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## WHEN LIFE FALLS APART

Psalm 3

By

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## When Life Falls Apart Psalm 3

Those of us old enough to remember the Watergate scandal recall the stunning, unprecedented resignation of President Richard Nixon. Whether you agreed or not with the man politically, it was a sad spectacle to watch. It must have been terrifically shocking, depressing, and humiliating for Mr. and Mrs. Nixon to endure.

One day, you are one of the most powerful men in the world. You are always the center of attention. You are always surrounded by a cadre of Secret Service agents whose job is to protect you at risk of their own lives. Your words are plastered on the front pages of newspapers around the world. At press conferences, reporters try to parse the nuance of your every sentence. What you say can make the stock market shoot up or down. When you give orders, a bunch of underlings jump to make it happen. You live in a mansion with servants attending to your every need. You have a private jet, helicopter, and limousine, plus a private retreat, at your disposal as you carry out the nation's business.

But the next day, you resign in disgrace, your presidency a shambles. You leave the public eye. You move out of the White House. Nobody cares anymore what you say or think, unless you're ready to confess your guilt in the scandal. Life changed drastically on that fateful day for Mr. and Mrs. Nixon!

But the resignation of President Nixon was not nearly as traumatic and humiliating as the events that hit King David when his son Absalom led a revolt against him. David had reigned for decades as one of the most powerful monarchs in the world. His military prowess was legendary. He had extended Israel's dominion far beyond its borders. He had become fabulously wealthy, living in a palace of breathtaking splendor with his many wives and servants. He had absolute authority of life or death over everyone with whom he had dealings. No one dared to get on his bad side.

But then David sinned with Bathsheba and ordered the death of her husband, Uriah. Although David subsequently repented

when the prophet Nathan confronted him, David's sins set in motion a series of God-ordained devastating consequences. David's oldest son, Amnon, raped his half-sister, Tamar. Tamar's brother, Absalom, took revenge by murdering Amnon. Absalom fled into exile for several years, but later was permitted to return. But after his return, David refused to see his wayward son for two years. The resentment built and Absalom began to court the disgruntled people in the kingdom, offering himself as a more sympathetic leader than his powerful father was.

Finally, Absalom pieced together a strong conspiracy. David realized that to survive, he had to flee the capital immediately with all of his supporters and their families. All of his servants and their little ones hastily grabbed what they could and took off towards the wilderness. David followed them, weeping, and walking barefoot with his head covered in shame. To add insult to injury, a man named Shimei, from the family of David's predecessor King Saul, came out as David passed by. He cursed at David, threw stones at him, and accused him of being a worthless man who had brought about his own downfall by being a man of bloodshed (these events are described in 2 Samuel 15 & 16).

It was David's most traumatic, humiliating experience in his entire life. Everything that he had spent his life working for had suddenly unraveled. Many whom he had thought were allies and friends had abandoned him and sided with his rebellious son. And the most painful wound of all was the treachery and betrayal of Absalom. It brought home to David his own failure as a father. One son was murdered, a daughter was raped, and the murderer was now after his own father's life in addition to his kingdom. Life was falling apart for David.

What do you do when life falls apart? Few of us have gone through anything close to the trauma that David was experiencing. But in lesser ways, you've probably had times when you could identify with David. Perhaps you thought that things were fine at work, but you suddenly got called into the boss' office and were fired under false allegations brought against you by those you had trusted. You were out of work and the firing made the prospect of finding another job look bleak. You didn't know how you would provide for your family. Life fell apart.

Or, perhaps one of your children turned against you and took up a lifestyle of drugs or sexual promiscuity that is totally opposed to your values. He leveled all sorts of false charges against you. He resisted your every attempt to talk or be reconciled. Your many years of love and sacrifice on his behalf were met with scorn and anger. Life fell apart.

Or, much to your shock, your mate suddenly announced that he was having an affair, he was leaving you immediately and filing for divorce. You had no hint of the situation in advance. You had thought that things were fine. You were happy. You trusted him. You were both involved in your local church and in your children's activities. But suddenly, you realized that you had been lied to and deceived for a long time. Life as you knew it suddenly changed drastically and fell apart.

