

Trouble

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Date: 27 August 2017

Preacher: Jake Tasker

[0 : 00] Good morning. Our first reading today is from Exodus chapter 15 verses 1 through to 18 and that can be found on page 68 of the Church Bibles.

Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord saying, I will sing to the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously. The horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and my song and he has become my salvation. This is my God and I will praise him. My father's God and I will exalt him. The Lord is a man of war. The Lord is his name. Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them. They went down into the depths like a stone.

Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power. Your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy. In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries.

[1 : 08] You send out your fury. It consumes them like stubble. At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up. The floods stood up in a pile.

The deeps congealed in the heart of the sea. The enemy said, I will pursue. I will overtake. I will divide the spoil. My desire shall have its fill of them.

I will draw my sword. My hand shall destroy them. You blew with your wind. The sea covered them. They sank like lead in the mighty waters.

Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? You stretched out your right hand. The earth swallowed them. You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed. You have guided them by your strength to your holy abode. The peoples have heard. They tremble.

[2 : 07] The people have seized the inhabitants of Philistia. Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed. Trembling seizes the leaders of Moab. All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.

Terror and dread fall upon them. Because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone. Till your people, O Lord, pass by. Till the people pass by whom you have purchased.

You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain. The place, O Lord, which you have made for your abode. The sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established.

The Lord will reign forever and ever. The second reading comes from Psalms.

Psalms 77. And you'll find that on page 585. Psalm 77. I cry aloud to God.

[3 : 37] I consider the days of old, the years long ago. I said, let me remember my song in the night. Let me meditate in my heart. Then my spirit made a diligent search.

Will the Lord spurn forever and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time?

Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion? Then I said, I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.

I will remember the deeds of the Lord. Yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work and meditate on your mighty deeds.

Your way, O God, is holy. What God is great like our God? You are the God who works wonders. You have made known your might among the peoples.

[4 : 44] You, with your arm, redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph. When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid.

Indeed, the deep trembled. The clouds poured out water. The skies gave forth thunder. Your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind.

Your lightnings lighted up the world. The earth trembled and shook. Your way was through the sea. Your path through the great waters.

Yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. Morning.

Let me add my welcome along with Simon. If you're visiting, I'm Jake. I'm a member of the congregation here. And we're carrying on, as Simon said, in the Psalms, the Psalm 77. So if you've got your Bible open in front of you at page 585, that would be really helpful.

[5 : 50] Let me pray for us as we start. Father, please would you speak to us this morning as we look at your word together.

Encourage us. Challenge us. Help us. In Jesus' name. Amen. I'll be there for you when the rain starts to pour.

I'll be there for you like I've been there before. I'll be there for you because you're there for me too. The Rembrandts. Or you might know it as the Friends theme tune.

If you need me, call me. No matter where you are, no matter how far, don't worry, baby. Just call my name. I'll be there in a hurry. You don't have to worry. Oh, baby, there ain't no mountain high enough.

Yolanda Adams. You've got a friend in me. You've got a friend in me. When the road looks rough ahead and you're miles and miles from your nice warm bed, you just remember what your old pal said.

[6 : 55] Boy, you've got a friend in me. Randy Newman. Or you might recognize it from Toy Story. The Rembrandts, Yolanda Adams, Randy Newman, they sing and we listen.

Nice sentiments from famous musicians. But as much as we might listen and hum along, we know those lyrics aren't actually being sung to us. The Rembrandts aren't promising they'll be there for you.

However much I call Yolanda, she won't be there in a hurry. And I don't think Randy would call me his friend. They're lyrics for our entertainment, but we can't rely on them.

And I wonder if sometimes we're not sure we can rely on God's promises either. We look around and see empty church buildings sold and converted into flats.

And we hear on the news or read in the paper of the statistics of church decline. And we begin to ask, is the Lord really at work? Can we really rely on his promises to us in the Bible?

[8 : 01] Well, that's something of the question at the heart of Psalm 77. Has God given up on his promises? Has he abandoned his people? Will he never show favor again?

The answer and the message of Psalm 77 is no. God is deeply committed to his people. Psalm 77 is part of a group of psalms written about 587 BC.

