

To the choirmaster: according to Jeduthun. A Psalm of Asaph.

You know the classic “footprints” story?

I dreamed I saw two sets of footprints on the beach –
God and I were walking together on the sand.
But then in the most difficult times I only saw one.
I asked, why did you abandon me in times of difficulty?
God said, “I was carrying you.”

Psalm 77 provides a different twist.

Because in Psalm 77 there are *no* footprints.

There are times when we experience the presence of God.
There are times when he seems to be absent, but we see his footprints –
we see the evidence of his provision for us –
we see his mighty deeds.

But then there are times when there are no footprints.

I’ve heard from many people over the years that they have felt rather dry
in their spiritual experience at Michiana Covenant.

What do you do when your spiritual experience runs dry?

In Psalm 77, “the congregation of the Lord cries to him in deep pain for help,
and the recollection of what the Lord has done in times past,
does not tend to ameliorate this pain, but rather tends to increase it...
and leads to doubt as to whether Israel still holds the place of God’s chosen people.”
(Hengstenberg, p. 441)

There is a sort of confidence in Psalm 77.

There is a confidence that God *once* did these things.
Will he do it in our day?

You hear things like this in Scotland these days.

Once upon a time, Scotland saw God’s mighty deeds.
Once upon a time, the churches were full and the gospel worked mightily.

But today, the churches are empty.

A church with 500 people is considered a mega-church.

Will God again do mighty deeds?
Will we see his mighty works in *our* day?

Psalm 77 calls us to cry out to God.

1. When Remembering God Brings No Comfort (v1-3)

77:1 I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me.

Literally this reads,

“My voice to God, and I am crying out, my voice to God,
and he will give ear to me.”

My life is characterized by crying out –
my identity is defined in this tragedy that consumes me.

*2 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.*

The last line, as Hengstenberg notes (p. 444) , is probably an allusion to Jacob,
when he was told of Joseph’s death (cf., Gen 37.35):

“All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him;
but he refused to be comforted, saying,
‘No, I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol.’”

There are no easy answers –
there is no quick comfort –
no simple solution for the weariness of my heart.

The image of a soul refusing comfort is also found in Jeremiah 15:18

“Why is my pain unceasing, my wound uncurable, refusing to be healed?
Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?”
Jeremiah grieved that everything kept getting worse!

And in Jeremiah 31:15,

the prophet speaks of Rachel’s voice
“weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.”

It is true that Jeremiah 31 will go on to speak words of glorious comfort –
but it will be 600 years before that comfort comes to fruition.
Rachel will weep for 600 years.

And so for 600 years Israel will sing Psalm 77!

But of course, this raises a question –

How can we weep, now that Christ has come?

If the glorious comfort has come in the resurrection of Jesus,
then how can we still mourn?

Remember Romans 8?

That glorious passage of comfort and confidence in Christ?

“there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”?

That same passage speaks of our present sufferings.

Paul goes on to say that not only does the creation groan in the pains of childbirth,

“but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit,
groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons,
the redemption of our bodies.” (8:23)

In our groaning we recognize that while God *will* make all things right –

that does not change the fact that *right now*,
things are not right.

By faith – we see that God has raised Jesus to his right hand –

but by sight, with our earthly eyes, we do not yet see all things under his feet.

And so,

3 When I remember God, I moan;

when I meditate, my spirit faints. Selah

Normally, when I remember God, this brings hope!

Right?

When I meditate, this brings comfort.

Right?

Wrong.

There are times when remembering God makes it worse.

There are times when meditating on God’s steadfast love feels like mockery.

When I pray, I feel like my prayers bounce off the ceiling.

My soul refuses to be comforted.

Maybe there is comfort there –
but I have no access to it.

The ordinary means of grace *ordinarily* bring comfort and hope.
But all Christians have experienced times when nothing “works.”

So what do you do when the ordinary means are insufficient?

Well, what does the Psalmist do?

It’s important to see that *in spite of* his situation,
the Psalmist does not cease to cry out to God.
The words of the disciples come to mind from John 6 –
“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!”

The fact that the ordinary means –
the word, sacraments and prayers –
aren’t “working” doesn’t mean that we try something else!

Psalm 77 is an eloquent testimony to the persistence of the people of God in prayer –
and in devotion to the ordinary means.

Indeed, as I reflect on my conversations with various folks over the years,
my observation is that most people give up too soon.

Consider your own situation.

Are you going through a “dry spell” in your experience of God?
Well, how consistent are you in reading the scriptures?
Are you praying – or should I say, “moaning” – regularly?
Do you regularly meditate on God’s mighty deeds?
Do you speak of them regularly to your children – or others around you?
Are you gathering with the people of God to worship him as often as you can?

It may not provide any comfort!
But are you doing it anyway?

