

Psalm 77 “A God for Sleepless Nights and Speechless Days”

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Date: 02 July 2023

Preacher: Will Spink

[0 : 01] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us. As Derek mentioned earlier, we are talking about a psalm of lament this morning.

Psalms of lament are actually the most common type of psalm in the hymn book of God's people. About 40% of all the songs he gives us.

I noticed reading through the psalms this time in our reading plan, it just felt to me like every page I turned, the psalmist was being attacked by his enemies or oppressors.

He was discouraged, again, page after page, chapter after chapter. And these are psalms that put into the mouths of God's people singing to him, praying to him words of distress, of depression, of despair.

They're put into our mouths because sometimes we are so overwhelmed that we have no words. We will read today of feeling so troubled you cannot speak.

[1 : 18] While God is holding your eyes open so that you also can't sleep. And some of you know right now about sleepless nights and speechless days that are in the title of this sermon.

I suspect if we're really honest that most of us, including me, would be uncomfortable with our worship services being that full of lamentation.

Of crying out to God and hurting and mourning. There is more than one different psalm of lament for every Sunday of the year.

Can you imagine if that was over and over and over what we would sing? But remember, we're in the psalms to ask God to shape our hearts in relationship with him.

So perhaps where our hearts are most uncomfortable, we most need his help. Let's read Psalm 77 together and then ask Holy Spirit to shape our hearts according to God's holy word.

[2 : 28] Rather than our own selfish comforts. Psalm 77. 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. When I remember God, I moan.

When I meditate, my spirit faints. You hold my eyelids open. I am so troubled that 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.

[3 : 35] 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. You with your arm redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph.

When the water saw you, O God, when the water 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 : 37] God, we give you thanks for your word. God, we acknowledge how deeply we resonate with some of the feelings and experiences that we just read.

And so we ask for your help. That we not just understand, but that our hearts are truly shaped by what you would have us to hear and to feel.

And to speak to you. Speak to us and for your hearts to speak to you also this morning. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. If you asked me when I was a kid what emojis should most be used to depict the life of a Christian, I would have asked you what an emoji was.

But then, after understanding what you meant, I would have certainly chosen the big smiley faces. Yes, probably especially the one on the end.

That's what it means to be walking with God. Now that I've lived a few more years and read a few more psalms, I realize how appropriate others can be.

[6 : 00] This one, or even this one, or my favorite. That one, which means I am so confused.

I don't know what's going on, but it is out of my control. And I don't even know how I feel right now. It's a favorite of my grace group when I ask them to give us an update on how their week has gone through sending an emoji to the group.

Aren't you sad you're not in my group? Yes, it's true that there is always a joyful hope for those who know Jesus.

But these painful emotions are part and parcel of life in relationship with God. And he wants to hear them. I mean, think about the history of God's people.

For generations and generations, they were in bondage in Egypt. Seemingly neglected by a God of big promises. But they're slaving away and they're getting nowhere.

[7 : 04] Even after God delivers them, that very generation ends up wandering around in the wilderness for 40 years. Not too long after they get settled with some happy days in the promised land, God's people are exiled.

Not too long after he brings them back from exile, they end up waiting silently for generations and generations. With no word from any prophet, where is God until John and then Jesus finally show up?

Jesus and the New Testament writers tell Christians that suffering is not abnormal. In fact, we should expect persecution, they say. God's people are a lamenting people.

Maybe now we can understand a little better why so many of the hymns of God's people are laments. God's people ought to lament.

God says his people should cry to him when they're hurting, afraid, discouraged, despairing. In fact, we should do it often.

[8 : 21] It's repeated there in verse 1 by Asaph. I cry aloud. Allowed to God. All night praying over and over.

Hands outstretched. Begging loudly for help. But isn't that a little inappropriate? Won't God wait until we speak in a more put-together manner?

Theologically rich with a very polished tone? Wouldn't he prefer that? That's not what Asaph says. God hears these cries.

That's not what Jesus did. Hebrews chapter 5. In the days of his flesh, when Jesus was here experiencing life on this earth, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death.

And he was heard because of his reverence as he cried out and wept tears. It is reverent to run desperate to one who can help.

[9 : 36] It's the proper response of a hurting child to cry out for a helpful parent. It is the right way for Christians to handle our pains.

To cry loud to God. I mean, after all, what kind of relationship do you have with someone? If you only tell them about your good days and your happy feelings?

The laments of Scripture are calling you to be honest about your heart. It's not only that you experience hard things, but you must also express the full range of emotions.

