

This psalm has the characteristics we have come to associate with the Asaph tradition. The poet expresses raw emotion and deep anguish over intense suffering. The psalmist feels this suffering is unjust, undeserved, and out-of-character with God's promises. He feels utterly rejected and abandoned by God. It is as if everything he ever believed about God, his promises, his unfailing love, and his compassion, have vanished into thin air *forever* (Ps 74:1, 10, 19). But then the poet makes a sudden transition that raises in sharp relief the miraculous history of God's redemptive intervention and salvation. These quick transitions are part of the Asaph style (Ps 73:15; 74:12; 75:9). The psalmist remembers the Exodus miracle and the power of God over the forces of nature. Great grief is transformed into the genuine hope of salvation history.

If the underlying historical crisis is the Babylonian captivity, as described in Psalm 74, we can see how sincere and faithful believers who have not "lost their foothold," "envied the arrogant," and "clothed themselves in violence" (Ps 73:2,3,6) could feel deep anguish and righteous sorrow as they experience the total destruction of Jerusalem. Psalm 77 stands in the faithful tradition of Asaph and Jeremiah. It wrestles with the harsh realities of becoming collateral damage in God's judgment of Israel. Faithful, innocent people suffered along with evildoers and idolaters. The vicarious experience of abandonment foreshadows the vicarious suffering of Christ, when "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).

A Grief Observed

*I cried out to God for help;
 I cried out to God to hear me.
 When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;
 at night I stretched out untiring hands,
 and I would not be comforted.
 I remembered you, God, and I groaned;
 I meditated, and my spirit grew faint.
 You kept my eyes from closing;
 I was too troubled to speak.
 I thought about the former days,
 the years long ago;
 I remembered my songs in the night.
 My heart meditated and my spirit asked:
 Will the Lord reject forever?
 Will he never show his favor again?
 Has his unfailing love vanished forever?
 Has his promise failed for all time?
 Has God forgotten to be merciful?
 Has he in anger withheld his compassion? (Selah)*

Psalm 77:1-9

There is no hint of repentance, suggesting that the psalmist does not believe he has brought this distress upon himself. He is caught up in consequences not of his making, actions provoked by others for which he is not responsible. Nevertheless he suffers. He is distraught, exhausted, and conflicted. He questions God's favor, which he cannot find. He doubts God's unfailing love, which has vanished forever. He longs for God's mercy, but what he feels is God's anger. "No one ever told me," wrote C. S. Lewis, "that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing."¹

First person singular pronouns heighten the poignancy of the psalmist's plea, but his lament is thoroughly God-centered. With every ounce of energy and in every waking moment, he cries out to God for help. Instead of escape, he seeks the Lord in his distress. "I cried. . . I sought. . . I stretched out untiring hands. . . I remembered. . . I groaned. . . I meditated, but all of his effort is to no avail. Doubt surges, comfort alludes him and his soul grows faint. He cannot sleep; he cannot speak. Every memory of God's blessing only causes him pain. He remembers his songs in the night, but now they seem like a cruel joke, because he feels rejected, forgotten, abandoned. Nevertheless, the lament is radically God-centric.

The psalmist gives free reign to his doubt and pain. He asks six heart-wrenching rhetorical questions, beginning with, "Will the Lord reject forever?" and ending with, "Has he in anger withheld his compassion?" Implicit in these questions is the fact that the Lord, and no one else, is the psalmist's principle source for communion, favor, love, promise, mercy, and compassion. Second, the absence of these vital provisions means the absence of life itself. For the psalmist and the people of God this is the most graphic way to describe their dire situation. Third, he prays expecting God to answer him and prove that God has not forgotten his people. The questions may be "a not-so-subtle prod for God to demonstrate his favor, love, grace, and compassion here and now."²

The psalmist did not choose this suffering and he was not responsible for what was happening to him. But the crisis presented him with a choice. He could reject God and indulge in self-pity. Or he could try to escape and drown out his sorrow in some form of addiction. Theologian Jerry Sittser suffered the loss of his wife, daughter, and mother in a terrible car crash caused by a drunk driver. Sittser came to see that choice is key. "We can run from the darkness or enter into the darkness and face the pain of loss. . . We can return evil for evil, or we can overcome evil with good. It is this power to choose that adds dignity to our humanity and gives us the ability to transcend our circumstances, thus releasing us from living as mere victims. These choices are never easy."³ The psalmist exercises his choice by bringing his lament to God with everything he has. All of his doubts and fears, all of his despair and anger, are brought raw into the presence of God through prayer. Devotion to God becomes the means by which loss is vented, examined, and offered up to God.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, New York: Bantam Books, 1961, 1.

