

Psalm 77: "The Questions Depression Asks" - A Sermon by Daniel Ventura

### **Background to the Psalms**

The Psalms express the whole range of human emotions. In the Psalms there is a progression from the feeling of despair to doxology (颂赞) . Our Psalm concerns a man named Asaph, who expresses first his despair in a real way. And as we look at Asaph and how it is he is able to move from despair to doxology.

### **Introduction**

Depression and anxiety are realities for Christians and non-Christians alike. We live in a world that is under a common curse (咒诅) ever since the fall of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the garden. And so we all share in the same sufferings and afflictions (痛苦) at times. There are external affliction: the loss of a loved one, loss of job, physical disabilities, sickness, natural disasters, and the list goes on. There are internal affliction:

discouragement/anxiety/discontentment (不满足) - in our struggle against sin. There are spiritual afflictions: battles the world, the flesh, the devil.

Contrary to some popular teachings of Christianity, we know that when we become a Christian it is by no means a ticket out of the trials (试炼) of this life. If you have been a Christian for a while you can know first hand that is the case. It was Jesus himself so said to his disciples, "In this world you will have tribulation (苦难) . But take heart; I have overcome the world." - John 16:33. So for us as well, tribulation and suffering is the pattern we follow, and it is not long before we find our self-asking the same questions that Asaph asked in this Psalm.

I do not doubt that there may be some here today that are full of anxiety and doubt, who are in valley of despair. Even if you are not there right now, you ought not tune out (置之不理) this Psalm, because you will be there at some point. Boys and girls, it is God's kindness to prepare you with good theology before you enter the dark valleys. So let learn from Asaph's testimony, and discover how he was able to move from despair to doxology. Our three points will be Asaph's Cry for help, Asaph's conversation with himself, and Asaph's confession of hope.

### **Cry for help (1-4)**

His cry begins with confidence, but then leads quickly to despair. Asaph demonstrates the

natural response of Gods child when affliction comes, he cries out to God as his heavenly Father.

This is the evidence of a true believer. He does not curse God, but cries out to him V.1-3.

We do not know what the circumstance was the caused these dark nights – was it is indwelling sin (like David), was it physical pain, or another circumstance? I’ve heard one person describe depression as a bruise (瘀伤, 青肿) in the heart and in the mind. Sometimes you know where a bruise comes from, but sometimes you do not. When your depressed, you simply can’t imagine anything turning out for good, and it seems as though death itself has you in its grip (掌控). In the previous Psalm, Asaph is recounting the holiness and judgment of God, and he calls for the kings of the earth toe fear Him. Read Psalm 76:7-9,12. Perhaps this is leading Asaph to consider his own sin, and how he can be reconciled before this Holy and awesome God. Maybe he is in great physical distress or stricken with disease as v.4 might indicate (“troubled” can also be translated as “bruised” KJV). Whatever the circumstance, he is crying out to the Lord, and his hand is stretched out in the night without wearing.

Whatever his situation, this is real prayer during a season of great desperation(绝望) – although he receives no comfort, his hands do not cease being stretched out to God. It seems as though he is not able to say many words at this point, but is struggling to make some sort of plea (恳求) to God through moaning (悲叹) and (v.4) – he is probably thinking, “What is going on, I am pouring out my heart and troubles before God in prayer, and instead of receiving comfort and support, I find only more tears, more sleepless nights, and an overwhelmed soul. I do not even know the words to pray anymore...” I wonder if you have been there?

It has been said of the preacher, Charles Spurgeon, that he experienced for over 20 years mental and physical illness (depression, neuralgia 神经痛, gout 痛风, so bad that he could not walk or write at times). He wrote this about Psalm 77, “Some of us know what it is, both physically and spiritually, to be compelled to use these words; no respite (暂时停止, 休息) has afforded us by the silence of the night, our bed has been a rack (刑架) to us, our body has

been in torment, and our spirit in anguish...Alas, my God...Deep valleys and lonely caves of soul depressions, my spirit knows full well your awful gloom ( 忧郁 )!” Asaph is here, sitting in the awful gloom. And after not hearing an answer from God, he turns within and begins to have a conversation with himself.

