

Late one very foggy night in 18th century London, a man stepped out of his home on to the side walk intent on taking his own life. He peered up the street for some time waiting for a carriage. He had been struggling in prayer for some time and felt that God had turned his back on him. He couldn't take it anymore. He determined to throw himself off of the London Bridge.

At long last a carriage arrived. He thought "well God, you provided no solace for me but at least you could provide a cab to take me to my death." He hailed the carriage and asked the driver to take him to the London bridge. "In this weather and at this hour?!" the driver replied. The man insisted, however, until the driver agreed. But as the driver went on his way to the bridge the fog grew so thick that he could not see even beyond the horse.

After some time of following the road the fog suddenly cleared and both the driver and his passenger found themselves back in front of the man's house. That man was William Cowper, the famous poet and hymn writer which inspired men like Longfellow and John Newton. It was Cowper who coined the phrase "God works in mysterious ways..." on the night in question Cowper found comfort while he warmed by his hearth, in psalm 77. And it is to that passage we will be turning to tonight as well.

Just a couple of weeks ago there was a story in the press democrat about a shooting in Petaluma. A man and wife who were in the process of getting a divorce were apparently arguing when the man pulled out a gun and shot his wife. Then, the man turned the gun on himself and took his own life as well; abandoning his three daughters and one son to orphan-hood and despair.

I overheard this story not from a news caster but from a woman at work who happened to know the family. She was understandably very sad. Another woman in our office made the thoughtless comment that she didn't understand these people who murder someone and then commit suicide. 'Why don't they just go kill themselves first?' She asked. I doubt whether her two cents was of much comfort or use to anyone. From the report I read the man had a history of violence and had made his family's life very miserable. Even so I dare say there must have been a better answer than "killing himself first."

Then again, just the other day my wife and I were walking together at Spring Lake and we saw several signs posted along the trail. They were a missing person notice. A young 15 year old girl was missing. I found out just a couple of days later that, even as we were walking, she had been found in Annadel park not far from where we had been walking. She was the victim of her own hand. It is such a sad thing and my heart and prayers go out to the families of these people who are left with the gaping wounds of loss. For those of us who are separated from that context these stories still stir up all sorts of grim and depressing feelings and thoughts. How hopeless it is to face a tragedy like that. How terrible it is to be in such a place as to be the perpetrator of such a tragedy.

We live in dark times and it always seems to be getting darker. The way that people around us handle guilt and stress, poverty and oppression is a varied as it is corrupt. What ought our response be, as believers? How is it that believers often suffer the same lows and grief's as an unbeliever? Shouldn't we all always be happy? If you really think that Christians should be immune to sorrows, then you haven't been a believer for very long. Even as one grows in their maturity they find sorrows an unbeliever would never have to deal with.

But doesn't the Christian have some means of hope and comfort superior to what the world offers? Certainly we do. But it seems to me to have been little used of late. The church much prefers modern therapy in all of its dysfunctions to the biblical prescriptions of old. How do you deal with trouble in your own life? What is your approach dealing with that dark night of the soul?

Our culture tells us that, "instinctively," there are two responses. Whether in the context of an immediate crisis point when we are faced with violence or loss; or in the long drawn out plains of grief and regret we can stand and fight or we can turn and take flight. We can set our face against a trial and, by the strength of our own arm endure every whim of the fates. Or we can run for safety if safety can be found. If it cannot be found we run for what pleases us that we might take refuge in desirable distractions.

Many of us like to think that in a crisis we would hold to our ideal standard of endurance. In those times of great tribulation we may feel an intense pressure to stand strong, go, on our own, down with the ship, fighting if possible. We see ourselves taking a proud stand to the end. On the other hand we may be overcome with fear or grief and just run for it, gorging ourselves on what gratifies us until the misery catches up with us. How do you respond to trial and conflict? Do you tough it out on your own? Do you dive into desirable distractions?

I have found that neither of these paths end well for the woes and curses of this world are greater than all the strength of man and swifter than their flight. And though some would romanticize the wages of a fighting stoic of the consequential death of the fleeing epicurean, they are not martyrs. They are fools dying the death of the damned. Admittedly there are other ways people deal with tribulation but most can be set in these categories. Even so the Christian knows another Way.

