

Summer Psalms

*“Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night. (Psalm 1:1-2 ESV)*

A Diagram For Distress

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Psalm 77

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Good morning, everyone. It is good to be with you all this morning. If you have a Bible with you, would you please open it now to Psalm 77. We have spent the last number of weeks working through the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. We have seen who we are in Christ. We have seen what WE ARE and what we need to BECOME. And last week we saw the overarching effect that becoming who we are will have on the world. Jesus has described the character and the norms of the Christian and then he showed us the INFLUENCE and WITNESS that truly living out the beatitudes will have on the world. That is a natural place to stop in the Sermon on the Mount and it allows us to spend the next number of weeks looking in a different direction.

We have spent a lot of time discussing who we are and what that means. I wanted to spend some time looking through various Psalms and seeing how they EMPOWER and EQUIP us to live out all that we have just talked about. The Psalms serve numerous functions in the Bible. We will see that over the next number of weeks. One of their functions, which we will focus on this morning, is that the Psalms help guide and shape our emotions. Throughout the Psalms there are great declarations of praise and joy and there are also Psalms that are full of sorrow and grief. The Psalms run the emotional gamut. They span the entire emotional spectrum so that, no matter where we are at, we can come and allow our emotions and our thoughts to be shaped by God's Word. The Psalms are one of the ultimate examples of God meeting us where we are at.

This morning, we are turning our attention to Psalm 77, a Psalm of lament. It is a Psalm that helps guide us in our sorrow and suffering. It kneels down in the muck and the mess of life beside us. It meets us in our darkness, and it helps point us to the light. The more I have studied this Psalm the more I have come to appreciate it as a wonderful example of the normal pattern of distress for the believer. It shows us the natural rhythms of someone who knows the Lord and how that influences the way they suffer. Hopefully you have your Bibles open now to Psalm 77.

Hear now the Word of the Lord.

I cry aloud to God,
aloud to God, and he will 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 When I remember God, I moan;
when I meditate, my spirit faints. Selah

4 You hold my eyelids open;
I am so troubled that I cannot speak.
5 I consider the days of old,
the years long ago.
6 I said, "Let me remember my song in the night;
let me meditate in my heart."
Then my spirit made a diligent search:
7 "Will the Lord spurn forever,
and never again be favorable?
8 Has his steadfast love forever ceased?
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

10 Then I said, "I will appeal to this,
to the years of the right hand of the Most High."

11 I will remember the deeds of the Lord;
yes, I will remember your wonders of old.
12 I will ponder all your work,
and meditate on your mighty 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 might among the peoples.

15 You with your arm redeemed your people,
the children of Jacob and Joseph. Selah

16 When the waters saw you, O God,
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;
indeed, the deep trembled.

17 The clouds poured out water;
the skies gave forth thunder;
your arrows flashed on every side.

18 The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;
your lightnings lighted up the world;
the earth trembled and shook.

19 Your way was through the sea,
your path through the great waters;
yet your footprints were unseen.

20 You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.” (Psalm 77:1-20)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

A Diagram for Distress

As I alluded to, this passage help serves as a pattern, a diagram of distress. It shows us the normal human response to suffering and distress and it also shows how having a relationship with God changes the way we respond. The very title of the Psalm “In the Day of Trouble I Seek the Lord.” Speaks to this pattern. We all experience days of trouble. To be human is to know days of trouble. One of the results of the fall is that the world has been corrupted by sin. Everything we see and know in the World has been touched by sin. It is why trouble is unavoidable.

We are impacted by hurricanes, forest fires, all sorts of natural disasters, we are surrounded by diseases and decay. Our lives are complicated by conflict and strife. Each and every one of us knows that it is to live in days of trouble.

Growing up my mom would always sing “my mama said there would be days like this, but she didn’t say how many.” I can hear her singing it now. Now it turns out that the second line wasn’t part of the song and the song itself is about hoping for good days, not necessarily lamenting bad

days. Either way, it is stuck in my mind as a song about the bad days that come. My mama said there would be days like this.