### **Conversation w/ himself (5-9)**

Sin naturally turns us inward. Asaph is now struggling to remember how he used to feel when he wasn't in the deep valley. Asaph is trying to remember the songs he used to sing in the night, and the meditations he used to feel in his heart. What is significant is 1 Chronicles 16, Asaph describes this song (Read 1 Chronicles 16). Asaph was appointed by David to minister before the ark ( 约柜 ) regularly. But doubts begin to sink in as the feelings he once felt are no longer there, but instead there is an inner storm raging ( 肆虐 ) within his heart. This leads Asaph to openly question God. Many commentators ( 释经者 ) believe these were questions Israel as a nation must have had during the dark nights of exile. He questions God's character, God's goodness, God's faithfulness, and God's covenant love.

Have these questions been in your heart? Doubts concerning the promises of God? Is Christ really my only comfort in life and in death? John Calvin has said, “Surely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged ( 受影响 ) with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety.” So are these questions bad to ask? We are allowed to sing them, Right? One reason God gave us the Psalms was to use them for prayer when we don't have the words to say. God sees our heart when we pray, and these questions are not hidden from him, and so we ought to bring our anxieties and doubts to him, acknowledging them as sinful and unfounded given the clear testimony of his faithfulness. We must be honest and real, but not content to stay there. We are called to be conformed in our minds, hearts, and affections to Jesus Christ.

But how does this happen? I want to be sensitive here - I am not talking about cultural methods, pop psychology ( 现代心理学 ), positive thinking, or medications, but about one

example of a man who has been there. How will he resolve this inner storm? Will he look within to find the answer? Will he try and read providence ( 上帝的护理 ) , searching for the “why” in his circumstances? Will he adopt a kind of moralism – or bootstrap theology ( 靴?理?, 引?程序 ) just pick yourself up and keep going? These all have some aspect of truth, but what will get to the heart of the issue. Notice he begins to look without – outside himself, specifically above.

The gospel turn us outward.

Before he was concerned with “Me, Myself, and I.” (1-6) These personal pronouns are used 13 times. But he shifts in the Psalm to “You” – Your mighty deeds, your works, your ways, your right arm. Before we considered God in a generic ( 通用的 ) way: “Lord, and God” (adoni, and elohim). Later in the Psalm he considers “God the Most High” (El Elyon) – which is the exalted one. He considers the covenant name for God, “LORD” (Yahweh). He begins to consider the deeds of the LORD, and how his mighty arm worked salvation for his people in the days of old. Before he was remembering his past experiences compared to his present circumstances, but now his focus is on what God has done for his people. And this leads to his... **Confession of hope (v.13)**

Asaph says in v. 13, "Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God?" It is only when Asaph looked outside of himself to the right hand of God in history that his questions changed. God met Asaph as he persevered ( 持守于 ) in prayer through that awful gloom in that painful sleepless night. He endured through remembering, pondering, and meditating on what God had done in history.

In our age this is especially hard given the technology and the many distractions around us. So many things keep us from meditating upon what God has done. I appreciate how John Calvin put it in his commentary, “The reason why so many examples of the grace of God contribute nothing to our profit, and fail in edifying our faith, is, that as soon as we have begun to make them the subjects of our consideration, our infidelity ( 不忠实 ) draws us away to something else, and thus, at the very commencement ( 开始, 开端 ) , our minds soon lose sight

of them.”

Beloved, when the day of trouble falls upon you, don't run away from God. Don't simply distract your self from the pain inside? Yes, we do need to get out of the home, and do things with other people, and not simply dwell on our problems, but take time to cry out God like Asaph, and take time to meditate on his promises and deeds of old. Continue to entrust yourself to God's love and faithfulness which does not change.

