

“Faith in the Midst of Foes”

Introduction: One of the three brothers in Dostoevsky’s famous novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, is named Ivan. Ivan is the atheist, and he kept a notebook in which he recorded every horrible atrocity he learned of or heard of, as a way of proving the nonexistence of God. Author Eugene Peterson remarks that Ivan’s notebook has become a perennial bestseller (*Reversed Thunder*, p. 74). That is, the question many seem to wrestle with is why bad things happen to good people. Like Ivan, they conclude that if bad things are happening, then God does not exist, or if he does, then he either really doesn’t care very much about us, or if he does care, he is not powerful enough to do anything about our bad circumstances.

If I were keeping a notebook such as Ivan’s, I would have made more than just a few entries this summer. From friends who have been diagnosed with cancer or other debilitating diseases, to escalating hostilities in the middle east that seem to be spinning beyond anyone’s ability to control, to the robbery and assault of the mission team from FCCH while in Guatemala, it seems like it’s been a really rough couple of months when it comes to horrible things happening. So, if I were to give us a question to guide our thinking this fall and heading on into Christmas, it would not only be, why do bad things happen to good people, but along with that, what do “good” people (people of faith; followers of Christ) do when bad things happen? Do we give up on God and conclude that he doesn’t exist? Or do we conclude that God is either not very loving or very powerful? Or is there another approach?

Fortunately, there is another approach, which God himself reveals. Now, the book of Revelation, which we will return to next week, will prove very helpful in this regard. But we start today with Psalm 3, a prayer which reveals the reality of foes, that bad things will happen to good people, but also that when they do, they can move us to discover that God is our greatest treasure.

I. The Presence, and Flavors, of Foes

A. Scholars tell us that the psalms are the prayer book of the Bible. That is, they not only teach us about God but they help us talk to God. What’s intriguing to note is that, if Psalms 1 and 2 are introductions to the collection of 150 that we have (Psalm 1 teaching us about the importance of God’s word and our meditation on it, and Psalm 2 declaring the sovereignty of God through his Messiah over all things) then the first true prayer in the collection is Psalm 3. And the first true prayer begins with a brief but urgent and frightened cry: “O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!” In fact, Psalm 3 is one of a number of psalms which reveal that the life of a faithful person is not one that is ever foe free. There is no place, as Jesus implies in his parable of the wise and foolish builders, that we can build our “house,” our life, which is storm free (Ma. 7:24-27).

B. Who, then, are the foes in David’s life? The superscription of this psalm (*A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom.*”) indicates that the specific circumstance in view here is the rebellion of David’s son Absalom, late in David’s reign as king of Israel. Like a sneaky candidate for political office, Absalom stole the hearts of the people by telling lies about his dad, and promising to solve the problems of anyone who had a complaint! As this all progressed, Absalom got the army on his side and so surprised David that David had no option but to flee his palace and the city of Jerusalem, taking refuge in the desert. The text tells us that he went weeping and barefoot, with former friends cursing him and throwing rocks at him and telling him that God was to blame (2 Samuel 15-16)!

C. This episode illustrates one of the four major ways, one of the four flavors of bad things that can happen to good people: other people, bad people, take some sort of action against us, even when we may be doing good things. It happens simply because we live in a sinful world. But the psalms do not limit bad things to this flavor. Bad things can happen to us because of bad things we do. We, if you will, are the foe. David is illustrative of this as well. Even though, in general, he was a “good” man, David experienced moral failure, the consequences of which are well known and spelled out in Psalm 51. His life fell apart; there was a specific sin by which he brought suffering upon himself. A third flavor of bad things is that we can simply experience loss; our life span is limited and, no matter how good we’ve been, disease and/or death will come upon our loved ones, or upon us, and leave us filled with grief and pain. Several psalms reflect on the brevity and fragility of life. A fourth and final flavor of bad things that can happen are those that simply are a mystery to us. Psalm 44 gives voice to this as the people recount their faithfulness to the covenant, that they had not forgotten God, that neither their hearts nor their feet had strayed, and yet it still appeared that in their current dire circumstances God was somehow against them.

Can you identify with at least one of these flavors?! I’m sure you can. You may not be facing an imminent military battle, but when you wake up most mornings, you are facing some kind of battle, some kind of foe, some kind of storm. How do we respond when such foes surround us, no matter what the flavor?