Days of trouble come, and this Psalm helps teach us what to expect in those days and how to respond. The first step we see in this diagram for distress is:

1. Disruption

This is the natural starting point. The day of trouble will come. We will experience distress, and distress brings DISRUPTION. It throws a wrench in our plans. It causes hurt and sadness, anger and frustration. It leads us to weep, to cry out, to question. Like a child shaking a snow globe it takes our calm and quiet life and turns it into a blizzard of chaos and confusion.

The day of trouble WILL come, and it will bring disruption. It will disturb our peace. We see this right in the beginning of the Psalm. Verses 2-4 say:

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 When I remember God, I moan;
 when I meditate, my spirit faints. Selah
 4 You hold my eyelids open;
 I am so troubled that I cannot speak. (Psalm 77:2-4 ESV)

My soul refuses to be comforted, my spirit faints, I moan, I am so troubled I cannot speak. This is the state of the Psalmist's soul. This is the disruption of his soul that naturally happens when suffering comes.

It is interesting to note that the kind of suffering the Psalmist is experiencing isn't mentioned here. Often in the Psalms, especially in the Psalms of David, we will be given a reason or a hint as to why the Psalmist is rejoicing or lamenting. Here there is no such detail. One of the things we can draw from the absence of that detail is that the focus of this Psalm is not about the EXTENT of the suffering, it is about the EXPERIENCE of suffering.

Let me say that again to make sure it is clear. This Psalm is not about the EXTENT of suffering. It is about the EXPERIENCE of suffering.

That is an important distinction. So often Christians downplay their own emotional distress because their situation isn't as bad as others. Or, even worse, they will downplay someone else's emotional distress because other people have it worse.

Look, there will always be someone who has it worse than you. There is always going to be situations that are more difficult and more painful. That 100% does not DELIGITIMIZE YOUR PAIN. One of the reasons Psalms like this exist is to give us the PERMISSION to feel and express our despair. It is okay to hurt. It is okay to say that you are hurting. There are people sitting here this morning that need to hear that.

You don't have to have it altogether. You don't need to be perfectly composed and have a smile plastered on your face. I grew up in a house with four siblings, I know what it's like to have the family screaming and crying on Sunday morning and, as soon as we get in the Church parking lot it is all sunshine, roses, and smiles. You don't have to do that.

Listen, life is hard. Suffering is painful. It can be EXCRUCIATING. You don't have to simply grin and bear it. So often we feel like we have but on a brave face. We will say things like "yeah it's hard but were trusting in God" which is an awesome statement... If you mean it.

But we don't always mean it do we? We say it because we feel like we should. We say it because that's "the Christian" thing to say. But it's not always true of us.

When we put on the fake Christian slogans and sayings, when we don't allow ourselves to feel the pain and the despair, when we don't allow ourselves to go THROUGH THE PROCESS than we actually inhibit and damage our ability to heal.

Now, let me be clear here. This Psalm isn't encouraging us to WALLOW in our pain and suffering. That would be to jump from one ditch right into the other. This Psalm is encouraging

us to ACKNOWLEDGE and EXPRESS our pain and hurt. It is not telling us to SIT THERE in our pain and despair. We have to work THROUGH it.

That implies movement. It implies forward progress. But we cannot make proper, healthy, progress if we merely ignore the pain. We have to deal with it. We have to Acknowledge it and then put it in its proper place. THAT is what this Psalm is telling us to do.

Because the suffering is real. The disruption is real. The tears and the pain are real. You are allowed to feel them. It is okay to admit that things are dark, and you don't know or understand what God is doing. It is part of the process. Which leads us to the next step in the diagram for distress:

2. Doubt

Suffering and distress naturally lead to despair and our despair often leads us to doubt. It leads us to ask questions. We see the Psalmist get to this point in verse 7. Look there in your Bibles with me.

“Will the Lord spurn forever,
and never again be favorable?
8 Has his steadfast love forever ceased?
Are his promises at an end for all time?
9 Has God forgotten to be gracious?
Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” (Psalm 77:7-9 ESV)

The Psalmist is looking at his situation. He is feeling the despair, he is feeling tired and worn out and he is struggling to see how his experience lines up with God's word. Notice that these questions contain a lot of COVENANT language. He asks about God's steadfast love, his *Hesed*, his covenant love. He asks about his promises ending.

