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Psalm 3

Praying with God: How to Complain Well

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No one likes a complainer, but everyone likes to complain. Have you ever heard that? As human beings, we complain—we vent, we express, we share. But no one really wants a **perpetual Eeyore** in their lives. Eeyore is **Winnie-the-Pooh's** donkey friend who has a never-ending **rain-cloud** hovering just above his head. He's gloomy, depressed, pessimistic, and **grey**. He's a complainer. Do you have a friend or family member who constantly complains? If you do, you probably don't want to spend time with them. If you don't know anyone who is a complainer, you may be the complainer.

What if I were to tell you God **invites** us to complain? He invites us to complain to him in our prayers. What if I were to tell you God **isn't afraid** of gloomy, depressed, pessimistic, and grey Eeyores? What if I were to tell you that God inserted a whole bunch of prayers **designed** just for **you** in the Bible?

The most **common** type of Psalm in the Bible is not a Psalm of **thanksgiving** or **praise**, but of **lament**. Of the **150** Psalms, **over 60** of them are either **individual** or **corporate** laments.¹ In fact, the **first** Psalm to call itself a Psalm (the Hebrew word “mizmor”, which means “psalm” or “melody”) is Psalm 3, and it's a lament. **Psalm 1** is about the goodness of God's **law**. **Psalm 2** is about the **Messiah**. And Psalm 3 is a complaint.

Because of the presence of **sin** and **evil** in this world, complaining is **necessary**; but God can **redeem** our complaining for good if we bring our complaints to him. In Psalm 3, **King David models** how to bring our complaints to God. His lament follows a **six element pattern** that other laments tend to follow. So when you read **other** laments, you can look for these six elements. It's as we **reflect** and **incorporate** each of these six elements into our prayers that we can be assured that we are complaining to God well.

Now I did not come up with these six elements. I've taken them from [How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth](#) by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. It uses Psalm 3 as **an example** of them, so I'm drawing from his book, so I encourage you to check it out. But I think each of these **six elements of a lament**, if we understand and use them, will help us complain to God well. What's the first element of a lament?

1. Address (v1a)

Looking at the very first part of verse 1, which is what “1a” means, we find King David addresses his Psalm directly to the **LORD**. When we encounter LORD in all capitals that's a signal to us that this is the special covenant name of God, **Yahweh**. When David begins this prayer, he recalls the **one true name** of God and all the goodness and promises associated with his name.

This **pattern** of addressing God directly continues throughout the Psalms and into the New Testament. When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray he teaches them to say, “**Our Father**, who is in heaven.” (Matt 6:9) When the first church martyr Stephen is stoned he prays, “**Lord Jesus**, receive my spirit.” (Acts 7:59)

When you pray, do you speak directly to God or do you speak about him? When you pray, do you say, “I pray the Lord would give me a good **night's sleep**” or “Lord, would you give me a good night's sleep”? Let's say you're the **mother** of a **child**. Wouldn't it be weird if your child came up to you and said, “I really

¹ Fee, Gordon D.; Stuart, Douglas. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: Fourth Edition* (p. 220). Zondervan. Kindle Edition. All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.

hope mom will buy me that toy.” That’s **manipulative**, that’s talking about you, not **to you**. But our Yahweh is interested in a relationship. And what does every healthy relationship need? Being on a **first-name basis**. If I can’t remember someone’s name at my **gym**, and call them “dude” or “hey you” it means I don’t know them very well. This is why we address our God directly. *Our first element is address.*

2. Complaint (v1-2)

Before I jump into verse one, I actually want us to pause and look at the **header**, which is verse 1 in the Hebrew translation of the Bible, “*A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom.*” If you ever read about David’s life in **1-2 Samuel**, it reads like a **soap opera**. He is a young man who comes from nothing to become King over Israel. But along the way he makes some mistakes, the biggest of which is killing a man so he could marry his wife **Bathsheba**. This act profoundly **impacts** how he rules. As he has **sons** and they do evil acts he is afraid to confront them. He **lacks** moral **courage**. His **eldest son Amnon** forces himself on one of his **half sisters Tamar** and David doesn’t do anything about it. Another one of his other sons **Absalom** is so angry he murders Amnon and David doesn’t do anything about that either.

