

Sermon 6, God Save the King!, Psalm 3

Proposition: God saves His king, breaks the teeth of the wicked, blesses His people, and reveals Himself as Savior.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, as Charles Spurgeon comments on this Psalm, it is in many ways the first Psalm. It is the first Psalm with a title, the first Psalm that uses the word “Selah,” and the first Psalm after the two great introductory Psalms. In it, the general conflict between the righteous and the wicked from Psalm 1, which was sharpened into the conflict between God and Christ on one side and the rebellious nations on the other in Psalm 2, is now rendered as the particular, concrete battle between David (on God’s side) and Absalom (who is against God). Yet, of course, the message is the same here as in the previous Psalms: God is going to win, and God’s Anointed is going to win. In this Psalm, as we will see, God saves His king, breaks the teeth of the wicked, blesses His people, and reveals Himself as Savior.

I. Salvation Needed, Title

The title of the psalm points us to a time when David definitely needed salvation. He was on the run from Absalom his son. It seems that Absalom may have been his favorite son; he was

certainly a good-looking son. And yet Absalom hated his father so much that he was willing to start a civil war to wrest the kingdom from him.

Salvation is the theme of this psalm. The king indirectly prays for salvation in v. 2, and the psalm closes with the affirmation that God saves. In between, the king definitely needs salvation, from the enemies of God who have taken the form of his very own son.

II. Salvation Denied, vv. 1-2

The psalm opens with a plaintive cry. The first word of the psalm is “Yahweh!” The king calls on God by name. This makes the psalm a prayer, for it is addressed to God.

A. A Triple “How Many”

We then have a literary feature called “anaphora,” where the same phrase is repeated at the beginning of successive clauses. The word here is the phrase “how many,” which is repeated three times. “How many are my foes! How many are rising up against me! How many are saying to my soul, ‘There is no salvation for him in God!’”

Let’s look at each of these “how manys.” The first is an exclamation over the number of his foes. Let’s just say that Absalom’s rebellion is not something that David was expecting. If North Korea attacked us, we would take it in stride. We’ve known for our whole lives that North Korea hates our guts. But if Canada launched a surprise attack on North Dakota, we would be shocked. We never expected such a thing from those nice polite Canadians, eh? Well, this first “how many” is an expression of shock — not at the identity of the enemies, but at their number.

At times in his career David had enjoyed overwhelming popularity. “Now all the people took note of it, and it pleased them, just as everything the king did pleased all the people” (2Sa 3:36 NAS). Well, that had been several decades ago at this point, and David is no longer the most popular ruler on the block. His good-looking, great-haired son has surpassed him. How many people prefer Absalom to him is an unpleasant shock, and one that leads him to cry out “How many!”

The second “how many” expresses that shock all over again, this time, I think, with the added wrinkle that the number with Absalom is increasing every day, while the number with David is . . . not. David flees Jerusalem with 600 men, while Ahithophel proposes to raise an army of 12,000 that same night with which to destroy the king. On a single day’s notice, Absalom can command twenty men for every one that David can.

That’s horrifying. David has been on the throne for maybe thirty years or more at this point, and the total number of men who will stand with him in a crisis is only 600, while the rebel usurper has twenty times as many.

But the third and climactic “how many” is the worst of all.

B. “No Salvation for him in God”

For every one that is ready to support Absalom on the throne, or to serve in an army for the purpose of bringing David down, there are probably several who are wagging their tongues. Obviously this war and David’s flight were the talk of Jerusalem. And the consensus, more or less, among the people whom David had ruled for so long, was that David’s goose was cooked.

Absalom had it in the bag. David's dynasty would stand, just as God had promised. But David personally was finished. God would not save him now.

I don't know that we should imagine that the chatty Jerusalemites had concluded that God could not save David. But the fact that the Almighty had not intervened to this point, and had let Absalom take over the capital and retain the services of David's most cunning adviser, were obvious pieces of evidence that the kingdom was going to be Absalom's property within a matter of days. Maybe God could save David, but He wouldn't.

Palace intrigues in the East. What's new? God's salvation has nothing to do with it. David simply doesn't have the political capital to win this one. God is not going to save him from his own idiotic choice to alienate his best-looking and most ambitious son.

Of course, that is the earthly perspective, and I want to challenge that perspective — as does the psalm, of course. David states the secular way of looking at it, and he states it not as an “alternative viewpoint” but as a life-or-death challenge to his faith.