The psalmist is asking these covenant questions because he is struggling to see how God is keeping his covenant promises to him in the midst of his circumstances. He is crying out to God “you said you would save me, you said you would bless us, you said you would be faithful to us, you promised to deliver us, where is that? Where is my deliverance? Where is my salvation from my suffering?”

Listen, it is good and okay to ask these questions. It is good to pray to God and ask him how he is keeping his promises. Tremper Longman III says this well when he writes:

“The very presence of this prayer in the Psalms makes it clear that God invites his people’s honest and courageous prayers”¹

Listen to that, God invites your honest and courageous prayers. It is entirely okay, and not only okay, it is actually good to pray God’s Word back to him. We need to make space in the way we live out our faith for these kinds of prayers. We need to allow ourselves to pray things like “God you promised in Romans 8 that you are working all things for the good of those who love you. God, I love you, but I don’t see how this is good. I don’t see your hand in this. I don’t get it. I am confused and hurting, and I need you help.”

One of the most beautiful, one of the most GLORIOUS realities of the Christian faith is that we have a God who hears us. We have a God who listens, and we have a God who RESPONDS. In Genesis 18 Abraham negotiates with God over the destruction of Sodom. In Exodus 33 Moses asks God not to abandon the Israelites and God agrees. God isn’t some cosmic divine watchmaker who created the universe, set it in motion and left it alone. No. God intervenes. He is ACTIVE. He is ENGAGED with his people. It’s why Hebrews says:

“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16 ESV)

It is why James 4:8 says:

“Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” (James 4:8a ESV)

It is why Jesus says:

¹ Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 15–16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 287.

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28 ESV)

God invites our questions and our concerns. So often, we treat doubting and questioning as this taboo, irredeemable sin. We act as if voicing our doubts or our questions would immediately make us an outcast and an untouchable. Yet this Psalm is telling us that it is okay to have questions. It is okay to not understand how God is using our circumstances for our good. It is okay to not know why God has ordained your suffering.

That’s another aside I want to mention here quickly. Notice that at no point does the psalmist hold anyone else responsible for his circumstances. He knows that God is the one who is sovereign and that everything happens according to God’s sovereign plan. Just like the Apostle Paul on the stormy seas in Acts 27 and just like Job, we see that God is the one who is in charge. Our hardship is never random or meaningless. It is never outside of God’s control or will.

That’s not the primary emphasis of the Psalm but I think it’s worth pointing out. It is a useful reminder. The emphasis here is that you are allowed to feel the pain of your circumstances and you’re suffering. Nowhere in the Bible are you told to pretend to be happy. You are allowed to feel despair. You are allowed to question and have doubts.

When James tells us:

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,” (James 1:2 ESV)

He is not telling us to pretend to be happy. We aren’t being told to fake joy and trust in God. No. What we see as the consistent message of the Bible is that we are allowed, and in fact, we are encouraged to go THROUGH THE PROCESS. To feel the pain and the hurt. To weep with those who weep. To question and to wonder. BUT WE DO NOT LIVE THERE.

That is the point. As with most things there are ditches on either side of the road. Often we don’t allow ourselves to go through the process. We don’t allow ourselves to feel the pain and the hurt as we should. We bottle it up and pretend everything is okay because we’re supposed to “count it all joy”. Or we go in the other ditch, and we feel the pain and we allow ourselves to question and

doubt but we don't move on. We don't progress through the process. We get stuck in the mud and the mess. We sit in it and we wallow in our emotions.

This Psalm shows us the process. It shows us that it is good and healthy to feel the brokenness AND it shows us the way to move forward. That is the third thing we see in the diagram for distress:

3. Deciding

Verse 10 serves as the hinge, the turning point, in this Psalm. You can see it visibly in the way the Psalm is broken up and you can see it through the word "then" at the beginning of verse 10, which reads:

Then I said, "I will appeal to this,
to the years of the right hand of the Most High." (Psalm 77:10 ESV)

Verses 11-20 serve to expand what is being said in verse 10. The Psalmist goes on in verse 11 to say how he will remember God's wonders of old, he will ponder his work, he will meditate on his mighty deeds. All of this is MENTAL language. It is THINKING language.

