

First Presbyterian Church
Psalm 77, “Unself-Pity”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 8/9/2020

The tricky thing about self-pity is this: we almost never see it coming.
Self-pity hides itself. It begins innocuously,
by taking real circumstances that we’re in,
real things that happened (or that we think happened).
These data points lend self-pity credibility,
because the facts of the situation we’re in are not in question.
But then(!)...then it creates a smoke screen
of rationalizations and comparisons that present themselves to us
as *unquestionable* interpretations of our circumstances.

That’s where self-pity does its dirty work,
under the cloak perceived by us as “reality.”
It is in this shrouded space that we begin to sulk and brood and complain.
Without even being aware of it,
we dig up all the dirt within reach
and stir in the water of unfair comparisons
until we achieve a suitable consistency for a good wallowing session.

I’m familiar with this phenomenon in my own life.
At the end of July I was exposed to someone who later tested positive
for Covid-19. I had maintained physical distance
and wore a mask, but the other person did not.
I was concerned. And then I had to stay home all week.
And then we had to reschedule medical appointments for our kids.
And our kids couldn’t play with their friends.
And we were all starting to lose our minds a little bit.
And I couldn’t focus on writing my paper for
the class I’m taking.
And it was a nightmare trying to get
a test that would provide
fast results.

And I started to feel a bit of self-pity.
Have you been there?
...I miss life before coronavirus.
(I tested negative on the rapid test, by the way –
still waiting on results for the more sensitive PCR test.)

Psalm 77 is a prayer of Asaph.

In this prayer, I get the sense that Asaph
is in about the same kind of mood that many of us are in.
He wishes he could be happy, but he just isn't.
And the reason he isn't happy is because he *remembers*
the way things used to be.

In the first half of the prayer, verses 1-10,
he compares the way things used to be (the good old days) to today.
As a result of the comparison, he feels
distress, discomfort, and distance from God.
But in the second half of the prayer, verses 11-20,
something changes, and new perspective arrives that produces
great hope and joy in what God has done.

In the first couple of verses, Asaph lays out his basic complaint—
he was in distress (of what sort we aren't told),
and he calls out to God for help, but he would not be comforted.

These are the basic, undisputed facts of the situation.

But then in verse three,
we start running into the smoke screen created by Asaph's self-pity.

v 3: **I remembered you, O God, and I groaned;
I mused and my spirit grew faint.**

There is something in Asaph's relationship with God which he remembers,
and it causes him to groan. Meditation makes his spirit grow faint.
This is a strange kind of spiritual experience...
what could the reason be? We find out in verse 4:

Asaph says, "**You kept my eyes from closing** (he couldn't sleep at night);
and I was too troubled to speak
(his distress disrupted his daily life as well)."

Self-pity loves to accuse others.

It's not *my* fault that I feel like this, *somebody else* is to blame,
and it's probably God!
Night and day he was bothered ... by God.

It's *you* God. You kept me from sleeping.
Is this all part of some plan of yours?

This attitude of blaming God leads him then into nostalgia.

In verses 5 and 6 he says,

**“I thought of the former days, the years long ago;
I remembered my songs in the night.”**

The thing that is causing him so much grief
in the present time is actually a good memory from the past.

The former days, the songs he sang in the night,
now stand in great contrast to how he spends his nights:
with his eyes propped open, unable to sleep.

This kind of a contrast is just the kind of raw material a self-pitying person
needs to start feeling sorry for themselves.

Accordingly, by verse 7, he turns to full complaint.

This is a complaint that is *about God*, but is not directed *to God*.

**“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?”**

These are, of course, rhetorical questions.

It's obvious to Asaph (and maybe to us!)
that the answer to each one is, “YES!”

At an emotional level we've all been there—

“What have you done for me lately, God?”

A question for you at this point—is it okay to pray this way?

Is it okay to voice this kind of feeling about God
failing to live up to God's promises?

I think it has to be okay. Keep in mind that the Bible is here *showing us*
that it's okay to pray like this,

not least because God knows you're thinking it anyway—
you may as well be honest.

Honesty, even brutal honesty,
is never going to set you back in your relationship with God.

But given that, let's just consider the kind of theology
that self-pity moves us toward.

The kind of God implied by this complaint is
rejecting, stingy, and untrustworthy, forgetful and angry.
Is this who we know God to be from *other* experiences?

Eugene Peterson expands on the perspective offered
in this complaint like this:

**“Who says that God is loving, compassionate, and kind?
If he was at one time, he is no longer. I am the
evidence. My condition, as everyone can see,
is proof that God is not what he is reputed to be;
otherwise, why would I be so miserable?
My grief has a theological basis: God doesn't love me.”**

So ends the first half of this prayer.

But then, without warning, the light in the room changes entirely.
And this is the kind of shift that can happen in prayer.

This is why we should pray,
even if we wonder about our motivation,
even if we are mad at God—you never know when
the Spirit of God will snap you out of self-pity
and set you in a new frame of mind
that reminds you of *who God is* rather than *the good old days*.

Prayer is not merely the mustering of our own spiritual resources
so they can be put on display before God.

If we're doing that, then prayer feels like such a burden.
Instead, prayer actually puts us in connection with
the power and life and purposes of God
so that our resources can be replenished and renewed.

And that's exactly what we see happen in the second half of this prayer.

In vv. 10-12 he prays,

**“To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand
of the Most High.**

I will remember the deeds of the Lord;

yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.

I will meditate on all your works

and consider your mighty deeds.”

What mighty deeds, specifically?

Asaph continues

**“the waters saw you God, the waters saw you and writhed,
the very depths were convulsed.”**

Asaph’s mind has become completely saturated
in the powerful acts of God in history.

The imagery culminates in verse 19,

**“Your path led through the sea,
your way through the mighty waters,
though your footprints were not seen.”**

For those readers who hadn’t caught on yet, this is the big reveal:

Asaph is talking about God’s deliverance of Israel
through the Red Sea.

For the Israelites, the Exodus was the preeminent example
of God displaying his power to the nations.

This was the definitive salvation moment for any Israelite.

When they asked, “Who are we?” The answer was,

“We are the people Yahweh rescued out of Egypt.”

I love that last line, “though your footprints were not seen.”

Have you notice what else is no longer seen?

The self-pity of Asaph.

All the doubts and concerns and smokescreens are gone.

It didn’t take a complex argument.

His theological questions were not addressed.

Asaph simply shifted his gaze from his navel to his God.

There is a certain kind of self-knowledge
and self-reflection that is undoubtedly necessary
for healthy relationships.

But there is also the tyranny of the self that can so easily take us over—
a preoccupation with self-fulfillment and self-questioning.

This prayer doesn't shame you for being concerned
about yourself, in fact it invites you to pray that way.

But you're not invited to stay there.

Your self-pity will eventually be put into perspective
by the mighty acts of God in the world.

For those of us who follow God after the arrival of Jesus,
we have a different salvation moment
that reminds us of who we truly are: the cross of Christ.

John puts it so simply in his letter,

**“This is how we know what love is:
Jesus Christ laid down his life for us,
and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”**

And that brings me back.

I have new compassion for so many whose experience
in this pandemic is much, much more worrying than my own.
And I know that God has acted decisively so that
we can have real hope for new life.

So let us take time now to consider God's mighty deeds—
to survey the wondrous cross of Christ,
and to recall the many times God has proven faithful
in our own lives.