² Ross, *Psalms*, vol.2, 636.

³ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 46.

The first half of the psalm ends on a question. The psalmist's life is up in the air, held in suspension between doubt and devotion. "And grief still feels like fear," wrote Lewis. "Perhaps, more strictly, like suspense. Or like waiting; just hanging about waiting for something to happen. It gives life a permanently provisional feeling."⁴ We have no way of knowing how long these questions filled the psalmist's mind or how long his memories of God's blessing caused more torment than comfort. It is fair to say that the psalm edits the narrative of hours of waiting and longing – the blank space that cannot be put in words. "Loss creates a barren present, as if one were sailing on a vast sea of nothingness." Jerry Sittser continues, "Those who suffer loss live suspended between a past for which they long and for a future for which they hope."⁵

A Grief Transcended

Then I thought, "To this I will appeal:
the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.
I will remember the deeds of the Lord;
yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.
I will consider all your works
and meditate on all your mighty deeds."
Your ways, God, are holy.
What god is as great as our God?
You are the God who performs miracles;
you display your power among the peoples.
With your mighty arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. (Selah)

*The waters saw you, God,
the waters saw you and writhed;
the very depths were convulsed.
The clouds poured down water,
the heavens resounded with thunder;
your arrows flashed back and forth.
Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind,
your lightning lit up the world;
the earth trembled and quaked.
Your path led through the sea,
your way through the mighty waters,
though your footprints were not seen.
You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.*

Psalm 77:10-20

The turning point in the psalm comes suddenly and unexpectedly without reference to outside

⁴ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 38.

⁵ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 66.

wisdom or a change in the situation. The language is terse and linguists have wrestled with the psalmist's intended meaning.⁶ The NIV anticipates the verbs that follow, "I will remember," "I will consider. . .and meditate," by adding the phrase, "Then I thought. . ." This signals a remarkable shift from doubt and despair to the first inklings of confidence and hope. Spurgeon clarifies the terse poetry of Psalm 77:10 and draws out the meaning of this critical pivot: "Here a good deal is supplied by our translators, and they make the sense to be that the psalmist would console himself by remembering the goodness of God to himself and others of his people in times gone by: but the original seems to consist only of the words, 'the years of the right hand of the most High,' and to express the idea that his long continued affliction, reaching through several years, was allotted to him by the Sovereign Lord of all. It is well when a consideration of the divine goodness and greatness silences all complaining, and creates a childlike acquiescence."⁷

"Feelings, and feelings, and feelings," remarked Lewis. "Let me try thinking instead."⁸ The psalmist endeavored to remember the Lord's great acts of deliverance so as to build his confidence.⁹ Instead of comparing his immediate troubles with previous personal blessings, he aimed for the big picture of God's miraculous acts of salvation. He exchanged the long-range view for the short-range view. Augustine characterized the psalmist's change as "leaping over himself" to contemplate the works of God's mercy.¹⁰ Instead of succumbing to his dark and depressed feelings, he is ready now to "remember the deeds of the Lord" (Ps 77:11). Augustine describes the psalmist: "Now behold him roaming among the works of the Lord."¹¹

The timing of this pivot from raw feelings of lament to remembering the Lord's mercy may depend on our capacity to receive from the Lord more than the Lord's openness to our pain. Lewis writes, "I have gradually been coming to feel that the door is no longer shut and bolted. Was it in my own frantic need that slammed it in my face? The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God can't give it: you are like the drowning man who can't be helped because it clutches and grabs. Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hope to hear."¹²

It is only when we begin to realize that our anger and self-pity do not define reality that we begin to be open to "remembering," and "meditating" on the big picture of God's mercy. Jerry Sittser writes, "The feeling self is not the center of reality. God is the center of reality. To surrender to God, however contrary to our emotions, will lead to liberation from self and will open us to a world that is much bigger and grander than we are."¹³

⁶ There is considerable translation debate over verse 10. The ESV reads, "Then I said, 'I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.'" The 1662 Prayer Book version reads, "And I said, 'It is mine own infirmity: but I will remember the years of the right hand of the most Highest.'"