If your experience of God is lacking –
and you are ignoring the very means that he gave to nourish your experience of him –
well, *duh!*

But remember that sometimes remembering God’s promises brings doubt:

2. When Remembering God’s Promises Brings Doubt (v4-9)
4 You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

I cannot sleep.
I cannot speak.

Paul may well have been thinking of Psalm 77 when he wrote in Romans 8
that when we do not know what to pray, the Spirit groans on our behalf (v26).

And so rather than speak, he “thinks”

5 I consider the days of old, the years long ago.

There is a certain irony in verse 6.

The “I said” is not in the Hebrew – probably we should translate this, “I thought”]

6 I said [thought], “Let me remember my song in the night; let me meditate in my heart.”

In the midst of another sleepless night,
the Psalmist meditates on God’s mighty deeds.

If you are in the midst of a time of spiritual dryness,
let this be your inquiry – let this be your focus:

Then my spirit made a diligent search:

7 “Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable?

8 Has his steadfast love forever ceased?

Are his promises at an end for all time?

9 Has God forgotten to be gracious?

Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” Selah

In one sense, all of these questions are far too simple.

Of course, the answer is no.

The Lord will *not* spurn forever.

His steadfast love has *not* ceased forever.

His promises are *not* at an end for all time.

God has *not* forgotten to be gracious.

He has *not* shut up his compassion in anger.

There!

That was easy!

The answer is “no!”

But that doesn’t really get at the Psalmist’s question.

Asaph isn’t wrestling with the cosmic question of “God in himself.”

This is not a point of abstract theology.
This is a point of concrete theology.
Given that I know the “right” answer –
given that God has promised that he will be faithful –
how do I make sense of the current situation?

Because where I am right now
does not fit with the alleged “reality” that my theology says should be the case!

You can say this a number of ways:
If God loves me, then why is everything going wrong in my life?
If I have been made holy in Christ, then why am I still sinning?
If God has promised to be with me, why do I feel so alone?
If sin is not my master, then why do I feel so helpless so often?

In short, if my salvation is assured, why do I lack assurance?

And so in verses 10-15 the Psalmist remembers God’s mighty deeds
in the context of God’s utter silence.

3. Remembering God’s Mighty Deeds in the Context of God’s Utter Silence (v10-15)
10 Then I said, “I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.”

Literally it reads,
“This is my grief (or sickness), the changing of the right hand of the Most High”

Many have found this perplexing, because it then goes on to speak of God’s mighty deeds.
So various scholars have suggested that if you reposit the Hebrew,
you could get the text used by the ESV.
And if you read Psalm 77 as maintaining a strong sense of hope,
then you would probably favor this translation.

But if you take the approach that we have been taking,
then the Hebrew makes perfect sense:
This is my grief: that the right hand of the Most High has changed

In other words,
remembering the mighty deeds of the LORD brings no comfort!

Because what if God has changed?

We recite what God has done in the past –
but with grief,
because God no longer does this.

At least – *not for us*.
(Habakkuk’s point that we sang earlier)

*11 I will remember the deeds of the Lord;
yes, I will remember your wonders of old.
12 I will ponder all your work,
and meditate on your mighty deeds.
13 Your way, O God, is holy.
What god is great like our God?
14 You are the God who works wonders;
you have made known your might among the peoples.
15 You with your arm redeemed your people,
the children of Jacob and Joseph. Selah*

Does this characterize your prayers when you are depressed?
Do you spend much time reflecting on God’s mighty deeds?
Meditating on his faithfulness to past generations?

The Psalmist now wonders:
this is what God did once;
has God changed?

The question underlying Psalm 77 is rooted in Exodus 34:6.
In Exodus 34, God reveals himself to Moses,
and declares,
“Yahweh, Yahweh, a God compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, and abundant in kindness and fidelity.”
Psalm 77 is asking, is this still true?
Has God changed?

Psalm 77 teaches us how to question God in the midst of trouble.
Asaph does not shake his fist at God.
He does not give a self-centered account of his troubles.
He reflects on God’s mighty deeds in history.
And he points out that whatever questions he may have about whether God has changed,
still there is “no god like our God.”
Again, the disciples point: “to whom shall we go – you have the words of eternal life!”

And so Asaph turns to God’s greatest victory –
the triumph over Egypt and Yahweh’s victory over the sea in Exodus 15.

Will God do this again?

4. Reciting God's Mighty Deeds: Will God Do It Again? (v16-20)

- 16 *When the waters saw you, O God,
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;
indeed, the deep trembled.*
- 17 *The clouds poured out water;
the skies gave forth thunder;
your arrows flashed on every side.*
- 18 *The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;
your lightnings lighted up the world;
the earth trembled and shook.*

This language reminds us of the Baal epic that we heard about a couple weeks ago.

In verse 18, one could translate it “the roar of the thunder was under the wheels” – which could be an allusion to the divine chariot riding the clouds (think of the vision of the cherubim in Ezekiel 1 and 10).

The glory of the LORD was revealed when he came in power to the Red Sea.

- 19 *Your way was through the sea,
your path through the great waters;
yet your footprints were unseen (lit, unknown).*
- 20 *You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.*

Does verse 20 jump out at you?

Wait a minute!

What are Moses and Aaron doing here!

In verses 16-19,

God does battle with the sea (Yam) –

but here in verse 20, we discover that this was about the Exodus.

But where is Pharaoh?

Where are the armies of Egypt?

The seas are often used to represent the nations – the Gentiles – those who are hostile and opposed to God.

What happens when you replace “Pharaoh and his armies” with “the sea” in retelling the story of the Exodus?

First, you can see the apologetic impact:

Yahweh – not Baal – is the one who defeated the Sea.

Second, there is a way in which the Exodus story is expanded to make a bigger point:

the Exodus was not merely how God redeemed Israel from Egypt – in the Exodus God delivered his people from the Sea.

Israel never really had much of a navy.

Solomon had a short-lived merchant fleet,
but that was a distant memory of the past,
and when Jonah fled for Tarshish,
there were no Israelite ships available.
The mention of Jonah only adds to the peril of the sea!
Bad things happen when you go out in ships.

Throughout the OT the sea is a perilous, hostile place of destruction.

You go down into the sea – just like you go *down* to Egypt! (or down into the grave).

So hostile and dangerous is the sea that Revelation will tell us that in the new creation,
there will be no more sea!

And so God's deliverance of Israel through the Red Sea
is properly seen in Psalm 77 as an act of new creation.
At the Red Sea, God brought his people out of death into life.

Paul will speak of this as a baptism (1 Corinthians 10),
just like Peter will speak of the Flood as a type of baptism (1 Peter 3).

I think of the old 6th century hymn (#420),
that takes this Red Sea imagery and weaves it together with Passover, manna,
baptism, and Lord's Supper

1. At the Lamb's high feast we sing praise to our victorious King,
who has washed us in the tide flowing from his pierced side;
praise we him whose love divine gives his sacred blood for wine,
gives his body for the feast, Christ the victim, Christ the priest.
2. Where the paschal blood is poured, death's dark angel sheathes his sword;
Israel's hosts triumphant go through the wave that drowns the foe.
Praise we Christ, whose blood was shed, paschal victim, paschal bread;
with sincerity and love eat we manna from above.
3. Mighty victim from the sky, powers of hell beneath thee lie;
death is conquered in the fight, thou hast brought us life and light:
hymns of glory and of praise, risen Lord, to thee we raise;
holy Father, praise to thee, with the Spirit, ever be.

The Exodus, with all of its sacramental imagery,
provides us with tangible manifestations of God's presence –
even though, as v20 points out,
your footprints were not seen (or were unknown).

After all, think back to those who lived through the Exodus –
those who saw God’s mighty deeds,
and who were brought through the waters.

What happened to them?

They saw God’s victory over the waters,
as they walked through the sea on dry land.
They heard the voice of the LORD from Sinai,
as God spoke to them from on high.
They tasted of the bread from heaven,
as they ate the manna in the wilderness every day.

Yet they rebelled (Psalms 81, 95, and 106 will reflect on this).
Seeing, hearing, and tasting of God’s mighty deeds
do not result in God’s blessing.
What brings God’s blessing?

Faith.

Sometimes, remembering God’s mighty deeds does not bring comfort, but pain.

What do you do, when remembering God’s mighty deeds does not bring comfort, but pain?

You remember God’s mighty deeds.
And you reinterpret your life in the light of what God has done for his people.

And the lack of footprints is important here.

As one scholar has put it,
“God’s presence recedes into the background
in the way that the Psalmist refers to his actions in the past...
When quoting verse 19, “Your path led through the sea . . .
though your footprints were not seen,”
Stevenson says, “That God delivers his people without visible footprints
is of great significance for the psalmist,
whose suffering arises from the perceived absence of God.” (Stevenson, 226).
The upshot of all this is that “God’s presence need not always be detectable
for his deliverance to be certain.” (Stevenson, 226).

There is a way in which by retelling Israel’s story,
the Psalmist places himself in the midst of the journey –
from Egypt to the Promised Land –

And even so, our singing together – whether Psalm 77 or anything else –
is a way of placing ourselves in the midst of the history of the people of God.
We are retelling the story of Israel –
the story of our Lord Jesus Christ –
and we are seeing how we fit into what God is doing in history.

True – maybe our place is small –
maybe our part will be filled with suffering and distress –

but that does not mean that God has changed;
that does not mean that God has forgotten us!

Rather, it means that we do not see all the purposes of God.
And we need to devote ourselves to the outward and ordinary means,
the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers,
so that we might be satisfied with the part that our Lord has called us to play
in making disciples of the nations until he returns.

Pray for church in Scotland