

When There's No Song in the Night

Psalm 77

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It's interesting when you study back through church history how many of the most courageous men and women of faith were plagued by periods of significant despair and depression. Martin Luther would have to go down as one of the most courageous believers in the last two thousand years. Yet Martin Luther fought this despair, anxiety and depression almost his entire life to the point where it caused physical symptoms that plagued him his entire adult life.

You think about Oswald Chambers who wrote the classic *My Utmost for His Highest*. You read that volume, and you think, *There is no way this godly man could lose his way*. But he did. For a period of almost two years he was so depressed, felt such despair, he was almost completely incapacitated.

Probably the greatest preacher in the nineteenth century was a British preacher by the name of Charles Haddon Spurgeon. A great man of God. But in the last 20 years of his life he struggled with many physical problems and entered in and out of depression and despair. As a matter of fact it was in those last 20 years of his life that he wrote his commentary on the Psalms. Listen to what he says about Psalm 77, the Psalm we will study this morning.

Some of us know what it is, both physically and spiritually, to be compelled to use these words. No respite has been afforded us by the silence of the night. Our bed has been a rack to us. Our body has been in torment, and our spirit in anguish....Alas, my God, the writer of this exposition well knows what thy servant Asaph meant, for his soul is familiar with the way of grief. Deep glens and lonely caves of soul depressions, my spirit knows full well your awful glooms!

--as quoted in *Psalms Volume 2*, James Montgomery Boice (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1996) p. 639

If you have a Bible this morning, turn with me to Psalm 77. This is a psalm of Asaph, a godly man, a worship leader in Israel. But through this psalm he struggles through his time in the quagmire, through his time of despair and depression. The superscription, the little writing under the number, tells us this was meant to be a song. There's a note for the choir director according to Jeduthun, probably his reference to a certain style of music and we're told it's a song of Asaph. Asaph was a worship leader in Israel. Verse 1:

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. (Psalm 77:1-3, *NASB)

Throughout the Psalms there is a common imagery of this cry in the night to communicate despair, depression or anguish. It's a great imagery of someone in the middle of the night who is so restless, who is so racked with anxiety or despair, that there's nothing to do but to cry out in the night and hope that God hears.

The psalmist says at the end of verse one that God will hear him, only in this psalm rather than that bringing comfort, it's a part of the pain. We'll talk about that more in just a minute. Verse 2:

In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord; in the night my hand was stretched out without weariness;

In other words what he's saying is in the midst of despair he pursued God with all of his heart. This isn't some foxhole conversion where he's suddenly felt himself in trouble and reaching out to God hoping God will bail him out. He's saying just the opposite. The idea of his hand or his arm "stretched out without weariness" is the idea that he has pursued God. He has done everything right. He is seeking after God with all his heart. And he's not been weary in the journey, but God doesn't seem to care.

This is very important to understand because I have these conversations with people all the time. People will come in and say, "Pastor Clark, I don't understand why this is happening to me." And then we begin to go through the checklist. And it's obvious how often we revert back to our performance driven mentality. Thinking that if we perform well for God, if we're doing all the right things, if we can check off all the boxes, then God should respond a certain way.

And when God doesn't respond that way we don't know what to do with that. So we think, *I don't understand why this is happening to me. I've been having my quiet time. Check! I've been taking time to pray. Check! I've been attending church every weekend. Check! I've been serving in a ministry. Check! I've been giving my money. Check!* We go through the checklist and say, "God, I've been doing all the right things." What's implied in that is, "God, if I do my part, You're obligated to do Your part." And we don't understand sometimes why God doesn't respond the way we think He should respond.

Several years ago I was reading an article in a leadership journal written by a very well known preacher. And he was talking about his 'gauges.' He was thinking of an airplane and looking at the gauges in an airplane and had equated those to the disciplines in his life. And he was going through a period of time where he was struggling, and so he went through the gauges. And that one's fine, and that one's fine and it was, quiet time, prayer, fasting, I mean all the typical things you would think of. And what he realized is he had missed one gauge. There was one part of his life that he had not really developed a gauge for. So he did that thinking that would solve the problem, and that's in essence how the article ended.

And I remember thinking to myself, *You know, it doesn't work that way. It doesn't work that way. This isn't a checklist of things you do. Sometimes every single gauge is reading correctly and the plane is going down.* And that's what the psalmist is saying. He's saying, "God, I've been pursuing You with all my heart. I've not grown weary in this pursuit. But for whatever reason God, You don't seem to be showing up."