These psalms with the heading, A Psalm of Asaph, are penned and crafted by Asaphite musicians, charged with the responsibility of leading God's people in their praise to the Lord.

It's helpful to imagine this psalm, not just sung by an individual, but sung by a congregation. A bit like we might sing together in church, God's people would have sung Psalm 77.

And so the psalmist has written it to encourage and build up God's people, that they would know that they can rely on God because he is deeply committed to his flock.

[9 : 05] But why might they need a psalm to help them know that? Surely they already know God is committed to them. Well, turn back a page or so with me and find the start of Psalm 74.

It'll help us with why they might need Psalm 77. Have a look at verse four. The psalmist cries out to the Lord, your foes, that's the Babylonians, have roared in the midst of your meeting place.

God's people, the Israelites, had been living in the promised land, Jerusalem, enjoying its blessings. But in come the Babylonians. They crash in and destroy the temple, the one place God's people can be in his presence.

They desecrate it. Have a look at verse five. They were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees. And all its carved wood, they broke down with hatchets and hammers.

They set your sanctuary on fire. They profaned the dwelling place of your name, bringing it down to the ground. God's people have been attacked, slaughtered and enslaved.

[10 : 17] The land God promised and gave to them is desolate and they can no longer meet with God. Psalm 74 verse nine helps us understand their state.

We do not see our signs. There's no longer any prophet and there is none among us who knows how long. How long, oh God, is the foe to scoff?

Is the enemy to revile your name forever? God's people are dejected and because God's messengers are dead, they're left in the dark.

And God's enemy is laughing. How long will it go on? And how will the psalmist lead God's people in the face of such trouble? There's an outline on the back of your service sheet if you'd like to see where we're going.

Firstly then, Psalm 74 shows we can cry out to God. Back in Psalm 77, have a look at verse one. I cry aloud to God, aloud to God and he will hear me.

[11 : 23] In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord. In the night my hand is stretched out without wearying. My soul refuses to be comforted.

When I remember God I moan. When I meditate my spirit faints. You hold my eyelids open. I am so troubled.

I cannot speak. Do you begin to get a sense of their pain? They look around at their circumstances. They see the place where they once met with God has been destroyed.

Their families have been killed or captured. They've been removed from the promised land and they're desperate. They can't understand what God is doing. So the psalmist leads them in crying out to God.

And verse seven to nine bring us to the heart of their cry. Will the Lord spurn forever? And never again be favorable?

[12 : 23] Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?

See God promised to their forefathers that he would make them into a great nation. Lead them to the promised land and be with them. But given the current state of affairs it doesn't look like that. It's happening. And so they ask. Has God backed out? Is that the end of his favor to us? Has he forgotten to be gracious?

Can we rely on his promises? Doesn't sound like they're far from giving up on God altogether.

Feeling as they are they'd have been tempted to bow down to the Babylonian gods.

That might have made their lives easier. Or they could have carried on with a stiff upper lip and pretended their current state didn't bother them. They could have silently resented God for what he was doing.

[13 : 25] But instead the psalmist encourages them. They can cry out to God in their trouble and despair. They can cry out with their doubts and their questions.

Lizzie and I have been watching a show called Suits recently. Follows a senior partner in a law firm and his apprentice as they take on cases and clients.

They're a great team. But there are numerous scenes where the apprentice really needs help. He's confused or something's gone wrong so he goes to his boss desperate.

And time after time he gets sent away with something like, I'm busy, just deal with it, ringing in his ears. And surprisingly as the episodes go on he asks for help less and less.

Well the psalmist wants God's people to know that God is not like that senior partner. With questions and doubts, in trouble, God's people can and should cry out to him.

[14 : 25] Now, we're not facing the same circumstances as the people in Psalm 77. We haven't been captured by the Babylonians. But I think we do know something of the psalmist's pain.

Maybe you've been praying for opportunities to speak to your colleagues about Jesus. And you have brief conversations here and there but they never come to much. And you're left frustrated. Wondering why the Lord isn't doing more in your workplace.

Maybe you've invited a friend to a guest service at church or jam or the school Christian union. And they said they'd come but they didn't. And you're left asking, Lord, what's going on?

