

(P) Psalm 3

Overwhelmed

Psalm 3:1-2 NIV

[1] ... Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! [2] 2 Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him ." ...

I can certainly relate to the Psalmist as he says that. Have you ever been in a situation which has left you feeling overwhelmed? We all go through times of feeling overwhelmed, or anxious due to circumstances that we face. Whether it's that feeling of stress associated with mounting work from school or uni or our jobs, whether it's the idea that you are all alone, or that you think every decision you are making is wrong or maybe life is just really hard. Or perhaps you feel attacked when the media criticise Christianity or condemn SRE. Or perhaps it's your family and friends who attack you because you're a Christian? It's safe to say that there are times and will be times when we feel helpless, we feel that there is nothing that we can do and we feel overwhelmed.

As you listened to the psalm being read, did you sense that the writer was feeling overwhelmed? But did you also notice the journey the Psalmist takes from being totally overwhelmed to a place where he has hope and is at peace. This psalm teaches and encourages us to have complete confidence in our sovereign and almighty God who can and will ultimately deliver us. And so in order to help us see this journey from anxiousness to peace, let's look at what the psalm has to say.

(P) David and deliverance

When we come to Psalm 3 we see that it has a title, it's actually the first verse in the Hebrew text. Not all Psalms have one, but this one tells us that it was written by David and more than that it gives us a context to know a little bit more about when and where it was written. And we see a tragic story behind this psalm. We can read about in 2 Sam 15. In summary King David is fleeing for his life because his son Absalom is trying to kill him so that he himself can be King. So with this context in mind we can begin to understand the situation David is in when he writes the first 2 verses. "Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!" David is feeling overwhelmed. Notice the multiple use of the word many. It is that growing feeling of being overwhelmed on all sides. And these people are not just rising up against him physically, they are attacking him verbally saying "God will not deliver him". That's an awful feeling isn't it?

Now, it is at this point in some Bible translations that you will see the word Selah. They seem to have been removed now from the newest translations of the NIV, but the word Selah is dotted throughout the Psalms in the Hebrew language. It's a word we struggle to

directly translate but The word seems to be a musical term signifying a change in theme, or maybe a musical interlude to the song. Either way the word Selah shows a shift And in this psalm we find the word Selah between verse 2 and 3, and so we expect to see a change. Verse 3 then starts with the words "But you Lord". David in the space of a musical interlude goes from focussing on his problem to focussing on God from despair and being overwhelmed to "But you Lord". It's in the next 3 verses we see 3 reasons why this change of attitude could come about. Firstly in verse 3 David remembers that God is like a shield about him and more than that God is his Glory and the person who lifts his head high. This is the first reason for a change. When he says you are a shield around me it's referring to what David remembers about God, that he is a faithful God, faithful yesterday, today and tomorrow. He is remembering back to the many times God has protected him over the years, the killing of a lion and bear to protect his sheep, to protecting him against the giant Goliath, or protecting him when King Saul was trying to kill him. David remembers the many times that God has brought him out of the darkness and helped lift his head high. Then in verse 4 we see the second reason. Because David calls out to the Lord and the Lord answers from His holy mountain. David remembers that God is there, he calls out and God responds. We don't know exactly how God responds to David, and we know that God has taken away the problem yet. But David remembers that when he calls, God is near, responding from His holy mountain. You might ask the question, where is this holy mountain? We actually get a glimpse of the writer talking about the holy mountain in Psalm 2 where God has installed His chosen King. It is where the Lord reigns and now in Psalm 3 this is where God's chosen King prays back to him. And God answers.

In verse 5 we see that the transition from overwhelmed to peace is complete. David can now lie down and rest because the Lord sustains him. It's really interesting to see that it's not because David's situation has changed, you would expect him to be saying I can rest now because you have defeated all my enemies, but it's not that, instead in verse 6 we see that if anything the situation has gotten worse. Its not just many, now its tens of thousands, they are not just rising up against him, they are now on every side. The situation is not the reason David's attitude has changed. It's because he has changed his focus. It's because he trusts in the Lord, in God. Despite the worsening situation David, because of faith in God, because of being sustained by God, is no longer the stressed, overwhelmed individual of verse 1&2. He now in verse 5 can lie down and sleep and be confident he will wake again. This Psalm shows an amazing thing. It's amazing to see how quickly a change in attitude can come despite no change in what is happening around us. It is possible to go from anxious and overwhelmed to peaceful and rested without a change in what is happening around us. This isn't a clever psychological trick which ends up with us ignoring reality, pretending the problem isn't there, if I just wish hard enough then my anxiety will go away. No, it comes from seeing that God can and ultimately will change circumstances even if he doesn't do so right away.

We see that in the confidence shown in verse 7. “Arise Lord. Deliver me my God!” David is sure God will save him. He then seems to ask for what we might find a shocking request. He asks God to “Strike all my enemies on the jaw, to break the teeth of the wicked.” It seems to be out of character to what we are used to in the Bible doesn’t it. To the point that some commentators tone the request down, basically saying that it’s a way of saying shut up in a forceful manner. Other preachers I have looked at, ignore it entirely, only preaching on the first 6 verses of this Psalm. I think it’s something that’s easy for us to be guilty of, just focusing on parts of the Psalms or even the Bible that we agree with. But if you look at the stress and the circumstance that David was in, I think his request is more serious than just asking for God to keep his opponents quiet. I think he wants judgement to come on his enemies. And it’s a reasonable request if you look at Psalm 1 and 2. Psalm 1 says “The wicked are like chaff that the wind blows away”, and that “The way of the wicked leads to destruction”, Psalm 2 says “God will break them with a rod of iron and will dash them to pieces like pottery”. One of the great things I think that the Psalms show us is that we can be honest about our desire for Gods justice to come. But do note that this request does not involve David taking action, David isn’t picking up a weapon and breaking jaws. It’s a prayer for Gods justice to happen.