What do you do when life falls apart? David wrote Psalm 3. *He wrote a psalm!* Maybe that's why he is called a man after God's heart! Some scholars call Psalm 3 a morning psalm, and Psalm 4 (which may have been written at the same time) an evening psalm. Perhaps David wrote Psalm 3 just after he crossed the Jordan, awaiting the inevitable battle with Absalom's forces. Verse 5 hints that he wrote it after waking up safely after a good night's sleep. Psalm 3 shows us that...

When life falls apart, you can experience God's peace  
by laying hold of Him in believing prayer.

After the superscription, which gives us the circumstances, the psalm falls into four strophes of two verses each. The first (3:1-2) reveals David's peril. Strophe two (3:3-4) records his initial prayer. Strophe three (3:5-6) shows the peace that results from his prayer. The final strophe (3:7-8) gives a repeated prayer and an affirmation of faith that God alone can deliver and bless His people.

1. There are times when life falls apart (3:1-2).

David cries out (3:1-2), "O Lord, how my adversaries have increased! Many are rising up against me. Many are saying of my soul, 'There is no deliverance for him in God.'" The first, second, and final strophes are followed by "Selah," which is probably a musical notation meaning, "pause," or "crescendo."

David begins by crying out to Yahweh, translated LORD (in small caps). When the NASB uses "Lord" (not small caps), it is translating the Hebrew, *Adonai*, meaning "Sovereign Lord." "LORD" in small caps translates *Yahweh*, the personal, covenant name of God. God revealed Himself to Moses with this name at the burning bush. It is related to the Hebrew verb, "to be," so that God tells Moses, "I am who I am" (Exod. 3:14). For David to address God as Yahweh had the same connotation as New Testament believers addressing Him as, "Abba, Father" (Willem Van Gemeren, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelein [Zondervan], 5:74). It is an intimate, personal cry for help.

I've already described David's traumatic situation, but note a few other features brought out by these verses. First, David's adversaries were increasing in number. He always had enemies, but the ranks were growing daily. Things were snowballing against David. Like a dam that first leaks and then suddenly bursts, the raging torrent of the rebellion was threatening to sweep David and his loyal followers to their deaths.

Second, verse 2 reports the words of David's enemies, who were impugning his relationship with God. The verse reads literally, "Many are saying *to* my soul..." That is, their words were hitting David in his heart or soul, saying, "There is no deliverance for him in God." Probably, they were bringing up his now-public sin with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband. They were saying, "Hypocrite! Scoundrel! How can he claim to follow God? His claim that God has anointed him as king is a joke! God is not on the side of such a phony!" C. H. Spurgeon (*A Treasury of David* [Baker], 1:25) writes,

Doubtless, David felt this infernal suggestion to be staggering to his faith. If all the trials which come from heaven, all the temptations which ascend from hell, and all the crosses which arise from earth, could be mixed and pressed together, they would not make a trial so terrible as that which is contained in this verse. It is the most bitter of all afflictions to be lead [sic] to fear that there is no help for us in God.

Of course, Jesus, David's Son, went through similar trials as He hung upon the cross. His enemies taunted Him (Matt. 27:43), "He trusts in God; let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him;

for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" And, even worse, as He bore our sin Jesus felt forsaken by the Father as heard in His awful cry (Matt. 27:46), "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" The difference was, David knew that he was being taunted because of his own sins. But, Jesus was without any sin or guilt.

Although I have never gone through anything close to what David experienced, I have had several times in the past 32 years of pastoral ministry when a disgruntled faction in the church rose up against me. These painful situations follow a pattern similar to Absalom's rebellion. A leader or several leaders begin to spread seeds of discontent among the church. People who already are unhappy about something gravitate to these men, thinking that they may understand their complaints. These leaders, like Absalom, always seem understanding and ready to listen (see 2 Sam. 15:2-6). The word begins to spread and more people begin to air their grievances to these "sympathetic" leaders. The whole thing begins to snowball. In the process, the leaders of the rebellion impugn not only the pastor's teaching and his leadership, but also his motives: "He doesn't really care for hurting people like you." "He isn't walking closely with God." When people that you have cared for and prayed for slander your motives, it really hurts!

