



Psalm 77 - God's Mighty Deeds Recalled

To the leader: according to Jeduthun. Of Asaph. A Psalm.

Introduction

This is a community lament, suitable to a time when the people of God are in a low condition. The description of the low condition is general enough that the psalm cannot be tied to any specific occasion. The psalm acknowledges that the reason for the trouble may be some fault in the people: to refer to God's anger (v.9) raises the question of whether his people's unfaithfulness provoked it; hence this is like Psalms 74, 79 and 80 in their recognition of this factor. Psalm 44, on the other hand, is a community lament suited to an occasion in which the community's unfaithfulness is not the cause of its trouble.

That this is a community lament is clear from the nature of the appeal in vv.10-20: <<**I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old**>> (v.11) refer to ancient times in which God redeemed his people (v.15) and led them like a flock (v.20). Thus the emphasis is on the condition of God's people as a body; but this corporate focus is certainly not impersonal. Each person singing this owns his or her membership in the people, and acknowledges that his or her well-being is bound up with the well-being of the whole: <<**I cry aloud to God**>> (v.1), <<**the day of my trouble**>> (v.2), and: <<**I am so troubled**>> (v.4).

The Bible presents the individual as a member of the community and encourages each member to seek the good of the whole. The repeated key words here are 'remember' and 'meditate,' both of which appear in each of the main sections. The psalm moves from remembering and meditating on God as the one who has made promises to his people, to remembering and meditating on how things once were better, to remembering and meditating on God's mighty deeds of old that build confidence for his people's future.

The leader or Chief Musician is thought by some to be the Lord God himself, and others suppose him to be a leader of choirs or musicians in David's time, such as Heman the Singer or Asaph; refer to 1 Chronicles 6:33, 16:17 and 25:6.

Jeduthun, mentioned also in the titles of Psalm 39 and 62, was one of the musicians appointed by David to lead Israel's public worship; refer to 1 Chronicles 16:41 and 25:1-3. Charles Spurgeon wrote regarding Jeduthun: "The sons of Jeduthun were porters or doorkeepers, according to 1 Chronicles 16:42. Those who serve well make the best of singers, and those who occupy the highest posts in the choir must not be ashamed to wait at the posts of the doors of the Lord's house."

Asaph was the great singer and musician of David and Solomon's era; refer to 1 Chronicles 15:17-19, 16:5-7 and 16:17, 2 Chronicles 25:6 and 29:13. First Chronicles 25:1 and 2 Chronicles 29:30 add that Asaph was a prophet in his musical compositions.

Psalm 77:1-3 - Opening Statement: I Cry Aloud to God.

This section describes earnest prayer coming from a troubled heart: the statements 'I cry aloud to God' (v.1), 'I moan,' 'and my spirit faints' (v.3) convey deep feeling, and 'my hand is stretched out (to God)' is a common posture of prayer; refer to Job 11:13, Psalms 44:20, 88:9 and 143:6, and 1 Timothy 2:8. Here, however, it is not limited to prayer in public worship: it preoccupies his private moments as well.

- ¹ I cry aloud to God,
aloud to God, that he may hear 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.
- ³ I think of God, and I moan;
I meditate, and my spirit faints. Selah

Psalm 77:1-3

I cry aloud to God. This psalm begins with a thought common in the psalms, with the psalmist describing his cry to God. He cried out with his voice unto God, and knew that God heard him, i.e. that he may hear me. This was a key component of Solomon's prayer during the dedication of the temple: <<**Let your eyes be open to the plea of your servant, and to the plea of your people Israel, listening to them whenever they call to you**>> (1 Kings 8:52).

In the day of my trouble. His cry to God was urgent (in the day of trouble), active (stretched out), and persistent (without wearying).

My soul refuses to be comforted. Encouraging thoughts came to mind but were immediately put away. Friends spoke of God's goodness in the present and brighter future, but the soul refused any comfort. Sometimes comfort is refused because it is superficial. One may say to the person in despair, "Go out and have some fun" or some other advice that treats their despair lightly. Sometimes people are in such despair that seeking God and God alone can help, and nothing superficial: <<*All his sons and all his daughters sought 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 bewailed him*>> (Genesis 37:35), and: <<*A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more*>> (Matthew 2:18).