Instead of addressing the sin, he lets **5 years** go by without ever seeing Absalom. Absalom grows so embittered and angry he leads a **coup** to overthrow his father and become king (2 Sam 15). He raises an army and David has to **flee** the capital of **Jerusalem** to save his own life. It’s at this time that King David composes this prayer to express his hurt and frustration.

1 LORD, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!
2 Many are saying of me,
“God will not deliver him.” (NIV®)

I want to make two points. **1)** David has **something specific** to complain about. David doesn’t complain for the sake of complaining. When he’s joyful he rejoices and when he’s thankful he praises God. So when we come to God, we can address specific hurts in our lives, but we shouldn’t complain just because we like to complain. And **2)** David **doesn’t** pray from a place of **innocence**. David is partially **responsible** for the situation he is in, but that does not prevent him from coming to God with his complaint.

Think of a **situation** you’ve complained about recently. Maybe you’ve even complained to God. Are you entirely innocent? Is it really all **their fault**? We usually have some level of responsibility for the situations we complain about. God doesn’t mind that. God doesn’t tell us to go **cleans** ourselves up first, and then he’ll hear our prayers. He cleans us up **while** we pray. David **doesn’t stay** in complaint. He moves forward to...

3. Trust (v3-6)

In the next few verses David moves from complaint to trust.

3 But you, LORD, are a shield around me,
my glory, the One who lifts my head high.
4 I call out to the Lord,
and he answers me from his holy mountain.
5 I lie down and sleep;
I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.

6 I will not fear though tens of thousands
assail me on every side.

David uses the language of his circumstances to fill his prayer. This is a **military coup**, so he pictures the Lord as a **shield**, the type of shield used in **battle**. This type of shield would have been either **round** or **torso length** and was meant to be **maneuverable** and offer protection from any side.² David is picturing the Lord as a maneuverable defense protecting him from threats all around.

I've never been a car wreck where **airbags** were deployed. Praise the Lord (I'm not going to knock on wood; that's pagan mysticism...). But my Pontiac Vibe has had its airbags recalled. Today car airbags are designed to protect you from any direction. Since Ford and GM began installing airbags in cars in the **1970s**, they've developed more and more airbags. There are **steering** wheel airbags, **dashboard** airbags, side **torso** airbags, and **side curtain** airbags. Now automakers are making knee airbags, **center** airbags, **rear curtain** airbags, **seatbelt** airbags, and even **pedestrian** airbags for the outside of the car. Our God can protect us from anything he chooses, **financial** threats, **relational** hardship, **sickness**, **spiritual** oppression, etc. So when you pray tonight you can pray, "But you, Lord, are an **airbag around me**. You protect me on every side. And you will never be **recalled**." **First**, David's trust is **all-encompassing**.

Second, David's trust is also **confident**. In **verse 4** David has been chased away from **Jerusalem**, where the holy mountain is. This is the place where they keep the **tabernacle** and one day the place where the **temple** will be built. But David knows that even though he's **far** from the holy mountain, God still hears him. So no matter where **we are** in life, whether we're close to God because we're at church or are reading our Bibles and praying all the time, or if God seems far away and we're going through a **dry season**, God still hears us. You know that place on your drive home where the **service drops** and you lose connection with your spouse? God hears you there. He never drops us. We can have **all-encompassing** and **confident** trust in him.

Verses 5-6 tell us this trust should give us **actual peace**. David has been driven from his home and his men, women, children, and soldiers are **refugees**. They're **exhausted** and **tired** and there is a chance for Absalom to pen them down with their backs to the **Jordan River** and destroy them, but God protects David and his people. He provides them with **food** and **rest** (2 Sam 16:2, 17:28-29). In the midst of all this stress, David lies down and has a **good night's sleep** because the Lord sustains him. Absalom has a chance to send 12,000 men to destroy King David, but God **thwarts** his plans and saves David (2 Sam 17:1).

Our trust in God can give us actual, **not imagined**, peace. Imagined peace is when we **busy** our **minds** with other things like **television** or **work** or try to **clear** them through by just putting it **out of mind**. It doesn't last. Actual peace is when we are **aware** of our circumstances but our understanding and trust in who God is gives our hearts rest. So let's trust, but with **hope** of...

4. Deliverance (v7a)

We're only looking at the first half of verse 7.

7a Arise, LORD!
Deliver me, my God!