My soul refused to be comforted. When I remember God, then I am disturbed. (vs. 2b-3a)

There's a sigh of relief when I remember God. Everything's going to be okay. Isn't it? "**When I remember God, then I am disturbed; when I sigh, then my spirit grows faint.**" What he's saying here—and he's going to unpack it throughout the rest of the psalm—is that he knows that God hears him (verse one). He knows all about God. He knows God is good. He knows God is faithful. He knows God is kind. He knows God has intervened all through history on behalf of His people. And in this moment rather than that bringing him comfort, it's adding to his pain, because he knows God has what is necessary to meet him in his hour of need and deliver him. But He isn't. He isn't showing up, and that just adds to the pain.

If I was in the hospital sitting at the bedside of one my children who was slowing dying and you were to come in to visit me, you might say to me, "I wish I could do more." And I would hear in

your voice compassion, and I would know what you meant by “I wish I could do more.” But I know that you can’t. But if someone were to come in and had the medicine, had the technology, had the procedure to do what was necessary, to heal my child but chose not to, I don’t know what to do with that. I don’t know how to process that.

And that’s what this psalm is saying. “God when I think about You, when I think about Your goodness, Your faithfulness, Your kindness and Your power, I know that at any moment You could show up and You could deliver me and You could lead me out of this pit of despair. But You choose not to.” There are these magnificent truths about God that often bring us comfort, but there are times when they only add to the pain because we don’t understand where God is in this moment.

It’s followed by the “Selah” which shows up a lot in the psalms. We usually just skip over it. But this is a good time to make mention of what “Selah” is all about. Nobody quite knows what “Selah” means. Most people think it means a pause or oftentimes a musical instrumental interlude. I think because this is meant to be a song of the choir, more than likely in this psalm it is a musical interlude. If we were doing this as a musical psalm, at this point the instruments would just play. And it would give us time to stop and to think and to ponder and to reflect before we move on.

I think it’s real important for us to remember that. This is a good weekend to do that because the worship team does this so well in this weekend service. We tend to think if there aren’t words, it’s not worship. And yet the psalms say over and over and over again, “We worship with our instruments.” It’s a time to think; it’s a time to meditate; it’s a time to process.

When the worship team just plays instrumentally, that’s not them just kind of going off on some jam session. It’s not somebody showing off doing their own thing. It’s very strategically placed. It’s a time to stop and to think. It’s a time to refocus. It’s a time to ponder. Everything you hear that you should think, *Okay what are we doing here?* This is a time to kind of re-gather, to refocus, to think a little bit. And that’s exactly the function of the “Selah’s” throughout the psalms. It’s a time to slow down, to pause, and to think about what was just said.

Verse 4:

You have held my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

The psalmist is so tired because he cannot sleep at night because of his despair that there’s a picture of God holding his eyelids open so he can function.

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. (vs. 4b-6a)

He’s beginning to unpack what he said in verse three when he remembers God and he’s thinking back to times in his life when he was going through difficult times, often described as “the night.” But in those moments God met him there and he had a song in the night and there was something deep within him that said, “Everything’s going to be okay.”

Most of us have experienced those moments where we’re going through hard times but yet in the midst of the darkness God is there. And God touches us in a way that seems so real and so compelling it’s as if we could reach out and touch Him. It’s as if He’s holding our hand and He is letting us know that everything’s going to be alright. So in the midst of the darkest moments we have this song in the night that says, “Everything’s going to be alright.”

Asaph is saying, “God, I remember those times. I remember when I was in the deepest despair and I struggling. I didn’t think I was going to make it, and You met me there and You held my hand and You walked me out of that pit into the light again.” But what he’s saying in this psalm is, “God, I remember that.” But what do you when there is no song in the night? What do you do when you’re in those darkest moments, and it seems like God has disconnected. It seems like God doesn’t care. God doesn’t seem to be showing up this time. And, “I don’t know what to do when there’s no song in the night.”

This past May I had the honor of speaking at the funeral for Dawn Marie Carlson who would be the daughter of Tom and Linda Rempel. Tom is the pastor of Faith Bible Church just up the road here and a dear friend of mine. They went through a very, very difficult journey as Dawn slowly died of cancer. The journey continues as they process through all of the challenges of three children who are all preschool age now growing up without a mommy.

Tom and Linda are courageous people of faith, and they’ll get through this. But it is really, really hard. And it fills our minds with questions—questions that seem to have no answers. I was just with Tom this last week, and we were talking about some of these things. He said in the last weeks as Dawn Marie’s strength faded away and it was evident that she was nearing her death that someone shared with them that they had gone through a similar thing with a loved one. And in the last few days there was a sense in which God had spoken to this loved one. And they got a completely different countenance and a smile and acknowledged Jesus. And there was a sense in which Jesus had connected in a very real and personal way and suddenly this person was at peace—and very peacefully, very beautifully passed into the next world.

And Tom said that he and Linda were waiting for that moment, but that moment never came. It just went from bad to worse. And then it got worse, and then it got worse again. The doctor said it was probably the second worst death he had ever seen. And Tom and Linda wrestle with, *What do you do when there is no song in the night? When it seems like God has disconnected, when it seems like God doesn’t care anymore? When it seems like in the most difficult moment of life, God is nowhere to be found? And why would He pick this moment to go silent?*

The psalmist follows up with a series of very disturbing questions. You saw them on the screen earlier:

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? (vs. 7-8)

Those are disturbing questions. You get the impression here that this was not something in Asaph’s life that had gone on for a few days or a few weeks. It sounds more to me like it’s been several years. And he’s starting to ask the question, “God, is this going to be the way it’s going to be forever? God, have you lost Your love forever? Are You going to reject me forever? God, have you run out of compassion? Do You not love me anymore? Are You all out of promises?”

Just imagine that someone in your LifeGroup, some friend of yours or neighbor began to ask these questions. We would immediately have to respond with five verses. We’d give them a book. We have to do something quickly to fix this. This is just too disturbing. But these aren’t questions of the head. These are questions of the heart. Asaph is a worship leader in Israel. He knows what’s true, but right now that’s not what he’s feeling. And right now what he needs is

not five verses to fix him. He needs some level of understanding, some level of compassion, some environment that's safe enough that says, "It's okay to say that here because that's really what you're feeling, isn't it?"

We tend to create environments that say pretty quickly to people, "Whoa, don't say things like that here because it makes me really uncomfortable. You know, I want to believe that there's a checklist of things that if you do those things that these kind of moments won't come. And if I have to acknowledge that you're feeling these things, then I open myself up to the reality that someday I could find myself in such an unexplainable place." And that unnerves us. We just want to think that can't happen. So we get really uptight when these kinds of questions are posed. And we quickly communicate, "Don't say that! Don't ask that!" And we quickly want to fix the situation.

Verse 10:

Then I said, "It is my grief, that the right hand of the Most High has changed."

Verse ten is the turning point in the psalm, and it's a little bit confusing. There are two different Hebrew words and both of those can be interpreted two different ways, so you end up with the possibility of four different sentences. The first part of the verse when he says "It is my grief" uses a Hebrew word that could be translated "grief" or "appeal." "This is my grief or this is my appeal." The second part of the verse uses a Hebrew word translated "changed" that can also be translated "years." So in essence you have two possibilities, one is captured by the New International Version (NIV) and one is captured by the New American Standard which is what I use. The New American Standard is saying, "This is my grief," meaning that I believe somehow this Most High God has changed. The NIV captures it as, "This is my appeal," and this is the idea that I am going to look at the power displayed by the Most High God down through the years as a way to begin to climb out of this pit of despair. Now I think the NIV in this case has it correctly. I think it should be, "This is my appeal," and he's looking at the years of God's faithfulness to try and refocus his attention.

In verse five the same word translated "years" is used. You'd think that the psalmist would use the same word consistently through the psalm. So if it's "years" which it clearly is in verse five it seems likely it would be that in verse ten. But more than that I think verse ten is the turning point and what he's saying is, "This is my appeal, this is my only hope, this is my only chance." He's not saying, "This is my grief." He's saying, "This is all I have." And at that point his attention turns. As a matter of fact the most important thing to notice in the first half of this psalm would be the pronouns because in the first nine verses it's "I," and it's "me." That's what happens when we get in the quagmire. That's what happens when we get in these moments. We become very self-focused, and it just gets us deeper and deeper into the mud.

What changes from verse ten on is he begins to very intentionally shift his focus. He's going to focus on God and God's power through the years as a way to crawl back out of this pit of despair. Verse 11:

I shall remember the deeds of the LORD; surely I will remember Your wonders of old. I will meditate on all Your work and muse on Your deeds. (vs. 11-12)

He's very intentionally saying here, "I'm going to remember; I'm going to meditate; I'm going to muse; I'm going to spend time focusing; I'm going to change my focus from myself and my circumstances to the stuff of God. And I'm going to focus on His deeds. I'm going to focus on His wonders. I'm going to focus on His works."