⁷ Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, Psalm 77.

⁸ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 41.

⁹ Ross, *Psalms*, 637.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Psalm 77*, 363.

¹¹ Augustine, *Psalm 77*, 363.

¹² Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 54.

¹³ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 101.

The whole demeanor of the psalmist changes.¹⁴ Kidner observes, “By the end of the psalm the pervasive “I” has disappeared and the objective facts of the faith have captured all his attention and all of ours.”¹⁵ Before he cried and groaned all through the night and refused comfort and sleep, but now he calmly ponders the mighty deeds of the Lord. The depth of his despair is matched and transcended by his unrestrained reveling in God’s miraculous acts of redemption. He declares to God for all to hear, “Your ways, God, are holy” (Ps 77:13). The shift from personal pain and sorrow to the shared hope of salvation is remarkable: “With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph” (Ps 77:15).

The psalmist returns to the song of Moses and Miriam for inspiration (Exodus 15:1-18). He paraphrases and embellishes the Exodus text. “Poetic freedom heightens and personalizes the drama. . . .But it is a true picture of God’s sway over nature.”¹⁶ To pray this psalm today is to remember the miraculous power of the Incarnate One who rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” (Mark 4:39). The psalmist is mindful that Yahweh is the Lord of History and that the essential fact of human existence is not oppression and revolution, but atonement and salvation. The Book of Exodus bears witness to God’s strategy for redemption. We see God’s saving action running like a thin red line through human history. As civilizations and empires come and ago, Israel’s exodus may not show up as even a blip on history’s time line, but what God did for Israel is what he seeks to do for all people. The Passover and the blood of the lamb are not referenced explicitly but they stand behind everything that is said and point forward to the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ.

The redemptive power of God is expressed in images of thunder, lightning, whirlwind and earthquake. By noting the absence of God’s footprints the psalmist, without meaning to, causes Christians to think of the Incarnate One. Jesus literally walked this earth. He left actual footprints and John the Baptist claimed he wasn’t worthy to even untie his sandals (John 1:27). Ross concludes, “Whereas the psalmist recalled the greatest act of salvation in Israel’s history, the exodus, Christians recall a greater salvation provided for them in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. Deliverance for all suffering and death is thereby assured; but until that happens, we are to follow Jesus’ example and seek to use our suffering to help others (1 Pet 2:19).”¹⁷

The psalm’s abrupt ending is consistent with Asaph’s literary style. The brief mention of Moses and Aaron’s shepherding leadership over the flock of Israel serves as a fitting segue to Psalm 78 and its historical review of God’s mercy and Israel’s stubborn failure to trust in Yahweh. The prophet Habakkuk may have drawn on Psalm 77 in his description of Exodus redemption and God’s deliverance. Franz Delitzsch concluded, “Where our Psalm leaves off, Habakkuk, chapter

¹⁴ James Boice, *Psalms*, vol 2. 638. Boice notes, “As we go through the psalm, one thing to pay special attention to is the pronouns. In the NIV, in the first six verses of the psalm there are eighteen occurrences of the first person singular pronoun (I or me), and six references to God by name, title, and pronoun. In the last eight verses (vv13-20) there are twenty-one mentions of God and no personal references at all.”

¹⁵ Kidner, *Psalms*, 277.

¹⁶ Kidner, *Psalms*, 280.

¹⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, 640.

3, goes on, taking it up from the point of continuation.”¹⁸ James Boice concludes that the prophet’s statement, “The righteous will live by his faith” (Hab 2:4), would be a fitting end for Psalm 77.¹⁹

¹⁸ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 349. Delitzsch argued that Psalm 77 was dependent on Habakkuk rather than the other way around. He claimed to have proven in his commentary on Habakkuk (1843) “that the mutual relationship is one that is deeply grounded in the prophetic type of Habakkuk, and that the Psalm is heard to re-echo in Habakkuk, not Habakkuk in the language of the psalmist.”

¹⁹ Boice, *Psalms*, 643.