

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, August 7, 2016**

OUR SHIELD AND OUR SALVATION

Psalm 3:1-8

When I was in college, I engaged every year in intercollegiate debate and competitive public speaking. It's how I met Maryanne. It's how I first learned to put together a coherent public presentation. It's how I learned to be able to speak in front of people without losing my breakfast. When we did this, when we competed, we did so all up and down the East Coast from Boston to North Carolina. And when we did so, we went first and foremost with one primary aim: Beat Princeton! Yes, we wanted to do the best that we could. Yes, we wanted to win overall. But the truth is, we always got a special pleasure out of beating Princeton. See, Princeton had been founded approximately 30 years before Rutgers was, and they had been lording it over us ever since. They are a private school. We're a state school. They're one of the top 10 in the country. We're one of the top 10 in New Jersey. They produced Bill Bradley, U. S. Senator and basketball star. Albert Einstein taught there. We produced Paul Robeson, opera singer and communist. They were in the beautiful village of Princeton. We were in the grimy city of New Brunswick. But when we beat them, as we did when we won the New Jersey state championship two years in a row when I was a junior and a senior, we were smarter than they. We were more eloquent than they. We were more handsome than they. When we beat Princeton, we beat the enemy! Because that's what they were. They were the enemy. And we all know when you beat the enemy, whether it's UVA for Virginia Tech, or Duke for North Carolina, or the Yankees for anybody, there's no feeling quite like that.

Now in all of the instances that I've mentioned, whether it is sports or public speaking, there's a friendly aspect to it, with the exception of the Yankees, of course. There's a friendly aspect to it and the truth of the matter is that we liked the guys from Princeton that we competed against. We would have dinner with them. We'd joke around with them and then we'd beat their brains out. And sometimes they beat ours out. And it was all in fun.

The enemies that David is speaking of in the third psalm, however, are very different. We might have referred to Princeton as the enemy, but there are two primary differences between Princeton as our forensics enemy and David's enemies. The first is, as I've mentioned, we were friendly. When we left at the end of the day, we shook hands and said, "See you next week." When David's enemies took off after him it was with the intent to kill him. And the other way in which we were different is that we were enemies because basically we set ourselves up that way. We took that mindset. We deliberately engaged in activities that would bring us head to head and we had a good time doing it. David didn't set out to make any enemies deliberately. Those were made in the course of his career and they were made in the course, yes, of his sin, and they were made, too, in the course of his faithfulness to God. Because there were those who could not abide by that faithfulness.

Well, he wrote about his enemies in the third psalm, the first psalm in the Book of Psalms that says it is by David. And in many versions it has a header on top of it that says, “A psalm of David when he fled from his son Absalom.” It was written in the midst of the revolt of his eldest son, Absalom, which is described in 2 Samuel chapters 15-18. You can read that at your leisure. It was a time of enormous challenge for David, obviously, one in which most of his people turned their backs on him, most painfully, of course, his own son. So this psalm is a psalm of lament and it’s a psalm of seeking after God’s help. It’s a psalm that is, first, about human adversity. It’s about David’s dilemma and ours. In verses 1-2 we have the lament: “O LORD, how many of my foes, how many rise up against me.” He’s not just talking about a handful of people. He’s talking about thousands. He mentions even tens of thousands who come against him later in the psalm. His enemies are increasing, and his enemies’ attacks are personal. “How many rise up against me.” This was personal. And certainly when his own son fought against him, his son thought of it as personal as well.

But this is not just a matter of a struggle for political power, though it was that. This wasn’t just an earthly battle, though it was that. The attack on David and the struggle in which he engaged was a spiritual one as well. His enemies claim that he has been abandoned by God and that they were doing it for the sake of Israel. In verse 2, “Many are saying of me God will not deliver me. God has abandoned me. God no longer cares about me.” In 2 Samuel 16, verse 8, one of his enemies, a man by the name of Shimei, who was of the house of Saul, whom David had supplanted as king, said, “The Lord has avenged on you all of the blood of the house of Saul in whose place you have reigned. And the Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, your evil is on you, for you are a man of blood.” Shimei was accusing him of being a murderer, one who had taken what was not rightfully his when he took the throne from Saul. Of course he ignored the fact that it had been God’s plan for David to supplant Saul. All he could see was that his master and the head of his house had lost in the struggle between the two of them. But ultimately, as Shimei had indicated, this was not just about what the house of Saul might do and it certainly was not about what Absalom was doing. It was, in his words, the Lord who had avenged Himself on David. So this was a spiritual struggle.