Psalm 77 was written by a man named Asaph. Asaph was a contemporary of King David. He was a Levite, indeed a prophet, appointed by David to be the chief musician of the tabernacle when the ark was brought into Jerusalem. He and his crew were responsible for interceding, giving thanks and singing praise to the Lord (see 1 chron 15 and 16 and 2 chron 29).

The context of this psalm is unknown. It may have been in a time of personal distress or it may have been in a time of public calamity when the nation was troubled. It is certainly something I think we can all relate to on some level.

Ps 77:1-3

For the choir director; according to Jeduthun. A Psalm of Asaph. My voice rises to God, and I will cry aloud;

My voice rises to God, and He will hear me.

2 In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord;

In the night my hand was stretched out without weariness;

My soul refused to be comforted.

3 When I remember God, then I am disturbed;

When I sigh, then my spirit grows faint. Selah.

We find Asaph in a dark place. It is a day that he calls the day of trouble; a time of extreme suffering. Perhaps it had been brought on by unforeseen or unavoidable circumstance; a sudden death of a loved one, an illness. Perhaps it was the consequences of the actions of others. Maybe he refers to David's moral failure or the moral failure of the people of Israel which Asaph writes about elsewhere. Or maybe this was a time of rebuke in Asaph's own heart for his own sin before the Lord. I think, for me the worst sort of grief is the grief you earn. Because not only are you miserable but you have to face the fact that you are the only one to blame. You brought it on yourself. You may wish you could undo it, but all of our misdeeds are immediately locked away from us in the untouchable past. We can do nothing to right our wrongs.

I suspect that Asaph is troubled by the moral state of both the people of Israel and himself. These are frequent themes in his psalms and would seem to me to be a primary concern for anyone who worked as a priest. Standing between the ghoulish fiends of men come to confess and sacrifice and the holy God of Israel, a priest was likely very aware of the abhorrent state he and his fellow man were in before God.

He lifts his voice to God, he cries out loudly. His grief overflows his silent prayers and his cries of shame and mingled anger pierce the air. Notice it says that God does hear him but it says nothing of an answer. It is as though the man pours out his heart and God does little more than nod. It is as though God is saying "yeah? So?" to Asaph's burdened prayer. Even so he continues to seek the Lord in his day of trouble. All through the day and into the night it says. He is crying out to God with desperate cries and frantic motions fueled by a seemingly unquenchable sorrow. His need is so urgent and so great that he knows himself to be beyond the aid of any man. He will take comfort from no one until he hears from the Lord. Whether for shame or for longing, when he remembers God and remembers to call out to Him, he moans and rages until he nearly faints.

I don't know if you have ever suffered that kind of emotional deprivation. I don't know if you have ever swam or sunk in the deep wells of depression. I have tread in those icy waters a time or two. I remember in particular the death of my father when I was 19. He died quite suddenly and unexpectedly and my family and I were left with a great void and much sorrow. In my grief I sought consolation in pleasure and distraction until my sin had gone over my head and I found all its weight breaking in on me and my family, which barely survived. I learned then a deeper grief than I had ever known with the loss of my father. I have never known such pain. To this day I still feel the deep stab of shame when I catch myself in the mirror. As I said before, one of the worst kinds of grief is the grief that you earn, the grief that you deserve. I know that when I remembered God in those times I too was greatly disturbed and afraid. I was afraid because I knew that God is just and powerful and I knew what I deserved. Thus Asaph continues his song.

4 You have held my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

5 I have considered the days of old, The years of long ago.

6 I will remember my song in the night;

I will meditate with my heart, And my spirit ponders:

This is intense trouble. He cannot sleep he cannot even speak anymore. His prayers are “groaning’s too deep for words!” (Rom 8:26). Have you ever been there? When you run out of words? When all you can do is bleed, ache and weep before the Lord? When all that is left are sobs and whimpers?

