

# Hardship and prayer

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] The first reading is on page 1080. It's John, chapter 10, reading verses 1 to 11.

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. This figure of speech, Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So Jesus again said to them, truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the sheep. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

The second reading today comes from Psalm 77, which can be found on page 585 of the Church Bibles. That's page 585 of the Church Bibles, and we'll be looking at Psalm 77.

Psalm 77.

[ 2 : 3 2 ] I am so troubled, I cannot speak. 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. 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. 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.

[ 4 : 3 3 ] Amen. Amen. Rosalie, thanks very much for reading for us. Let me add my welcome. It's lovely to see you this morning.

And as Ben said, we're continuing this sermon series on when life is hard. So do please keep Psalm 77 open and let me pray for us. Let's pray together.

heavenly father we praise you very much that the lord jesus is the good shepherd and we pray this morning please would you help us to listen carefully to his voice and to take it to heart and we ask it in his name amen one of the ways in which people often describe periods of great hardship is like being stuck in a tunnel with no light in sight at the end of it yes there's light behind the light of better happier days in the past but light ahead is elusive or perhaps it comes for a moment and then our hopes are dashed and it's gone again i guess some of us will have experienced something like that as i have and i guess many of us probably most of us will know others who have experienced it as well well the aim of this series when life is hard is to help us to tunnel out of darkness to light and hope last week we began to get our bearings on what life is like in a fallen world and we saw god's very special promise which he gives to those who know the lord jesus do catch up online if you missed it and today we are thinking about how to pray when we find ourselves in the darkness psalm 77 is one of many psalms in the old testament known as psalms of lament they show us how to pray when life is full of questions when we're experiencing pain and hardship and yet when we're also wanting to trust god's promises a lament if you like is a prayer cried out to the lord in pain and through a path of hardship and disappointment and brokenness we are then led to hope and trust and that is the journey which i want to lead us on this morning moving from pain to trust but before we get there i think it's worth saying it is a journey and there is an alternative because suffering will either draw us near to god or if we let it it will drive us further away from god i wonder if that's something you've ever thought about or pondered i guess some of us will know that's true from our own experience some from the experience of others it can be true for the unbeliever my grandfather was like that he fought in the second world war he was seriously injured a number of his number of his number of his friends were killed he wanted nothing to do with god and it can be true for the christian believer as well life is hard the life we expect it doesn't come our way yet some of us draw near to god and others let that experience drive us away in other words the way we respond to suffering has a profound effect on our lives not just in the short term when life is hard but also in the longer term because of the way in which we respond to what's happening a negative response may show that actually we're not really pursuing jesus kingdom at all but we're pursuing our own kingdom happiness success health security and when we don't have those things we turn away from god and that is why we need to learn from the psalms of lament

as they lead us to trust him in the midst of hardship now just to get our bearings psalm 77 was probably written in response to the devastation of the exile in the 7th century bc god's people invaded by the babylonians carted off into exile to live most of them far away in babylon it looked as if god's purposes and promises were in ruins no more the psalm teaches us two things about prayer that lead us towards god when life is hard rather than away from him and you'll see they're there on the outline if you've got a paper copy of the outline they'll come up on the screen as well firstly pray and pour out your heart secondly turn and trust so firstly pray and pour out your heart pray verses one and two i cry aloud to god aloud to god and he will hear me 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 it takes faith to pray to trust because it's saying that i want hardship to draw me towards god and not away from him for the follower of jesus perhaps the two most wonderful words in the bible are those two words which we heard the very beginning of our service this morning our father our father in heaven yes he is the sovereign lord of all things and yet wonderfully if we belong to him if we belong to the lord jesus he invites us to address him as our heavenly father so what makes christianity unique we can be all too quick to forget the amazing privileges we have if we belong to the lord jesus does a muslim or a hindu or buddhist or anyone else for that matter no god is their heavenly father no a father who longs for us to talk to him and a father who is good such a contrast with the secular world world around us which has no answers in the face of suffering and no one to turn to i guess that's why people don't really talk about it and yet if richard dawkins is right well we better get used to the idea because being hardship because suffering times of hardship and suffering well if we're just a bunch of chemicals well that's just life and we need to get used to it hardship is just the luck of the draw just like the national lottery well it may be there are one or two here this morning and actually deep down in your heart that is what you believe and i hope that this morning and indeed during this series of talks on hardship i hope you'll begin to see how wonderful it is to know the god who we can indeed address if we know him as our heavenly father so when life is hard pray we may not feel like it but it is the first step to tunneling our way out to hope and light because we know don't we that silence is a killer in any relationship and silence is a killer in the way we relate to god as well the devil would love us not to pray but our doubts and questions are far better put into plain speech than left to fester