Your way, O God, is holy; what god is great like our God? You are the God who works wonders; You have made known Your strength among the peoples. You have by Your power redeemed Your people, the sons of Jacob and Joseph. Selah. (vs. 13-15)

Verse 13 is very important. What he is saying is, “God, you are holy. There’s no one great like You.” “Holy” means “set apart.” My favorite definition is it means “other than.” The psalmist was surrounded by pagan nations who believed in thousands of gods. But the thing that distinguished the God of the Hebrews from the thousands of other gods around them is the God of the Hebrews had intervened and acted in human history. He had made Himself known to the peoples. He had demonstrated His power. And even the pagan nations knew that.

These pagan people had often experienced the same level of despair and cried out to their gods. The difference is their gods had never shown up. Their gods had never acted because they were no gods at all. But the psalmist is saying, “God I understand that. You are other than every other god. You alone are the God who is great.” So what he’s saying is, “I have nowhere else to go. I have nowhere else to turn. You’re still my only source of hope! So even though in this moment when I don’t understand what’s going on—You don’t seem to care, I wonder if You’ve rejected me forever, I wonder if You’ve run out of compassion, if You don’t love me anymore—even though I’m so confused at this moment as to why this is happening, I have nowhere else to go. I’ve got nowhere else to turn, because You are the only God who can deliver the goods.”

Moving it through the New Testament, we would say, “God, you’re the only One who made the lame to walk. You’re the only One who made the blind to see. You’re the only One that raised the dead to life. You’re the only One that redeemed sinful people back to life. So I’ve got nowhere else to go. I’ve got nowhere else to turn. So all I can do is focus on You and believe.”

In verse 15 the psalmist is making reference to God’s deliverance of the Hebrew people out of the land of Egypt. And in the verses that follow, he just unpacks that further.

The waters saw You, O God; the waters saw You, they were in anguish; the deeps also 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 paths in the mighty waters, and Your footprints may not be known. You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. (vs. 16-20)

He’s referring to the time when the Hebrew people found themselves on the banks of the Red Sea with Pharaoh and his army closing in, and God made a way of escape. One of the great all time miracles. There are details in Psalm 77 about that event that aren’t even listed in Exodus when the event itself is described. Verse 16:

The waters saw You, O God; the waters saw You, they were in anguish.

This is a great picture when God showed up and parted the Red Sea. It’s kind of humanizing the waters and saying, “God, You so intimidated the waters by Your awesomeness that when You stepped in there, they just peeled back.” It was God’s awesomeness. It was God’s intimidation that caused the waters to part and separate.

“The clouds poured out water.”(v. 17a) You’ve got this great scene of this mighty storm and you’ve got thunder and you’ve got lightning. And you’ve got this impressive scene as the waters

peel back and make a way of escape. But this must have been incredibly frightening for these Hebrew people. Think about the level of intensity as the army of Pharaoh is closing in from the back, these walls of water pulled back—the sound of that must have just been incredibly intimidating—you’ve got lightning; you’ve got thunder and by faith they had to believe this is the way of escape, walking through this unimaginable tunnel.

And that’s why he says, “There were no footprints,” because when God makes a way of escape, you go through by faith. You just had to believe this is God and this is God doing this and this is your way of escape. But there are no footprints to follow. Faith is still required. And then a reminder that God shepherds His people, God shepherd’s His people. He does care. He does make a way of escape. And with that, the psalm closes.

The psalm doesn’t really resolve itself very well. We like those psalms that maybe start out like this but they really climb up in the end and we have this sigh of relief, *That was a close one! But everything’s going to be okay.* But that’s really not the way this psalm ends. The psalm ends with Asaph hanging on for dear life because he’s got nowhere else to turn. And it is a reminder that we don’t follow by footprints, we follow by faith—that we just have to believe.

Years ago there was a poem called *Footprints in the Sand*. It was very popular. It was on everything. It was on posters; it was on pictures; it was on coffee mugs. There was a song made about it. It was everywhere. It was all very warm and fuzzy. You have two sets of footprints walking down the beach, one is mine and one set is God’s. And yet it seems like during certain times of life, during the most difficult times of life, there was just one set of footprints. So I get to heaven and ask God, “Hey God, when in those most difficult moments was there just one set of footprints?” God says, “Well those were the moments where I carried you.” We like that. We like that. It’s very settling. And there’s truth to that.