David then finishes by summing up what he has said in verse 3 to 7, “From the Lord comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people”. David finishes praying, not just about himself but all of Gods people. He rejects what was said about him in verse 2 and unlike the scared, worried tone of verse 1&2, he finishes with what you can imagine as a confident and certain tone. From the Lord comes deliverance.

Jesus and deliverance

As I said at the beginning that feeling of being overwhelmed is throughout the Bible, it’s not just David who felt it. Even Jesus felt this way. So let’s see if this Psalm would apply to Jesus and what did Jesus do when he felt overwhelmed.

Jesus had foes all around him. He had growing opposition from leaders, both political and spiritual. He certainly had the spiritual leaders saying that he was not from God and questioning whether God will deliver him. And what did Jesus do when he felt overwhelmed? We too see him praying, we see him trusting God, looking for God to sustain him. Whether it was before he started his ministry where he prayed for 40 days or at the end of his ministry when he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to God. He prayed, he was answered by God and he was sustained by God. Because of Jesus faith in God, he could pray your will be done and come away from the garden with a sense of peace despite his circumstance not changing.

Now one part of the Psalm you might think doesn’t really apply to Jesus is verse 7. After all we look at Jesus on the cross and he doesn’t pray for all the soldiers and Pharisees to be struck down where they stand, to have their jaws and teeth broken, he prays for their

forgiveness. If that's all you focus on it looks like Jesus wouldn't focus on judgement at all. But if that's all you look at it's ignoring Jesus's full ministry and especially his last week of ministry where we see Jesus talk about the fate that awaits those who don't believe, his enemies. He turns tables over in the temple, he tells the Pharisees "Woe to you" like an old testament prophet, he tells stories of people excluded from banquets, left outside where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. One key difference with Jesus is that he is the one who will bring this judgement, unlike us who should pray for justice, Jesus will, when he comes again, carry it out. In Jesus we know it's not vengeance, it is justice, in his perfect judgement deliverance will come as the wicked are judged. Unlike King David who raised his hand against Uriah and murdered him, unlike us who sometimes have enemies because we are in the wrong, Jesus is completely reliable in identifying God's true enemies and those who aren't.

Peter in his letters speaks a lot about the enemies of Christians, he points out that we can have enemies for the wrong we do, because we are lazy, because we meddle and in that case I don't think you can read Psalm 3 and think it's ok to pray to smash someone in the jaw. But Peter also speaks of times when we have enemies because we are doing good and are righteous. In this case Peter says that we are to be like Jesus. In 1 Peter 2:23 it says we are not to retaliate we are to entrust ourselves to Him who judges justly. Or in 1 Peter 4:19 where it says we should commit ourselves to our faithful creator and continue to do good. You see entrusting ourselves to the one who judges justly gives a different perspective to the prayer in Psalm 3:7. As God is just it is perfectly right to pray for God to deliver the innocent and punish the guilty. It is not for us to impart justice, we are to pray to God and keep doing good. Ultimately we do not know who will end up being God's friend and who will be God's enemies, that is why we are to focus on doing good and pray to God for just judgement.

Us and deliverance

As I conclude I want to look at how this psalm can encourage us when we feel overwhelmed.

Although the Psalm 3 experience, the transformation from overwhelmed to being at peace, can happen in the length of a song, it can also take weeks or years. Consider David who wrote the Psalm. He certainly had sleepless nights running from Absalom. His problems were not solved instantly. He had to remind himself again and again that God was there to sustain him, that God was there to bring justice, that God was there to deliver him. It's not an easy process. I think we all go through times of feeling overwhelmed and when I do focus on God and what Jesus has done for me, I do realise that I can lift my head high, that God has delivered me and my problem ultimately doesn't matter. But I also still go through times when I struggle, when I focus on my problems and not God. That's when it is good to know that God is happy for us to cry out to him. This Psalm shows us that He is happy for us to share with him our anxieties and worries. We need to read the Bible to be reminded again

that God is our shield, its then when it is good to hang out with other Christians who can also remind us of God's love. When we feel overwhelmed and surrounded and often don't feel like being around others or reading Gods word and praying its then we need to push ourselves to do so. Because it is the best way to change our focus. And even though circumstances may not change, our perspective can.

One of the most encouraging verses that I read when I am feeling overwhelmed is the one we read out today. Rom 8:31-39. It is here I am again reminded that although things may seem dark, things may seem too hard for me to overcome, that I can't see an end, that God promises that nothing "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So are you currently in a verse 1 type of space. Do you feel overwhelmed? Whether at work, at home or elsewhere do you feel surrounded on all sides? If you feel this way now or might feel like this in the future realise that God is there to protect you, that He is a shield around you. Realise that God is delivering you and is eternally committed to deliver you. And when that happens we can be free. We can have the freedom to both pray that God's enemies will be judged and free to love those who are causing the pain. We can be free to live, we can have a sense of rest as we know that no matter what happens God will be there to deliver us, that no matter what happens God will use it for our good.

Let's realise that we can go from overwhelmed to restful in the space of a song, not because our circumstance has changed but because our perspective has, because we are now focused on the God that loves us. In times of trouble we can remember that our peace does not depend on our circumstances, rather that Christ's peace is independent of them. It is rooted in the knowledge that God is our Father, Christ is our Saviour, the Holy Spirit is our comforter and heaven is our home. Nothing that happens in the world can affect these realities.

Amen.