I think Stuart makes a really good point in *How to Read Your Bible*. He says, "Notice how the direct request for aid has been held until this point in the psalm, coming *after* the expression of trust." Both "arise" and "deliver" are **imperatives**. David is making his **request**, but after he's spent four verses trusting God first.

² NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible. 2016. Psalm 3. Page 882.

Sometimes I treat my prayers like **letters** to **Santa**. “Dear Santa, I’ve been good this year. I’d like a new **bike**, a new **Nintendo**, a new **trampoline**, and…” What if we tell our Heavenly Father we **trust** him ever **before** we ask for help? I don’t think it’s wrong to ask for help right away. Sometimes we need to get right into it. Neither do we tell God we trust him first because that increases the **odds** he’ll answer our prayer. Rather, we express our trust as a way to **prepare** our **hearts** to ask with humility, **accepting** whatever answer he gives. Our next element is…

5. Assurance (v7b)

When we **assure** someone that something is going to be okay, we try to give them confidence. Here David is making a statement that God will indeed deliver him.³ It’s like when we say in our prayers, “God, I know you’re going to act. You will deliver me. It may not be the way I’m asking for, but you’ll do it.” David **nowhere** says in this Psalm that God has to deliver him a **certain way**. God may let **bad things** happen to him, even **death**, but he knows that God will **vindicate** him according to the promises of God.

7b Strike all my enemies on the jaw;
break the teeth of the wicked.

Psalm 3 is **poetic** and so this is a **metaphor** for God knocking out all of David’s problems. God is big enough to give our issues a **mean right hook**. **Sometimes** we need assurance that God is going to use our circumstances and prayers for good. We can find that assurance here and in **Romans 8:28**, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” (NASB) This is another reason we need a **church community**. We need **brothers** and **sisters** in Christ to come alongside us in our complaints and **comfort** us that God is going to use it for our good, and we will get through it with his help. The 5th element is assurance… The **final** is…

6. Praise (v8)

From the LORD comes deliverance.
May your blessing be on your people.

David goes back to the name of the Lord, Yahweh, because he is his deliverer, and he knows that **in the end**, no matter how God acts, whether in **this life or the next** God will deliver him and bless his people. So often I forget to just praise God for how good he is, and how he can deliver us. David praises God and so can we.

Do you want to know what happened to David and how the story **ends**? **Absalom** leads his army into the **woods** to kill David, but David’s generals defeat Absalom. Absalom was a very **prideful** man who loved his own hair. He grew it out and as he was riding through the woods on his donkey his hair got caught in the “thick branches of a **large oak**” (NIV®), and the ESV says he was “suspended between heaven and earth” (2 Samuel 18:9). That’s when one of David’s commanders took **three javelins** and ran them through Absalom’s **heart** and he **died**. To die on a **tree** was to be considered **cursed** by God (Deut 21:23).

The Lord **delivers** King David through great **heartbreak**. The Hebrew words for **deliverance** in **verse 2** where his enemies say “God will not deliver him” and in **verse 8** where David says “From the LORD comes deliverance” are the **same** Hebrew word. They’re the Hebrew **noun** “yeshua” which is where we get the name **Joshua**, which is where we get the name **Jesus**. The Hebrew name Yeshua means “**Yahweh saves**.”⁴

³ Fee, Gordon. Page 223.

⁴ Kohlenberger/Mounce Concise Hebrew-Aramaic Dictionary of the Old Testament, s.v. “י,” paragraph 7698.
https://accordance.bible/link/read/KM_Hebrew_Dictionary#7698

The angel told **Joseph** to name his child Jesus “because he will save his people from their sins.” (Matt 1:21b) Psalm 3 **whispers** the name of Jesus. In his **tears** King David spoke his savior’s name and so do we.

Jesus, Yeshua, is not a son who rebelled and sinned against his father, trying to overthrow his father’s kingdom. No. Jesus is the humble and submissive **eldest son** who **obeyed** his father’s will perfectly. He is the one who willingly climbed up onto a **tree**, the **cross**, and hung **suspended** between heaven and earth to bridge the gap for us, delivering us from death to life. He became a **curse** for us so that we who were **enemies** of God, could join the **family**. Now we can bring him our **prayers** no matter how high or how low we feel, even our complaints. *When we remember Jesus it turns our **complaints** into **praise**.*

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church.

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