

## Comfort in Trouble

Psalm 77:1-20

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

*October 30, 2005*

If you have your Bibles, please open them with me to Psalm 77. Edward Young once provocatively said, “Among my lists of blessings infinite stands this at the foremost: that my heart has bled.”

The Psalmist who wrote this Psalm would have understood that, but that stands in stark contrast to the comfortable spirituality of our own age.

In our own day, we suffer from a superficial spirituality. It often sustains us in crisis only by denial, only by pretending that it's not happening. It's often shocked by trial and calamity. In fact, many Christians expect to go through this life with no struggle, no pain, no weakness, no difficulty, no sense of absolute tragedy, but when you read the Psalms and you read the anguish of the Psalmist's heart, there you find the resources for a spirituality that is deeper than the surface, one that meets the realities of our own experience. The Psalmists deal with the realities of life and pour their souls out to the living God — their complaints, their heartaches, their emptiness — all of these things poured out to God. They show us how to live the Christian life.

You see, the Reformers thought that we not only ought to sing Psalms, but that the Psalms were at the core of a well-rounded Christian experience. The Psalms actually teach us how to live the Christian life.

Now, this Psalm is one of those Psalms that teaches us how to live the Christian life in the darkest of days. Notice before we even read it, it breaks fairly easily into four parts. There is in verses 1-3 a burdened cry; then, secondly, in verses 4-10 there is a plain expression of inner doubts; and then, thirdly, in verses 11-15 there is a remembrance of God's past deeds; and then, finally, in verses 16-20 there is a focus in God's great Old Testament act of redemption. Jim Boice says this of this Psalm of Asaph: “One thing you have to say about Asaph, he tells it like it is. He's respectful, but if he's unhappy or puzzled about what God is doing or not doing, he says so.”

And indeed he does. Let's hear God's word from Psalm 77.

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.  
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.  
When I remember God, then I am disturbed;  
When I sigh, then my spirit grows faint.

[Selah.]

Thou hast held my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak.  
I have considered the days of old, the years of long ago.  
I will remember my song in the night; I will meditate with my heart;  
And my spirit ponders.  
Will the Lord reject forever?  
And will He never be favorable again?  
Has His lovingkindness ceased forever?  
Has His promise come to an end forever?  
Has God forgotten to be gracious?  
Or has He in anger withdrawn His compassion?

[Selah.]

Then I said, "It is my grief,  
That the right hand of the Most High has changed."  
I shall remember the deeds of the Lord;  
Surely I will remember Thy wonders of old.  
I will meditate on all Thy work, and muse on Thy deeds.  
Thy way, O God, is holy; What god is great like our God?  
Thou art the God who workest wonders;  
Thou hast made known Thy strength among the peoples.  
Thou hast by Thy power redeemed Thy people, the sons of Jacob and Joseph.

[Selah.]

The waters saw Thee, O God;  
The waters saw Thee, they were in anguish;  
The deeps also trembled. The clouds poured out water;  
The skies gave forth a sound;  
Thy arrows flashed here and there.  
The sound of Thy thunder was in the whirlwind;  
The lightnings lit up the world; The earth trembled and shook,  
Thy way was in the sea,

And Thy paths in the mighty waters,  
And Thy footprints may not be known.  
Thou didst lead Thy people like a flock,  
By the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

Any believer who has ever known the deepening darkness of enveloping hopelessness can be profoundly thankful for the frankness and candor of this fellow-sufferer who wrote this Psalm. Here is a believer who has been there and back again. Here is a believer who knows what it is for almost all the lights to go out. And notice at the very outset the way out of this labyrinth of pain; notice the movement from self-focus to God-preoccupation. Notice how in the first 11 or 12 verses of this Psalm we hear this refrain: "I...I...I...my...my..." and then, beginning at about verse 13 to the end of the Psalm we hear, "Thy...Thy...Thy...Thy." There's a movement from perplexing, subjective experience — 'Lord God, what is going on with me?' — to clarifying, objective reality: 'This is what God is like...this is what God has done...this is what is true about God's redemption of His people.'

We learn here that when we are wrapped in despondency and at the edge of all hope, we must do four things: We must look up to the throne; look into our hearts and face up to our deepest fears; look back to the future; and then, look up to the cross. I want to look at those four things with you very briefly tonight.

## **I. Up to the Throne.**

First, we must look up to the throne. You see it in verses 1-3, don't you? There we find the burdened believer's cry of distress:

"My voice rises to God, and I will cry aloud;  
My voice rises to God, and He will hear me."

Notice these loud cries. If this man had been praying in his house, nobody in his house would have been unaware of it! I remember my wife's cousins giving testimony to the fact that their father, Bob Hudson, who just died this year, the son of a Scottish Presbyterian minister, their sweetest memory of childhood was hearing him in his room with his door closed, pleading to God for them. Well, let me say if you had been in the house with this Psalmist you would have heard him pleading with God! With loud cries he lifts up his voice, he remonstrates with God—and you know, the Book of Hebrews tells us that that's what the Lord Jesus did. In Hebrews 5:7 we're told that the Lord Jesus with loud cries and tears lifted up His voice to God. This reminds us, doesn't it, that our prayer needs to be earnest and verbal in these dark nights of the soul.

And then he goes on to say,

“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.”

The Psalmist is telling us that the days of his trouble were days of prayer, and that's a great lesson for us. Our days of trouble should be days of prayer. Our mourning, our sighing, our complaint does no good until we lift that mourning and sigh and complaint up to the throne, up to Him. And that's what the Psalmist did. He took his mourning and his sighs and his complaints, his troubles, his darkness, to God.

And notice again his words: “My soul refused to be comforted.” When God did not answer, when he didn't feel like his prayer was getting through, he didn't stop. He didn't slacken. He, like Jacob, refused to let go until he had an answer. He refused any comfort apart from the word of God, and Christians who have learned the secret of prayer are inflamed, not weakened, by the lack of an immediate answer.

And then he utters these dark words in verse 3:

“When I remember god, then I am disturbed;  
When I sigh, then my spirit grows faint.”

He is so low that at this point the very thought of God troubles him. He doesn't know what God is doing in his experience. He can't explain it; he's puzzled by what's happening in his life. He feels far from God, as if the Lord is against him (we'll see that in the next verses), and so the very thought of God troubles him.

It's a dreadful thing, my friends, when the thought of God disturbs. There is no trouble more grievous to the soul, and yet, perhaps some of you know exactly where the Psalmist was. But even when we feel that our trouble emanates from the throne of God itself, even when we are troubled by our thoughts of the One who is on the throne, we must run straightway up to that throne and spread our broken hearts before the One who is on that throne, and beg His help.

As we ponder things which have been instigated deep in our souls by inscrutable providences of God, those ponderings ought to be so many promptings to go to God in prayer, and so this Psalmist shows us the first step: In the midst of our trials, the first step of comfort is up to the throne.

## **II. Into the Heart.**

But then you'll also notice, secondly, in verses 4-10, how the believer now turns into his own heart, and he examines himself and he admits the questions that are circulating in his inner man. You see, what we're being told here in verses 4-10 is the burdened believer's inner doubts and questionings. He's cried out in distress in verses 1-3. We've gotten a hint of his anguish, but now he is going to express to us his deepest inner doubts and questionings. He starts off by saying, "You have held my eyelids open...." Sleepless nights are no new thing, are they? He goes on to say, "I am so troubled that I cannot speak." And you know what he's talking about. Sometimes troubles are so great that they leave us dumbstruck, without the words to say to God or friends.

And then, he says this in verse 5: "I have considered the days of old, the years of long ago." What is the Psalmist trying to do? He's already trying to go back. He's already trying to remember God's past mercies and deliverances, but he's having a hard time getting there; and so, in verse 6 he looks deep into his heart and he says,

"I will remember my song in the night; I will meditate with my heart; and my spirit ponders."

And these are the questions that he ponders: "Will the Lord reject forever? Will He never be favorable again? Has His lovingkindness ceased forever? Has His promise come to an end forever? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Or has He in anger withdrawn His compassion? Then I said in my grief that the right hand of the God Most High has changed." You see what the Psalmist is doing. The Psalmist has turned in to examine his own heart, to try and search out his own heart, to commune with his inmost self; and he is allowing himself to ask out loud the hard questions that are realities in his own soul.

