

Refuge

*I will say to the LORD,
“My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”
(Psalm 91:2 ESV)*

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
(Psalm 42:2 ESV)*

*And those who know your name put their trust in you,
for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.
(Psalm 9:10 ESV)*

When It Feels Like God Has Changed

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Psalm 77

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Introduction:

Well good morning church! If you have your Bible with you I'd love for you to open it now to Psalm 77. You've heard me say a few times now that there is a Psalm for every season – and Psalm 77, I think you will agree is a Psalm for this particular season in the life of the North American church.

As the ascription indicates this is a Psalm of Asaph - whether the original Asaph or one of the several that followed him in the Bible we do not know – and it doesn't really matter. The point is that this worship leader – this mature believer – was FEELING all of the sudden as though God had changed.

There had been a SHIFT in Asaph's circumstances – we aren't told what it was – but whatever it was it affected how he FELT about God.

And that's human nature!

We human beings tend to approach God through the lens of our personal experience - specifically our most recent personal experience. And the Psalms so often encourage us to push back against that – because if we don't we will end up with a culturally located and personally distorted vision of God.

And of course we haven't heeded that warning very well in our day and age. I've often said that there is no other time in human history that could have given birth to the Prosperity Gospel as it currently manifests in North America - and as it is exported via television and the internet to the rest of the world. This particular brand of absolute nonsense could only have emerged out of the 70 year stretch of ever-increasing peace and prosperity that we have enjoyed here. It is impossible to imagine this sort of ridiculous emerging out of 4th century Northern Africa or 16th century Western Europe or even 21st century modern Iran - the Prosperity Gospel is a VIEW on God that has been shaped and refracted by our very narrow experiences.

So, all of that to say, this is HUMAN NATURE; we struggle NOT to view God solely through the lens of our experiences. But it's hard – the struggle is real - so thankfully, every once in a while - God SHIFTS OUR EXPERIENCES so as to ALTER our perspective on reality. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes reflects on this aspect of Providence; in Ecclesiastes 7:14 he says:

"In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him." (Ecclesiastes 7:14 ESV)

So different circumstances allow us to think about God in different ways. Michael Eaton says here:

“Both *prosperity* and *adversity* have their uses. One leads to joy, the other draws attention to the realities of life and leads (if so allowed) to a life of faith in a sovereign God. Both are subject to God's will and part of his providence. The constant fluctuation between them keeps us dependent not on our own guesswork, but on God who ‘holds the key to all unknown’.”¹

¹ Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 18 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 129.

Now that last phrase in the Ecclesiastes 7:14 is hard to make sense of – what does it mean "that man may not find out anything that will be after him"? Keil and Delitzsch - world class Hebrew scholars – say that it means that:

“God causes man to experience good and evil that he may pass through the whole school of life, and when he departs hence that nothing may be outstanding (in arrears) which he has not experienced.”²

That’s a good phrase isn’t it: “the whole school of life”.

There are multiple courses in the whole school of life and we learn something different about God in each of them - but as Asaph is lamenting here in Psalm 77 - it is HARD to move from one class in “the whole school of life” to another. Specifically, it is really hard to go from Prosperity 101 to Adversity 101 - when the bell rings and you make that SWITCH it FEELS for a moment like GOD HAS CHANGED.

But we know that can’t be true – so we mustn’t be demoralized – we mustn’t wallow in our depression – rather we must LOOK DEEPER and CONSIDER WIDER and REMEMBER LONGER in order to make sense of our current experiences. That is the journey that Asaph shares with us in this remarkably useful Psalm.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1:

TO THE CHOIRMASTER: ACCORDING TO JEDUTHUN. A PSALM OF ASAPH.

¹ 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.”

² C. F. Keil and Delitzsch F., *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), paragraph 24686.

In the first section of this Psalm the focus is on how Asaph FEELS. “When I remember God I MOAN!! When I meditate my spirit FAINTS.” D.A. Carson says here:

“Asaph was so despondent he could not sleep; indeed he charged God with keeping him from sleep (77:4). Memories of other times when circumstances were so bright that he sang with joy in the night hours (77:6) serve only to depress him further.”³

Are you seeing that? Are you FEELING THAT? Brothers and sisters, that is exactly how so many of us are feeling right now! Things were incredibly good just a short time ago - weren't they?

I have some pictures hanging in my bedroom of my wife and I at various baseball stadiums around North America. Those pictures represent some of the happiest moments of my life. A game of baseball on a beautiful summer day with my best friend in the whole wide world is like a little slice of heaven. You could sit there and listen to the sounds and smell the smells and close your eyes and almost believe that you were in everlasting kingdom.

There will be baseball in the everlasting kingdom, my friends, I am reasonably convinced of that!

It was a little slice of heaven – and it said something to me about the goodness of God – something true. Something marvelous. There are things to be learned about God on sunny days!!!

But now - those pictures seem to mock me. They torment me - they remind me that the world has changed – and that tempts me to think that GOD HAS CHANGED – but he has not!

God is still good - even if they never play baseball on this earth again – I hope they do – but baseball or no – sunshine or no – peace or no – prosperity or no – God doesn't change!

He is the same whether the sun is shining or covered by cloud – but how I experience him may change. When the sun goes behind the cloud I FEEL COLDER – there is a REAL CHANGE IN ME – in MY EXPERIENCE - that is the FEELING that Asaph is expressing here. And he was THROWN BY THAT – HE WAS MOMENTARILY DESTABILIZED BY THAT – and he begins to process that change in verse 6; he says:

³ D.A. Carson, *For The Love Of God* Volume 1, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), May 23.

Then my spirit made a diligent search:

He says: “I’ve got to wrap my head around this! What in the world is going on? And what does this mean with respect to the nature and character of the Lord?”

That’s what he’s wrestling with in verses 7 and following:

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

J. Alec Motyer says marvellously:

“Here is a psalmist in deep trouble”⁴

And, you know, there is a sense in which we are encouraged by that because it gives us permission to flounder a little bit when we are faced with jarring transitions in life. Apparently it is OK - it is within the acceptable range of normal responses to external stimuli to ask some pretty ill-considered questions in a time of personal crisis.

The Bible is very realistic with respect to human weakness.

That’s one of the things we learned in our walk through the Book of Job. God let Job get away with some pretty awful statements when he was adjusting to the extremely jarring change in his personal experiences. Do you remember what Job said in Job 16:9? He said:

“He has torn me in his wrath and hated me; he has gnashed his teeth at me; my adversary sharpens his eyes against me.” (Job 16:9 ESV)

I’m sure on a sunny day that statement would have been a sin!! He accused God of hating him!! He called God his adversary - his enemy!! On a sunny day he might have been struck dead for that!! But on a cloudy day - a stormy day - a day when the world had been ripped out from underneath him like a rug - apparently, such statements got a pass. God never condemned Job for

⁴ *Psalms By The Day* (Geanies House: Christian Focus Publishers, 2016), 215.

saying the things that he did. At the end of the Book, God shows up and says to Eliphaz, the leader of Job's friends:

“My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” (Job 42:7 ESV)

As my servant Job has?!! “God, did you not even read chapter 16? Job said some pretty awful stuff, Lord” - but apparently God allows us an outburst or two of pain when we are initially responding to shock and trauma.

That's good to know.

We won't be judged on our FIRST STATEMENTS or our FIRST QUESTIONS when our world has turned upside down.

But we mustn't linger in such places – that's why this Psalm is here. Psalm 77 now begins to show us how to work our way out of situational doubt and depression. You can see the turning point in the Psalm in verse 10:

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

Are you hearing that?

I will appeal to the YEARS of the right hand of the Most High.

The Psalmist is saying: “I need to get out of my immediate perspective. I need to take a longer view of things. I need to look at reality through the lens of ETERNITY. I need to look at who God is and what God has done ACROSS THE AGES”

That is how you THINK your way out of doubt and depression - you widen the lens of your consideration!!!

Look at verse 11:

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.

In Hebrew that is 4 words - I'm not sure why the ESV uses only 3. The ESV has him thinking about DEEDS, WONDERS, WORKS and then DEEDS again - but that is a different Hebrew word. All of these words are overlapping - they are all similar - but it might be better to translate one of those words as ACTS or ACTIONS because the impression is supposed to be one of BROAD CONSIDERATION.

The Psalmist is saying: "I stopped looking at God through the lens of my own personal experiences and instead began to consider the FULL SCOPE of his activity OVER TIME. I remembered his ACTS, his WONDERS, his WORKS and his DEEDS."

Willem Van Gemeren says here:

"The psalmist chose his words carefully so as to create the impression that he is reflecting on the Lord's works in their great variety: in creation, redemption, judgment, and salvation."⁵

That's exactly right!! I LOOKED LONG and I looked WIDE - that's what the Psalmist is saying.

And this is the conclusion he comes to in verse 13:

¹³ Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God?

Now, if you are a little older you probably remember how the KJV translated verse 13; it says:

Thy way, O God, is in the sanctuary: who *is so* great a God as *our* God? (Psalm 77:13 KJV)

Now, that's not WRONG it's just hard to make sense of. The Expositor's Bible Commentary explains the meaning of the first half of the verse this way:

⁵ Willem Van Gemeren, *Psalms* in The Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 5, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 502.

“We take it to mean that God’s way is on behalf of his people.”⁶

Meaning that verse 13 is basically the Old Testament equivalent of Romans 8:28:

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28 ESV)

That’s what the Psalmist is saying. He is saying: “When I took the long view and when I broadened out my perspective I realized that everything the Lord does is for the end of his own glory and for the good of his own people forever – thanks be to God.”

And so having figured that out he now begins to praise the Lord – look at verse 14:

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*

You are a MIRACLE WORKING GOD! You are a SAVING GOD!! You are a FATHER GOD!!

Verse 16:

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 77:0–20 ESV)

Are you hearing that? He was thinking about the Exodus! He was thinking about how God frightened the waters of the Red Sea! He was thinking about the thunder and the lightning of Mt.

⁶ Willem Van Gemen, *Psalms* in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Volume 5, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 503.

Sinai. He was thinking about the manna and the rock and the wise and life-giving leadership of Moses and Aaron.

And as he thought about those things, fear fled away and worship entered in.

J. Alec Motyer says here:

“That’s why the psalm stops so abruptly. It does not draw a conclusion but demonstrates a solution: the mind stored with, assured of, resting on the great facts of God’s salvation is a mind at rest.”⁷

It was enough for the Psalmist to remember the Exodus - thinking about that, put all his immediate problems in proper perspective. If God could handle that - if God could humble Egypt and terrorize the Red Sea, and give law and make a nation out of a rabble of refugees, if he could feed and water a multitude in the desert then surely he can take care of me.

What more was there to say?

But of course as Christians we do have more to say! We have even greater works of redemption to look back upon! We have the cross and the empty tomb!! We have the Holy Spirit! We have the whole Word of God.

So why would we be afraid?

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?” (Romans 8:35 ESV)

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:37–39 ESV)

My dear friends, that is how you work your way out of situational doubt and depression. It is not a sin to FEEL ANXIETY during a PANDEMIC. It is not a sin to WONDER what in the world is

⁷ *Psalms By The Day* (Geanies House: Christian Focus Publishers, 2016), 215.

going on. It is not a sin TO FEEL for a moment as if God has changed – all of that is as natural as feeling a chill when a cloud momentarily obscures the light and heat of the sun.

You can FEEL that way.