As the psalm makes clear, the issue is actually the same issue that we saw in Pss. 1-2. The issue is the combat between God and the rebellious nations of the earth. Absalom is one of those kings who refuses to submit to the Lord's Anointed. He is one of the ones who lead the nations to rage and the peoples to imagine a vain thing. He wants to throw off the bonds of the Lord's Anointed. David, meanwhile, *is* the Lord's Anointed and he is duty-bound to stand against this rebellion, and to do so in the name of Yahweh. Absalom must fall, because David is God's Messiah.

In other words, though there are obvious “secular” reasons for Absalom's rebellion, and in political terms we can see that Absalom has an excellent shot at winning this one, in theological terms Absalom's final victory is impossible. God is 100% committed to saving His Anointed, and the one who attacks that Anointed will fail.

So let me ask — when you are in trouble, can you simply adopt the king's perspective, say “I am the Lord's Anointed; it's impossible for me to lose” and plow right ahead? The answer is that it depends. If you are doing what God commanded you to do, walking in the path of righteousness, then you need to plow ahead. You are walking as a Christian, and the Lord's Anointed must put all His enemies under His feet. If you are in Him, then your enemies are God's enemies and they will perish. But if you are in sin, you cannot expect God's blessing, and you're not going to win.

There is salvation for the king in God. There is salvation for those who are united to the king. But there is indeed no salvation for the one who insists on keeping his sins.

III. Salvation Granted (and Asked), vv. 3-7

In any case, the psalm is only indirectly about you and what you should do in the midst of the battle between God and the rebellious nations. The psalm is directly and primarily about the king. When the king is in trouble, who is God? How does He help His king? What does the king do in response? When you see those things, you will know better how you ought to respond to the battle between God and the rebellious nations.

A. Who God Is in Trouble, vv. 3-5

Vv. 3-5 highlight half-a-dozen realities of God's identity toward the king in the king's distress.

1. The King's Shield

The first reality is that Yahweh is the king's shield. He protects the king from the weapons of the enemy. That is a metaphor describing spiritual protection. The Lord will not always protect you from sleeping on the ground or losing your health. But He will protect you from losing your salvation and your faith. This is true of every saint, and much more of the king! The Lord saves His Anointed. Period.

2. The King's Glory

The king also calls on God as his "glory." What does this mean? It means that the king's glory is not his royal palace, his concubines, his wealth, or his political power. The thing that gives him fulfillment and satisfaction is his God. As Shakespeare put it,

Some glory in their birth, some in their skill,
Some in their wealth, some in their body's force,
Some in their garments though new-fangled ill;
Some in their hawks and hounds, some in their horse . . . (Sonnet 91)

The King glories not in any of these things — nor should you! Your glory is not in your car, your home, your clothing, your skill with words or swords, your travels or your wealth. Your glory is in Jesus Christ and His Father.

Thus, no matter what Absalom took, he could not take David's glory, because David gloried in the Lord.

3. The Lifter of the King's Head

The king has his head lifted by God. What does this mean? This is a metaphor taken from the posture of the human body. When your head droops and hangs down low, what does that signify? That you are feeling upbeat and ready for any challenge? Hardly. But when your head is high and your eyes flash with vigor, you are ready to take on the world.

It is Yahweh who lifts the king's head. And it is Yahweh who lifts your head too.

4. The Answerer of the King's Prayers

Well, David has characterized the Lord in three ways, and now he recounts how the Lord answered him. God is the hearer of prayers. When you cry out to Him, He hears. And when He hears, He never ignores you. He always responds to His Anointed and to those who are united by faith to His Anointed.

Why pray? Because God hears. You need help from beyond the world. Sometimes, perhaps, the only help you need is to be listened to. Other times, you need something more tangible. Guess what? God knows when those times are, and He gives you exactly what you need at all times.

Notice too the location of God: He is on His Holy Hill — Zion, as mentioned in v. 6 of the previous psalm. Why this reference to the Holy Hill? Because God hears from His home, and the home of His Anointed King. David almost seems to be hinting that he is not personally the

ultimate version of the Lord's Anointed, that there is a better one on the holy hill even now, answering the king's prayers.

You are in that same boat. You, Christian, have been anointed with the Holy Spirit and that is why you are a Christian. But you are not the ultimate anointed of the Lord. You need to cry to God's true king, the king of kings, enthroned on Zion and responding to the prayers of His people.

5. The King's Sustainer

The Lord is also described as the one who sustains the king. Do you actually believe this? That the word of God is more necessary to you than your daily food? That God, not your boss, is the one who ultimately pays your salary? That God, not your parents, is the one who ultimately gives you life and provides for you?

If God is your source of sustenance, do you need to worry about another source of sustenance? Or do you need to instead focus on drawing sustenance from the God who sustains?

David does not freak out in this psalm about where his next meal is coming from. Instead, he mentions that it is going to come from God and therefore he is not worried. He is able to sleep peacefully because he gets everything he needs from the Lord.

