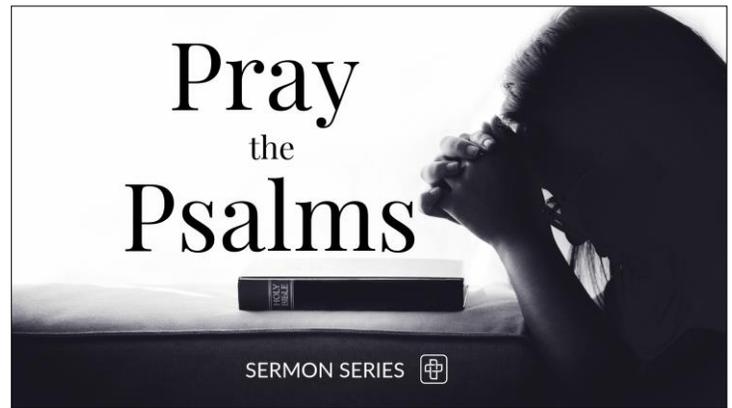




Moving From Gloom to Gratitude

Psalm 77

David Sunday July 21, 2019



Let's worship God together as we open His Word to Psalm 77. I'm going to be reading out of the Christian Standard Bible. Psalm 77 begins with a heading that says, "For the choir director," so this was meant to be sung in public worship, "according to Jeduthun," who was one of the chief musicians appointed by David to lead public worship. It's also "Of Asaph," who was the one who wrote the Psalm. He was a member of the tribe of Levi, who was also a worship leader with King David. Let's open our hearts to the Lord, Who welcomes us to pour our hearts out to Him in this Psalm.

- ¹ *I cry aloud to God,
aloud to God, and he will hear me.*
- ² *I sought the Lord in my day of trouble.
My hands were continually lifted up
all night long;
I refused to be comforted.*
- ³ *I think of God; I groan;
I meditate; my spirit becomes weak. Selah*
- ⁴ *You have kept me from closing my eyes;
I am troubled and cannot speak.*
- ⁵ *I consider days of old,
years long past.*
- ⁶ *At night I remember my music;
I meditate in my heart, and my spirit ponders.*
- ⁷ *"Will the Lord reject forever
and never again show favor?*
- ⁸ *Has his faithful love ceased forever?
Is his promise at an end for all generations?*
- ⁹ *Has God forgotten to be gracious?
Has he in anger withheld his compassion?" Selah*
- ¹⁰ *So I say, "I am grieved
that the right hand of the Most High has changed."*
- ¹¹ *I will remember the LORD's works;*

yes, I will remember your ancient wonders.

*¹² I will reflect on all you have done
and meditate on your actions.*

¹³ God, your way is holy.

What god is great like God?

*¹⁴ You are the God who works wonders;
you revealed your strength among the peoples.*

*¹⁵ With power you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. Selah*

¹⁶ The water saw you, God.

The water saw you; it trembled.

Even the depths shook.

¹⁷ The clouds poured down water.

The storm clouds thundered;

your arrows flashed back and forth.

¹⁸ The sound of your thunder was in the whirlwind;

lightning lit up the world.

The earth shook and quaked.

¹⁹ Your way went through the sea

and your path through the vast water,

but your footprints were unseen.

²⁰ You led your people like a flock

by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Pray with me.

Merciful Father, we thank You today that we don't have to be the hero of our story. Jesus is the Hero. We are so needy, so desperately dependent on the constant resources that flow to us from what Your Son has accomplished for us. So we pray that You, by Your Spirit, would work through Your Word, that we would see our need of Jesus afresh today, and that through Your Word You would give us Your very self, give us Jesus. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, open our eyes that we may behold wonderful things now in Your Word, and give me strength to preach it as I should for the glory of Your name. Amen.

There's an old hymn that has some precious words for many Christians that goes like this:

O what peace we often forfeit
O what needless pain we bear
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.

(From "What a Friend We have in Jesus" by Joseph Scriven)

Those are true words and one of the main reasons God gave us the book of Psalms, to encourage us, no matter what we're going through, to "take it to the Lord in prayer." But what if you've done that? What if you've taken your pain to the Lord in prayer and it hasn't worked? You've found no relief.