Maybe as you prepare for a Sunday club or growth group, you're tempted to think, what's the point, Lord? Is this worth doing? Nothing seems to happen.

Where are you, God? And in those times, the questions in verses 7 to 9 start to resonate a little.

Maybe we feel it when we hear of churches freezing out and getting rid of their leader because they don't want to hear about Jesus anymore.

[15 : 36] Maybe we feel it when we hear of Christian brothers and sisters being persecuted in other parts of the world. We groan. Lord, how are you keeping your promises there and there and there?

We cry out. And that's good because when we do, we're in line with Psalm 77. But what about the times we don't cry out?

Maybe it's that actually we don't feel a sense of concern for that city where the gospel isn't being heard. Or we're not fussed whether we have conversations about Jesus at work. Maybe we're a bit disillusioned because we don't feel like God is at work anymore. Or maybe we're a bit half-hearted because we've lost sight of the importance of God rescuing his people. Either way, Psalm 77 is here to draw us back, to help us see that we can and should cry out to God. And wouldn't it be a great thing if more and more we were concerned about whether God was at work saving his people?

[16:43] So as God's people cry out to him with their doubts and questions, can they rely on him to keep his promises? Can they rely on him to rescue?

Well, secondly, the psalmist leads God's people to see that we can rely on God because he is deeply committed to his flock. Verse 10 says, as a turning point in Psalm 77, have a look. Then I said, I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High. The psalmist leads God's people from singing about their current circumstances, their despair and their questions. Notice all of the I's in the first half of the psalm. To singing about and remembering God's acts in all of history. Notice the I's disappear and are replaced with yous in the second half of the psalm. Specifically, the psalmist points them back and has them meditate on God's rescue of his people from Egypt. God's people had been in a similarly desperate state in slavery in Egypt. [17:59] And they were asking, where is God? What's happened to his promises? Has he forgotten us? Then God displayed his wondrous works and mighty deeds as he sent plagues on the Egyptians to prove his power.

That's what the psalmist was referring to in verse 11. I will remember the deeds of the Lord. Yes, I'll remember your wonders of old. I'll ponder all your work and meditate on your mighty deeds. The plagues in Egypt. They showed everyone, Egyptians and Israelites, that there's only one true God. No other God could match up.

That's what the psalmist is referring to in verse 13. Your way, O God, is holy. What God is great like our God? You are the God who works wonders.

You've made known your might among the peoples. But the psalmist doesn't just stop there, pointing out God's mighty deeds and wonders with the plagues. Have a look at verse 15.

[19:07] You, with your arm, redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph. He reminds them that their God is a God who rescues his people. After the plagues, Pharaoh agreed to free the Israelites.

And they left Egypt rejoicing. But they were quickly despairing again. As they stood trapped, the sea on one side and Pharaoh's chariots, having changed his mind, chasing after them on the other. They asked Moses, have you brought us out here because there are no graves in Egypt? They're convinced they're going to die. Then the Lord speaks.

And as Moses lift his staff over the sea, God parts the waters and his people walk through the sea on dry ground. When they get to the other side, the sea covers the Egyptians, defeating them. And God's people sing the reading we heard earlier from Exodus 15. Maybe you spotted the similar language in both readings. The events of the crossing of the Red Sea are summarized in the last few verses of Psalm 77.

[20:14] Verse 16. When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid. Verse 19. Your way was through the sea.

Your path through the great waters. Yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. The psalmist has God's people sing of the Exodus from Egypt because it shows God's incredible power.

But not just that. It also reveals God's character. He is the great God who rescues his people. And that's where verse 20 is so helpful.

In some ways, it might seem like a bit of an anticlimax. All this talk of God's might and power. And yet the last verse of the psalm has none of that. So what difference does verse 20 make?

Why has the psalmist included it? Well, notice the way the psalmist describes God to have led his people like a flock. Rather than simply remembering and meditating on God's power and acts in history, the psalmist wants to draw God's people to see that their mighty God is a shepherd who is committed to rescuing his flock, his people.

[21:31] Now, I don't know much about sheep. But when there are wolves howling in the forest nearby and thieves plotting to steal, I know what sheep need.

