

7/23/23 - Psalm 77 - "God's Word Guiding a Humble Heart"

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Date: 23 July 2023

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[0 : 00] We're going to be reading from Psalm 77 today. 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.

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?

[1 : 04] 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 all 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.

[2 : 06] Yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. Amen. That is God's word.

It's great to be gathered back with you here this morning. Just a couple things went a little wacky since I've been gone. The microphone was broke and scratch on the floor.

But hey, the building's still up, so we're good to go. But it's great to be back. It's been a good rest for our family. It's been a great time to catch up on some reading and things like that for the summer.

So wonderful to be gathered back here. Psalm 77 is such a...

It almost seems like a simple psalm, but the weight and the reality of the issues that it addresses makes it almost embarrassing for us to read and say, it's so simple.

[3 : 15] It's right there. You see, as seasons come and go in the Christian life, we can expect a fluctuation of those high seasons and the low seasons, those seasons where we're on fire for the Lord and nothing can stop us.

And then the fluctuation to the cold seasons. And interestingly enough, it's often the cold seasons that we look and we often look at who we used to be.

We look at... We're in the cold seasons and we're like, man, I remember back in the 90s, I was on fire. I felt like Billy Graham leading the Crusades of who we used to be.

And we inventory our lives to identify what is the variable factor in this plight. Why this cold season? During the season, questions haunt us, don't they?

Has God forgotten me? Has God abandoned me? Or probably worst of all, has God changed His mind about me?

[4 : 3 5] We can certainly expect difficulties in life to hit, but quite often, like a perfect storm, those trials in life often come when we're in those cold seasons.

And things get interesting. What season might you be in today? What season does God have you in? Is it that mountaintop?

You're yodeling from the mountain peak. Glory is God! Or are you in this valley today? Are you on fire for the Lord this morning?

That you're ready to go out? It's even a struggle to sit in these seats because you can't restrain yourself from going and evangelizing the lost outside of this building or maybe you're shivering cold in your seat.

Regardless of the vast range of seasons of life, this psalm is applicable for every season. Whether it's us in our high seasons of being on fire for the Lord, being a season where we take note for the inevitable cold season and cold season to come.

[5 : 5 1] Or it's a call for us to remember when we are in those low seasons, as God is instructing us. This collection of psalms in book 3 of the Psalter, there are five books in categories in the psalms that are broken up.

And we're in book 3 this summer. It's drawing from the well of book 3. And these psalms refer to a dark day in the nation of Israel.

This is when God's people experienced the destruction of the southern kingdom by Babylon and the northern kingdom destruction by the Assyrians.

And so with that, it is a low season for the nation of Israel, and especially being a Levitical priest, Asaph. This psalm particularly was penned by honest Asaph.

I've coined him as that. He might not like that when I see him again one day. But for now, that's his motto. Honest Asaph.

[7 : 0 4] He's a man who's not afraid to honestly work through his doubts in the cold season. Even being a Levitical priest, he wasn't afraid to work through his doubts.

And many of us, I think, struggle to find the strength to be honest with God. Truly honest, even with one another.

Because this type of honesty, even for me, is difficult to fathom at times. And we often avoid this sense of honesty like the plague. And so we try to put on this happy face.

Les up there is telling us to smile and see our teeth. And we're just like, I'm not going to show you my teeth, Les. Mm-mm. Not today. If you don't know what I'm talking about, maybe he'll do it next week for you.

But this type of honesty, of being in a cold season, where the fire of the Lord in your life is far from being felt.

[8 : 0 9] You kind of resort to faking it till you make it. Put a smile on your face until you actually feel it. And you jinx and dupe yourself to actually think that you're happy when you're sad.

But what if I were to propose to you, each and every one of you today and those on the live stream, what if I were to propose to you that an honest heart is the beginning of a spiritually vibrant and sanctified life?

An honest heart being the beginning of a spiritually vibrant and sanctified life. The sermon today is titled, God's Word Guiding a Humble Heart.

And we'll begin this journey with Asaph. We're going to break this psalm literally equally in two. As the first section, we're joining Asaph in his turmoil.

In this cold season, this low season. We're joining Asaph, the author, later to rise in triumph. And so I want to pray as we enter in because this is a serious matter that we all, I believe, struggle with or will struggle with from at one point or another.

[9 : 29] So join me in prayer as we ask the Lord to truly work through the power of his word to speak to us today and to change our hearts and transform us. Let's pray. Lord, we come to you today and we are just looking to you, turning to your word and yielding to you.