That's what we have here in Psalm 77. We really don't know what prompted the writing of this Psalm. Was it something that happened to Israel as a nation? Or was it something that Asaph was experiencing as an individual? We really don't know the context. But what we do know, what we can see, is that as Asaph describes the pain and turmoil he's feeling, he is taking it very personally.

Look at what he says in verses one and two. He tells us he pulled an all-nighter in prayer. He was crying aloud to God, actually screaming out in prayer. He knew God heard him. He was seeking the Lord in the day of his trouble. He was stretching out his hands all night long. But he didn't feel any better at the end of that dark and restless night. His soul refused to be comforted, he says.

In verse four, Asaph seems to blame God for keeping him up all night long. He says, "*You have kept me from closing my eyes. I am troubled and cannot speak.*" So if you've ever felt like you've prayed and prayed and nothing has changed, if you've ever wondered if your prayers are not working, you're not alone. Here is a man in the Bible who gets it. He's been there with you. And he's coming alongside as a fellow sufferer to tell you there's no quick fix. There's no magic wand or silver bullet. God's people must go through pain and it will not go away overnight. Sometimes not even after a night of intense prayer. But notice that our songwriter does not give up. He does not stop praying. He keeps crying out to the Lord. He's reaching out to God with his pain, while his pain is still raging. He's refusing to pretend that he's just fine.

I read recently that when Christians say to one another, "I'm fine," what we really mean is, "Feelings Inside Not Expressed." That's what "FINE" is. Sometimes it's what you have to do in human relationships. You can't just bare all. You can't tell your feelings to everyone all the time. Some feeling should not be expressed to fellow people. Sometimes you've got to bottle them inside and not express them.

But not so with God. God wants you to come to Him and say, "I'm not fine." God wants you to express the raging emotions, the turmoil, the raw pain that doesn't make any sense to you. When you do that—when you lament—you're actually expressing deep faith in God.

Who are the people to whom we will "tell all"? It's the people we know will love us no matter what we say. It's the people we know truly love us. So we can tell them what's in our heart without feeling a need to edit it, without feeling the need to screen it or filter it in advance.

One out of three Psalms are Psalms of lament and what you're saying when you lament before God is, "God, I know You're sovereign. I know You're good. But I don't understand how that connects with my present experience, with the pain I'm going through. I'm going to trust You enough to tell You what I really feel, to put it all out there unfiltered." If you didn't believe in the sovereignty of God, if you didn't believe in the goodness of God, if you didn't believe in the love of God, then you would just stop talking to God. You'd give God the silent treatment.

But you do believe. That's why you cry out. That's why you say, "No, I'm not going to just grin and bear it. I'm not going to get used to it. I'm not going to pretend that everything's all right with the world. I'm going to cry out. I'm going to persist in prayer. I'm going to stretch out my weary hands and refuse to let up, even if there's no relief. Even if the pain doesn't go away, I won't stop wrestling with the painful gap between what I'm presently experiencing and what I know to be true about God."

So in verse three, Asaph says, "When I think of God, I groan." Thinking about God at first is hurting him more than helping him. When he meditates on the truths he's learned about God, his spirit faints within him, because right now it seems like the God he's always believed in isn't acting in the way He's promised to act. The God Asaph is experiencing at the moment doesn't seem like the God Asaph experienced in the past.

There's really an important lesson here for each of us as God's people and it's this: You can't build a doctrine of God upon your experience. One day you might feel great; another day you feel awful. One day God feels very close and your relationship with Him seems very tender. The next day, you say, "God, You've hidden Your face from me."

Spurgeon talked about how the experience of Christians is a lot like the weather in England. South winds blow and all is warm and balmy. A few hours later, the north wind comes. The east wind is cutting, then the ground is covered with snow and hard white frost. Then in another day or two, there will be a storm and it all changes again. Spurgeon says, "Some believers have all spiritual weathers in a week."