pray pray but not just pray pray and pour out your heart have a look at the rest of verses three to nine i wonder if you can feel the pain of verse three when i remember god i moan when i meditate my spirit faints and then verse four the anxiety of insomnia being lost for words you hold my eyelids open i am so troubled that i cannot speak and verse five that the kind of memory of happier days but of course that only makes things worse and then in verse seven to nine the perplexity as the psalmist effectively asks one question and does so six times see if you can spot it verses seven to nine will the lord spurn forever and never again be favorable has his steadfast love forever ceased are his promises and end for all time has god forgotten to be gracious has he in anger shut up his compassion now i don't know what you fear the most perhaps ill health perhaps losing your financial security perhaps uncertainty perhaps something happening to your children if you have them but here is the most fearful of anxieties that a soul can ever harbor was i right to believe that god is faithful to his promises will he reject me forever has his steadfast love ceased has he forgotten to be gracious will he no longer be compassionate we all know don't we what it is to be rejected by another person but to be rejected by god remember the context is the exile god's people driven out of their lands enslaved in babylon it's why these verses verses 79 are full of covenant promise keeping language you see it's as if there's a mismatch between the promises of god that he has given to his people on the one hand and their experience of god on the other hand perhaps you've had a relationship like that or a friendship like that you thought you knew someone they'd made promises and yet as time went by there seemed to be a growing mismatch between what you thought you knew about them and the reality that you were experiencing they're painful questions and yet some of us will know what it is to have asked them or will know others who know what it is to have asked them now of course it may well be that some of us are surprised by this kind of language in the bible has god forgotten to be gracious that they're big questions will he no longer show compassion and yet of course it is a wonderful thing that we have these psalms of lament in the bible at all because it shows that it's okay not to be okay and it shows us how to pray when life is not okay and it shows us how to encourage others to pray when their life is not okay so firstly pray and pour out your heart

[ 17 : 04 ] secondly verses 10 to 20 turn and trust turn and trust firstly turn verses 10 to 12 then i said i will appeal to this to the ears of the right hand of the most high i'll remember the deeds of the lord yes i'll remember your wonders of old i will ponder all your work and meditate on your mighty deeds i want us to focus just on one word at the beginning of verse 10 then one of the characteristics of the psalms of lament is that there is usually a turning point where the psalmist turns from pouring out his heart to the lord to trust whereas in verses 3 to 6 those verses are full of troubles in verses 10 to 12 he turns and remembers god's works and character it's reflected in the change of pronouns so verses 3 to 6 just have a look at them they're full of eyes when i remember i'm going to be able to pray when i remember i'm going to be able to pray when i meditate i am so troubled i cannot speak i consider the days whereas in verse 10 onwards the focus changes as he appeals to the right hands of the most high the right hand of course being the hand of god's power and then just scan down the verses and the eyes have been replaced by yours and you's verse 12 your work your deeds verse 13 your way verse 14 you verse 15 you and so on all the way down to verse 20 you get a similar pattern in the other psalms of lament as well in other words yes the psalmist is teaching us to pray and to pour out our heart to the lord but then to turn not to stop at the end of verse 9 by pouring out our hearts but to move beyond that and to turn in other words we need to make sure that we don't just stay at the end of the first half of the psalm but move on to some of us i guess that may well be something of a warning those perhaps who by nature are glass half empty those who are perhaps in danger of complaining to the law but never moving on those who are more inclined to self-pity and yet of course to others this will be a great encouragement that actually when life does seem so overwhelming when we feel ourselves in verses three to nine the encouragement that actually we can move on mark vrogop in this excellent book dark clouds deep mercy says this complaint is central to lament but christians never complain just to complain instead we bring our complaints to the lord for the purpose of moving us towards him we allow the honest opening of our souls to become a doorway to the other elements of lament in other words we move from complaint and pouring our heart out to the lord we turn and then we begin to trust in other words when our hearts say to us things are hopeless we need to argue back when life is hard we need to make a decision

