

Psalms 143:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For the enemy hath persecuted my soul; he hath smitten my life down to the ground; he hath made me to dwell in darkness, as those that have been long dead.

Analysis

For the enemy hath persecuted my soul; he hath smitten my life down to the ground; he hath made me to dwell in darkness, as those that have been long dead. David describes his affliction with three escalating images: persecution, being struck down, and dwelling in death-like darkness. "The enemy" (oyev, אֹיָב) is singular, perhaps referring to a primary adversary (like Saul or Absalom) or personifying all opposition. The verb radaph (רָדַף), "persecuted," means to pursue, chase, or hunt—David feels like hunted prey.

"Smitten my life down to the ground" (dikka la'arets chayati, דָקָא לְאָרֶץ חַיָּתִי) uses daka (דקא), meaning to crush, beat to pieces, or pulverize. His chayyah (life-force) is crushed to the earth—utter devastation. The third image is most startling: dwelling in machashakkim (מַחְשָׁקִים, darkness) like metei olam (מֵתִי עַזְלָם, the dead of old/long ago). David feels entombed among the ancient dead, cut off from life and light.

This language anticipates Christ's descent into death, His three days in the tomb. Yet David's darkness wasn't final, nor was Christ's. Resurrection morning came, and with it the vindication that David's psalm anticipates. For believers, even when circumstances feel death-like, resurrection hope sustains.

Historical Context

Whether written during Saul's persecution, Absalom's rebellion, or another crisis, this psalm captures the experience of feeling utterly defeated and abandoned to darkness. In ancient Israelite thought, Sheol (the realm of the dead) was characterized by darkness and silence—separation from life, community, and God's active presence (Psalm 88:3-6, 10-12). To 'dwell in darkness as those long dead' expressed the psychological and spiritual devastation of being cut off from hope, similar to clinical depression or trauma.

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. Have you experienced seasons feeling 'crushed to the ground' or dwelling in darkness? How did God meet you there?
2. How does Christ's descent into death and resurrection provide hope when life feels death-like?
3. What is the relationship between honest lament (acknowledging darkness) and faith (holding onto God in darkness)?

Interlinear Text

בָּאָסַרְתָּ	בְּעֵדָה	אָנוּ בָּהּ	נִפְשָׁה	דָּלָא	לְאָרֶץ	לִפְתָּחָה
H3588 hath persecuted	H7291	H341 For the enemy	H5315 my soul	H1792 down	H776 to the ground	H2416 my life
הָשִׁיבָה	בְּמִתְּשֵׁךְ	כַּמְתִּיבָה	עֹלָם:			
he hath made me to dwell	in darkness	dead	as those that have been long			

Additional Cross-References

Lamentations 3:6 (Darkness): He hath set me in dark places, as they that be dead of old.

Psalms 142:6 (Parallel theme): Attend unto my cry; for I am brought very low: deliver me from my persecutors; for they are stronger than I.

Psalms 35:4 (Parallel theme): Let them be confounded and put to shame that seek after my soul: let them be turned back and brought to confusion that devise my hurt.

Psalms 7:5 (Parallel theme): Let the enemy persecute my soul, and take it; yea, let him tread down my life upon the earth, and lay mine honour in the dust. Selah.

2 Samuel 18:11 (Parallel theme): And Joab said unto the man that told him, And, behold, thou sawest him, and why didst thou not smite him there to the ground? and I would have given thee ten shekels of silver, and a girdle.

2 Samuel 2:22 (Parallel theme): And Abner said again to Asahel, Turn thee aside from following me: wherefore should I smite thee to the ground? how then should I hold up my face to Joab thy brother?

Psalms 54:3 (Parallel theme): For strangers are risen up against me, and oppressors seek after my soul: they have not set God before them. Selah.

Ezekiel 37:11 (Parallel theme): Then he said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts.