

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Psalms		Pastor/Teacher
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WITH FOOTPRINTS UNSEEN

Psalm 77 wrestles with the fact of God's invisibility in a fallen world. This psalm will feel familiar because we have already studied Psalm 73, which is another Psalm of Asaph in intense agony. This shows us that just because Asaph did reach several important insights in Psalm 73 and strengthened his faith, his doubts and frustrations did not simply vanish all at once. He still had a long way to go, as we all do. We see here in Psalm 77 another stage of growth in the life of faith, continuing to strive with God in worship while he seems distant and uncaring.

1. Sleepless torment (Verses 1-6)

- a. Much like Psalm 73, Asaph begins with an expression of clear confidence in God's faithfulness. "I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me." This sets the theme of the whole rest of the psalm.
 - i. The psalmist is in deep anguish of soul; the repetition here implies he is crying out repeatedly, over days, weeks, perhaps even months or years of suffering.
 - ii. Also like in Psalm 73, Asaph's brief statement of faith is important here because it frames the difficult questions he is going to ask in just a few verses. The psalmist is not seeking to accuse God; he is expressing genuine doubts that it would be much worse to suppress.
 - iii. But also notice what he *doesn't say*. Asaph says "he will hear me," not necessarily "he will answer me." The psalmist *knows* that God listens, but he does not necessarily expect to receive a direct answer. This foreshadows the psalm's conclusion.
- b. Verses 2-4 describe the psalmist's pain in excruciating detail so that you can vividly picture his posture.
 - i. He cries out through the night with his hands raised, unable to sleep and unable to really articulate his prayers.¹ Instead he moans outwardly, with his spirit fainting within him. Asaph even goes so far as to say it feels as though God himself is exacerbating his pain when he writes, "You hold my eyelids open" in verse 4.
 - ii. The last phrase of verse 2 is reminiscent of Jacob's attitude after hearing Joseph was likely dead.² We know even less about what caused Asaph's grief in this instance than we did with psalm 73, but it was something extreme if he uses this kind of language.

¹ At this time people almost always prayed out loud, so being unable to speak means being unable to pray in the manner to which he was accustomed.

² "All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, 'No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.' Thus his father wept for him." - Genesis 37:35

- iii. It's important that, as much pain as he is in, the psalmist does not cease to cry out to God. He has retained the lesson he learned in Psalm 73, so he knows there is nowhere else to turn for help.³
- c. In verses 5-6 the psalmist begins to turn away from his present suffering to the past mercies of God to his people.
 - i. It is absolutely necessary to realize that when you are closest to despair, looking to yourself and our own experiences will not deliver you. If your assurance of salvation is built only or primarily on events in your life, all of these will seem dubious in your darkest hours. If you are having truly miserable experiences in the present, it is easy to doubt whether you are *really* remembering or interpreting your past correctly. Was I just excited back then because I wanted it to be true? One of the great mistakes of American evangelicalism is that it relies so heavily on people telling compelling conversion stories. The only dependable foundation of faith is outside of ourselves, namely what God has revealed publicly in his Word.
 - ii. Developing a strong faith on this foundation seems very simple, but it is not at all easy. The psalmist shows us this by repeatedly, almost redundantly describing his contemplation on God's past works of salvation. He *considers*, he *remembers*, he *meditates*, he makes a *diligent search*. To really lift our spirits up from the misery that surrounds us to remember God's grace is such difficult labor for us because we are fleshly creatures, fixated on the things of this world. Praise God that we have the Holy Spirit to drive us to spiritual remembrance when we are most in need!⁴

2. Piercing questions (Verses 7-13)

- a. In this section we see more clearly why it was so difficult for him to focus on the objective works of God over his own subjective experiences.
 - i. At first, when he turns his thoughts to "the days of old" it only reminds him of God's wonderful covenant promises, which seem to have utterly failed.⁵ Realizing that Israel as a whole, and he as an individual, are sinners unworthy of God's generosity, Asaph is at first even more discouraged.
 - ii. Therefore he asks these pointed questions: "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?" In other words, have we gone too far and the Lord is through with us? Is there only God's just wrath left for Israel?
 - iii. Our takeaway from this is God encourages us, through the inspiration of this painful psalm, to express our doubts and fears to him in worship. Merely suppressing these kinds of thoughts because they feel impious is foolish. The Lord knows your heart, so there is no point at all to hiding these kinds of questions.
 - iv. This also shows an important reason why regularly singing the psalms in corporate worship is so valuable. Even the best hymn-writers have rarely felt so bold as to ask these kinds of penetrating questions, but the Lord wants us to be honest.

³ "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you." - Psalm 73:25

⁴ Consider how Christ promises the Spirit will come as a Comforter to his disciples and all who follow them: "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." - John 14:26-27

⁵ He is likely thinking here of the blessings promised for obedience to the Law of Moses in passages like Deuteronomy 28:1-14.