6. The Wicked's Bane

Finally, the God to whom David prays is described as the wicked's bane. He smashes the enemies on the cheekbone and breaks their teeth. One should think of a dog that can attack only with its mouth. When its teeth are smashed in by a rifle butt, it is essentially helpless. Just as you have been taught from childhood not to fear the daddy longlegs because its mouth is too small to bite you, so you should be taught from childhood not to fear the wicked because God will render their mouths powerless to harm you. No matter what the consensus around town about David's political future was, those mouths could not harm him. They could say all they wanted that God was not going to save His Anointed; it was false and will always be false. God is going to make sure that His Anointed wins.

B. What the King Does in Trouble, vv. 4-6

That further explains what the king does when he is in trouble. Our psalm mentions four things that the king engages in when he is in trouble.

1. He Prays, v. 4a

First of all, he prays. He cries to the Lord with his voice.

Now, I just said that the Lord is definitely going to save His Anointed. That's true. But God will not save His Anointed apart from His Anointed asking for it. David believed that there was help for him in God, which is why he prayed hard. He prayed with this very psalm, and no doubt with plenty of other prayers and petitions and pleas too. When the king gets into trouble, when he is caught in the nations' rebellion against God, he does not just hunker down and hope for the fight to move away from Him. He prays to the Lord. And of course, you and I need to do this too. If you read Luke's gospel you will see what a big part of Jesus' life prayer was.

2. He Sleeps and Wakes, v. 5

The second thing the king does in trouble is lie down, sleep, and wake up again in safety. Luther commented that the literal sense of this is ridiculous and that it must be a reference to Jesus dying and rising again from the dead. While it's true that there is a reference to the king's death and resurrection here, the literal sense is far from absurd. In fact, it is a huge promise and delight to God's people. We all know many people who have trouble sleeping. It's an affliction that is extremely not fun. Many of those who can't sleep can't sleep because their mind is racing and they have thoughts they can't shut off. The balance between mind and body has gotten out of whack, and they suffer from insomnia as a result.

God's Anointed is not like that. He enjoys peace of mind. He sleeps sweetly and profoundly.

What a gift and blessing it is to sleep so deeply, untroubled by anxious thoughts! Those who have ever wrestled with insomnia will know that the literal meaning here is one of the greatest blessings that God bestows on His king and people.

3. He Is Not Afraid, v. 6

We also see that the king in trouble is not afraid. Though Absalom were to raise an army of 12,000 and pursue him, David would not walk in fear but in faith. Even if he were to learn that such an army had completely encircled him, that there was no way out and he would have to face their swords, he would still have a whole heart of faith in the God who saves His Anointed.

Your king has this kind of faith. I have been emphasizing that you need to imitate your king, to follow His example. But allow me to say here that the opposite emphasis is just as true. Your king had this kind of faith in your place. He was and is able to defy twelve thousand men because He is the Lord's Anointed. His courage is yours when you trust in Him.

4. He Prays Again, v. 7a

The king prays again. He says he won't be afraid of ten thousand armed men ravaging for his blood, but he also doesn't just happily throw himself on their swords. Instead, he prays again. He asks that God would arise. That means to stand up. He asks God to get up off His throne.

Now, we have talked about this in Sunday School recently. If God has to get up off His throne, is that a good sign? Not for whoever He's getting up to attack. The King prays that God will do this, and he reminds God that He already smashed the teeth of the enemies.

Just as the Lord laughs at the rebellious nations in Ps. 2, so they are already defeated foes here in Ps. 3. Yet the king still experiences their threat, and he still prays for God to stand up and deal with them. In the same way, we know that the world, the flesh, and the devil are vanquished already today through the death of Christ — and yet we have to vigorously pray for the Lord to vanquish them and preserve us from their attacks.

IV. Salvation's Source, v. 8a

Well, the Jerusalem consensus was wrong. David, of course, won the civil war and Absalom was killed in a tree by three javelins to the heart. God's salvation did in fact rescue His Anointed. That's because salvation does not come from politics or from physical attractiveness. It comes from God. "Of Him are all things" — including salvation.

V. Salvation's Outcome, v. 8b

And the outcome of salvation is that it brings blessing to God's people. The sufferings of the Lord's Anointed at the hands of the rebellious nations are transmuted in blessing for His people.

So if you find yourself caught in the battle, if the rebellious nations are turning on you because they can't reach the Lord's Anointed in heaven, what should you do? Put your trust in the Lord. Take refuge in Him. That's the path of victory, the path of blessing, the path of delight. His blessing is upon His people. Blessed are all who take refuge in Him, for only in Him is salvation to be found. Amen.