

Lest we forget

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[0 : 00] Well, we've come to the last of our psalm for this series, Psalm 77. Over these five weeks, we've been looking at the start of Book 3 of the Psalter.

And I wonder whether you noticed that actually they're all written by the one person, Asaph. We've actually now got an Asaph in our church as well. It's very good.

And actually, he's quite a prolific psalm writer and songwriter. Probably a bit like a Keith Getty or a Stuart Townsend of his day.

So it's interesting. We don't have the music, but we have his words. And they're all pretty introspective, pretty honest, as we shall see tonight.

Incidentally, we did not plan this psalm to coincide with Mother's Day. But, you know, as Steph was saying, perhaps some others do resonate with this.

[1 : 05] But I wonder whether you, you yourself might remember a time when life was difficult, tough.

And the problems you were facing were so overwhelming, you felt like you couldn't keep going normally anymore. And it can happen, can't it, to any of us.

I'm sure you've gone through those times yourself. No one is immune, even if we try to avoid it. And perhaps you might even be going through that right now.

Well, our psalm today, then, gives us hope and help. It's one of the resources that God provides for us to help us through such times.

And here in Psalm 77, we meet someone who is in trouble. As a believer in God, he knows to turn to God for help.

[2 : 03] What we get in the first nine verses is really an unedited version of the psalmist's emotions and thoughts. As I said, it's raw and honest.

He doesn't hold back. And so, beginning in verse 1, he writes, Now, all this is in the past tense, so we know he's looking back.

But he tells it as it is. When he cried out to the Lord, he thought that he was looking in the right place for help. You can't fault his persistence.

He's stretching out untiring hands. That was the right posture of dependence. And yet, he finds no relief. He would not be confident.

And I suppose we can readily identify, can't we? There are perhaps times when we've tossed and turned in the night and prayed long into the night and yet nothing happens.

[3 : 13] Somehow, God is not answering like we would expect him to. He goes on, verse 3, I remembered you, God, and I groaned. I meditated and my spirit grew faint.

Now, that's not right, is it? To turn to God and yet, instead of finding relief and comfort, what it produces is groaning. His spirit growing faint.

How can that be? I mean, imagine me as your pastor encouraging you when you're having a tough time. Please, turn to God in prayer. Meditate. Meditate. Only for you to do that and then you afterwards tell me, I felt worse having done that.

And yet, that's what's happening. God's apparent silence when he cried out to him, I think makes his suffering even more acute. Because he now has to consider, you know, does God really care? Maybe he hasn't heard me at all. And so in verse 4, the psalmist goes so far as to hold God responsible. You kept my eyes from closing.

[4 : 22] I was too troubled to speak. God, you've done this to me. And whether it's true or not, what we're getting here are the honest feelings of the psalmist.

And he goes on now with a series of questions that come to his mind. I thought about the former days, the years of long ago. I remembered my songs in the night. My heart meditated and my spirit

asked, will the Lord reject forever?

Will he never show his favor again? Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful?

Has he in anger withheld his compassion? I don't really know how many I didn't count, but there's about six or seven unanswered questions, aren't there? And I wonder whether these are the same questions that you might ask yourself.

Here he has a few lines of inquiry, doesn't he? First, the question of time. How long, O Lord, will you reject forever? And then to make matters worse, of course, the psalmist recalls God's past favor.

[5 : 28] And that's ironic, because having tasted God's kindness in the past, the fact that he's not experiencing it now raises questions as to why not.

Is it because God's changed his character so that his unfailing love has vanished forever? That, of course, is an oxymoron, isn't it? Because unfailing love means he cannot fail.

It does not vanish. Does it mean then that God's love in the past was conditional? That his promise then cannot be realized? Now, when we are sort of, when things are going okay in our lives, and we look at these questions, we can tell that these are not rational questions, are they?

They sort of, they don't add up. God can't be like that. Because if that's who he is, then he's not worthy to be God. And yet, when our own emotions are in upheaval, then it starts to play on our minds, doesn't it?

We entertain irrational thoughts in our desperation. So, verse 9, Has God forgotten to be merciful? That's not right. And yet, when we're desperate, we sort of grasp at anything, don't we?

[6 : 45] To come up with all sorts of theories just to make sense of what's going on. Maybe he's not God, but us, he thinks. Maybe he's angry, and has withheld his compassion.

And then, if that's the case, we start thinking, well, what have we done wrong? You know, look back at all our actions and every circumstance, where did we go wrong with anything?

Now, you know, I hate to admit this, but when I'm stressed or tired or under pressure, I'm sadly a very different person to what I'd like to be. Worry, anxiety, anger, they cloud my thinking.

I begin to entertain and even act on irrational thoughts. And the words of the psalmist here, I think, demonstrate that. It's really sobering, isn't it?