Charles Spurgeon commented, "He refused some comforts as too weak for his case, others as untrue, others as unhallowed; but chiefly because of distraction, he declined even those grounds of consolation which ought to have been effectual with him. As a sick man turns away even from the most nourishing food, so did he. It is impossible to comfort those who refuse to be comforted."

I think of God, and I moan. The psalmist earnestly and sincerely cried out to God and knew that God heard him - yet he was troubled and felt his spirit was overwhelmed. The sense is, "God, I know you are there - why won't you help me the way I need to be helped?" Most often when the believer cries out to God and senses he or she is heard, it brings the peaceful assurance of faith. This is not always the case. Sometimes - especially when the person remains in their difficulty instead of being delivered from it - the sense that God has heard them yet their trouble remains brings more frustration and not less: <<*I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping*>> (Psalm 6:6), and: <<*You said, 'Woe is me! The Lord has added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest'*>> (Jeremiah 45:3). Perhaps this was some of what Paul felt regarding his thorn in the flesh described in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. At first he felt the frustration of unanswered prayer; then the challenge of prayer answered, but not according to his previous expectation.

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect. This is the kind of struggle with God known by those somewhat further along in their relationship with God. The depth and complexity of this struggle is worthy of meditation - thus, Selah is here inserted.

Psalm 77:4-9 - Specific Complaint: Has God Forgotten to Be Gracious?

Now the psalm describes what gives so much unrest to the singer: during the night, when he cannot sleep (vv.4-6), he ponders the question of whether God will spurn his people forever (vv.7-9).

- 4 You keep my eyelids from closing;
I am so troubled that I cannot speak.
- 5 I consider the days of old,
and remember the years of long ago.
- 6 I commune with my heart in the night;
I meditate and search my spirit:

Psalm 77:4-6

You keep my eyelids from closing; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. Asaph considered the intensity of his cry to God. With weary eyes and a troubled heart he sincerely sought God. David felt the same way at times: *<<I was silent and still; I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse, my heart became hot within me>>* (Psalm 39:2-3a).

The days of old and the years long ago refer to earlier times, when it seemed that the condition of the people of God was better – this provokes the question, did God use up his favour? The answer is in vv.10-11, repeating parts of these expressions: ‘the right hand of the Most High has changed’ and the ‘wonders of old.’ Asaph considered the extent of his cry to God, considering what God had done even in ancient times: *<<Remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your father, and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you>>* (Deuteronomy 32:7), and: *<<We have heard with our ears, O God, our ancestors have told us, what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old>>* (Psalm 44:1). He wondered why God seemed to answer those in the past with more satisfaction than he in the present. These were not wise thoughts: *<<Do not say, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask this>>* (Ecclesiastes 7:10).

I commune with my heart in the night. Since the word for song, Hebrew *neginah*, occurs often in the sense of ‘stringed instruments’ used in public worship (as in the titles of Psalms 4, 6, 55, 61, 67 and 76, Isaiah 38:20 and Habakkuk 3:19), it is reasonable to suppose that these songs are worship songs, celebrating God’s mighty deeds for his people, which the faithful Israelite might sing in private for edification or comfort.

I meditate and search my spirit. Asaph's seeking after God remembered better times, and it was deep and diligent.

- 7 'Will the Lord spurn for ever,
and never again be favourable?
- 8 Has his steadfast love ceased for ever?
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

Psalm 77:7-9

Will the Lord spurn for ever? With four rapid questions Asaph spoke his fear, that the season of dryness and frustration might last forever. He feared that never again he would see the favour of God, the mercy of God, and the fulfilment of God's promises.

Charles Spurgeon commented, "Very wisely this good man argued with himself, and sought to cure his unbelief. He treated himself homoeopathically, treating like with like. As he was attacked by the disease of questioning, he gave himself questions as a medicine. Observe how he kills one question with another, as men fight fire with fire. Here we have six questions, one after another, each one striking at the very heart of unbelief." And again, "Beloved, if we were sometimes thus to school ourselves and cross-question our own unbelief, the Holy Spirit would give us comfort."

Spurgeon's studies of the psalms were produced between 1865 and 1885, and during those twenty years he experienced much ill health, which continued to deteriorate until his death in 1892. He had neuralgia and gout, which left him with swollen, red, painful limbs, so that he frequently could not walk or even write. He had debilitating headaches, and with these physical ills came frightful bouts of depression, leading almost to despair. Therefore, he would also write of this psalm: "Alas, my God, the writer of this exposition well knows what thy servant Asaph meant, for his soul is familiar with the way of grief. Deep glens and lonely caves of soul depressions, my spirit knows full well your awful glooms!"