I thought, that's kind of the climate I tend to live in emotionally. I'm not just flat. I can experience a lot of different weather changes in a week. Spurgeon says, "Being somewhat excitable, they readily take to themselves wings and mount aloft, but then as a high soar is often followed by a great fall, these very believers are soon sighing and crying out of the very depths and half-doubt whether they are the people of God at all. We are uphill and downhill all the way to heaven." That's what our experience is probably going to be like. So don't interpret God by your experiences. Learn to interpret your experiences by what you know to be true about God.

He thinks in verse five about experiences he's had in the past: *"I consider days of old, years long past."* In verse six he remembers happy nights of worship music and a joy that once seemed vibrant. But as he thinks about these things in his heart, as his spirit ponders these things, all it does is raise more questions. But he doesn't hide his questions. He believes our God is a God Who takes questions. Our God desires our questions.

So with bracing honesty, he fires away in verses seven through nine. I'm going to read you his questions from the New Living Translation:

*Has the Lord rejected me forever?
Will he never again show me favor?
Is his unfailing love gone forever?
Have his promises permanently failed?
Has God forgotten to be gracious?
Has he slammed the door on his compassion?*

Are we allowed to talk like that in church? Imagine that Dan Leeper comes to the pastor team meeting and says, "I've written a new song. I want to have us sing it in church. The title is 'My Soul Refuses to be Comforted.' It starts with these words. 'God, I remember You and I moan.' And then it unfolds, verse after verse, with a series of questions. 'Lord, have You rejected me forever? Lord, will You ever show me Your favor again? Lord, has Your unfailing love failed? Lord, have Your promises come to an end? Lord, have You forgotten to be gracious? Lord, have You slammed the door on Your compassion?'"

How do you think we'd respond to a song like that? Would it make you a little uncomfortable if you came into church and we were singing Psalm 77:1-9 together? But aren't you glad that God did not edit out this portion from His hymnal? Aren't you glad that God did not say, "Asaph, you need to clean up those first nine verses? I don't want My people singing in a minor key. I don't want My people questioning Me like that." Aren't you glad God didn't do that?

The truth of the matter is God knows what we're thinking inside. He doesn't want us to bottle it up and not express it. If God had to choose between you asking Him bracing questions—like verses seven through nine—or you giving Him the silent treatment, pretending things are just fine, "Feelings Inside Not Expressed," you know what God would choose. You know God would say, "Bring Me your questions." You know that because He gave you this Psalm.

It's far better to be honest about what we're thinking than to bottle it up inside and not express it. What requires more faith, taking your painful questions to the Lord and wrestling with Him in prayer, or keeping your pain to yourself and not speaking to God about it at all?

Alexander Maclaren writes, “Doubts are better put into plain speech than lying diffused and darkening, like poisonous mists, in the heart. A thought, be it good or bad, can be dealt with when it is made articulate.” In other words, these poisonous mists, these doubts and fears—if they are not made articulate, if they are not poured out to the Lord—the poisonous mists will end up dehydrating your soul and turning it into a spiritual desert. You’ll become embittered. You’ll become unable or unwilling to talk to God.

Mark Vroegop says, “Silence is a soul-killer.”

Lesson #1: True faith wrestles in prayer with the painful realities of the present.

The first of two lessons we’re going to learn from this Psalm today is that true faith wrestles in prayer with the painful realities of the present. True faith is not passive. True faith does not pretend. True faith does not put on a pretty face. True faith cries out and keeps on crying, even when the pain and darkness don’t lift.

How are you doing with that? Are you on speaking terms with God right now? Are you telling Him what’s really on your heart? Are you telling Him your doubts, your fears, your anger, your failures, your shame? Or have you stopped speaking with Him, other than in the public worship?

When I was a young pastor and I would look out at the congregation, I used to think, “These people are all so much more spiritually mature than I am.” I used to think it was really true when they told me, “Everything’s fine. Doing great!” . Now I know better. I know from my own experience that actually the ones who are probably not doing very well at all are the ones who think they are doing just fine. I know from my own experience that we are desperately dependent on the constant grace of Jesus Christ, or else we’re a mess.

God knows us infinitely better than we know ourselves. He knows what’s hiding underneath these masks. God knows that some of us came to church after having a painful divorce, wondering, “Is there anyone who will ever really love me? Is there anyone I can ever really trust with my soul?” God knows that some of us come to church with marriages that on the outside look perfectly fine, but on the inside they’re cold, unloving, even oppressive.

God knows that some of us hate ourselves because of battles with sinful addictions we feel powerless to fight, so right now we’re down for the count. He knows.

God knows that some of us are so loaded down with financial debt we wouldn’t dare tell a soul because of the shame we’d feel if anyone knew.

God knows how many of us are feeling overwhelmed with confusion about our sexuality and that church is the scariest place to open up about that.

God knows how some of us feel like we've utterly failed as a father or a mother, how we grieve over lost opportunities with our children, how we wrestle with anger over choices they've made, yet feel even more angry with ourselves for how we've messed things up.

God knows how some of us come to church and feel overlooked, rejected, unneeded, passed over—like the only people who really matter in church are the ones who speak in public, or can do music, or can lead, or who have financial resources to give a lot, or who are good looking. Those are the A-team, but somehow you're down on B-team or lower. God knows.

He knows how many of us secretly wonder, "Does God really love me? Why didn't He stop my abuser? Why hasn't He answered my prayers? Why hasn't He freed me from the struggle? Why don't I feel valued at church? If I can't conquer this addiction will the Lord reject me forever? Will He slam the door on His compassion toward me?"

He knows the pain. He knows the fear, the shame, the failure we're carrying. The question is can we trust Him enough to talk with Him about it? Can we be honest with Him about our heartache? Can we cry out to Him with our confusion? One of the surest signs of our adoption into our heavenly Father's family and that Jesus is our older Brother, is when we trust Him enough to cry to Him with the feelings inside that we wouldn't dare express to another person.

I know I've told you this story before, about three years ago, and I hope you'll forgive me for telling you again. This touches me so deeply. This is Russell Moore talking about the adoption of his sons from an orphanage in Russia.

The creepiest sound I've ever heard was nothing at all. My wife Maria and I stood in the hallway of an orphanage somewhere in the former Soviet Union on the first of two trips required for our petition to adopt. Orphanage staff led us down a hallway to greet the two one-year-olds we hoped would become our sons. The horror wasn't the squalor and the stench, although we at times stifled the urge to vomit and weep. The horror was the quiet of it all. The place was more silent than a funeral home by night.

I stopped and pulled on Maria's elbow. "Why is it so quiet? This place is filled with babies." Both of us compared the stillness with the buzz and punctuated squeals that came from our church nursery back home. Here, if we listened carefully enough, we could hear babies rocking themselves back and forth, the crib slats gently bumping against the walls. These children did not cry, because infants eventually learn to stop crying if no one ever responds to their calls for food, for comfort, for love. No one ever responded to these children, so they stopped.

The silence continued as we entered the boys' room. Little Sergei, now Timothy, smiled at us, dancing up and down while holding the side of his crib. Little Maxim, now Benjamin, stood straight at attention, regal and czar-like. But neither boy made a sound. We read them books filled with words they couldn't understand.

But there were no cries, no squeals, no groans. Every day we left at the appointed time in the same way we entered—in silence.

On the last day of the trip, Maria and I arrived at the moment we had dreaded since the minute we received our adoption referral. We had to tell the boys goodbye. By law, we had to return to the United States and wait for the legal paperwork to be completed before returning to Russia to pick them up for good.

After hugging and kissing them, we walked out into the quiet hallway, as Maria shook with tears. And that's when we heard the scream. Little Maxim fell back in his crib and let out a guttural yell. It seemed he knew, maybe for the first time, that he would be heard. On some primal level, he knew he had a father and mother now. I'll never forget how the hairs on my arm stood up as I heard the yell.

I was struck, maybe for the first time, by the force of the "Abba, Father" cry passages in the New Testament. Little Maxim's scream changed everything. It was the moment in his recognizing that he would be heard that he went from being an orphan to a son.