Now, true piety...the true believer, will ultimately reject the conclusions of unbelief in answer to these questions, but the Psalmist's honesty compels him to lay these questions before the Lord, because he is asking these questions in his heart. He is asking whether God has rejected him. He is asking whether God will ever show favor to him again. He is asking whether God's lovingkindness has failed. He is asking whether God's promise has failed. He is asking whether God has forgotten how to be gracious to him. He is asking whether God in His anger towards him has withdrawn His compassion, and he is asking whether God, who is unchanging, has changed. That's where he is, and so he lays those questions out to God.

By the way, isn't it interesting — the answer of the Scripture to the questions that he's asking? "Will the Lord reject forever? Will He never be favorable again? Has His lovingkindness ceased forever?" Turn forward with me to Psalm 103.

Look at verse 8:

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. He will not always strive with us; nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgression from us. Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust.....The lovingkindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, to those who keep His covenant, and who remember His precepts to do them.

So what is the answer to the question, "Will the Lord reject forever?" No. "Will God never be favorable again?" No. He will not refrain from showing His favor. "Has the lovingkindness of God ceased forever?" No. In fact, His lovingkindness is from generation to generation. "Has His promise failed?" No. His promise cannot fail. "Has He forgotten how to be gracious?" "The Lord is gracious and full of compassion." "In His anger has He withdrawn His compassion?" No. He will separate our sin from us as far as the east is from the west. "Has the Lord God changed in His purposes towards us?" No, He hasn't.

But the Psalmist doesn't realize that right now. He's having a hard time taking that in. And my friends, very often we think the Christian life isn't supposed to be filled with hard things that make us think like this — dark nights of the soul, wounds and disappointments — and so we try and cope, when we ask these questions, with denial. But that is not God's way. We must own our brokenness and our unbelief, and our fears and our failures; we must look deep into our hearts and face them, and then take them up to the throne.

### **III. Back to the Future.**

Then, if you notice, thirdly, in verses 11-15, he goes in his next step back to the future. In these verses we see a burdened believer's sanctified remembrance of the Lord's past works: "I shall remember the deeds of the Lord," he says. In verses 11 and 12, the Psalmist is showing us the way out of the pit. How do you get out of the pit? If you would know and experience more of divine comfort in the midst of your trial, then you are going to have to meditate more on God's deliverances and His methods in dealing with His people. And so the Psalmist tells you,

"I shall remember the deeds of the Lord; surely I will remember Thy wonders of old. I will meditate on all Your work, and muse on all Your deeds."

He's going to work over and over and over, and he's going to remember and

reflect on what God has done in the past.

A Mississippian who lived not too long ago once said, "Remembering knows, before knowing ever remembers." And that's exactly what the Psalmist is doing. He is remembering in order to know. He's remembering what God has done towards him.

And then you'll notice in verses 13-15, now the Psalmist is lost in God. Now the Psalmist is thinking about the character of God. The first thing he says is, "Your way, O God, is holy." In other words, 'God, the way that You do things is the right way. I accept that. I see how you dealt with me in the past. I see how You've dealt with Your people in the past. The way that You deal with us is the right way.'

And then listen to this: he meditates on God's character. God is what? Holy. God is what? He is great. "Who is great like our God?" God does what? He is a wonder worker! He does the miraculous. "You are the God who works wonders." God does what? He has specifically revealed Himself to His people. "You have made known Your strength among Your people." And what does God do? God redeems His people. "You have by Your power redeemed Your people, the sons of Jacob and Joseph."

The Psalmist first reflects on God's past dealings with His people and with him, and then he turns to meditate on God Himself, and he meditates until he believes, and he thinks until he knows, and he seeks until he finds, and he prays until he is able to feel it in his bones. And that's the way forward that the Psalmist is showing to you and to me: that we're to meditate until we believe, and think until we know, and seek until we find, and pray until we feel it in our bones.