And we face enemies as well. We may not think of them that way and there’s nothing wrong with not thinking of them that way. But we face enemies, nonetheless. We face the constant assault of a culture and its parrots among our acquaintances who say that our faith is misplaced or even evil. How many of you are on Facebook? How many of you have ever had a discussion, conversation, argument, knockdown dragout fight about faith on Facebook? Not as many, which I’m glad to hear. But you can find them on a daily basis, if you really want to. Those who are out front about their faith on Facebook will frequently find themselves under assault because of the peculiar way in which peoples’ posts are linked to, in some instances, people they don’t even know. I’ve found myself on many occasions having discussions with people I’ve never met, have never even heard of, but who happen to be a friend of a friend. And so you wind up discussing it. In the process, sometimes those arguments can get pretty ugly. And the truth is, it’s not just on social media and we all know that. We’re constantly bombarded with messages from our culture, from its media, from its academy, even at times from its government, saying that

what you believe is either irrelevant, or irrational, or it's bigoted, it's hateful. It's something that no civilized person should have anything to do with. We hear those kinds of messages on a daily basis and for many of us we simply block them out, and that's good. But that doesn't mean they're not there and it doesn't mean that at some level or another we don't hear them. It certainly doesn't mean, I hate to say, that our children don't hear them, because they do. If anyone ever wonders why it is that so many children that grow up in the church leave the church and go off to college and four years later or eight years later suddenly we find out that they're not the person that they were when they were growing up in the church and in children's ministry and in youth group. When we find that out we realize that in fact those messages did penetrate. And those messages were deadly.

So we have enemies, whether we wish to admit it or not. We have enemies. And yet, it is the case that Jesus told us that we are to love our enemies, not that we didn't have any, mind you, but that we are to love our enemies. And we are to love our enemies because we are to love all those who have been made in the image of God. So what do we do with the language of enemies and what do we do with what David has to say? Well, part of what we can do is we can keep in mind what the apostle Paul says when he writes in Ephesians 6:12 that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. We don't have to fight tooth and claw against college professors or news announcers. The enemies that we fight against are those unseen, who come against us in countless ways, even within our own spirits. Who come against us and tell us that what you are doing with your life, what you believe in, what you hold to be important is misguided or is irrational or is evil, to call what is good evil. We are assailed by Satan, whether directly or indirectly on a regular basis. That's why Paul says we have this fight to wage against the powers of darkness. We don't have to think in terms of a being with a red suit and a long tail and a pitchfork. That's the culture's mythology and it's the culture's way of downplaying the significance or even the reality of what we're talking about. But the enemy that we face is real, and the enemy that we face hates us, and the enemy that we face is seeking to undermine us in every way he can. And so when David talks about enemies, and when he turns to God for help in dealing with them, we can hear that as being as much for us as it was for a king seeking help in dealing with his own son.

Well, the answer to David's lament and to our lament is in God's character and His actions. In verses 3-4 David speaks of God in military metaphors. He says, "But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head. To the LORD I cry aloud and He answers me from His holy hill." He is a shield around me. Far more than armor is, far more than our education is, far more than our spiritual disciplines are – and I'm not denigrating any of those things – but far more than any of those things He is our shield and our defender. He is our protector and relying on our own strength, relying on our own righteousness, relying on our own piety, is ultimately futile. Because the enemy who stands against us is stronger than any of those things, but not stronger than Him. In one version he says that God is his glory. He says in the NIV, "You bestow glory on me." The word there is *kabod*, and it literally means "heavy." It refers to the

extra weight of a treasure that soldiers returning from war would come back with. They'd have to cart this stuff. They didn't have checks in those days. When you raided a neighboring town and you carried away the gold, you couldn't turn it into dollars or euros for easy transport. You had to pack it up and you had to carry it. And it was heavy. And for David to refer to God as his glory, for him to ask Him to bestow glory upon David was another way of saying that God was David's treasure. He says, "He lifts my head." You lift up my head. To hang one's head is a mark of shame and defeat. To lift it up, well when God lifts our heads up, that's a sign of victory over all that opposes us.