I don't have to tell you that life is hard. Just in the last few days, you have shared with me things like overwhelming family drama, chronic pain that is wearing you down, defeat in battles with sin, heartbreak over adult children, slow progress by the church in reaching our neighbors.

We lament school shootings and social injustice and poverty and persecution of God's people around the world. And God calls us to express the emotions we feel in such heart-wrenching circumstances.

[11 : 09] And there are many, many others just in this room. To whom do we express them? Where do we go with such feelings?

To him. Don't miss this. I cry aloud to God. In the day of my trouble, I seek the Lord. See, lament is a part of worship.

It's a part of, that's the way you relate to God. You know, a relationship of worship with him. Because lament demonstrates faith in and dependence on God.

It's pleading for help from a God who is sovereign and faithful. It's crying out against injustice to a God who has promised to bring justice.

It's bringing our weariness in struggle to a God who offers peace and rest. That's why a vital part of lament is talking to God himself about who he is, what he has promised, and how he has acted in times past.

[12 : 21] Is that where you go? When life falls apart? When it just feels like too much? Do you go to God?

Sometimes I do. Sometimes I look to myself and work harder to make things work the way I want them to.

Sometimes I look to another area of life where I can feel some more positive inputs and ignore the hard places. Sometimes I seek to escape the hard things.

Just avoid them altogether. Some ways that are healthier than others, but I just want to get away from them. Anyone else? In the day of my trouble, I seek the Lord.

Listen, I want to make sure you hear this. This is more than permission for the weak who just can't handle it sometimes.

[13 : 28] They're just not strong enough. No, no, no. This is instruction to all of our hearts to relate to our God this way.

Faithfully relying on him to be strong enough and to be our only hope. Cry aloud to God. And by the way, when someone is bemoaning things to you, listen.

Listen patiently to them, right? And ask if they've told God what they're processing with you.

How are you talking with God about that? How could I be asking God to help with what you are sharing? Biblical lament teaches us that God's people must cry at times in a world that is not our home.

And we must cry to Him. Anne Steele wrote in her hymn, Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul. By the way, please sing some of the hymns from this service, from the meditation through the end.

[14 : 44] If you're hurting her, great lyrics of lament in the Psalms and in the hymns of God's people through the ages. Anne Steele wrote, Hast thou not bid me seek thy face?

And shall I seek in vain? And can the ear of sovereign grace be deaf when I complain? No! Still the ear of sovereign grace attends the mourner's prayer.

Oh, may I ever find access to breathe my sorrows there. If you've never cried out to God, come.

Let Him be your refuge. He longs for that. If you've often cried out to God, come again. He never tires of being your refuge.

Puritan Thomas Brooks had seen God meet him in dark places and he wrote, Oh, despairing souls, you see that others whose conditions have been as bad, if not worse than yours, have obtained mercy.

[15 : 53] God hath turned their hell into heaven. He hath remembered them in their lowest state. He hath pacified their raging consciences and quieted their distracted souls. He hath wiped all tears from their eyes.

And he hath been a wellspring of life unto their hearts. Therefore, be not discouraged, oh, despairing souls, but look up to the mercy seat.

That's good advice. Look up to the mercy seat. But, let's make sure we don't think crying out to God is a quick fix solution to our troubles.

Making the pain go away is not the purpose of lament. Lament. This is, frankly, where Psalm 77 gets even more disturbing.

But, I think also more helpful and hopeful. The psalmist is doing all the right things, it seems. And yet, his soul refuses to be comforted.

[17 : 09] Verse 2. In fact, he does what we just talked about last week. He remembers God, and yet, what happens? He moans.

God may be meeting others, Thomas Brooks, but I don't feel him showing up for me, so the fact that he's showing up for others just frustrates me even more. Now I'm angry.

Now I'm confused why he's not showing up when I cry. Why? The psalmist meditates. That's what Psalm 1 told us to do, right?

He remembers the good days, the times he could sing in the dark night of the soul, but that only seems to remind him that God hasn't been giving him a song like that lately, the way that he did back then.

And so he meditates more on God himself, and yet, his spirit faints. Maybe you're saying, Will, I'm one week into the Psalm 119 challenge you gave us, and I don't feel different.

[18 : 23] Something must be wrong with me, or it's wrong with God. I'm just more disheartened than when I came last Sunday. Why? Great British preacher of the 1800s, Charles Spurgeon, knew the feeling all too well.

Like many famous Christians, he battled persistent depression. He relates to verse 4 of this psalm, No respite has been afforded us by the silence of the night.

Our bed has been a rack to us. Our body has been in torment and our spirit in anguish. Have you been there? God, I just want to go to sleep.