The Psalmist is saying I have DECIDED to THINK about what God has done and who he has PROVEN himself to be. He is allowing his mind to guide and direct his heart. He is doing what we are called to do in Romans 12, he is being transformed by the renewing of his MIND.

What we need to see hear is that the first half of the Psalm tells us that our emotions are VALID and IMPORTANT, and the second half reminds us they are not AUTHORITATIVE. They do not and can not dictate how we live.

The Psalmist doesn't talk about feeling and experiencing. The pivot point is when he decides to SPEAK TO HIMSELF. Listen to how Derek Kidner captures this change.

“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.”²

The Psalmist begins to move forward by looking BEYOND HIMSELF. That’s important for us to hear. So much of the therapy and counselling that is done in the world is far too introspective. It doesn’t move us past ourselves. It teaches us that we have to learn to find peace within before anything else.

What we are seeing here is that inner peace comes from understanding and accepting what is TRUE. It comes from understanding that true peace can only be found in right relationship with God. It comes from accepting that we are not perfect and that only through faith in Jesus can we have any true or lasting hope.

As Kidner said, it is the objective facts of the faith that we need to remember. The Psalmist looks back upon the story of the Exodus as God’s great redemptive act in the Old Testament. He paints a vivid picture of the SPECTACLE that was the Exodus.

Sometimes we become so familiar with certain Bible stories that we begin to take them for granted. I think that we have talked about the Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelite people so much that we have lost sight of how truly EPIC and BREATHTAKING it was.

Try, if you can, to imagine that you are an Israelite fleeing Egypt, standing on the banks of the Red Sea as the Egyptian army comes to bring you back into captivity. Imagine the roar of the hoofbeats and the thundering of the chariots as the Egyptian army storms towards you. Now listen to the words of the Psalmist.

“The clouds poured out water;
the skies gave forth thunder;
your arrows flashed on every side.

¹⁸ The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;

² Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 306.

your lightnings lighted up the world;
 the earth trembled and shook.
¹⁹ Your way was through the sea,
 your path through the great waters;
 yet your footprints were unseen.
²⁰ You led your people like a flock
 by the hand of Moses and Aaron.” (Psalm 77:17-20 ESV)

His lightning lighted up the World. The Earth Trembled and shook. The Seas Parted. He Led his people to redemption. This scene would have been MIND BLOWING. It is INCREDIBLE. It was EPIC.

God ordained to redeem his people in the most epic way possible. Through ten NATIONAL plagues, through the MIRACULOUS and MAJESTIC crossing of the Red Sea to ensure that his people NEVER FORGOT.

There is NO WAY the Israelite people would ever let their ancestors forget what God had done for them!

So, the Psalmist remembers. He knows what God has done for him. He has seen God’s faithfulness to his people on FULL DISPLAY and he DECIDES to trust in it. He is like the Father in Mark 9 crying out:

“I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24b ESV)

Of course, as Christians we have an even GREATER and MORE MIRACULOUS act of redemption to look back on as the ULTIMATE DISPLAY of God’s faithfulness and goodness. You see, we just highlighted how AMAZING and INCREDIBLE the EXODUS was. It was this BREATHTAKING act of redemption. Yet, it is like a little tea light next to the BONFIRE that is the CROSS of JESUS CHRIST.

The Exodus DOESN’T EVEN COMPARE with the DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS!

After the Exodus, God was still separated from his people, they still needed redemption. They still needed a saviour. At the cross EVERYTHING IS FINISHED. JESUS PAID IT ALL! He accomplished EVERYTHING! Through his death and resurrection, we have EVERYTHING WE NEED! We have the ULTIMATE DISPLAY of the GOODNESS and FAITHFULNESS of GOD!

We see the fullness of his justice, we see his perfect mercy, his amazing grace, his unending love; we see the answer to every question, every doubt we may ever have about whether or not God is for us.

Not only is the cross God's ultimate act of redemption and salvation. It is also a PARADIGM SHIFTING, WORLD CHANGING event. The death and resurrection of Jesus changes EVERYTHING. We are reminded of this clearly in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 which says:

“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)

We do not grieve as those who do not have hope. Because of the cross and because of the empty tomb, we have hope in the midst of even the most dire and extreme circumstances. We can rejoice in ANY and ALL tribulation because of Jesus.

