

May 17, 2020

“The Way Forward” Psalm 77

FCF: The dark night of the soul

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Knowing well the struggles of the journey,
(magnet) the Lord shows us the way forward.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

“The dark night of the soul.” It’s a malady many Christians have suffered through the ages. It caused David to soak his pillow with tears. It is why Jeremiah is called “the Weeping Prophet.” It was the burden that afflicted Martin Luther, John Bunyan, and Charles Spurgeon. It is a depression tied to a crisis of faith, a terrible crisis that comes with the felt absence of God.

It is not an uncommon experience for the Christian. That may surprise you. But what should encourage you is that the Lord knows this and gladly guides us through such dark nights.

SCRIPTURE READING: Psalm 77

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

The film *The Lost City of Z* portrays the events surrounding the British explorer Percy Fawcett, who was sent to Brazil in 1906 and made several attempts after that to find an ancient lost city in the Amazon. Fawcett was obsessed with his quest. These journeys were hazardous - wild creatures, hostile natives, rough terrain, long distances, partial maps - all without the many tools we take for granted today. As I watched the film, I thought, “If only they had a guide, someone who not only knew the way through the jungle but who would stick with them.”

Which brings us to Psalm 77. The Psalms were the songbook for God’s covenant people. At least one third of these 150 psalms are laments. They make up the largest category of songs in the Psalter. That’s well worth noting. And we would do well to get acquainted with them. For the Christian life is a journey that is not always easy. That said, there is a Guide. There is One who knows the way through and has promised to stick with us. And that is the Lord Himself. Knowing well the struggles of the journey, the Lord shows us the way forward.

Knowing well the struggles of the journey, the Lord shows us the way forward. What does that way look like? What are the marks of this path? There are three we need know. First, the place of lamentation. Second, the need for meditation. And, third, the way to resolution.

I. THE PLACE OF LAMENTATION

First, the place of lamentation. That the psalmist begins here is wonderfully surprising.

A) Honesty

There is such honesty here (**READ Psalm 77:1-3**). He speaks with such honesty.

1. He is not afraid

He is not afraid. He is not bottling things up. He speaks within the flow of a relational history.

2. He is not silent

He is not afraid. And so he is not silent. The psalmist is not pretending. He is praying in pain.

B) Openness

There is such honesty displayed here. And such openness (**READ Psalm 77:4-9**).

1. Painful memories

His pleasant memories bring him pain. He thinks back to how things were. His past joys collide with his present sorrow. “What is happening? How can this be?” There is a bewilderment.

2. Hard questions

And from that come some hard questions - six pointed rhetorical questions. His past joys collide with his present sorrow. And, worse, his past certainties collide with his present circumstances.

And he speaks it. Which is wonderfully surprising. This is how we are shown to pray.

Illustration:

Much like we read in John 11 with the conversation between Jesus and Mary as Mary meets Jesus on His way to her brother Lazarus’ tomb. What did she say to Jesus? (**READ John 11:32**). And what was Jesus’ response? Not rebuke or rejection (**READ John 11:33-35**).

Application:

This is still how Jesus receives us. After all, it takes faith to pray a lament. To lament is to see the suffering clearly and feel it deeply. It is to hold that in tension with what you know to be true of the Lord. And it is to talk to Him about it - honestly and openly. That’s what we see.

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II. THE NEED FOR MEDITATION

That brings us to the need for meditation (**READ Psalm 77:10-12**). This is the turning point, the hinge of the psalm. And there are two parts to this - an appealing and a remembering.

A) Appealing

1. What that means

What does it mean to appeal? In a legal setting, a case can be referred from a lower to a higher court. Lawyers appeal a case when they hope for a different verdict from what they’ve received.

2. How that works

How does that work here? The psalmist is arguing with the ruling, the verdict of his heart that said things were hopeless. The ruling is unsatisfying so he appeals. What then does he do?

B) Remembering

1. Deeply

He remembers. And deeply so - not merely reciting the facts but pondering, dwelling upon them.

2. Historically

He remembers deeply. And historically. His pondering is not untethered from the truth. This is biblical meditation - not emptying but filling the mind. In this case, the psalmist is dwelling on (**READ Psalm 77:10b**) - the deeds, the wonders of old, the work, the mighty deeds of the Lord.

In the context of lament, the turning point comes with meditation. That’s vital to know.

Application:

This can sound like a message from outer space to the crazy busy people of planet Earth. For meditation means time, time slowing down and being still, time asking God to work the truths of Scripture into the depths of our being. Which can sound so foreign to us. Think of how hard that is even in weeks of “shelter in place.” It just feels foreign. But it can be so restorative.

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III. THE WAY TO RESOLUTION

Which brings us to the way of resolution. Where does the psalmist direct his gaze? In his troubled present, he looks to what God has done in the past. We see that in vv.13-20 (**READ Psalm 77:13-15**). Then he describes the exodus - the greatest act of God’s mercy to that point. Meditating upon this, what effect does this have? Two things - a regaining and a refocusing.

A) Regaining

First, as you read the whole psalm, you can see a regaining of sanity and perspective.

1. From self-occupation

In vv.1-9, it’s quite striking the number of first person singular pronouns we read. Which is what pain often does. It makes us self-occupied. Our vision narrows. We become near-sighted.

2. To God-occupation

But as we keep reading, we see the self-occupation shift to a God-occupation. We start to see far more second person singular pronouns. Which is a wise place to be since the Lord is the central figure of all reality. He is the gravitational force around which everything rightly orbits.

B) Refocusing

So we see this regaining. And then also a refocusing. That becomes clear at the end.

1. Where he stops

Look where the psalmist stops in his remembering and meditating (**READ Psalm 77:20**). It’s as though he is saying, “That’s it. That’s what I needed. The assurance of God’s boundless power and steady presence, His standing far above me and walking right beside me at the same time.”

2. That’s enough

That’s where he stops because that’s enough. For if that is all true, then whatever may come, we know the Lord will not let us go. All our troubles then begin to shrink - not necessarily disappear but shrink in comparison to the greatness of these assurances. They can’t compare or compete.

But, again, the way to this resolution begins with lamentation and meditation.

Application:

The psalmist looked back on the exodus. What do we have to look upon? As much as he had, we have so much more. He was waiting for the Messiah. All that held and sustained him - great as it was - was but preparing for Jesus’ coming. His life, death, and resurrection. Oh, how much more we can see how much the Lord is for us. That’s where walking this path brings us.

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CONCLUSION:

Behind our seeking Him is His seeking us. We yearn for Him because He yearns for us. We pursue the Lord this way only because we are being pursued. The Bible is clear on this. The Lord knows this path. He has walked it Himself. We see that in the Gospels. Jesus has walked every step of this path Himself. He calls us to follow Him on it. And promises to be our Guide.

Think of what are often called “wilderness experiences” - these ventures where you are given minimal gear, taken out into the woods, and left there to figure things out and fend for yourself. The theory behind it all being, “If it doesn’t kill you, it will make you stronger.” Well, here’s the thing. That’s not how the journey of faith works. Left to figure things out and fend for yourself, this wilderness will kill you. So this Guide has promised to stay with us. And He does.

So much so that Jesus gives us the very words to pray, the very words to express our lost aching hearts, the very words that He will use to restore our lost aching hearts and bring us far through to the other side. For He has promised never to leave or forsake us, not in the least.

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