And it seems God is keeping you awake. Sometimes when it's really dark, thinking on God actually intensifies the pain, doesn't it? Going to God is not some magic eraser of bad feelings.

Many of you know that. I talked with a guy recently who grew up in church, but he's struggling after decades of feeling that God doesn't respond to him the way he seems to respond to all of his friends.

[19 : 45] It seems to him after all this time, the best path forward is to lower his expectations, quit talking to God altogether so that he doesn't feel the pain of the disappointment or the pretending.

He wonders if a God who hears prayers doesn't hear his. Such a tough place to be, right? I told him without sarcasm, it sounded like he could write a psalm.

Those are the kinds of questions that Asaph starts asking about God. Look how they pile up in verses 7-9. Will the Lord spurn forever?

Will he 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? Asaph has been where my friend is. Some of us have asked some of those questions, haven't we?

[20 : 52] These are genuine questions. They're expressing real doubts. Aren't you glad you can take your real doubts to God that he actually wants you to sing them and say them to him?

But they're also questions that point to their own answers. If God is by nature favorable in pouring out grace, then he will be again, right?

Steadfast love by definition is love that does not cease. Promises are kept by God. They don't end. So no way is he out of grace or compassion, but it surely does feel like it sometimes.

That's what the psalmist is saying. When you're seeking diligently and not finding an answer, it feels like those things are happening. I tell you this because it's really important that we realize that lament is not a formula to get something transactionally or automatically or immediately out of God.

Best I can tell in this psalm, and I wrestled hard trying to see if I was missing something, when things start to turn more hopeful for the psalmist, there are only very, very slight changes to what he is doing.

[22 : 29] I don't know the length of time Asaph spent stuck in verses 1-9, but I know for Israel at times it was generations long.

Why does it take so long for God to change the way the psalmist feels? Why so many sleepless nights before finding rest?

Why so many doubts before faith is strengthened? It doesn't say. The picture the song paints for us, though, is Asaph continuing to lament.

Biblically, he keeps crying honestly to God, remembering who God is, what he has promised, and how he has been faithful. The biblical lament is needful for relating to the biblical God.

Asaph does it again. Verse 10, appealing to God's powerful actions in history. Verse 11, remembering God's deeds. Verse 12, meditating on God's mighty deliverance.

[23 : 41] He's doing it again. You hear it? And this time, his heart begins to worship. To worship the great and holy and incomparable God who redeems his people.

Interestingly, Asaph doesn't look back to an event that was, in his own experience, something that he lived through. That can help sometimes, but Asaph, generations later, meditates back on God's foundational act of gracious deliverance of his people in the exodus from Egypt.

That's what this whole second half of the psalm is meditating on. Do you remember what develops not far from Egypt as they've come out? God's people quickly become very fearful and very discouraged.

They were stuck between an advancing Egyptian army whose power and terror had ruled their hearts for generations. They're rushing after them and on the other side is a raging red sea, the epitome of chaos and uncontrollable danger.

You want to talk about a dark night of the soul. They felt it and Moses heard about it. Why in the world had God brought them out of Egypt just to be taken right back?

[25 : 07] Or worse, why would he think of making them feel like they were special to him when they're about to run off a cliff into the tumultuous sea? Is this Yahweh worth following if this is what life with him is like?

We're just getting started. And the psalmist depicts a storm way worse than an Alabama summer thunderstorm.

The whole earth shook. And you know what happens. God parts the Red Sea. Moses and Aaron lead God's people through the sea on dry ground.

The waves crash on the Egyptians and Moses and Miriam lead God's people in songs of celebration of their mighty God that sound like some of this psalm. There may have been, I suspect there was, a more direct and brighter and easier path to the promised land from Egypt.

But there wasn't one that would have helped God's people know him and his power and his faithfulness to his promises better than the path through the sea.

[26 : 27] God's people are going to be. Listen, lament is not the only way that we talk to God. Aren't you thankful for that? But it is a way that we must talk to the God who delivers not just in but through darkness.

If God's way of redemption was through the sea, then those delivered would be those who lamented all the way to their deliverance. Do you see that? There was not going to be a moment they weren't lamenting until they were brought all the way through.

If they had looked for a quick fix solution, they weren't getting it, but they did get a faithful God. If they had gone back to Egypt in order to miss that awful dark night of the soul, they would have missed the light of God who delivered through the sea, wouldn't they?

Some of you, most of your words right now are lament. You can't find a lot of other ones. If the words of your heart are mostly lament, you may be close to deliverance and you are most likely very close to God.

Don't lose heart, brothers and sisters who are hurting. off-despairing William Cooper wrote in his song, God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.