I want to say something to some of you who came here today loaded down with shame, guilt, fear, anger or defeated resignation to constant failure. You've come to church this morning and are not realizing that there is a God in heaven you can cry out to with your pain. You might be a spiritual orphan today, thinking you have to fend for yourself in this world. I have good news for you. Jesus came into this world so that all who would receive Him, so that all who would believe in His name, can receive the right to become children of God, sons and daughters, adopted into the Father's family (John 3:16-17; Ephesians 1:3-14).

Jesus came so that you could know God as your Father, a Father Who loves you, a Father Who hears your cries of anguish. He came so you could know that you will be heard by Someone Who cares. You might be thinking, "There's no way God could love someone like me." But our heavenly Father doesn't wait until we're lovable to love us. It's just the opposite. G.K. Chesterton said, "A thing must be loved before it is lovable." That's what God does. He loves us before we're lovable. He loves us when we're still His enemies. He's the beauty; we're the beast. He embraces us and kisses us when we are still hideous monsters.

He sent Jesus His Son to die for the cleansing of all the ugliness of our sin, then He sends His Holy Spirit into our hearts so that we can start crying "Abba! Father!" And we can know we're heard. Friends, believing in Jesus will not take away all the pain you're going to go through in this world. But believing in Jesus will give you a Savior, a Friend, a Father you can cry out to with your pain. I commend Jesus to you today. I offer Jesus to you today. I commend to you a Savior Who cried with agonizing tears in the Garden of Gethsemane as He contemplated the horror of what He would endure and the darkness of a cross where He would scream in writhing agony so that you and I could know that when we cry out to God, He will always hear us.

Will you believe in Him? Will you receive Him? Will you start to trust Him, know Him and pour out your heart to Him? That's what faith is. Faith wrestles with God. It cries out to Him with your pain in this fallen world. True faith laments, but lament is not the end goal of true faith. Lament is the vehicle that brings you from restlessness into a resting place. Lament is the catharsis that cleanses your gloom and makes room in your heart for gratitude.

Lesson #2: True faith finds its resting place in what God has revealed throughout history, not in what I am experiencing at this present moment.

That brings us to the second lesson this morning. The second lesson we need to take home from this Psalm is that true faith finds its resting place in what God has revealed throughout history, not in what I am experiencing at this present moment. If Psalm 77 ended at verse nine, it would still be valuable. I'd still be glad it's in the Bible, but I'm glad it doesn't stop there.

Verse ten is like a hinge. It's a difficult verse to translate. There are a couple valid options. One says, *"I am grieved that the right hand of the Most High has changed."* He's no longer acting as powerfully as He did in the past. If that's the right translation, then verse ten kind of brackets out the pain of verses one through nine. But another valid translation says, *"To this I will appeal: the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand."* If that's the right translation, then verse ten belongs with what is coming up next. He's shifting his focus.

Either way you translate it, verse ten swings open the door out of the gloom in verses one through nine into the gratitude of verses 11-20. We enter a new room in verse 11. It's a room full of fresh air and magnificent views of the mighty works of God. Verses 11 and 12 are full of good resolves, the kind of resolves that are necessary if we want to grow in faith and not be held captive by our feelings.

We've got to resolve like he does in verse 11, *"I will remember the Lord's works..."* This is the only time in the Psalm the covenant name of the Lord is used—*Yahweh*, the Who acts on behalf of His people. *"I will remember your ancient wonders. I will reflect on all you have done and meditate on your actions"*—God's mighty deeds. In other words, "I'm going to remember His works. I will call them to mind. I'm going to rouse myself to do this, even with my pain."

We've got to do that too, friends. It's not a good thing to stay inconsolable. It's not a good thing to stay forever at the end of verse two, *"...I refused to be comforted,"* never letting any gospel truth permeate your parched soul. That's not a good thing.