Because we are very easily impacted, aren't we, by our circumstances in life. Even small disappointments and setbacks.

[7 : 51] We're so easily shaken by that. And yet, I think reading the psalmist's thoughts is also comforting, in a way, isn't it? Because it shows that God is aware of what's going on in our lives.

He knows what we're going through. And what's more, God didn't think so poorly of this psalmist, of Asaph, that he barred him from penning his psalm. Or, you know, excluded his thoughts from God's word.

No. God didn't look down on the psalmist. He did not despise or disregard his thoughts or feelings. He allowed for these raw feelings and thoughts to be reflected and recorded for us in the Bible.

You know, sometimes we think that, you know, as mature and godly Christians, we have to be with it all the time. You know, always need to be sensible and calm, never flustered.

And, you know, leaders, we want to think we need to set a good example and not portray or model things that are not right to others. But actually, God knows that we're all weak and frail.

[8 : 57] He doesn't need us to shush our thoughts and feelings or to pretend that our life, our inner life, is not in turmoil. I mean, who are we trying to deceive anyway?

Others or God? No. No. No. God knows what's going on. And he's allowed us, he's allowed this psalmist, to express those thoughts and honesty, crying out to him to help.

But, of course, the psalm doesn't end here, does it? Because God doesn't leave us, in verse 9. It's one thing to admit our thoughts and emotions.

It's another then to allow it to endure as the reality, as the dominant interpretation of what's going on in our lives. And so what we get then in the psalm is the turning point in verse 10.

So, look with me, because verse 10 begins with three words. Then I thought. And what's occurred here is that, inspired by God, the psalmist comes to an important realization.

[10 : 08] And so he consciously and deliberately turns his mind to focus on something more concrete than the doubts his questions have thrown up.

He's disciplining his mind to counter those feelings. Now, you have to think, you have to ask, is there truth in our feelings and emotions?

That is, are the fears and doubts that arise from our distress, well, in most cases, they are. You know, we cannot deny the reality of our feelings and thoughts.

And very often, they arise because we're afraid of what might happen in the future. You know, we're already suffering, but what if there's more pain? What if things are going to get worse? But what the psalmist is teaching us, verse 10, is that valid those feelings and thoughts are, there is a way to redirect our thoughts and our mind to remind ourselves of something greater, a truth and a reality that's bigger than our felt experiences.

And it's a discipline that we can actually train ourselves to do. You can call it girding the loins of our minds, if you like. But the more we practice this, the more it becomes habit.

[11 : 34] So that, although we can still experience what we go through in verse 1 to 9, the time we spend there could be reduced or minimized because we arrive more quickly at verse 10.

And I know that for some of us, our struggle with mental health, like depression and anxiety, is real. And we find it hard, don't we, when we are stuck in it, to shake off those negative thoughts.

We feel helpless to escape them. And yes, you know, going to see a doctor or a counselor or a psychologist, getting some medication, those are helpful. Those can be helpful to treat the symptoms.

But in the long run, we need something more than that, don't we? We can't just rely on treating the symptoms when we ought to be getting to the root cause.

What we're given then here is a way to train our mind to be resilient. It's not just mental exercises, you know, just think positively, that kind of stuff.

[12 : 42] But rather, as we look further on in verse 10 onwards, what it does is, what the psalmist does, is it focuses his thoughts on foundational truths that he can ground himself in.

And these truths are about ultimately who God is and what he's done. And so, the psalmist now thinks to himself, to this I will appeal.

He's telling himself, it's a sort of self-talk, to this I will appeal, the years when the Most High stretch out his right hand. I will remember the deeds of the Lord. Yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.

I will consider all your works and meditate on all your mighty things. Back in verse 4, the psalmist had previously considered the past and grew faint because what he was doing was comparing the past when God acted to the present when he thinks that God hasn't acted.

But this time, however, as he goes back into the past, there is no mention of his present situation. Instead, what he remembers is God's mighty acts of the past so as to remind himself of God's character.

[13 : 53] So verse 13, your ways, God, are holy. What God is as great as our God? You are the God who performs miracles. You display your power among the peoples.

With your mighty arm you redeem your people, the descendants of Jacob. God's ways show who he is. He's holy and great. And the psalmist here doesn't compare with the past, the past with the present, but instead compares God with other so-called gods and says, who else is like you?

And the answer, of course, is no one. But even more than that, God's greatness is directed towards saving his people and redeeming them from slavery.

Now the word here, redeeming, is significant because it's a reference to a specific event in Israel's history. God's redemption of Israel when he freed them from slavery in Egypt.

this was the great work and miracle that the psalmist is recalling. It was so great that it was displayed among the peoples, he said. Not just Pharaoh and Egypt, but everyone, all the nations in Canaan and beyond.