### **Conclusion**

But what exactly was Asaph remembering about the Lords wondrous deeds? What Old Testament event of God's right hand was embedded on his mind? It was the Exodus event where God redeemed his people through the Red Sea, delivering them out of the land of Egypt, leading them as a Shepherd. This was the central redemptive act ( 救赎行动 ) in Old Testament when God's right hand gloriously delivered his people through the red sea. This great act led to songs, and generations of remembrance and meditation all throughout the OT story. Indeed, the parting of the waters meant salvation for Israel, as they escaped from Pharaoh. But for Pharaoh's army this was an act of judgment, as the waters overwhelmed and covered them. These events were not only to stay in the minds of Jew's, but are also for us, because this event serves as a paradigm ( 范例, 样式 ) of an even greater display of God's right hand in history, as manifested in the Lord Jesus Christ. Although the Exodus was a real historical manifestation of God's right hand of salvation, it was still a movie trailer ( 电影预告片 ) pointing forward to the coming attraction, when the Lord himself would come to us in Jesus Christ. This is our story.

We celebrate the fact that God the Son took on human flesh, and entered into the awful gloom of human history in order to bring his people out of spiritual darkness. Isaiah called him the Man of Sorrows, since he was acquainted with grief in his life. Remember in Luke 9:30 how Moses and Elijah speaking with Jesus about his Exodus that he was going to accomplish at Jerusalem. Just as God brought Israel out of the land of Egypt by the hands of Moses and Aaron, so to in Christ God is bringing his people out of the of darkness and bondage to sin, out from

under the tyranny ( 暴政 ) of the true Pharaoh, the devil, in order that we may enter our promised rest. How has he led us?

Jesus' cross is our Red Sea – the cross is where salvation and judgment meet. It is the place where darkness covered the land for three hours, because the Son of God was taking upon the judgment waters of God's wrath as our sins were laid upon him. Therefore, to believe in Jesus' cross is to receive God's salvation, to pass through the judgment waters of God on dry ground. The questions that Asaph asked became a reality for Jesus on the cross. The essence of these questions in Psalm 77 is summed up in that one question Christ from the cross, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" For Asaph the Lord did not shut up his compassion and removed his steadfast love, but for Christ it "It was the will of the Father to crush him," and this for our sakes.

So that now, beloved, in times when we feel like God has spurned ( 轻视地拒绝 ) us, or forsaken us, or forgotten to be gracious, we are at a more privileged position than Asaph to remember the faithfulness of God. There is no wrath left over, but only God's Fatherly care as he leads us even through the storm of life. "When through the deep waters I call thee to go, thy rivers of sorrow shall not overflow. For I shall be with thee, thy trouble to bless, and sanctify ( 使成圣 ) to thee thy deepest distress." Take comfort in the faithfulness of God's right hand supremely displayed in the gospel of Lord Jesus Christ. For Christ has also been raised from the dead out of the awful gloom and is now seated at the right hand of the Father.

It is not only the this Psalm and the Psalms in general that move from despair to doxology, but this is the end to which all things move now for those who love God. Christ is leading his people like a flock to a place of perfect peace, where he will wipe away tears from all faces, and death will be no more, neither will there be mourning or crying, for the former things have passed away." But what are we to do until that day, when we find ourselves in the valley of despair? We are to continue to entrust ourselves to our God who has manifested his love and

faithfulness to us in Jesus Christ. The Man of Sorrows does not forget the sorrow that is often carried in the hearts of his people. But “looks down from heaven upon [our] afflictions, and sympathizes ( 同情 ) with us as our elder brother.”

If depression is like a bruise, then God’s love is like a balm ( 香膏 ) , which soothes and restores. It’s not a quick fix, but something you gently apply over the course of a lifetime.

Therefore, when we find ourselves crying out for help, and beginning to have those conversations within ourselves, let us appeal to our Good Shepherd, who has loved us by suffering for us and suffering like us. He is the one who knows our affliction, and is leading us even now through the storms of this life, to our heavenly rest.