

Psalms: The Theology and Petitions of Psalm 3

Dr. Bruce Waltke — Session 14

Sponsored by Biblecallelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Psalm 3, Bruce Waltke, Petition Psalms, Lament, Absalom's Revolt, Ahithophel, Hushai, Divine Deliverance, Doxology, Typology

Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Bruce Waltke provides an in-depth theological and literary analysis of Psalm 3, identifying it as the foundational petition psalm following the thematic gateway of Psalms 1 and 2. Waltke explores the historical context of David's flight during Absalom's revolt, emphasizing how David combined strategic human means with unshakeable spiritual confidence in God. The lecture outlines the structural motifs of petition psalms—address, lament, confidence, petition, and praise—while addressing the theological function of imprecation and the necessity of praying through to divine peace. Ultimately, David's experience of divine preservation through trial and sleep serves as a prophetic type fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and echoed throughout church history.

Outline

I. Introduction and Opening Invocation

A. Opening Prayer for Spiritual Illumination

1. Distinction between cognitive hearing and Holy Spirit transformation
 - a. Human speech as acoustic waves vs. spiritual reception
 - b. Conjoining the word with the Holy Spirit to form Christlike character
2. The Psalter as a doxology of theology returned to God's people
3. Participation in the historic Catholic (universal) church across creation history

B. Literary Context within the Psalter

1. Psalms 1 and 2 as the dual gateway to the celestial city
 - a. Psalm 1: The ethical requirement of delighting in Yahweh's law
 - b. Psalm 2: The coronation of the anointed King and the mandate to pray for kingdom expansion
2. Transition to Psalm 3: The stark reality of earthly opposition and spiritual struggle

II. Broad Classification and Core Motifs of Psalm Genres

A. Four Principal Genres of Psalms (Gunkel / Form Criticism)

1. Hymns: Celebrating God's incommunicable (eternity, omnipotence) and communicable attributes
2. Petitions / Laments: Crying out to God in personal or communal distress
3. Songs of Trust and Grateful Praise: Thanksgiving for specific deliverances
4. Instruction Psalms: Wisdom Psalms commending righteousness (e.g., Psalm 1)

B. Five Distinct Motifs of Petition Psalms

1. Direct Address: Immediate, exclusive appeal to Yahweh in times of crisis
2. Honest Lament: Transparent articulation of foes, suffering, and distress
3. Shift to Confidence: Transition from complaint to firm reliance on God's character
4. Specific Petition: Requests for divine intervention and justice against enemies
5. Doxological Conclusion: Praise, assurance of answer, and communal blessing

III. Theological Foundations: Confidence, Imprecation, and Human Means

A. Praying Through to Confidence (Luther and Calvin)

1. Re-examining Luther's 'Amen in the heart' and Calvin's rule of prayer
2. Clarification: Absolute confidence in God vs. confidence in a specific outcome
3. Submission to divine sovereignty (Christ's 'Not my will, but yours be done')

B. The Problem and Purpose of Imprecatory Psalms

1. Scope: 35 of 50 petition psalms contain prayers for divine punishment of foes
2. Theological necessity: Affirmation of divine justice, ethical boundaries, and sound doctrine
3. New Testament dispensation: Discontinuance of personal vengeance while looking to final judgment

C. Four Key Theological Features of Petitionary Prayer

1. Always doxological: Complaints are consistently coupled with praise (unlike Job's initial protests)
2. Express deep humility and total dependence upon Yahweh
3. Integration of human means: Dependence on God does not exclude practical action or medical care
4. Communal orientation: Prayers extend beyond self to seek blessing for all God's people

IV. Historical Context: Absalom's Revolt (2 Samuel 14–18)

A. The Historical Superscript

1. Validation of superscripts as authentic historical markers
2. One of 14 psalms explicitly tied to David's historical life events

B. The Domestic and Political Crisis

1. David's prior sin with Bathsheba and subsequent domestic breakdown
2. Amnon's rape of Tamar and Absalom's murderous revenge

3. Absalom's treason: Deceptive sacrifices at Hebron and stealing the hearts of the people

C. Key Historical Characters and Countermeasures

1. Ahithophel: The brilliant counselor (Bathsheba's grandfather) whose treason threatened David
2. Zadok and Abiathar: Establishing an intelligence spy network in Jerusalem
3. Hushai the Archite: Divine answer to David's prayer, defeating Ahithophel's counsel
4. Ittai the Gittite: Gentile devotion contrasting with Israelite betrayal

V. Exegesis and Structure of Psalm 3

A. Address and Lament (Verses 1–2)

1. Overwhelming military opposition against the anointed king
2. The enemy's taunt: 'God will not deliver him'

B. Declaration of Confidence (Verses 3–6)

1. Yahweh as a protective shield, glory, and lifter of the head
2. Prayer answered from Yahweh's holy hill (transcending spatial separation)
3. Evidence of faith: Sleeping peacefully in the midst of ten thousand surrounding troops

C. Petition and Imprecation (Verse 7)

1. Cry for divine intervention: 'Arise, I AM, deliver me, my God'
2. Striking the cheek and breaking teeth: Render foes defenseless and harmless

D. Doxology and Blessing (Verse 8)

1. Affirmation that salvation/deliverance belongs entirely to Yahweh
2. Concluding benediction extending blessing over the entire covenant community

VI. Typological Fulfillment and Church Tradition

A. Davidic Typology and Christology

1. David's suffering as a prototype of Christ's rejection by His own nation
2. Psalm 3:5 ('I lay down and slept; I awoke') as a prophetic type of Christ's death and resurrection

B. Historical Reception in Church Practice

1. Early Church Fathers celebrating Psalm 3:5 at Easter
2. Desert Fathers opening daily morning prayer recitations with Psalm 3
3. The enduring lesson: Faith relies on divine sovereignty while actively executing duty