In verse 5 he speaks of considering the days of old. This may be Asaph’s recounting his attempt at comforting himself. But I think it may be a clue to his sorrow. The phrase “consider the days of old” seems to me to be a reference to passages like Deuteronomy 32 where Moses warned the people of Israel to remember always the Lord and the things that God has done, lest he reject them and give their inheritance to other nations. Psalm 44 sums up the consideration of the days of old when it says:

“Oh God we have heard with our ears, our fathers have told us the work that you did in their days, in the days of old. You with your own hand drove out the nations then you planted them you afflicted the peoples then you spread them abroad for by their own sword they did not possess the land and their own arm did not save them but you r right hand and your arm and the light of your presence; for you favored them.

Moses pled with Israel to consider those times and remember that it was God who had saved and established them. Asaph seems to have heard the call and given great thought to such things. It may have led him into deeper despair or it may be the real source of his troubled heart.

Perhaps he had in mind the deeds of Saul before David ruled as king or Samuel’s rebuke when Israel demanded a king. But if this psalm was written during Israel’s golden age, during the reign of David and Solomon, then it may have been that Asaph saw how the people were beginning to forget about the Lord; how the attendance at the tabernacle was dwindling or how many seemed disinterested in the things of the Lord. Either way he was clearly disturbed and more than likely because he saw, either in the nation or in himself, a disregard for God and all that God had done.

In verse 6 Asaph remembers another song. When Asaph was appointed the chief musician by David and on that day they sang a song that had been written by David. It was a song that they were to play before the Lord. It was a charge to the Levites, especially to Asaph which described his call. There it says:

Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name;

make known among the nations what he has done.

Sing to him, sing praise to him;

tell of all his wonderful acts.

Glory in his holy name;

let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

Look to the LORD and his strength;

seek his face always.

Remember the wonders he has done,

his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced,

O descendants of Israel his servant,

O sons of Jacob, his chosen ones. 1 Chron 16:8

Perhaps this song stirred something in him; though it did not free him from his grief. When the memory of his charge to sing praise and tell of all his wonderful acts came up in his mind perhaps the music in his head turned to an old reprise; a repeated passage of music or a return to an earlier musical theme. It is as though Asaph's song plays like a melancholy dirge and in the refrain another tune can be heard. An old song, full of meaning to Asaph, comes to point him. I don't know. But whatever the song is it sets Asaph searching his heart diligently. His spirit ponders through these rhetorical questions.

7 Will the Lord reject forever? And will He never be favorable again?

8 Has His loving-kindness ceased forever? Has His promise come to an end forever?

9 Has God forgotten to be gracious, Or has He in anger withdrawn His compassion? Selah.

Can you feel the suspense? These very dark questions, that his heart has been contemplating rise up like the deepest shade of night. Will the Lord reject forever? And will he never be favorable again? There is wrestling here. The man is dangling between despair and hope; groping in the dark for the promises of Numbers 6:24-26 but not finding them. He knows the conditions of the old covenant. He knows God is merciful and that he is just. But where is the line? Has he, has Israel crossed the line? Is this the end FOREVER?!

I know that I have often wondered such things in my desperation. Does God hate me? Has he abandoned me? Can I blame him? Indeed I can't, but how can I live without him? What hope do I have apart from him? Oh how cold and dark are those depths. How heavy is the heart which must face a life, indeed an unending life, void of God's mercy or grace. To be eternally and hopelessly separated from God's goodness and grace, to know him forever as an all-consuming fire delivering what we rightly deserve in light of his perfect holiness. It is a terrifying thought. It is even more a terrifying reality that billions face each day, often without a clue. But thankfully the music changes in verse 10.

10 And I said, "This is my anguish; But I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High."

11 I shall remember the deeds of the LORD; Surely I will remember Your wonders of old.

12 I will meditate on all Your work And muse on Your 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 strength among the peoples.

15 You have by Your power redeemed Your people, The sons of Jacob and Joseph. Selah.

This verse is very tricky and has been translated in many ways. I think it makes most sense in the NKJV where he says “this is my anguish, but I will remember the years of the right hand, that is the blessings, of my God. His anguish is really his lot. He sees that anguish and abandonment is what he truly deserves. Never the less he makes up his mind to remember the years of the right hand or the Lord. He makes a conscious attack on his despair by meditating on the blessings and wonders that God has done. Asaph determines in his heart and mind to remember the goodness of the Lord in all his done. What deeds he recalls we will see shortly but he takes courage in the things that God has done, not just in his own life but in the distant past, when God saved his fathers and finished the work he started in them; those wonders of old which demonstrated God’s great power, purposes and moral character.

Just as the darkest deepest night gives way to the light of dawn, so too, Asaph sorrow begins to wane in the light of God’s holiness. ‘God’ he says in verse 13 ‘is holy.’ What does it mean to be holy? It means that God is set apart. But he is not just separate or distinct from other gods; he is exalted high above them all. ‘What god is like our God?’ he says. Did Dagon speak all creation into being out of nothing? Did Molech crush the armies of Egypt and Canaan? What wonders has Asherah or Baal preformed in the Jordan and the Red Sea? Is Allah both a god far off and a god close at hand? Is man a god who does not change or lie? God’s holiness, his exalted otherness also speaks of his majesty and his kindness. When Moses pleaded with the Lord to show him His glory God told Moses that no one can see God and live. His glory is too much for man to behold. But he put Moses in the cleft of the rock and covered him so that Moses might glimpse the afterglow of the majesty of God as he passed by. As this happened God declared His name to Moses and said:

“The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving-kindness and truth; who keeps loving-kindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.”

Ex 34:6 7.

Asaph remembers that God is holy and His ways are holy. He remembers that God is good. Do you know tonight that God is holy and that God is good? Do you ever take time to remember what God has done? Asaph remembers that what may be impossible with man is possible with God. Our God is the God who works wonders and has made his strength known among the nations. Oh how the philistines trembled when God came into the camp. How the hearts of the people of Jericho and all Canaan melted at the thought, not of Israel, but Israel’s God. And yet, He is the redeemer, he is gracious and compassionate and mighty to save. Israel was never a strong nation apart from their God. They could not save themselves, they could not sustain themselves. They, like us, were contingent, dependent and needy.

But God was able to save. And save he did, for his good pleasure and his Glory he took them from their captors and destroyed their enemies.

Don't you know that God is so good? His goodness rises like a mighty wave over the bow of a burning boat and drenches the flames in one stroke. In fact, it does better than that. Hear now the music trembles softly building into a determined triumph like something from Beethoven's 5th or 9th symphony. Asaph continues:

16 The waters saw You, O God;

The waters saw You, they were in anguish;

The deeps also trembled.

17 The clouds poured out water;

The skies gave forth a sound;

Your arrows flashed here and there.

18 The sound of Your thunder was in the whirlwind;

The lightnings lit up the world;

The earth trembled and shook.

19 Your way was in the sea And Your paths in the mighty waters, And Your footprints may not be known.

20 You led Your people like a flock By the hand of Moses and Aaron.

These waters, in beautiful poetic lines hearken back to both the wrath and mercy of God when he delivered Israel from Egypt. When they had their backs against the wall and there was no way out, God showed up just in time and did the unthinkable. He saved a band of nearly faithless slaves he knew would never fully trust in him, he saved them, not because they were a great people but because he was gracious. He saved them completely. He wiped out the entire Egyptian army in one fell swoop. Some see verse 17 and 18 going back even to Noah, the day he and his family were saved from the wrath of God. These waters which writhe in anguish before the face of God represent throughout all the scripture things like chaos and turmoil, you can see it in verse 17 and 18. Its like the world has gone mad. But these waters also represent our most terrible enemy; the last enemy that will be destroyed. Death. Who of us can escape the cruel jaws of death?

When Moses and all Israel stood between the red sea and the coming Egyptian army they saw no hope. They cried out to the Lord to deliver them FROM the situation. But verse 19 (and this is the key; if you miss this you have missed the whole psalm) says God's way was IN the sea and his paths in the mighty waters. All through the psalm Asaph is looking for deliverance from something. Certainly God does deliver us from things. But more often than naught, God, in his providence, is at work though our

circumstances. He is in the waters. He is at work in every circumstance, orchestrating in one way or another, a symphony of goodness and glory. He produces, arranges and weaves every event to work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose. And though the threads seem dark and rough to us at times they are all in his good and strong sovereign hands.

