

## **“Sleeping on the Eve of Battle”**

**Psalm 3:1-8**

**January 15, 2012**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Psalm 3 is the first psalm with a heading. This one says, “A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.” It is generally agreed by Old Testament scholars that these headings were later editorial additions and should not be regarded as part of the inspired text. But they are widely considered to be reliable, probably reflecting ancient Jewish consensus about the historical settings of the psalms.

The incident referred to here, when David fled from Absalom, gets a surprisingly large amount of attention in 2 Samuel, extending from chapters 13 through 19. The conflict began when Absalom’s sister was raped by her half brother, Amnon. Absalom avenges his sister by murdering Amnon, after which David banishes him. Absalom is eventually allowed to return to Jerusalem, but his hatred for his father had ripened during his exile. He was angry that the king had not taken action against Amnon, and that he was being banished for defending the honor of his sister when David should have been the one to do so. So upon his return he engages in a campaign to steal from his father the affections of the Israelite people. For four years, right under David’s nose, Absalom positioned himself at the king’s gate, where he would intercept people coming to see the king for justice. He would then employ the strategy of negative campaigning, saying to those people that they had a good case, but the king was unwilling to hear it. If he were king on the other hand, they would certainly get justice. In this manner he stole the hearts of the people. Absalom’s conspiracy grew, and David didn’t hear about it until it was too late. He was forced to flee the city for his life. He knew a battle with Absalom’s army would come, and this psalm was written on the eve of that battle. Though the stakes could not be higher, David found rest in the Lord and was able to sleep the night before the battle, while being surrounded by the army of Absalom.

I would like for us to get into this passage by asking you to imagine what it would feel like to be able to say what David said in verse 6 about your greatest fears. He said, **“I will not be afraid.”** What are your greatest fears? I mentioned at Marjorie Poole’s memorial service this past Monday that one of mine is that everyone will leave the church and I will be remembered in the history of AVPC as the pastor who killed the church. What are the fears that grip your soul and keep you in bondage? Perhaps your fears relate to your children or your career. What would it feel like if you were never afraid of that again? Can you imagine yourself free of that fear to the point that you could sleep even if the thing you feared seemed likely to happen? David found such freedom, and we can too.

## I. A Rising Tide of Enemies – v. 1-2

David reports of multiplied enemies. **“O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me.”** David’s experience was the same as reported by others, in the fact that troubles often come in bunches. You might go several years without any expensive repairs being required on your car or home, and then your transmission on your car goes out at the same time your house’s heating and air conditioning system breaks down beyond repair and must be replaced. A season of health is followed by several serious illnesses cropping up. Years of peace in a church are sometimes followed by an outbreak of serious dissension and disunity.

After years of growing power and peace in his kingdom, David experienced a time in Absalom’s rebellion where everything seemed to be coming apart at the seams. Many enemies are reported in the account of 2 Samuel. There was first of all his son, Absalom, who betrayed his father not in a moment of irrational passion, but in a calculating, systematic way for four years. One of David’s most feared enemies during the time when he was forced to flee Jerusalem was one of his former advisors, a man named Ahithophel, who decided to use his considerable wisdom to counsel Absalom on how he could kill his father, David. And then there was Mephibosheth, grandson of David’s predecessor, King Saul. When David became king, he showed great kindness to Mephibosheth, contrary to the normal practice of kings in this day to kill every heir of the previous king they could find. Now Mephibosheth remained in Jerusalem instead of going with David, in the selfish hope that the kingdom would now be restored to him. Then there was Shimei, another of King’s Saul’s descendents, who cursed David as he fled. Finally, the majority of the nation allied themselves with Absalom against David.

David reports in verse 2 one of the greatest challenges he faced during this time. **“Many are saying of my soul, there is no salvation for him in God.”** It is unclear whether it was his friends or his enemies saying this. If it was his friends, they were saying this sorrowfully, but these would have been very discouraging words to hear from your friends. It would mean that they are convinced your time is up and there is no hope for you. But perhaps the words were spoken by his enemies in a mocking, rejoicing tone. In either case, these words would tempt David to give up completely.

Have you ever experienced the multiplication of enemies? Perhaps the enemies take the form of a series of financial setbacks or health setbacks. Or perhaps there are people who are upset at you, and maybe some of them would love to see harm come upon you. I read this week of a newly ordained pastor who said, “I didn’t know that, once you become a leader, there’s always someone mad at you!” I would go so far as to say that if you’re not aware of

actual or potential enemies, you're probably not paying very close attention. Earlier this week I was listening to the radio while heading to the office, and there was a report about some newly discovered strain of tuberculosis in India that is completely unresponsive to all current antibiotics. Like David, we are not unfamiliar with enemies. In light of their presence, how can we rest? Let's notice how David found rest as we consider the next verses of the psalm.

## II. An Aroused God – v. 3-4, 7-8

The first word of verse 3 is an example of a case when the word 'but' is very large. Enemies are multiplied, *but* all that is neutralized by what comes next. It's like saying, "My checking account has plummeted to a balance near zero, *but* I have over \$100,000 in a savings account that I can get anytime." The truth that neutralizes the proliferation of enemies is David's reminder to himself about the Lord. **"But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head."** The idea of God as a shield is a common metaphor in the Bible. It appears first in the Bible when God comes to Abraham after his battle with the five kings of his region in his rescue of Lot, his nephew. **"Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great"** (Gen. 15:1). A shield surrounds and protects by taking the blows itself that would otherwise come to the one being protected. It is interesting here that David reports that he is surrounded by two things. He is surrounded not only by the Lord as his shield, but also by **"many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around"** (v. 6). But the shield is closer to him than the enemies, and nothing can get to him but by the permission of the Lord, his shield.

