down. In verse 5,

I lie down and sleep. To be let down, and indeed to be lifted up by God, that sounds familiar to us.

These are experiences that we can relate to. It seems, given the knowledge that we have of God, and who He is, and what He is like, it seems reasonable to consider that that is how God would respond to us in circumstances where we are let down. But what has lying down and resting got to do with this matter of being let down? In the midst of a crisis, we would hardly imagine that lying down for a wee rest is the recommended course of action. But what does David say in the psalm?

I lie down and sleep. How does David confront his situation? How does he deal with the crisis? What strategies does he employ? He prays, and he sleeps. He cries out to God, and he lies down to rest.

[24 : 13] There he is, trapped in a cold and dismal cave, the world on his shoulders, his son intent on sending him to an early grave. And yet, for David, having cried out for help, it's good night and sweet dreams.

Why is he able to lie down and rest in such circumstances? Well, he gives us the reason. I lie down and sleep. And then he says, I wake again because the Lord sustains me. I wake again because the Lord sustains me. I can rest in security and in confidence because it is the Lord who will rise me up again as the day dawns. The shield that he had gloried in and spoken on, that shield will be working throughout the night, protecting David. David trusts in God, and it makes a difference. It really makes a difference. It makes all the difference for David.

The trials that he faces are the same. They're as intense. His circumstances are no less tragic. But he faces them tightly gripped by the hand of God. And so, he is able to lie down and rest.

He's let down. He's lifted up. He lies down. And in many ways, it would be much more comfortable to draw things to a close at this point. But we would be remiss in not recognizing what David goes on to say when he uses language that we might describe as David lashing out. Verses 7 and 8, Arise, O Lord, deliver me, O 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. If lying down was surprising, the final action of David in the face of being let down appears, maybe to our minds, just a little disappointing. He lashes out.

[26 : 39] Strike all my enemies on the jaw. Break the teeth of the wicked. That David would cry to God for deliverance is to be expected, but why the need to wish violence on his enemies? The language he uses is vivid, it's violent, and in great measure, disturbing. What are we to make of it? Do we distance ourselves from these unworthy sentiments and maybe recognize that they're the words of a man under severe stress, and so we make allowances? Is that not how we operate in daily life? Somebody says something that's maybe unfair or hurtful or offensive, and we say, well, I'll make allowances.

I wonder what is going on at home, what difficulties they're under, and so though what they say is wrong, we make allowances, or at least we try to. Is that what we should do here? Do we consider that David was wrong to express himself in this way, but the poor man, he's under such stress and such difficulties?

I think not. What then are we to make of the words that he uses, the manner in which he lashes out, or so it would appear? Well, I don't pretend to have a full answer to that question, but I would say three things. The first thing I would say is that the words that David uses here, difficult though we might find them, are realistic. What do I mean by that? Well, deliverance for David. This is a situation of physical and imminent danger. His enemies are there to kill him, to shed his blood, and for David to be delivered required the destruction of his enemies. That was the means that would allow for his deliverance. And of course, in the real world that we live in, there is seldom a bloodless deliverance. And so, at that level alone, we can say that the words that

David uses are simply realistic if deliverance is to be secured. But we can say more, and I think we can say more of greater significance. The words he uses also are what we might describe as covenantal.

What I mean by that is that they reflect David's loyalty to God. You see, the enemies of David are first and foremost the enemies of God. Indeed, that is why they are the enemies of David. They have raised their hand against the Lord's anointed. And tragically, the first one guilty of that, of course, was Absalom, the one who had least excuse for such rebellion. And he has raised his hand against God's anointed. And the destruction that is called for is their just reward. What David is calling for is justice. This isn't base vengeance or pettiness on the part of David. No, what David is calling for is justice, that God would do the right thing. But I think there's a final thing we can say about these words that are difficult. And I say it as a suggestion.

[30 : 12] Might it not be the case that these words that he delivers concerning his enemies are also words that are moderated by mercy? And I say that because the psalm ends with a final petition. Notice right at the end, David cries out in this way, may your blessing be on your people. And the question is, to whom is David referring? Clearly, he's directing this petition to God, and he is seeking blessing on what he describes as your people. So, who are these people that God, or rather David, wishes to be blessed?

Well, his cry is that God would be merciful to the whole nation of Israel that he forms a part of. And can we not suggest that this includes those of the nation of Israel who were showing no mercy to David? You see, remember what we've already established very clearly, that those who were opposing him, those who were seeking his death were not from foreign nations. No, they weren't Gentiles.

They were from the very people of God. They were Israelites who were seeking his destruction. Well, I don't know if it is the case that when David cries out to God, may your blessing be on your people. I don't know if he was maybe thinking even of those who were opposing him. But I'm intrigued by the possibility, and it's certainly true, and this we can say with great confidence, it's certainly true that David would have celebrated and rejoiced in any mercy shown to his own son Absalom.

And if he would have rejoiced in that, surely he would have rejoiced in that mercy being extended to those who followed Absalom. Well, as we think of this matter of the attitude that we are to have as we fast forward to today and think, well, what does this got to say to us in relation to those who oppose us, to those who are enemies of the cause of Christ? And there are lessons from the language of the psalmist. But it's also true that the lessons that we have here are enriched in the light of Calvary. It's not that what we have in the New Testament is in any way a contradiction of what we have in the Old, by no means. But there is an enriching of our understanding of these matters.

We are granted a deeper insight into God's attitude to His enemies, a deeper insight that has to inform our own perspective. We know that God sent His own Son, Jesus, to die for His enemies. We know that Jesus Himself, as He hung on Calvary's tree, He prayed for forgiveness for the very men who nailed Him to the cross. And so, as we are instructed by the words and the sentiments of David, so we bring to that the greater and the greater and the further light that we have on the matter in the New Testament.

[33 : 31] Much more could and perhaps should be said, but we leave it there. Well, we return to the beginning. We return to where we began in this psalm. David was let down, and it happens. We also are let down.

You too may know what it is to be let down. And the lesson that we learn, the principal lesson that we can draw from this psalm is that when that is our experience, when that is your experience, what you can do and what you must do and what you are invited to do is to cry out to the One who is able and willing to lift you up. And as you cry out in faith for the help that He is able and willing to give, so lie down to rest in confidence and security. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you this evening.