We often see the trials of life, the loss of status, property, freedom, or a loved one. We see hard times where things seem to be going from bad to worse and we begin to get disappointed with God. We think that He has forgotten us; that He either doesn't know what is going on or He just doesn't care. But friends God way is IN the sea. His paths are in the mighty waters. You may not be able to see His foot prints, but He is there just the same. He is at work to bring you thorough the tribulation, not around it. Our Great Shepherd is there with you in the storm leading you "by the hand" through the valley of the shadow of death.

All that happened to Moses and Noah, we know from the New Testament, was a type which pointed to something or someone beyond the people and events themselves. The passing of the children of Israel through the red sea, salvation from the flood, was a picture (like baptism) of us dying and being raised to walk in newness of life; in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We all like sheep have gone astray. We deserve to drowned at the bottom or the Red Sea. We are Egyptians by nature. But God in his mercy has reached down and killed his son in our place. He accounted our sins to Christ and they have been punished. Not only that! He has taken the righteousness of his son, the righteousness of God and accounted it to us. It is finished! We are on the other side. We have been saved from the wrath of God. Whatever we now face we face knowing that all things work together for our good as we are conformed into his image. Come what may, God is at work in us and through us and our circumstance be it good or bad.

In our day of great tribulation we would do well to remember Christ in Gethsemane who prayed earnestly for the cup to pass from him. Alas, if it had, who would drink it? We would. But through his suffering, through his humiliation and death he gave us life, He was resurrected and He was exalted to the highest place. He had to face death, yes, but Jesus, being God was the one that could turn death back on itself so that it devoured itself. Be encouraged my brothers and sisters. Have faith and do not despair. God's paths are in the sea; they lead through the storm.

Romans 6:3-11.

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin — 7 because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. 10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. 11 In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

In our great tribulations, when we stand in the shadow of death; when we have sought comfort and solace in both wisdom and folly until we are spent and can only weep; we have, still, hope in Christ, our advocate, who intercedes and in whom we are kept as dead to sin and alive to God. In that day we can worship. Even amid the twisting, raging, torrents of tears, even from beneath the weight of our heavy hearts we can trust and worship (as Job did) the Sovereign God who delivers us providentially not often from but through the waters of all that was intended for evil but which He ordained for good. Oh how great is our God? How unsearchable are his ways.

I cried out to God with my voice—

To God with my voice;

And He gave ear to me.

2 In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord;

My hand was stretched out in the night without ceasing;

My soul refused to be comforted.

3 I remembered God, and was troubled;

I complained, and my spirit was overwhelmed. Selah

4 You hold my eyelids open;

I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

5 I have considered the days of old,

The years of ancient times.

6 I call to remembrance my song in the night;

I meditate within my heart,

And my spirit makes diligent search.

7 Will the Lord cast off forever?

And will He be favorable no more?

8 Has His mercy ceased forever?

Has His promise failed forevermore?

9 Has God forgotten to be gracious?

Has He in anger shut up His tender mercies? Selah

10 And I said, "This is my anguish;

But I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High."

11 I will remember the works of the LORD;

Surely I will remember Your wonders of old.

12 I will also meditate on all Your work,

And talk of Your deeds.

13 Your way, O God, is in the sanctuary;

Who is so great a God as our God?

14 You are the God who does wonders;

You have declared Your strength among the peoples.

15 You have with Your arm redeemed Your people,

The sons of Jacob and Joseph. Selah

16 The waters saw You, O God;

The waters saw You, they were afraid;

The depths also trembled.

17 The clouds poured out water;

The skies sent out a sound;

Your arrows also flashed about.

18 The voice of Your thunder was in the whirlwind;

The lightnings lit up the world;

The earth trembled and shook.

19 Your way was in the sea,

Your path in the great waters,

And Your footsteps were not known.

20 You led Your people like a flock

By the hand of Moses and Aaron.