But you can't crawl up in a ball and lose the Lord.

You have to push back – and you wrap yourselves in the THICK, WARMING truths of Almighty God.

W.S. Plumer said fabulously while commenting on this Psalm:

"Good men know what a tormentor discouragement is. They flee from it. They war against it by resorting to the higher truths of religion."⁸

And that's exactly what we see Asaph doing in this Psalm. He is warring against discouragement by resorting to the higher truths of religion.

That's the solution.

And that suggests an appropriate application – we need to do the same. We're going to need some HIGHER TRUTHS and SOME DEEPER UNDERSTANDING if we are going to keep our head and hold our faith during this pandemic.

Toward that end I offer 3 very precious and much neglected TRUTHS of biblical religion.

Higher Truths For Darker And Colder Days:

The first one is this:

1. The Sovereignty of God

⁸ W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2016), 740.

The other day I saw a meme that was being passed around by Christians on Facebook. It was a picture of two equal sized characters sitting at a table that was made to look like a map of the world. The one character who was obviously supposed to be the devil said to God: “How do you like that? In just 6 weeks I shut down every church in the world!!” And then God replied: “How do you like that? In just 6 weeks I turned every house in the world into a church!”

Oh snap! And Evangelicals are loving it!! Despite that it ought clearly to have been recognized as heretical.

God does not play chess with the devil.

He does not COUNTER the devil’s moves! That my friends is the heresy known as DUALISM. Dualism is the idea that the world is a chessboard upon which God is matching wits with the devil – but that isn’t how the Bible describes God – and that isn’t how the Bible describes the devil. According to the Bible, the devil is not God’s opponent – the devil is a pawn on GOD’S BOARD. God doesn’t play with anybody. God sometimes uses the devil – but he does not play with the devil.

Who would play chess with God? Who would match wits with the God who says this about himself in Deuteronomy 32:39?

“See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.”
(Deuteronomy 32:39 ESV)

I’m the whole board, God says! I’m the King! I’m the Queen! I’m the black squares and the white squares and there is NO ONE in the PATH of my purpose.

Yeah, you don’t play with God – nobody plays with God.

But that’s a truth we’ve lost hold of. I’ve seen so many evangelicals trying to insulate God from any sort of responsibility for COVID19.

They'll say: "God would never send a disease like COVID19! Don't say that about God! Say that God cares, say that God hurts with us because of COVID19, but don't say that God sent it – don't put God on the other end of that leash. What will our neighbours think about God if you say that?"

Well that's not really the issue is it? The issue isn't whether our neighbours LIKE THAT about God – the issue is whether or not the Bible SAYS THAT about God.

And it does.

Amos 3:6 says:

"Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?" (Amos 3:6 ESV)

But of course, some people will say: "But that's in the Old Testament" - as if there are two Gods described in the Bible – that's a whole other heresy. But thankfully there are not two Gods in the Bible – there is only one God – and in both the Old and New Testaments that one God claims to ordain all things for the cause of his glory and our ultimate good.

Jesus said that.

Do you remember in John 9 the disciples were trying to figure out why a certain man had been born blind. Who is ultimately responsible for this tragedy, they asked? Was it the man himself or was it perhaps his parents? Jesus said to them:

"It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." (John 9:3 ESV)

Are you seeing that? The word "THAT" there is an indicator of purpose. Jesus says that this man was born blind THAT the works of God might be displayed in him. God ordained this tragedy so that HE might be glorified IN IT and so that other people might be saved BECAUSE OF IT.

That's a category we need to recover if we are going to maintain our mental and spiritual stability throughout this crisis known as COVID19.

Here's another HIGH TRUTH we need to reacquaint ourselves with:

2. The severity of God

This is really the sticking point. You can show contemporary Christians verses like the ones I just showed you but those verses struggle to PENETRATE 70 years of peace and prosperity conditioning. For 70 years God has only been KIND to us here in North America. It has been ALWAYS Christmas and NEVER WINTER – and now these verses are just bouncing off people's heads – we have no category for this – but we better get one. In the New Testament Paul says we better get one. He says:

Note then the kindness and the severity of God (Romans 11:22 ESV)

Do you see that?

Now listen, I'm not saying we were wrong to believe that God is kind – he is kind! That's the right lesson to learn from our sunny days – but there is a lesson to learn in these days – and the lesson is that God is willing to be severe when the situation warrants it.

Some of you will know that Pastor Levi was supposed to be preaching this Sunday on Psalm 23 – and God willing you will hear that message from Pastor Levi next Sunday – but Pastor Levi came down with appendicitis a week and a bit ago. It was so bad they had to take him to the hospital – and do you know what happened there? A doctor STABBED PASTOR LEVI in the abdomen with a KNIFE!! STABBED HIM!! CUT HIM OPEN! Ripped things right out of his body and threw them in the trash! Can you believe that?

Now – why did they not arrest this HORRIBLY NASTY SURGEON?

He stabbed brother Levi!!

Who would do that?

A physician who understood the severity of Levi's condition. Appendicitis will kill you if it is not properly treated. And so thank God for a doctor who understood that sometimes you have TO WOUND IN ORDER TO HEAL.

That's what the bible says about God:

“he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.” (Hosea 6:1 ESV)

God is like a doctor who is willing to hurt in order to heal.

That's a category, my friends – that's one of those HIGH TRUTHS OF RELIGION - that we are going to have to rediscover if we are going to keep our theological and psychological bearings throughout this pandemic.

And then lastly, we need to reacquaint ourselves with:

3. The wisdom of God

God can accomplish a variety of good and glorious ends through any particular plan or ordination. And that's why we should be careful about speculating – is it this? Or is it that? It could be both – it could be neither – it could be a bunch of things that we will never see or understand.

God's ways are higher than our ways – and just because you can't figure it out doesn't mean that God doesn't have a purpose. He does!

“Whether for correction or for his land or for love, he causes it to happen.” (Job 37:13 ESV)

Francis Andersen says here:

“God is free to do what he pleases without having to explain everything as part of his purpose for mankind.”⁹

In the Book of Job God never explains WHY Job experienced the terrible things that he did. His friends offered suggestions, Job had a few thoughts, everybody weighed in but nobody actually landed on the right answer and so the conversation kind of ground to a halt. But then God showed up and started to speak – but do you remember what he said? He didn’t tell Job what happened. He didn’t say: “I gave permission to the devil to mess up your life and set fire to your universe because I was going to show the world what true faith looked like” – he didn’t say that. Job was never told what was going on behind the scenes.

Do you remember what he was told?

A bunch of stuff about God’s ability to WISELY govern the universe.

“I put the stars in their place”

“I make sure that the wild donkey has food to eat and water to drink”.

“I teach the birds to fly and guide them on their annual migrations.”

“I manage the rains and send the frost and turn the seasons”

“I do all of that Job and I do it WISELY”.

That’s what God said – and then do you remember what Job said? He said:

“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.”
(Job 42:2 ESV)

⁹Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 286.

Yeah, Job says, I forgot about that. I lost my head for a moment there because I forgot that you are wise and that you do all things well and that no good purpose of yours can be thwarted.

But now I remember and therefore I am content.

You see these are the HIGHER TRUTHS that settle the soul during seasons of chaos and upheaval. It takes BIG TRUTHS to survive a stormy day. So appeal to the years of the right hand of the Most High God. Remember his ACTS, his MIRACLES, his WORKS and his DEEDS across the ages. Remember creation. Remember the Exodus. Remember the cross and remember the empty tomb.

Think about these things!!

MUSE and MEDITATE upon these things.

Rest in who God is and trust in what he has done – and praise the Lord.

That's the path – that's the way out of situational doubt and depression and this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God! Let me pray for us.