It's like what Aunt Marilla said to Anne Shirley in "Anne of Green Gables." I remember watching this series with my daughters and I confess, I kind of liked it myself. But when Anne

Shirley says, “I am in the depths of despair,” Aunt Marilla, the Scottish Presbyterian, says, “To despair, Anne Shirley, is to turn your back on God.” Don’t talk like that. Don’t say you’re inconsolable. The truth is somewhere in between Anne Shirley and Aunt Marilla.

God says, “Give Me your despair. Give Me your grief. Give Me your pain. But let Me turn your eyes in a different direction. Let Me focus your faith on some realities that are so much bigger than you and your little finite life right now.”

There’s a striking shift that starts to take place in this Psalm. There are no more personal pronouns. In the first six verses of this Psalm, “I,” “me” and “my” occur 18 times. But starting in verse 11, God is mentioned at least 25 times. This is how we move from gloom to gratitude, from lament to praise. We must look at what God has done in the past and let it shape our vision of what God is doing now—and in the future.

If you want to know what God will do in the future, you should be paying very close attention to what He has already done in history, what He’s already accomplished. How do you do this? You meditate on what God has revealed to be true. You meditate on His Word—and that’s exactly what Asaph is doing in these verses. He’s meditating on Exodus 15, the song of Moses as the people of Israel were delivered from Egypt and came forth from the Red Sea.

Asaph focuses on Who God is and what His character is like. In verse 13 he says, “*God, your way is holy...*” In other words, “You’re wholly other than us. In no way can You be compared to the ways of men.” That means God is not a heavenly vending machine. It’s not like you put in your quarters, press the button, the coils start to turn and the candy bar starts to come out, but then it gets snagged. What do you do? You start pounding on that machine, shaking that machine. “I paid for this—you owe me!”

“God, Your way is holy. Your purposes are higher than mine. You’re other, so I can’t manipulate You. I can’t rush You. I can’t demand things from You. I can’t accuse You. You are holy in all Your ways.” Verse 13 continues with, “*What god is great like our God?*” Who can compare with Him? As Asaph is writing these things, he’s almost quoting verbatim Moses’ words in Exodus 15:11: “*LORD, who is like you among the gods? Who is like you, glorious in holiness, revered with praises, performing wonders?*”

Then Asaph focuses on why God has done His mighty wonders and miracles in the past in verse 15. Why has God done these mighty wonders? He’s done it to redeem His people, to make us His next of kin. Then he dwells on how God has redeemed His people in verses 16-19 and he traces the exodus story from Egypt: the parting of the Red Sea through the wilderness to Mt. Sinai and how God was with His people all the way.

So we've come today to see and remember a redemption even greater than that. The exodus was the great redemptive moment of the old covenant, but the life, death, resurrection, ascension and soon return of our Lord Jesus Christ is the great redemptive event of the new covenant. That's what we come to remember today.

Verse 19 is just a good reminder that we cannot interpret God's providence. We don't always see where He's going or what He's doing. His path is through the vast water, He plants His footsteps in the sea and He rides upon the storm. There are lots of things we are not going to understand.

Verse 20 ends this Psalm very abruptly: *"You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron."* It's like Asaph realizes, "Here's the answer. This is all I need. The Lord is my Shepherd. He lays down His life for His sheep. Nothing can pluck me out of His hand. Nothing can separate Me from His love. The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. I have everything I need" (John 10:7-30; Romans 8:31-39; Psalm 23).

I heard someone say once that in your kitchen you've got cupboards and refrigerators full of food that will nourish you, but what good will that food do if it remains in the cupboard? If you want to be nourished, you've got to take the food out, then you've got to eat it. The value of the food is best realized as it is consumed. Dear friends, the value of the Word of God is best realized as it's consumed. The gospel is best realized as it's consumed.

So in our darkness, in our pain, as we cry out to God, let's remember the gospel. Let's ponder on it, feed on it, treasure it, preach it, sing it. Let's do that together as we pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for what we're about to sing: how sovereign You are, how good You are, how You're working in all the mysteries of our waking, in all our weariness, in all our groaning. You are doing something that will amaze us in the end. Help us pour our hearts out to You, receive You and feed on You as we praise You now around Your communion table. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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