[28 : 03] He plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm. See, it wasn't just in the exodus that God delivered through darkness, was it?

God of the God of the Red Sea is the God of the cross. When darkness covered the earth in the middle of the day, when the whole earth shook again, when the storm of God's wrath poured down upon his son, Jesus cried out in lamentation, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And his disciples thought, no, no, no, this shouldn't happen. Why another false hope after we've waited so long?

Is this Jesus worth following if this is what life with him is like? right when you think that light is covered by darkness, the light of the world is delivering you from your darkness into his marvelous light.

Oh, followers of Jesus, he is worth following. In fact, right now, he's making the greatest statement ever of his love for you, of his provision for you, of his meeting you in your darkest moment at your deepest need.

[29 : 36] What's the point of this? Please don't miss this, especially if today you are hurting or you're confused or you're feeling abandoned by a God you are not even sure exists.

Being confused by God does not mean that you're not also being rescued by God. Double negative, I'm going to say it again. Being confused by God does not mean that you're not also being rescued by God.

Pastor Dane Ortlund says it this way, in the Old Testament, his way was through the sea. In the New Testament, his way is through the cross. The gracious provision of God confounds us even as it delivers us.

If you're hearing that truth about God today, remembering his way is through the sea can give you hope when those hard times and those negative feelings persist, when those sleepless nights and those speechless days seem to pile up and you don't know how to make them stop, you can actually enjoy a completely honest, desperately dependent, at the same time truly worshipful relationship with God right there where you are.

you don't even have to turn your frown upside down first. You can cry out to God again today. If you don't have your own words, he understands and you can, like Jesus on the cross, borrow the lament of the psalmist.

[31 : 14] And when you do that, you can know that as far as you feel from God in that moment, you are relating closely.

He is with you. The God who always hears, always has compassion, always delivers, he is with you.

I want us to lament together now because for many of us, this is unfamiliar. It's so unfamiliar we don't know what to say.

When I say, hey, you can go home and lament to God today. And for others of us, it's so familiar we can't say anything else and if we don't lament, we're not going to be able to talk to God. I'm going to lead us in prayer, but I'm going to leave some time for you to pray as well, more than once.

And then the worship team will start leading us in a song of lament that is a prayer that begins in despair and ends in trust of a God who delivers through darkness.

[32 : 23] you can join in with that song on the last couple verses or whenever your heart is ready to do that. But make it part of your prayer as we experience that lament is something God gives us in relationship with Him.

It's right, it's good, it's needed for our hearts. When we're together and on our own, we join me as we go to God in prayer. Our Father in heaven, we cry out to you this morning.

We look around us and if we're honest, we wonder sometimes what you're up to in this world. In many ways, it does not appear to us that your kingdom is coming on earth as it is in heaven.

all around us, a human life created in your image to reflect your image. It's being devalued and discarded at every stage, young and old.

How long, oh God, will we hear of school shootings? Where is your peace? As wars rage, have you turned a blind eye to the suffering of the weak, the oppressed, the orphans and the refugees?

[33 : 43] Repeatedly in our own country, the marginalized seem to be pushed further out, not welcomed in to be valued and cared for and learned from.

So hear us, Father, as we lament over the world we live in. And Father, we acknowledge the problems of the world are all too present among your people.

We grieve abusive leadership. We mourn for its victims. We grieve absent shepherds and neglected sheep.

We confess to you that our churches more often seem to reflect the divisions of the world around us than we do work together for the sake of your kingdom on the same team.

Help us, Holy Spirit. But even when we don't struggle in these ways, all over the world your people are being persecuted for following you.

[34 : 53] Killed for their faith at rates never before seen. Have you forgotten your people whom you called by your name? Will you not come to their rescue?

Oh, God, be their shield and defender. Hear us, Father, as we lament for your people. Finally, Father, we bemoan the struggles of our own hearts and lives in relationship with you.

Grief and loss and heartache and depression and anxiety and fear, they often drive us away from you instead of to you. Father, I admit it doesn't take a crisis to see my my life, neglecting your word, prayer, the God in whom our souls are to delight because we're addicted to devices and substances and ourselves.

We chase pleasure instead of chasing people who need your hope. Sometimes it's none of these particular things going on, but just no matter what we try, you feel distant.

And we have been there and felt that and wonder if we'll never smile and laugh and rejoice again, if we'll never love one another well, if we'll never live with zeal for you as we once did.

[36 : 27] Oh, Jesus, you sympathize with our weaknesses. Thank you. Draw near to us again. Help us to draw near to you.

Hear us, Father, as we lament our own struggles. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.