And while I am a frail individual, I can't articulate everything perfectly, but Father, your truth is so perfect.

Help us to experience your perfection today through the power of your word.

Feed us, Lord, and guide us. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. So the first section that we have today is the power of a humble heart.

And just as was read just a moment ago, thank you, Bethany, in verse 1, it says, I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me.

[10 : 53] In the day of my trouble, I seek the Lord. In the night, my hand is stretched out without worry. My soul refuses to be comforted.

When I remember God, I moan. When I meditate, my spirit faints. Look at the little indication, Selah, as a moment of rest and reflection.

At this point, we join Asaph there on the floor, surrounded in darkness, nothing making sense. And quite the descriptors.

I cry, I seek, I moan. But what's the basis of these descriptors here? Well, the cries stem from an assurance of being heard.

He says it right there. He will hear me. The seeking is a hope to find light in the darkness. But the moaning, the moaning is directly connected to remembering God.

[12 : 03] In fact, the psalmist spirit faints in verse 3 when he meditates upon the Lord. How is it, church, that a Levitical priest is inflicted with distress when he dwells upon God?

That doesn't make sense. Or in other words, something that ought to bring refreshment to his soul is bringing discouragement.

How could this be? Well, this is a cold season. This is a low season indeed.

And watch the progression. It gets worse. It's as if the Lord is intentionally inflicting this spiritual and emotional distress. Look at me with verse 4. Don't take my word for it.

Look with me. You hold my eyelids open. The Lord is holding his eyelids open. I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

[13 : 11] 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.

Asaph remembers during those mountaintop days, those on fire days, where God's favor was ever so present.

Looking back upon his prayer journals and the praise journals that we have, like Asaph had back then, I trust. Something like that. And seeing those reminders of the past that God was working out for Asaph.

And now the psalmist is living the very reminders that he was making to his future self. And the darkness is consuming.

Can you imagine? Asaph's spiritual and emotional state is in distress by looking back and remembering who Asaph used to be, who God's people used to be.

[14 : 20] And I've got to hand it to you. I've counseled many, even in this room, many Christians outside of this room, whose marriages aren't what they used to be.

Jobs aren't what they used to be. Whose churches aren't what they used to be. And faith not being what it used to be.

Asaph is there looking back at what used to be. His present state of distress develops into six rhetorical questions in verse 6.

The other part of verse 6. His spirit makes a diligent search. And look at this honesty. Verse 7. 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?

[15 : 28] That will leave you for a theological red flag. Has He in anger shut up His compassion? And another, Selah.

A moment of reflection. And at the foundation of all of these questions, if you were to relate what these questions have in common, He is essentially asking the theme, Has God changed?

Church, how many of us would self-shame ourselves for asking such questions? We'd probably expect lightning to hit us on a broad daylight from the Lord Himself for the silliness of those questions.

We might think that we'll be laughed at by our brothers and sisters here in this room. Pastors in the room, you might be doubted for your competency of being able to lead.

But what if the Holy Spirit desires such honest inquiry? What if that's the honesty that the Holy Spirit desires?

[16 : 46] What if the road of revitalization in your walk with God is paved upon the road of honesty? The reality of being honest.

You see, I would argue this Asaph model of honesty is a mark of spiritual maturity. That when we can articulate our doubts or write them out, God's ministering Spirit can begin to guide.

And this falls within sound biblical theology of true biblical strength, which is made perfect in what?

Weakness, church. As these rhetorical questions have their way of answering themselves in the emphatic, no, God has not changed.

There we find the variable factor. And Asaph discovers that he's the one who has changed.

[17 : 59] His flesh has changed. He is the one who has forgotten. And in his doubt is spurning the Lord.

But God has never changed. These honest questions remind Asaph of who God is. And the same remains true for us today, church.

God is unchanging. God is a promise keeper. God is merciful. And to ask if God is any of those things is actually to answer them.

And for that, we uphold the faith that we have in what he says and what he has done. You see, Asaph discovers through honesty that God is not the problem.

In other words, as Asaph meditated upon God to his own shame, he's meditating on the Lord. But what he finds out is that he was only thinking about himself through it all.

[19 : 04] Maybe that's the root of our reluctance, to be honest. That we actually can't bear the thought of dealing with our selfishness.

Church, as the foundation of all relationships is built upon trust in our day, honesty ought to flourish within a trustworthy relationship.

And if that is true for our earthly relationships on this earth, how much more vital this is true for our relationship with God in heaven. You know, I can't help but think of the dark day that Asaph, the author of this psalm, was in, and not think about the last days of Jesus Christ's humanity on this earth.