Note that even though God knows all these details, David tells Him what's going on. He's not informing God, but rather laying his burden on the Lord. David is acknowledging to God that he is not able in himself to handle this overwhelming situation.

2. When life falls apart, you must know who God is and how to lay hold of Him in prayer (3:3-4).

"But You" (3:3) reflects David's shift of focus from his frightening circumstances (3:1-2) to the Lord in prayer. This strophe shows the Lord to be our shield, our glory, the restorer of our joy, and our prayer-answering God.

A. The Lord is our shield.

We recently studied this as we looked at the shield of faith as a part of our spiritual armor (Eph. 6:16). It first occurs in the Bible when God told Abram that He is Abram's shield (Gen. 15:1). It also occurs frequently throughout the Psalms (5:12; 18:2, 30, 35; 28:7; 33:20; et. al.). It means that God is our protector and de-

fender. He shields us from the enemy's attacks. Note how David personalizes it, that the Lord is a shield "about me." Your faith in the Lord must be personal.

B. The Lord is our glory.

Although David had great earthly acclaim before this catastrophe, he is acknowledging that his identification with the Lord is his only claim to glory. Whether the Lord restored David to his place of earthly prominence or not, God was his glory. The term points to "the comparative unimportance of earthly esteem, always transient and fickle" (Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* [IVP], p. 54). As Christians, we will share in Christ's glory (2 Thess. 1:10).

C. The Lord is the restorer of our joy.

"To lift up the head" is a Hebrew expression for restoring someone who is cast down to his dignity and position. Joseph told the cupbearer (Gen. 40:13), "Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office." (See, also Gen. 40:20; 2 Kings 25:27 [NASB, margin]; Ps. 27:5-6). By way of application, it refers to God restoring to us the joy that we had before the crisis brought us low. He humbles the proud, but lifts up the humble who cry out to Him, bringing joy to those He restores (1 Sam. 2:1-10; Ps. 107:9, 33-42).

D. The Lord is our prayer-answering God (3:4).

J. J. S. Perowne (*The Book of Psalms* [Zondervan], p. 123) observes that David's crying to the Lord with his voice does not express "a single act, but the habit of a life." Spurgeon said (*ibid.*, p. 26), "We need not fear a frowning world while we rejoice in a prayer-hearing God."

God's "holy mountain" (or hill, 3:4) refers to Mount Zion in Jerusalem, where the ark of the covenant remained. Zadok and the Levites were carrying the ark to join David in his escape. But David sent them back into the city, saying (2 Sam. 15:25-26), "Return the ark of God to the city. If I find favor in the sight of the Lord, then He will bring me back again and show me both it and His habitation. But if He should say thus, 'I have no delight in you,' behold, here I am, let Him do to me as seems good to Him." David's heart was humbled before God. If the Lord restored him, David would worship Him. If the Lord did not restore Him, David still would

bow before His just and holy ways. But even though now David was separated geographically from the symbol of God's dwelling place, the separation was no hindrance to his prayers.

We should learn to humble ourselves before God, realizing that our only plea is His grace. Also, no matter where we're at or in what kind of difficult circumstances we find ourselves—even if our difficulties are the result of our own sin or failure—we can cry out to the Lord for grace and know that He will hear and answer according to His purpose.

Thus when life was falling apart, David laid hold of the Lord in prayer. Then what happened?

3. When you lay hold of the Lord in prayer, you will experience His peace (3:5-6).

The whole of Psalm 3, but especially verses 5-6, is a real-life drama illustrating Philippians 4:6-7: "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." David cried out to God in prayer, then he went to bed—not in the palace, but camped in the wilderness—and slept through the night. It reminds me of Peter on the night before his intended execution. He was so sound asleep in the prison between two guards that the angel sent to rescue him had to hit him to wake him up (Acts 12:7)! David awoke safe and sound, because the Lord sustained him. As reports came in of the tens of thousands set against him, he was not afraid (Ps. 3:6).

When the Lord is your shield and the one who sustains you, the odds or numbers against you don't matter. As someone has said, "One plus God is a majority." Or, as Paul puts it (Rom. 8:31), "If God is for us, who is against us?" As he goes on to say, even if we are like sheep for the slaughter, "in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37). Even if our enemies kill us, we can have God's peace in our soul.