- b. Thankfully, the rhetorical questions of verses 7-9 are not the end of his reflections. Verses 10-12 represent Asaph's second wave of attempts, as it were, to lift his soul up from his present misery to contemplate the mighty works of God.
- i. Much like 7-9, 10-12 features a variety of similar phrases that feel redundant, to emphasize he had to keep coming back to this again and again, when he did not feel like it at all. "I will *appeal*," "I will *remember*," "I will *ponder*," "and *meditate* on your mighty deeds." Remembering and reflecting on the mighty deeds of God are the premier fuel for the faith of all true believers, both under the old and new covenants.
 - ii. The wording of verse 10 is infamously difficult to interpret. The second Hebrew word in the verse, translated by the ESV as "I will appeal to," could also be reasonably translated "This pierces me," which many good commentators prefer.
 1. In that case the meaning of the verse would be that reflecting on God's works actually wounds Asaph's soul, at least at first, which I think fits this part of the psalm very well. He has not yet come to the full confidence he will express in the second half of the psalm.
 2. The phrase, "the years of the right hand" refers to the era of Israel's history in which God was displaying his power most overtly and publicly. Verses 16 and 19 will show that he has the Exodus specifically in mind here.
 - iii. Pentecostal Christians today often forget that, even within biblical history, the periods of much greater, more overt miracles were not the norm. Whenever God took a decisive new step in the redemption of his people, it would be attended by awesome, public miracles like the plagues, the fall of Jericho's walls, the cloud covering the Temple, etc. But then there would also be long "dry spells," as it were, where the people of God relied on the ordinary routine of prayers, public reading of the Word, festivals, and sacrifices to maintain their sense of connection with God.
- c. In verse 13, Asaph raises a new question to indirectly answer his previous questions. He still does not know exactly when God will return mercy to Israel, but he does know God's *character*. The God of Israel is "holy," which is the root of Israel's blessings and curses. He is utterly unlike any of the pagan deities that surround Israel, in terms of his absolute perfection (which means demanding perfect righteousness) and his overflowing generosity.

3. Invisible answers (Verses 14-20)

- a. In verse 14 Asaph finally begins to answer his questions, in reverse order. He answers the question of verse 13 by steering his soul to consider how God has publicly shown his holiness, which makes him greater than all foreign gods. Even the pagan nations have, at various times, acknowledged the unmatched power of Israel's God in response to his glorious victories.⁶
- b. Verses 16-18 may seem very strange to us because we can see no reason for natural elements like the waters and the earth to be afraid of their creator. Furthermore this

⁶ The most relevant example here would be how news of the Red Sea crossing spread even to Jericho, so that Rahab said to the spies, "I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction." - Joshua 2:9-10

section seems to combine references to the crossing of the Red Sea with Noah's Flood in a very short space.

- i. I think the explanation is actually fairly simple, based on the context: Asaph is meditating on a combination of several of God's most impressive displays of power in redemptive history up to that point to show the God of Israel is greater than all foreign deities. This fits well with everything he has said in the previous verses.
 - ii. In ancient pagan religions, particularly those in the Middle-east, it was very common to portray the gods as fighting natural forces such as great sea monsters. They would have dramatic battles to overcome an enemy and then create or establish new order in the world. These stories were certainly gripping to listen to, and also explained why so much chaos remained in the world: these gods were not all-powerful, so it took a lot of time and effort for them to impose any order on the world.
 - iii. Much of Israel's poetry invites a contrast with those gods by showing there is simply no contest because the true Creator and his creations. God doesn't really do battle with the seas or the earth. The world is his work, so he does not fear it; it trembles before *him*.
 - iv. The crossing of the Red Sea and Noah's Flood have one other key feature in common: in each case, God saved his own people at the same time that he judged others. He drowned the Egyptians with the same water that Israel passed through. He shielded Noah and his family from the Flood that wiped out the rest of humanity.
 - v. So together, these events show that (1 God does not lack the power to save his people, (2 God will not allow evil against him or his people to go unpunished, and 3) God will always save some of his choosing from his own wrath.
 - vi. These three facts together are what encourages Asaph and answers his anxious questions from earlier. If God has done this much to save his people, he will not stop there. He will not abandon them to the predations of this fallen world, either of the hostile nations around Israel, his people's own sin, or the devil himself.
- c. Pay special attention to how exactly God leads his people, according to verses 19-20. Although the Israelites saw the *effects* of God's power, and the path he carved for them through the Sea, they never saw him at any time. Instead, God gave them Moses and Aaron to focus on as his agents, his mediators between the holy God and his sinful people. He also instituted the feasts of the Jewish calendar in order to regularly remind them in an especially vivid way of all that he did for them in the Exodus.⁷
4. Conclusion: This all leads to a very important point every Christian needs to write on his heart: just because God *feels* far from you does not mean he has left you. Just because he does not answer you out loud does not mean he refuses to hear your prayers.⁸ He does not normally communicate to his people through new revelations or ecstatic experiences. Instead he quietly and invisibly leads them through his appointed man. For us, that man is Christ, a better prophet than Moses and a better priest than Aaron.

⁷ For the Passover, the Jews were supposed to actually recreate a lot of the conditions of the night they left Egypt: "In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD's Passover" (Exodus 12:11). The Feast of Booths was similarly designed to recreate the conditions of the Exodus, this time of the wilderness wanderings: "You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 23:42-43).

⁸ Notice again how Asaph does not say God will answer him, in verse 1.

- a. Although Christ has ascended to the heavens and is therefore also invisible to us right now, God has given us sensible means by which to hear and, as it were, touch and taste his steadfast love in all kinds of tribulations. The Lord's Supper in particular calls on us to do exactly what this psalmist did on his darkest days: remember God's amazing work of salvation. Like the Jewish festivals, the Supper forces us (unless we lack all faith) to bring the critical moments of our redemption to mind.
- b. Christ's death for your sake is not a memory or an experience you have, which is subject to interpretation and could have had many causes. Your experience of the Christian life will rise and fall, at times more full of joy and peace, at times more doubtful and confused. But Christ's death is a historical event that cannot be undone, and God has interpreted it for us in his Scriptures. He tells us today that the death of his Son provided a substitute for his people's sins and saved them from his own wrath.
- c. Paul follows the same logic as Asaph in Psalm 77, when he writes, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"⁹ If you apply yourself to reflecting on God's glorious work of salvation for your sake, you will grow in the confidence of faith. Your faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, is surely more authentic and trustworthy than all your fears and doubts.

⁹ Romans 8:31-32.