[15 : 06] And why this reference to Jacob and Joseph? Well, because it is to them that God had promised at the end of Genesis that he would one day bring them out and deliver them out of Egypt back into the promised land.

And all this, even though they had to wait for hundreds of years. And so implicitly, the psalmist has answered his own earlier question, hasn't he? Is God going to forsake him forever?

No. It may feel that way, but if Israel had to wait hundreds of years to be free, then God hasn't forgotten his promises. Even though it may feel like that because the wait is long.

Well, finally, in verse 16, the psalmist zooms in on one specific event in the Great Redemption, that is the parting of the Red Sea. So he writes, The water saw you, God.

The water saw you and writhed. The very depths were convulsed. The clouds poured down water. The heavens resounded with thunder. Your arrows flashed back and forth. The thunder was heard in the whirlwind.

[16:12] Your lightning lit up the world. The earth trembled and quaked. Your path led through the sea. Your way through the mighty water, though your footprints were not seen.

You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses. Now, what comes across first is God's mastery over nature.

It was God's command that parted the Red Sea. It was this great miracle that allowed Israel to pass through safely even though these very same waters then float back to drown the feral.

And as the psalmist describes it, nature itself belongs to God. The thunder, the lightning, these are God's own arrows. The waters themselves saw God and obeyed His command.

But imagine that in the midst of this terrifying and awesome scene, what happens is that the people experience a sort of calm, don't they, as they walk through the parted sea.

[17:24] On both sides there are huge walls of water, right? Convulsing, writhing, lightning and thunder all around, and yet through it God creates a secure path of salvation, which they walked through.

God Himself, it says here, leads His flock by hand to be free at last. God was there with them in the midst of the turmoil, shepherding His people.

And here, I think, is the key insight for me. God was with them even though He cannot be seen. So yes, in verse 16, the waters saw God, but in verse 19, God was leading them through the sea even though His footprints were not seen.

What a comforting thought for the psalmist when he realized this, because in his own experience of trouble and distress, he is now assured that even though he cannot see or hear God, God's love has not failed him.

God has not forgotten to be merciful. God's silence does not mean He's not there. How did the people know God was there with them?

[18:46] Well, in the person of Moses and Aaron, who led them by hand. These were the human shepherd that God appointed so that they could see and follow.

And that's the same for us, isn't it? except we have someone greater than Moses. The other reading in Hebrews chapter 3 tells us that. It's on the slide.

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful.

Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything.

Moses was faithful as a servant in all of God's house, bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. But Christ is faithful as the son over God's house, and we are his house, if indeed we hold firm to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

[19:58] So for the psalmist, in his time of trouble, what he did was look back to the exodus, to be assured of God's love for his people. For us, when we are in trouble, what we need to look back to is the cross of Jesus, to remember that it is Jesus that God has appointed to lead us by hand, to redeem us and shepherd us out of sin and death.

Our thoughts on Jesus is what the Hebrew writer says. Remember with whom you share your heavenly calling. Hold firmly to our confidence and the hope of glory.

Brothers and sisters, when we face troubles in life, I know that the most, almost the most urgent thing we want to know most of the time is answers and solutions to overcome the problem that we're facing, isn't it?

And our search for answers can sometimes be all-consuming. But the psalmist learned and is teaching us that there are times when and then focused on the truth about God and what he's done.

And so for us, that's the same thing, isn't it? When we pray and ask, it may be that things may not change. But what can change is our knowledge of what is the truth and what is the reality.

[21:42] Our assurance that no, God has not forgotten us and his anger is not against us. And what the psalmist trains us to do is to step back, isn't it?

Because we often zoom in on just that narrow period of our lives and the troubles that we have are even narrower still. But if we zoom out into what God has done across history, then we can see that God has already rescued his people.

And that if you're in Christ, you are among those people. And that means you already have a sure hope of glory. And with that certainty of deliverance.

And so relief to your specific problem may not come immediately, but know that God has redeemed his people. And that thought, that truth, ought to give us strength to keep going, to hang in there and persevere and wait for the time of glory.

So let me encourage you, if you're going through a hard time, don't let the thought of worst case scenarios debilitate or frighten you. Instead, train your mind to refocus on who God is and what he's done.

[22 : 57] And remember that even if he may be silent about your circumstance, it doesn't mean that he's not with you. In fact, he is with you.

God has already revealed himself to us in his son. He's redeemed us in his son. We're being led out of sin and death by the death of his son.

And right now, by his spirit's son, by his son's spirit, he is present with us. Let's pray. Father, strengthen and comfort those of us who are going through difficult and distressing times.

even as we cry out to you, help us not to be overwhelmed by thoughts of being forsaken or forgotten. Help us to keep our thoughts on Jesus, to remember your mighty hand of salvation through him.

Gird up the loins of our minds so that we may trust in you, even though we may not see you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.