It does not offend God when his troubled people raise these questions with an interest in the explanation. Indeed, just putting the questions invites the answer, since they touch on the points of Exodus 34:6, which describes the enduring benevolence of God toward his people: if God abounds in steadfast love, then it cannot cease, nor can his promises be at an end; if God is gracious, he cannot forget to continue that grace, nor can he shut up his compassion.

The key matter is the last line: has he done this in anger? God's anger is a response to unfaithfulness on the part of his people, and will only remain if they remain impenitent: <<*And you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve him with single mind and willing heart; for the Lord searches every mind, and understands every plan and thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will abandon you for ever*>> (1 Chronicles 28:9). Hence this calls the people to examine themselves and to lay hold of the covenant afresh.

Psalm 77:10-20 - The Appeal: What God Has Done in the Past for His People.

This psalm directs attention to what God has done for his people in the past, especially in the exodus and in the wilderness, as grounds for confidence that God will not abandon his purpose for his people: the spiritual condition of any particular generation will not derail that purpose, although it may indeed prevent members of that generation from receiving saving benefits from God, and from participating constructively in the outworking of that purpose in the world. This is why the appeal is not to the people, but to the right hand of the Most High. God's 'right hand' is the expression of his power for the sake of his people, e.g. Exodus 15:6 and 15:12. God's deeds, wonders, work, and mighty deeds (vv.11-12) are likewise great things he has done to save and preserve his people. The colourful recollection of the exodus (vv.16-19) comes to a soft landing with the simple statement that God led his people like a flock through the wilderness, by the hand of Moses and Aaron (v.20). The singing congregation is left to draw the conclusion for themselves: the God who has done these great things certainly has the power to do them again if need be; and all the records of these events in the Pentateuch speak clearly of God's unwavering commitment to bring blessing to Abraham's children, and through them to the world. So this song helps God's people to refresh their hope and renew their commitment to be a holy people, an attractive advertisement of the true God to the rest of the world.

- ¹⁰ And I say, 'It is my grief
that the right hand of the Most High has changed.'
- ¹¹ I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;
I will remember your wonders of old.
- ¹² I will meditate on all your work,
and muse on your mighty deeds.

Psalm 77:10-12

It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed. The honest anguish of Asaph is appreciated by the reader of this psalm. For him, the apparent gap between what he believed and what he felt was painful; this true of life.

The right hand of the Most High is a symbol of his mighty strength and power over all things: <<*Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power – your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy*>> (Exodus 15:6).

I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord. Asaph was determined to remember the better seasons when God's power seemed unhindered, when his symbolic hand of strength and skill were evident. In discouraging times he decided to remember better times and taken firm hope for the future.

Again Spurgeon comments, "If no good was in the present, memory ransacked the past to find consolation. She fain would borrow a light from the altars of yesterday to light the gloom of to-day. It is our duty to search for comfort, and not in sullen indolence yield to despair."

I will remember your wonders of old. In the midst of the painful anguish between what he believed and what he felt, Asaph spoke to himself and declared what he would do. He was determined to remember something, and to keep it in mind.

It was often the failure of the Israelites to remember that got them into positions where they seemed to be God-forsaken, even though they never were: <<*But they and our ancestors acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks and did not obey your commandments; they refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them; but they stiffened their necks and determined to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them*>> (Nehemiah 9:16-17).

I will remember, I will meditate, and muse on your mighty deeds. Asaph presented a three step process to encouragement. It begins with remembering God's great works, his wonders of old. Meditation on those works follows, focusing on what they may have to teach believers today: <<*I remember the days of old, I think about all your deeds, I meditate on the works of your hands*>> (Psalm 143:5). The third step is to talk of these great things with others: <<*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn*>> (Isaiah 61:1-2), <<*And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations*>> (Mark 13:10), and: <<*For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the*

Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ. Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, 'Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand'>> (Romans 15:18-21).

13 Your way, O God, is holy.

What god is so great as our God?

14 You are the God who works wonders;

you have displayed your might among the peoples.