about where we place our trust to get our bearings will we trust our circumstances or will we trust god's promises turn but but then not only turn but trust and notice in verses 13 to 20 how the psalmist turns to remind himself of god's great salvation in the past as he recalls the events of the exodus hundreds of years earlier when god rescued his people from egypt when he rescued them from under his judgments and when he brought them out through the wilderness to the land he had promised verse 14 you are the god who works wonders you have made known your might among the peoples the whole purpose of the exodus was for the lord god to reveal himself to the nations verse 15 you with your arm redeemed your people the children of jacob and joseph he rescued his people fulfilling the promise that he had made to jacob and joseph in verses 16 to 19 he rescued them through the waters of the red sea verse 16 when the waters saw you o god when the waters saw you they were afraid indeed the deep trembled verse 19 your way was through the sea your path through the great waters yet your footprints were unseen god's footprints were indeed unseen god himself was was unseen and yet he was actively delivering working for the salvation of his people indeed this sense of unseenness may well have been the psalmist's own experience that he cannot see god that he seems far away but he is in fact always present with and leading his people just like a shepherd it's striking i think the psalmist finishes with verse 20 you led your people like a flock by the hands of moses and aaron a wonderful deliverance by the unseen god because as always god's people live not by sight but by faith and that exodus rescue was the anticipation of the far greater rescue that we too have experienced if we know the lord jesus christ rescued from sin rescued from satan rescued from the judgment to come from death itself through the death of Jesus on the cross through to being given new life through his resurrection from the dead.

Yes, the Lord Jesus will lead us to the new creation, and yet he is unseen. We too live not by sight, but by faith.

It means, of course, that we don't have to understand everything God is doing in our lives. Or indeed, in the lives of others, if we are to trust him. We may find ourselves inwardly crying out, Lord, why are you doing this?

Please explain it to me. And yet we walk by faith. We don't walk by explanations. Faith in God's shepherd care for his people.

[ 24 : 48 ] In the Lord Jesus, the good shepherd, John chapter 10, who lays down his life for his sheep. So when life is hard, how do we know that God won't give up on us?

How do we know that the answer to those questions in verses 3 to 9 is no? Well, we look to Jesus' death on the cross.

That is where we see the rock-solid evidence of God's unchanging, unwavering, unshakable love for his people.

He won't give up on us. He'll bring us to his final place of rest, as the Apostle Paul says in Romans chapter 5 that we looked at a couple of weeks ago. But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since therefore we've now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. That is the foundation we need in hard times.

[ 25 : 58 ] That is what we need to remember. To meditate upon it. Not just to know it in our heads, but actually to know it deeply in our hearts.

Trusting means not living by our circumstances or how we feel, or putting our faith in the fact that our situation may change in the future, but rather putting our faith in the promises of God.

Knowing that his overriding concern is the salvation of his people, keeping us and taking us to the new creation.

Many of us will have heard of William Cooper. He was an English poet who struggled with debilitating bouts of depression for much of his life. He was a hymn writer. And his last hymn is God Moves in a Mysterious Way.