The Psalmist looks back to remember how God has dealt with him so that he can walk into the future in trust. William Plummer makes this interesting observation: "If history is philosophy teaching by example, then church history is religion speaking by the facts." And so he goes back to the facts of God's dealings with His people in history, and He draws from it a lesson in trust.

And then, finally, he turns to the great scene of Old Testament redemption. You recognize the language of verses 16-20. They are drawn for the most part right out of the crossing of the Red Sea.

"The waters saw You, O God, the waters saw You and they were in anguish; the deeps trembled, the clouds poured out water; the skies gave forth a sound; Your arrows flashed here and there. The sound of Your thunder was in the whirlwind. The lightnings lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook, Your way was in the sea, and Your path in the mighty waters, Your footprints may not be known. You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron."

What's he doing? He is recalling the greatest scene of redemption in the Old Testament. He is recalling God leading Israel through the Red Sea, leading them out of Egypt away from their enemies and safely across the Red Sea. And what does he draw from that? If God can shepherd His people through the Red Sea, then God can be my Shepherd even in the valley of the shadow of death.

#### **IV. Up to the Cross.**

But, my friends, there's a great irony for those of us struggling and looking for comfort today, and that great irony is that we have something far, far greater to look back to that brings us comfort. In fact, we don't look back to it, we look up to it — and that is the cross. The new covenant believer runs to the cross, and we find there an even deeper comfort, because we find when we look to the cross that the antidote to our sin and to our grief was in what the Lord Jesus Christ absorbed. Many of us have heard our dear Minister of Teaching, Derek Thomas, remind us of how Aaron's benediction was reversed on Jesus Christ. Aaron's benediction, “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace”... and in our place the Lord Jesus Christ endures from His Father the exact reverse of the Aaronic benediction: “The Lord curse you and abandon you; the Lord turn His face from You and remove all His grace and favor from You. The Lord shun You with His presence, and take from You all peace.”

When we realize that, we suddenly realize that we ourselves have never, ever, been where this Psalmist describes. In fact, this Psalmist has never been where he describes. The only One who has been there is Jesus. This Psalm, lacking comfort in bitter darkness, only measures up to Jesus' experience, because He's been there for us.

And suddenly we realize that the very way of our redemption gives us comfort in our deepest hours of depression, in the times when our souls are downcast. I love the way Horatius Bonar closes his meditation on this Psalm: “There is a day coming when we shall with Christ our Head sing of the church's safe guidance to her rest in such strains as these, remembering how often by the way we were ready to ask ‘Has God forgotten to be gracious?’ We are taught by the heart of Asaph in moments of despondency to remember the days of old, and assure ourselves that the God of Israel liveth! The God of the Passover night, the God of the Red Sea, the God of the pillar cloud, the God of Sinai, the God of the wilderness, the God of the Jordan, the God, too, we may add, of Calvary, and the God of Bethany who shall lead us even as He led Israel, even when the earth shakes again, until that day when He comes to cast some light on His way that was in the sea, and His paths that were in the great waters, and His footsteps that were a mystery. Asaph has been the instrument of the Holy Ghost to cheer us here, by bidding us to look on this picture as the picture of the righteous One,

Jesus, under the cloud, recalling to mind the Lord's former doings.

Amen. May God bless His word. Let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, we thank You that we are never forsaken. Though we feel it, though our hearts question and doubt, we are never forsaken because He was forsaken for us. The everlasting expression of our gratitude is not sufficient to such a gift, but You intend by that gift manifold blessings for Your people, and not least among those gifts is that we would be comforted, even in the trials of life by the knowledge of who You are and by the knowledge of Your redemption in Jesus Christ. O God, how can we respond to such mercy but to commit ourselves to You, the whole of ourselves to You? We rest on You. You are our strength, You are our hope, and in Your name we will go. And as we go, we will pray to You even as Your Son taught us to pray, saying, 'Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.'*

Let us stand and respond with No. 449, in your bulletin.

[Congregational Hymn: *We Rest on Thee*]

*Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord, until the day break and the shadows flee away. Amen.*

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

*This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.*

*Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.*

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill).  
If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

**Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine***

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).