15 With your strong arm you redeemed your people,

the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. Selah

Psalm 77:13-15

Your way, O God, is holy. In the first part of the psalm Asaph explained the goodness of remembering, meditating, and speaking of God's greatness. He begins the second part of the psalm by actually describing God's good works, beginning in the sanctuary - either of the temple or tabernacle. The way of God was in his holy sanctuary in the sense that the tabernacle/temple and its rituals all spoke of the way to God through the blood of an innocent sacrifice, ultimately pointing to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

You are the God who works wonders; you have displayed your might among the peoples. Asaph spoke of the work of God in miraculous works that displayed the strength of God, as he had done time and time again throughout the history of Israel, and continues to do today.

With your strong arm you redeemed your people. Many times through their history Israel saw God's faithful strength rescue them from all kinds of trouble.

The descendants of Jacob and Joseph. The coupling of Jacob and Joseph as ancestors of the people redeemed from the Egyptians may be due to the insistence of both of them that the Promised Land, not Egypt, must be their final resting place: <<*When the time of Israel's death drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, 'If I have found favour with you, put your hand under my thigh and promise to deal loyally and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt. When I lie down with my ancestors, carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place.'* He answered, 'I will do as you have said'>> (Genesis 47:29-30), and: <<*Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore*

to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.’ So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, ‘When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here’>> (Genesis 50:24-25).

- 16 When the waters saw you, O God,
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;
the very deep trembled.
- 17 The clouds poured out water;
the skies thundered;
your arrows flashed on every side.
- 18 The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;
your lightnings lit up the world;
the earth trembled and shook.
- 19 Your way was through the sea,
your path, through the mighty waters;
yet your footprints were unseen.
- 20 You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Psalm 77:16-20

When the waters saw you, O God. In this last portion of the psalm, Asaph most likely had in mind the parting and crossing of the Red Sea as an example of one of the great works of God that he would remember, meditate upon, and tell of. He began by poetically describing the waters of the Red Sea as being afraid of Yahweh and they readily flee at his presence. The waters of the Red Sea are here beautifully represented as endued with sensibility, as seeing, feeling and being confounded, even to the lowest depths, at the presence and power of their great creator God: <<*Why was no one there when I came? Why did no one answer when I called? Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver? By my rebuke I dry up the sea, I make the rivers a desert; their fish stink for lack of water, and die of thirst*>> (Isaiah 50:2), and: <<*Was your wrath against the rivers, O Lord? Or your anger against the rivers, or your rage against the sea, when you drove your horses, your chariots to victory?*>> (Habakkuk 3:8).

The clouds poured out water. The reader is not told of a mighty thunderstorm that accompanied the parting of the Red Sea, but Asaph described the rain, thunder and lightning, i.e. your arrows flashed on every side. It is hard to know at this point if Asaph is describing something not included in Exodus Chapter 14 or simply describing the presence and power of God in poetic terms. It seems more favourable to take this literally. In Jewish Antiquities 2:15-16, the ancient Jewish historian Josephus did: “As soon as ever the whole Egyptian army was within it, the sea flowed to its own place, and came down with a torrent raised by storms of wind and encompassed the Egyptians. Showers of rain also came down from the sky, and dreadful thunders and lightning, with flashes of fire. Thunder-bolts also were darted upon them; nor was there anything which used to be sent by God upon men, as indications of his wrath, which did not happen at this time; for a dark and dismal night oppressed them. And thus did all these men perish, so that there was not one man left to be a messenger of this calamity to the rest of the Egyptians.”

The earth trembled and shook. Asaph described the presence of God as being so manifest at the parting of the Red Sea that the earth itself shook. Again, since this is not recorded in the Exodus Chapter 14 account, either he adds information or is simply giving a poetic description.

Asaph’s words are similar to those of Deborah: <<*Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens poured, the clouds indeed poured water. The mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai, before the Lord, the God of Israel*>> (Judges 5:4-5).

Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters. As God miraculously parted the waters of the Red Sea it was as if he cleared a great road or path for himself that he also gave to his people to use.

You led your people like a flock. As a final description of God’s mighty work at the Red Sea, Asaph noted that God led his people on the path through the sea, led by his servants Moses and Aaron. God works both in great wonders, as at the Red Sea, and in the normal leading of his people through human instruments like Moses and Aaron. One never excludes the other.