But the psalmist would paint a very different picture, while on the surface it may look very similar. You would say to Asaph, “Asaph, I understand what’s going on here. There are two sets of footprints, but there are certain times—it seems like those are the most difficult times—when there seems to be just one set of footprints, why is that?” He would say, “For reasons I cannot explain, sometimes in the most difficult moments of life it seems like God left me to go through the valley alone. I cried out to Him, but He didn’t answer. I pursued Him with all my heart, but I got no response. And I started to think, *God, have you rejected me forever? Am I going to have to walk this walk all by myself? Do You not love me anymore? Have You run out of compassion? You don’t keep Your promises anymore?*”

As I said before we don’t like that. It’s not very warm and fuzzy. We want to believe there’s no way that can happen. You might ask me the question, “Why is that? Why is it that sometimes in the moments when I feel like I need God the most He just doesn’t seem to be there?” We know those moments when we’re going through the valley and God seems so close, so personal, it’s as if I can reach out and touch Him. And in those moments there’s a song in the night, and we love to share those stories.

But some of us would say, “You know, there have also been times when I’ve been in the valley, and there was no song in the night. God didn’t seem to be there. It seems like He disconnected, like He doesn’t care anymore.” You say, “Why is that?” And the answer is, “I don’t know. I don’t know!” I don’t know why sometimes it has to be that way. I understand the big picture of suffering in the world and all of that. But I don’t understand why it’s necessary that in certain moments in life—sometimes the deepest valleys—it just seems like God is disconnected. And it feels like we walk that valley alone. I don’t have an answer. I wish I did.

If I had an answer I would run from this place this morning to the house of Tom and Linda Rempel, and I would say, “I figured it out!” To be able to present them with that answer so they would say, “Oh! Finally it all makes sense!” But nobody has that answer. They don’t need another book; they don’t need another passage of Scripture; they don’t need another sermon. Nobody can answer that question. I don’t know.

I was in my mid-twenties and every weekend I was preaching the truth of the Scripture—that God is good and God is faithful and God is kind and God is loving. God is always with us. And in my mind I knew that was true, but there was something deep within me that was still feeling the tension between what I was preaching and what I experienced the first twenty years of my life as day after day I watched my dad suffer in unimaginable pain. I’m saying, “I’m struggling here; there seems to be a tension here; my head knows this is true but my heart still is really confused.”

And I realized over a period of months that there would be no answers to my questions. I had concluded there is no book I’m going to read that is suddenly going to make it all make sense. There’s going to be no passage I’m going to open up to where I’m going to be able to say, “Oh, now I get it! Now I understand! Now that makes sense!” There is no sermon that I was going to hear preached that would finally unlock the key.

Much like the psalmist, I simply realized I’ve got nowhere else to turn. I’ve got nowhere else to go. There is no other God. I know He made the lame to walk. I know He made the blind to see. I know He raised the dead. And I know He can do it. And for reasons only God knows, He chooses not to. I’ve got nowhere else to turn. I’ve got nowhere else to go. There is no other God like our God. So I just have to believe.

The most difficult thing in my life I’ve ever surrendered to God, is not my family, is not my health, is not my career, is not my money and my stuff—frankly that stuff’s easy. The most difficult thing I ever surrendered to God was my list of questions—coming to a point in my life where I finally had to acknowledge, *There will be no answers. I don’t understand, I can’t explain. I don’t know why there are those moments in life.* But at that moment, I had to surrender my questions and say, “God, I’m just going to believe. I’m going to believe You tell the truth. I’m going to believe You are who You say You are. And I’m going to hang on for dear life, because that’s all I have!”

You might say this morning, “Well, that’s not very much.” And I would disagree. See, actually that is everything!

Our Father, we are thankful that You are faithful. Lord, You are good; You are gracious; You are kind. Lord, I say that this morning, I believe that with every fiber of my being. Lord, we also acknowledge that there are times in life where it stretches us to the ultimate end of our faith to believe that. There are times when it seems like You just don’t care. It seems like You’re nowhere to be found. It seems like we walk the valley alone. Lord, there are times when we’re in the dark, and You are so close, You are so near, it’s as if we could touch You. And Lord, in those moments You give us a song in the night, and those moments are so precious. But Lord, there are other times when You just seem to be nowhere to be found. And Lord, in those moments all we can do is by faith hang on because we’ve got nowhere else to turn. Lord, give us the courage we need in those moments to hang on with all that we have and wait for the morning. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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