The same questions are tilled within the soil of our hearts, just as it was for the disciples' heart. Did God lose? Was Jesus of Nazareth a liar?

Has he abandoned us? Death seemed to have won. And for three days, the disciples were in this state, stretching out their arm to God, trusting that it was true.

[20 : 31] And when that tomb closed, it was borrowed for three days. And revival came. The tomb was empty. And it was clear that death had not lost at all during those three days.

Man had forgotten. You see, don't allow the depth of darkness to change our perspective of the depth of God's unchanging nature.

God doesn't change. He's always good. And not a single tragedy, sorrow, hardship, or loss can ever redefine that.

That is good news. And so the shift begins. The variable is identified. And he makes a new appeal, after much reflection in section 2, the Word's power.

We see the power of God's guiding Word. This will lead us all the way to the end. It will be verse 1 through 20.

[21 : 44] And then I said, Asaph says, I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High. Now, I'm always a stickler for calling out the ESV translation for the oddity of why they chose to translate it in these ways.

But thank God we have a plethora of translations to compare it to as we ought. And you'll see a footnote. Even they provide some help in this verse.

They put a little asterisk and a footnote in the ESV. And this is actually translated as, This is my grief, that the right hand of the Most High has changed.

If you don't see that, check out our pew Bible. You'll see a little asterisk. This is my grief, that the right hand of the Most High has changed.

Huh. Which, as we just discussed, that's a theological impossibility. Because God does not change.

[22 : 54] He's the same yesterday, as He always will be. And that's an absolute. You see, what's changed then? Asaph was remembering the wrong things.

In distress, he remembered how he used to be. But in doing so, he was forgetting how God has always been. And so this stanza serves as the turning point of how every single believer in this room, outside this room, whoever you might be, is to how we ought to remember.

Remember God's works. Forget how you used to be. Forget the flame that was going on. Yeah, praise God for all of that.

And we can give glory to Him. But remember who God is. What His works are. And this church makes all the difference.

Because we fluctuate in faithfulness. God does not. We are the variable. And in verse 11, He turns and He remembers the right thing.

[24 : 02] I will remember, what? The deeds of the Lord. Yes. I will remember your wonders of old.

Verse 12, I will ponder all your work. Not Asaph's work. And meditate on your mighty deeds.

Verse 13, Your way, O God, is holy. What God is great like our God? Verse 14, You are the God who works wonders.

You have made known your might among the peoples. And verse 15, You with your arm redeemed your people. Who?

The children of Jacob and Joseph. Selah. What a wonderful pause and reflection. Now that's more like it, Asaph.

[25 : 04] God never fails. Even through the darkness of earlier turmoil, the famine of Egypt. He recalls Jacob and Joseph, that God is not the rejecter of His people.

He's not forgotten. He's the redeemer of His people. And one of the most profound joys that I have as a pastor is watching those light bulbs click within all of your lives.

As the power of God's Word ignites and reminds each and every one of you, that'll get me through another decade of pastoring.

Is to see those light bulbs going off by the power of His Word. Season after season as we are all sanctified. As it happens for us, this happened to Asaph.

And so will we remember, church? Will we remember the right things? The deeds of the Lord and the wonders of old. As we fix our attention off our present variable season and trouble.

[26 : 11] And gaze upon the absolute past triumph. Looking at no other than the cross of Jesus Christ. Will we ponder all God's work and meditate on His mighty deeds.

As Jesus Christ disarms the variable powers of darkness. And triumphed absolutely over them. In His body and flesh on the cross.

You see, God is holy. God is incomparable. And God works wonders. God will be glorified. And as God redeemed Jacob and Joseph in dark days and famine.

So too, the same God is ever present this day. Amen. It's the same God. The same truth. It is absolute.

It's not that the Lord was intentionally inflicting spiritual and emotional distress on Asaph by holding his spiritual eyes open. Saying, God, I can't take it anymore.

[27 : 14] But maybe what the Lord was trying to do was wake Asaph up. And I think that's true. And being that we have the Bible, isn't it almost impossible to think?

Almost absolute silliness. To think ever to enter into Holy Scripture. Like we have in all of our possession.

You've got apps on your phones now these days. And leave without assurance of God's mighty hand. Isn't it almost silly to think that we would ever doubt God's assurance?

After all the tools that he's given to us. You see, essentially, Asaph dusts his Bible off. Opens the pages.

What does he find? He knows who God is. He's looking at the deeds. But he opens up the metaphorical pages of Scripture. And what does he find? Verse 16 through 20 to the end.