## II. Responding to Our Foes by Recognizing Our Treasure

A. In verse 2 David gets the standard response: “Many are saying of me, ‘God will not deliver him.’” Or more literally, “There is no help for him in God.” In other words, the pundits are saying, as they’ve always said, either God doesn’t exist, or he doesn’t care, or he’s not powerful enough, so don’t go looking to him for help. But that’s precisely where David does go. His experience of foes, even though they’ve made the circumstances of his life very difficult, does not drive him away from God but toward God. And his circumstances drive him toward God because of the experience he’s had of God throughout his life, ranging from a young shepherd boy, to a highly successful king, to a moral failure, to a struggling father and aging leader.

Writer David Benner observes that we pray not to get God’s attention but so that God will get our attention. And as our attentiveness to God increases, our souls are shaped by the reality of God’s constant and loving presence (*Opening to God*, p. 65).

B. So as David prayed, as he pondered God, as he become more attentive to God, his soul was shaped; he came to recognize that God was his greatest treasure: “But you, LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high” (v. 3) Let’s parse that out a bit. David identifies God as the “one who lifts my head high.” To walk with one’s head held high is a metaphor for self-worth, with having confidence and certainty. Now at one point in his life, David thought that his own accomplishments had enabled him to hold his head high, that he was the one who was lifting his head. However, slowly but surely, David came to recognize that it was God who was doing the lifting. Why? Because God was his shield and his glory.

1. A shield, of course, is something that protects. It stands between us and the danger. David had come to learn that any protection he had received in the past had come from the hand of God. Beginning as a young shepherd boy, it was the rod and the staff of the Great Shepherd that had protected David. In fact, we might say that David had begun at an early age to have this sense that he was saved by grace, by God’s undeserved favor. And, if we read forward and think about a

shield in light of the cross, in a very literal way Jesus became our shield; he substituted himself for us, taking the blows that we deserved and would have destroyed us.

2. Because of God's protection, David has come to recognize that God is his only glory. It's not his military record, or his political power, or his people's acclaim, or his son's love – all things that had been his glory. Now it is only God, God's love, God's friendship, God's faithfulness, God's grace, that is David's glory. God had become his greatest treasure.

C. So what does this all mean? As David prayed, he became more and more attentive to God's greatness. Though bad things were happening, as he turned his gaze upon God, God became bigger and his foes became smaller.

Illustration: It's like the twelve Israelite spies who Joshua sent into Canaan to survey the land. When they came back, ten said "no way should we go in; the people there are too large and too strong." But two said, "let's go; it can be done." What was the difference? All twelve saw the same thing. But the ten fixed their eyes on their foes, and as they did so they felt small, like grasshoppers. The two fixed their eyes on God, and as they did so he became big, so they felt big.

As David fixed his eyes on God, as he pondered the character of God in his mind and heart, as he reflected on how he had come to know God by experience, he was able to sleep and not fear all that was around him because whatever bad circumstances life had dealt him, he knew that it could not touch his main treasure, which is to be known and loved by God. That is the ultimate treasure which no thief can break in and steal, as Jesus would later put it (Matt. 6:19-20). Again, sometimes it's only when bad things do happen that we are forced to see this clearly. At other times, when all is going well, it's all about our glory, or so we think.

D. Of course, David still wants his foes to go away! Although he's back to sleeping well, he still wants to be released from that which surrounds him. So we hear him implore God to strike his enemies on the jaw and break the teeth of the wicked (v. 7). And it's not the last time in the psalms that you'll hear this kind of a plea as a part of prayer. It hardly seems like the way to love your enemies; what's it all about? The picture here is one of what needs to be done to a ravenous beast that is mauling its prey – one needs to smack it on the jaw, and perhaps break a tooth or two, to encourage it to release its death grip. It's therefore not a cry for retribution or vengeance; it's a cry for justice. Significantly, it's a cry for God to bring about the justice, taking it out of our not so very capable hands. If we find ourselves wanting to get even, instead of letting God do the work, in his time and in his way, then there may be some anger we need to give to him in the process of praying for relief from our foes.

What, then, can Psalm 3, and others like it, do for us when bad things come upon us? They help us to be honest in prayer. They help us to recognize and acknowledge our foes, they help us to recognize and acknowledge the greatness of God, they help us to recognize and acknowledge where we need justice to be done, and they help us to put it all in God's hands, resting in him as our shield and our defender, and trusting that he is all loving and all powerful and that no matter what happens, he is our greatest treasure, a treasure that can never be taken away.