4. Believing prayer depends completely on God for deliverance (3:7-8).

In a make-believe world, David could have said, "Amen" after verse 6. But in the real world, when not only you, but also hun-

dreds of loyal supporters and their families are depending on you, anxiety has a way of creeping back in. So David cries out to God again (3:7-8), "Arise, O Lord; save me, O my God! For You have smitten all my enemies on the cheek; You have shattered the teeth of the wicked. Salvation belongs to the Lord; Your blessing be upon Your people."

In verse 1, many were rising up against David. Now, he uses the same verb to ask God to rise up against his enemies. In verse 2, David's skeptics had said that God would not deliver him. Here, David uses the same verb to ask God to save him. He pictures his enemies as ravenous beasts baring their teeth, ready to devour him. So David asks God to break their teeth, which would render them powerless. The verbs may be translated as petitions (VanGemeren, 5:78) or they may reflect David's sure confidence that God would act. So he wrote as if He already had acted (Alan Ross, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. by John Walvoord & Roy Zuck [Victor Books], 1:793).

David's final exclamation, "Salvation belongs to the Lord," shows that David was not depending on his troops, or his counselors that he had planted to mislead Absalom, or on any military strategy. Rather, he acknowledges that any victory would come from God alone. When we cast ourselves on God alone for deliverance, He gets all the praise when He answers our prayers.

David's final request, "Your blessing be upon Your people," shows that David was not praying selfishly. He was the anointed king of God's people. Absalom's rebellion negatively affected the entire nation. So when David asked God to deliver him, he saw it in terms of God's blessing His people.

Believing prayer always keeps this kingdom purpose in focus. The Lord's prayer teaches us to pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). If your world has fallen apart because you've been wiped out financially, or your marriage is in trouble or your child has rebelled, don't just pray selfishly so that your happy world might be restored. Pray in light of God's kingdom purposes. Pray that God will act so that He will be glorified and His people will be blessed and strengthened.

## Conclusion

David turned this horrible experience of betrayal, emotional pain, and nearly being killed into a song of praise. This teaches us that God can use our worst trials to deepen our trust in Him and to produce praises that will encourage His people. When life falls apart, you can experience God's peace by laying hold of Him in believing prayer. When He answers, He gets the glory, you get the joy, and God's people get the blessing.

Although, as I said, I've never gone through anything close to David's experience, I have weathered a few difficult attacks. On one such occasion, as I faced a difficult meeting that evening, I spent the day fasting and seeking the Lord in prayer. I realized that not only was my survival as a pastor at this church at stake, but also the well being of the church. About mid-day, the Lord encouraged me with a phone call from the man who had succeeded me as pastor in California. He had learned about the crisis here because one of my opponents had called him to try to dig up some dirt to use against me. But this pastor told me that the elders at my former church had been up past midnight praying for me. They were standing behind me.

But as I walked up the sidewalk towards the meeting that evening, I was anxious. I asked the Lord why I didn't have His peace in this situation. I was reciting Philippians 4:6, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Those two words, "*with thanksgiving*," hit me between the eyes. It was as if the Lord said, "I haven't heard you thanking Me for this opportunity to trust Me." I stopped, bowed my head, and whispered, "Lord, thank You for this trial." I immediately sensed His peace. He worked that evening to deliver me.

Whether it's a minor crisis or whether life is falling apart at the seams, if Jesus is your High Priest you have access through His blood to the same prayer-hearing God who rescued David. Even if the crisis is the result of your own sin, humble yourself before Him in repentant, believing prayer and He will exalt you at the proper time.

## Application Questions

1. Why does God not always remove the consequences of our sins, even after we've repented? See Hebrews 12:3-11.
2. David not only prayed; he also escaped and then organized his army to fight the enemy. Where is the proper balance between prayer and the use of permissible means?
3. Some say that to pray in faith means to "command God" to act according to His promises. Why is this wrong? See 2 Sam. 15:25-26.
4. Why is it essential not just to pray for your problems, but also to pray for God's greater purpose and glory for His people?

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