John Paton was a 19<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian missionary to the New Hebrides Islands in the south Pacific. His first location was on an island named Tanna, where the cannibals living there violently opposed his work for the entire four years he was there. His suffering had been intense, including the loss of his wife and their baby. As he was attempting to flee the island with his assistant, Abraham, they were surrounded by raging natives who kept urging each other to strike the first blow. Paton wrote in his autobiography about how he drew courage from remembering the sovereignty of God.

My heart rose up to the Lord Jesus; I saw Him watching all the scene. My peace came back to me like a wave from God. I realized that I was immortal till my Master's work with me was done. The assurance came to me, as if a voice out of Heaven had spoken, that not a musket would be fired to wound us, not a club prevail to strike us, not a spear leave the hand in which it was held vibrating to be thrown, not an arrow leave the bow, or a killing stone the fingers, without the permission of Jesus Christ, whose is all power in Heaven and on Earth. He rules all Nature, animate and inanimate, and restrains even the Savage of the South Seas.

As a result of being his shield, he says that the Lord is his glory and the lifter of his head. To say that the Lord is his glory means that the Lord is his precious treasure. And the Lord is also the lifter of his head, meaning that he delivers him from despair. Verse 3 finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. He is our shield, protecting us from all our enemies by taking the blows himself. He protects us from our own sin, taking the blows from God's just penalty for our sin. He also takes the blows from Satan, that we might escape them. Do you remember that time on the cross when Jesus was being mocked by the onlookers? "He saved others, let him save himself if he is the son of God." Ironically, the truth was that as our shield, he could save others only by sacrificing himself.

There is one other important truth that needs to be pointed out here. The practical expression of David's faith, and a necessary part of being delivered from our fears, is prayer. David said, **"I cried aloud to the Lord, and he answered me from his holy hill."** The specific prayer he utters is found in verse 7. **"Arise, O Lord! Save me, O my God! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked"** (v. 7). I like David's confidence in the Lord here. Spurgeon comments on this verse by saying that David has such a strong confidence in the Lord "that he feels the Lord hath but to *arise* and he is saved. It is enough for the Lord to stand up, and all is well."

This prayer against his enemies is the first occurrence of something that is quite common in the psalms, and it invites a question. In light of Jesus' command to love our enemies, how we ought to apply the many prayers of the psalmist against one's enemies? Should we name personal enemies in our prayers, asking God to strike them on the cheek (a symbolic act which means to bring shame upon them) and to break their teeth (remove their greatest weapon)? A quick answer will have to suffice here. I believe that with the coming of Christ in the New Testament, God's conquest of his enemies undergoes a fundamental change. In this present era between Jesus' first and second coming, God still thoroughly conquers his enemies, but he now does so primarily by converting them. For example, the apostle Paul was a vicious enemy of the early church, but this enemy was defeated by his own conversion. So we can still pray for God to defeat his enemies, but we pray that he would do so by converting them. Eventually, all God's enemies will be defeated, either through conversion or through judgment of all who refuse his mercy.

### **III. A Rested Warrior – v. 5-6**

Knowing that the Lord was his shield, David was able to lie down and sleep, even though he was surrounded by many thousands of his enemies. This is the rest of trusting God. In Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the hobbits and their companions find a time of rest in Rivendell. They have already endured many

hardships on their quest, but there are even more difficult ones to come. For now, though, they find rest in Rivendell. Here's how Tolkien describes it.

For awhile the hobbits continued to talk and think of the past journey and of the perils that lay ahead; but such was the virtue of the land of Rivendell that soon all fear and anxiety was lifted from their minds. The future, good or ill, was not forgotten, but ceased to have power over the present. Health and hope grew strong in them, and they were content with each day as it came, taking pleasure in every meal, and in every word and song.

One of the great enemies of this kind of trust in God is when we insist on writing the script for our own lives, and ask God to play his part in our script. If we would trust God, we must abandon the script-writing business to God. There is an account of David doing just this when he fled Jerusalem. As he was leaving, several of the priests followed him carrying the ark of the covenant. David told them to carry the ark back to the city, and he spoke words of trust in God as the chief script-writer in doing so. **“If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both it and his dwelling place. But if he says, ‘I have no pleasure in you,’ behold, here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him”** (2 Sam. 15:25-26).

This resting in the Lord is no mere passivity. After David slept the sleep of those who are content to rest in God, he says, **“I woke again.”** When he woke that day, he developed battle plans, strapped on his armor and went out and fought. It is this rhythm of rest and work that is essential to healthy, effective living. They exist in a relationship of interdependence, in our spiritual lives just as much as in our physical lives. All rest and no work soon leads to the inability to rest. All work and no rest soon results in an inability to work. As I was reading the commentaries in preparation for this sermon, I noticed that some called this “A Morning Hymn” while others called it “An Evening Hymn.” Because of this blend of resting and working, it is appropriate either way. It is a great prayer for the evening, as we lay our heads down to sleep, asking God to help us sleep the sleep of those who have God as their shield, no matter how many obstacles may face us when we awake the next day. It is also appropriate as a morning hymn, spoken with a prayer that we would awaken with our hearts filled with a bold confidence in the Lord and a song of praise upon our lips.

## **CONCLUSION:**

It's appropriate that we close where the psalm closes. **“Salvation belongs to the Lord; your blessing be on your people!”** May God liberate you from your deepest fears as you trust in Jesus your shield! All who seek refuge behind that shield will find perfect peace and rest, and all the blessing of God upon them.