Upon recalling these traits of God, these attributes of God, David then calls upon Him and He answers. Contrary to the curses of his adversaries, God answers. "He answers me from His holy hill. He answers me from Mt. Moriah. He answers me from His throne in heaven." And God's answer to David and His answer to us when we are faced with the enemies who come against us is the following, in verses 5-6. His answer to David's prayer for protection is that he lies down and he sleeps. He's able to sleep because he has given God his burdens. Anyone here ever kept up at night worrying about the stuff that you have to do, or about the child who is giving you a problem, or about the boss who is driving you crazy, or about the test that you're going to have to take tomorrow that you haven't studied adequately for? Anybody ever have those sleepless nights? David doesn't have those. He lies down and he sleeps because God has taken his burdens. God faces his enemies on his behalf. And then, in the second half of verse 5, "I wake again because the LORD sustains me." He wakes because God has kept him through the night which then, and for many people now, is the scariest and perhaps even the most dangerous part of the day. When there's no light, when evil seems to be about, then we're most vulnerable. Well, God wakes him because God has kept him.

In verse 6, David proclaims that God's protection over him takes the form of courage. "I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side." David's fear of his enemies is a perfectly natural fear. The man's outnumbered, the man's outgunned, the man at least early on was out-generaled. It was natural for him to fear for both his power and for his life. And yet his fear of his enemies was swept away because of who God is and the protection that God has given him. He is relieved of his fear. And in the same way we have no need to fear. We need have no fear of the culture around us or of the spiritual enemies that we have. Yes, it is undoubtedly true that Satan assails us; that he tempts us; that he wants us desperately to look at God and curse Him and die, as Job's wife wanted him to do. No doubt about that. And he will whisper that in our ear at every turn. And we need have no fear. Because as the Spirit of God lives in us, we have been given all of the spiritual resources needed to say, with Jesus, "Be gone, Satan. Be gone, college professor who wants to turn me into an atheist. Be gone, news announcer who wants to tell me that what I'm doing is futile." Be gone, as powerless, all of those messages that we take away or are assailed with every day.

Now the funny thing is, David's circumstances didn't change as a result of his prayer. There's nothing in this psalm that indicates that when David prays for God's protection Absalom has a change of heart, embraces David as a loving son and declares his everlasting loyalty. He doesn't do that. David's circumstances don't change, at least not

immediately. What changes is David. David changes as a result of this prayer and what God does within him. In verses 7-8 he says, “Arise, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked.” And yes, I know that’s not going to happen right away, but I know it’s You who fights for me. I know it is You who ultimately wins the battles, so Lord, take over. I can plot and I can plan. I can strategize. I can employ the most clever and original tactics that one could conceive of from a military standpoint. I could be as well supplied as to have stores coming out of our storehouses. I can have so many men under arms that I outnumber my enemy by a hundred to one and it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t make any difference unless the Lord arises and the Lord delivers and the Lord strikes and the Lord breaks. He reminds God of His past deeds and the assurance that the same will happen now.

Then he cries out in advance of the battle, the battle that is to come. He cries out that the outcome is not in doubt and that God’s people, not just David, but God’s people, will be blessed as a result. “From the LORD comes deliverance.” Not, “From the Lord *might* come deliverance.” Not “From the Lord I *hope* (in the sense that we use the word hope) deliverance will come.” But “From the LORD *comes* deliverance.” And it’s a promise. A promise to us. It’s a promise to us that against all of the cultural and, more importantly, spiritual forces that come against us that the final victory is not in doubt. We may lose a battle here and there. As a matter of fact we almost certainly will. We’ll lose a battle here and there. But the end result of the war, that has already been decided, No matter how much our enemy fights against it, he is going to lose and God and His people are going to win.

In a moment we’re going to be coming to the Lord’s table and, as we do so, I would ask that you come to this table and receive the body and blood of Christ and recognize that this table is one of the signs and seals of that victory. When we come to this table, as the apostle Paul says, we come to proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes again. And what’s going to be the result of His coming again? Final victory. At this table we receive anew the promise. Not just that He is with us every day, which He is, but we receive the promise that He is with us for the rest of our lives and for all eternity in the certain and sure hope of eternal life and victory over all our enemies.