[28 : 19] He turns to Exodus. He finds God's promise. Through the parting of water. In verse 16 and 19 in the Exodus. And even the revealing of himself to Moses.

Guiding his people. After Mount Sinai. And so too, God is revealing himself still today. Church, it's not whether we will forget during darkness.

But it's a matter of if we will remember where to find him when we forget. That's the issue for us today.

We have a more full revelation from Genesis to Revelation. And so it's not a matter if we're going to forget. We're going to forget, church.

Public service announcements. So it's not a matter of if we'll forget. But where are we going to find his promises when we forget?

[29 : 26] Our natural ability to change is the variable. But God's divine inability to change is the absolute. God is the absolute.

Church, don't neglect your word. If the road to revitalization is paved upon honesty. The engine to get us there is only by the power of God's word.

And the sufficiency of his word. And so, maybe today you found yourself maybe wandering in your unbelief.

Maybe you thought you, maybe your baptism as a child seemed to ring true. That you've just been living a life of just rejection of God in so many ways.

And your attitude and your demeanor. And just rejecting God in all your ways. Maybe you find yourself wandering in unbelief. Maybe you weren't ever a Christian.

[30 : 32] Maybe you grew up in a Catholic church. You thought what they had to offer was convincing. But then you still were left with a little bit of a doubt. Maybe now you might be convinced that the darkness that is consuming your life is simply a wake-up call for you.

To come to the light of Jesus Christ. And that there is an offer for you by faith. Because the gospel is simple, but it is profound.

Because all of us have sinned. We've all fallen short of the glory of God. And just one single sin separates us from a holy God. We don't deserve forgiveness.

We don't deserve it. But by God's grace and His love of which He created all of us. Sent Jesus to die to pay the penalty.

For even just that one sin that comes to your mind. He paid the penalty. And by your faith, God counts you as righteous.

[31 : 37] Forgiven. And so maybe this darkness that you can't escape from, you're finally seeing that light. And I would invite you to come today.

Become a Christian. Walk among the community of God by faith. Not by sight. Welcome. But maybe today, you've been a Christian maybe for a while.

And you found yourselves wandering in a similar way, almost looking like a non-Christian. And wandering to and fro. Yeah, you got your Bible. You have those memory verses from VBS as a young child.

Maybe you're looking upon the fire of your faith that you once had. And you're looking back then and saying, man, if I could only get back to that.

Because now you look in the mirror and you just see a barely flickering flame of a Christian life. You remember those days and they haunt you.

[32 : 43] You wonder if you're going to ever get back to that. Well, a psalm like this should remind you that an honest heart is the beginning of spiritual revitalization. Being honest with God.

I invite you to get honest today. Think and let this weigh upon you. That if you put your faith in Jesus Christ, do you know what that means?

Well, according to His Word, God saved you. God chose you.

God revealed literally Himself to you. He has revealed Himself. God will bring about His work to completion.

That's what it means for putting your faith in Jesus Christ. Friends, don't condemn yourself upon a metric of who you used to be.

[33 : 53] Whether that might be accounted for your sin, the amount of sin in your life then, or maybe just how you used to be on fire. Don't condemn yourself upon a metric of who you used to be.

But rest upon the metric of God's righteousness, of who He is transforming you to become. And this is a process.

Seminaries will call this progressive sanctification. You're not who you used to be, but you're also not who you are going to become.

And for the rest of us, may we recall the right things when darkness is all we see. And we are blinded to what's ahead. So as we close, we must remember Psalm 119, verse 105.

The psalmist declares to the Lord, Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

[35 : 05] Just as a lamp brightens a path for our feet to walk, God's Word provides the illumination and guidance. And we have all we need then to walk faithfully in this world, trusting in the Lord.

We must also remember 2 Peter, chapter 1, verse 19, as he describes the Word as a reliable lamp shining in a dark place. He says, We have the prophetic message as something completely reliable.

And what's reliable is absolute. It's reliable. And you will do well to pay attention to it. As to a shining light in a dark place, until the dawn and the morning star rises in your hearts.

The same God we trust in our salvation is the God that we cling to amid our sanctification, this progressive sanctification of being set apart from this world.

He is trustworthy, always has been and always will be. The Word of God is the living source of energy, a living source of energy that actively provides illumination, insights, direction, and guidance for our pilgrimage.

[36 : 34] Yes, we're pilgrims. As we travel through this dark and sinful world. Church, it's time to get honest with our Bibles open.

Let's pray.