In the New Testament we see that the dominant theme of the Christian life is JOY. Joy in peace and blessing and joy in the day of trouble. It is the dominant, the primary theme of the Christian life. This Psalm helps remind us that it is not the ONLY theme. Jesus was a man of sorrows, a man acquainted with grief.

There is a place for grief, hurt, sadness, and confusion in the Christian life. It is PART of the PROCESS. It is a STEP in the journey through distress and suffering. It is a step that we should not skip over and neither is it a step that we should REMAIN IN.

The Psalmist acknowledges his pain, he experiences it, he expresses it, and he moves PAST IT.

The Psalmist decides to FIX HIS MIND on what God has done. He decides to remember, to meditate, to ponder God's acts of redemption. And that is the instruction for us this morning. Notice that I used the word deciding, not decided, not decision. No, I used the word deciding because we have to KEEP DECIDING. Just like that Father from Mark 9 we must pray "Lord I believe, help my unbelief!" We have to decide to continue deciding. We have to choose to keep on choosing God.

Because the storms are going to come. Trials, tribulations, suffering, and hardship will come. The Despair and the Doubts will arise and, if we are not prepared, if we are not fixing our eyes upon Jesus, then we will not be able to work through them and grow. The world is going to tell us lie after lie. The Devil is going to do everything in his power to convince us that God is not worth trusting.

That is exactly what he did to Job after all. The Devil saw Job's righteousness and his love of God, and he did everything in his power to convince Job that God was not worth loving and not worth obeying. He subjected Job to Absolute agony. He took away everything that Job held dear, his house, his animals, his family. And he seeks to do the same to us. The Devil will do everything he can to make you think God is not worth trusting.

Sometimes that means he inflicts us with suffering and hardship. Sometimes that means we get cancer, or that our children get cancer. Sometimes it means we lose loved ones in horrific accidents. And sometimes he is more subtle. Sometimes he lies and tells us that we would be happier if we weren't so restricted by God's commands. Sometimes he tells us that next high will be the one we need, or that next drink, or that next video, that will be the one that's satisfying. The Devil is prowling around like a lion seeking to kill and destroy. He is seeking to dazzle and distract. He is trying to convince us, as he did with Adam and Eve, that God is not worth following.

What we are seeing in this Psalm, what we see all throughout the Bible, is that GOD is 100% WITHOUT A SHADOW OF A DOUBT WORTH FOLLOWING. HE IS FAITHFUL! HE IS GOOD! HE IS ABOUNDING IN STEADFAST LOVE AND MERCY! HE IS WORTHY!

He is worthy of all of our love, all of your affection, all of your desire, all of your time and energy. Do you see that? Do you know that?

Have you decided to believe that? Have you come to recognize your despair, have you seen the distress you are in? For apart from Jesus, we are all lost. It doesn't matter how good your life is. It doesn't matter how much money you have. It doesn't matter if you try to be a good person. Apart from Jesus, we are all like Psalmist at the beginning of this Psalm. We are lost, we are in darkness, and we are without hope. If you are here this morning, and you have not repented of your sins and put your faith in Jesus, the offer stands before you. We have a God who listens. We have a God who loved us so much that he sent his Son to die on the cross in our place. So, come. Put your faith in Jesus and receive the free gift of eternal life with God.

Decided to trust in the objective facts of the faith and know the hope, the joy, and the peace that is available to you in Christ.

And if you have already decided to believe God is worthy to be followed, are you going to continue to believe that? Are you going to entrust yourself to him? Will you ponder his wondrous deeds? Will you meditate upon his great works? Will you FIX YOUR MIND upon Jesus, upon who he is and what he has done for you?

Will you allow your life to be directed and guided by that focus on him? So that you may be able to allow your emotions their proper place, so that you can work through the process, so that you may be shaped and grown by your sufferings, so that you may look to God in your day of trouble and say:

The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. Job 1:21b
ESV

This is heart of this Psalm, this is the diagram for distress, and this is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.