It was written just before he died. And most of his life he had struggled with this whole business that Psalm 77 helps us with.

[ 27 : 08 ] How do I turn sorrow and struggle and heartache into trust and confidence? And yet his last hymn does it beautifully.

I put a couple of verses there on the outline. Just have a look at them. The first verse there. Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take that clouds you so much dread, are big with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head.

He turns from hardship to the character of God. Fearful clouds are full of mercy. And then the other verse.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace. Behold, a frowning providence. He hides a smiling face.

Again, he turns from hardship to the character of God. Our experience may seem to be a frowning providence. But actually behind it, he hides a smiling face.

[ 28 : 20 ] Which means the answer to those questions of verses 7 to 9 is no. His steadfast love never ceases. Jesus, the good shepherd, will continue to lead his people to shepherd us, to work in our lives for our utmost good.

He will take us home to the new heavens and the new earth. Psalm 77 shows us how hardship can lead to trust.

Which means, you see, when life is hard, there is a choice we need to make. And when others we know, other Christian believers we know, are finding life hard, there is a choice that we can help them make as well.

It's about who we trust. The version of events that our circumstances are telling us, or the version of events that God is telling us.

No one can make that choice for us. And yet it is a choice that has to be made. I was reading recently about a couple called Gary and Bonnie Witherell, who are missionaries in the Lebanon.

[ 29 : 43 ] In 2002, one day when she was working as a GP in her medical clinic, a gunman came in, opened fire, and she was killed outright.

No warning. It had just been a perfectly normal day up until 11 o'clock in the morning, or whatever it was. This is what Gary wrote about the choice he faced.

Suddenly I was wrenched into a place that I could never have imagined. I was forced to fall and fall and fall into the abyss of grief. I was not ready for this.

I was not given time to prepare for the loss of the one person who lit up my world. And yet in his sorrow, he cries out to the Lord.

And he goes on to use the language of choice that he had to make. He says this, Psalm 77 is filled with deep pain and tough questions.

[ 31 : 04 ] And yet a determined trust in the Lord's salvation. Many of us have had to make that decision to trust God in the face of hardship, as I have over these last several months.

And as I said last week, all of us will have to make that decision at some stage in our lives. And there'll be some of us in the church family who need the encouragement to do so today.

So can we see how the psalm leads us to a point where we can begin to see light at the end of the tunnel? The way it gets us praying.

The way it gets us pouring out our hearts to the Lord. But not staying there. But turning. And then trusting. Trusting for the future.

It means, of course, that we don't need to know how all the various bits of the jigsaw of our lives are going to fit together. Because we can trust the one who does.

[ 32 : 14 ] Our Heavenly Father. Indeed, we can rejoice that he does in the midst of our pain and hardship. Let's have a few moments of quiet, and then I shall lead us in prayer.

You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed, that you are our Heavenly Father.

We praise you for the Lord Jesus, our Good Shepherd. We praise you for the great confidence we can have that just as you led your people then out of Egypt to the Promised Land.

So as we look at the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, thank you that we can be absolutely confident that you are for us, of your love towards us, that we are forgiven, that you are leading us to the new creation.

And we pray, Heavenly Father, in all the ups and downs of life, please would you keep us trusting in your great goodness and kindness. And we ask it in Jesus' name.

[ 33 : 26 ] Amen. A couple of book recommendations, which you'll see on the bottom there of the outline. Firstly, the one I quoted from by Mark Rogop, Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy.

I think there's a copy of that on the bookstall. So do have a look at it on the bookstall and then order it if you'd like to. And then secondly, Tumbling Sky by Matt Searles.

Just helpfully goes through some of the other psalms of lament in a similar way in which we have this morning, but that may be helpful to some. If you need an extra encouragement to look at it, it's Laura Nelson's brother who is the author.

So do chat to her about it afterwards as well if you'd like to. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.