WHEN GOD ISN’T ANSWERING YOUR PRAYER (Psalm 77)

Is it possible that we have been misled into thinking we can solve our problems with prayer? What could be more important than knocking harder on the door of heaven when God seems to go silent in the midst of our requests?

In this excerpt from Psalms: Folk Songs Of Faith, Ray Stedman suggests that prayer may not be the first thing to do when we are in trouble. This experienced pastor even admits that more prayer may not give us the peace of mind or answers we are looking for.

So what should we do when we don’t know where else to turn? The following pages will show us how to renew our strength when all we feel is our own weakness and fear.

Mart De Haan
IN TIMES OF DOUBT (Psalm 77:1-13)

Someone once said, “You know you have a problem with doubting when your prayer goes like this: ‘O God (if there is a God), save my soul (if I have a soul) so I can go to heaven when I die (if there is a heaven).’” We chuckle at this prayer, but when it’s 3 a.m. and we are unable to sleep, doubt is nothing to laugh about. Doubt is painful and disturbing. It robs us of our joy and peace. It creates distance in our relationship with God.

Sometimes doubt comes from our emotions. When the doctor says, “It’s cancer,” when we lose someone we love, or when our hearts are broken, we sometimes ask God, “Why? You could have stopped this from happening but You didn’t! If You are all-powerful and all-loving, how could You allow this to happen?” At such times we may feel disappointed with God. Our painful emotions will trigger an attack of doubt.

At other times doubt comes from intellectual questioning. Bible teacher G. Campbell Morgan (1863–1945) preached his first sermon when he was 13 years old. Though he had no formal training, he was deeply devoted to Bible study. While still in his teens, he was greatly sought after as a Bible teacher. But at age 19, he experienced a crisis of doubt that nearly drove him from the ministry.

Morgan had begun reading the works of various scientists and agnostics, such as Thomas Huxley and Herbert Spencer, and some of their arguments against the existence of God began to make sense to him. As his doubts deepened, he canceled all of his speaking
engagements and shut himself in a room with his Bible. For days he did nothing but read the Bible from cover to cover. He told himself, “If the Bible is the Word of God, and if I come to it with an open mind, it will be all I need to bring assurance to my soul.”

Days later, Morgan left his room and announced, “The Bible has found me!” He went back to his preaching ministry convinced of the reality of God in his life and the reliability of God’s Word. Those who heard him preach said he spoke with a new sense of power and conviction.

Psalm 77 was written to help people who struggle with doubt. It is the story of a man who is driven nearly to despair because God seems to refuse to respond to his prayers. This psalm shows how we as believers—and yes, sometimes as doubters—can move from despair to a durable faith in God.

DISTRESSING PROBLEMS, PERPLEXING DOUBTS

Psalm 77 opens with a cry of pain. The psalmist Asaph writes:

*I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted. I remembered You, O God, and I groaned; I mused, and my spirit grew faint.*

Selah (vv.1-3).

Asaph doesn’t tell us what his affliction is. It may have been a terrible loss in his life, extreme illness, the rebellion of a son or daughter, or a friend’s betrayal. We don’t know the source of his distress, but we know his emotions are twisted in knots. He has cried out to God, and his spirit has withered within him. He feels crushed by
sorrow and disappointment. Though he tries to focus on the Lord’s goodness, the psalmist’s soul refuses to be comforted. He can’t take his mind off his pain.

The writer continues: “You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak” (v.4). He tries to sleep, but his eyelids won’t close. His emotions are so disturbed that he cannot even describe his problem to others. The psalmist Asaph speaks authentically to human affliction. He holds nothing back but describes exactly how he feels.

Sometimes we church people don’t like to admit that such intense affliction and doubting are a normal part of the Christian experience, but they are! Doubts are a normal part of the Christian life. Part of our growth and maturity as Christians is learning how to persevere through our doubts so that God can bring us to a place of unshakable faith.

Many Christians think, “Now that I’m a believer, my faith will answer every problem, every doubt.” But the book of Psalms is testimony to the contrary. Life is full of problems and doubts, and no one understood this better than Jesus Himself.

Think of His agony in the garden in Gethsemane. There we see Him perplexed and troubled by what lies ahead of Him. He cries out to the Father, saying, in effect, “I don’t understand what is happening. If at all possible, let this horror, this awful cup, pass from Me. Yet, let it not be as I will, but let Your will be done” (see Lk. 22:42). Later, on the cross, He is left alone to wonder, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mt. 27:46). If Jesus knew such intense inner struggle over God’s will for His life, then He certainly understands how perplexed we often feel.

In 2 Corinthians 4:8, the apostle Paul speaks of being...
hard pressed and perplexed, so we should not feel that we are unspiritual if we face similar struggles in our lives. In fact, it is superficial and unrealistic to imagine that the Christian life can be lived without trials of pain and doubt. The history of God’s people is a lengthy record of tragedies, catastrophes, problems, pain, and, yes, doubt.

But thank God that’s not the end of the story! The psalmist cites two things he does in response to trials of pain and doubt: He prays, and he meditates on God. It’s clear that the psalmist is not a mere beginner in the faith. He knows how to approach God in times of affliction, and he uses those approaches of prayer and meditation. Even so, his pain continues unabated. In fact, the pain of his affliction is compounded by God’s apparent failure to answer his prayers.

It’s hard enough to endure affliction, but what really troubles us is the possibility that our faith may collapse under the pressure. If that happens, we not only lose this battle but we lose all of our battles because faith in God is all that makes life worth living. Whenever we are in pain, we are tempted to disbelieve.

That’s the temptation the psalmist faces. He has tried prayer, but prayer doesn’t seem to work. He has tried meditating on God’s Word, but that too leaves him empty. Why? Because he is relying on prayer and meditation as techniques—and his problems cannot be solved by techniques.

A DISTURBING CONCLUSION
This psalm unmasks the glib and superficial advice we Christians often give one another in times of trial and discouragement. We see a person whose heart has been ripped out, and what is our
response? “Pray about it,” we say, “and meditate on the Word.”

I’m not saying that such advice is wrong. I’m saying it’s useless advice as far as it goes. Prayer (as we will see later in the psalm) is not the first thing to do when you are in trouble. Does that surprise you? Does it seem almost blasphemous? Yet Psalm 77 assures us that it is so. When we are afflicted, there’s something we should do before we pray—but what?

The problem that the writer of this psalm expresses is a common one: He thought that prayer would solve his problems. He used prayer as a problem-solving technique. Prayer was never designed for that purpose. God designed prayer as an instrument of intimacy between Him and us. We make a serious mistake when we reduce prayer to a technique.

If we advise a fellow Christian in distress to “pray about it” and that person has prayed and received no answer from God, then we have not helped in any way. That person will end up even more discouraged and defeated and will be all the more tempted to give up on the Christian faith, thinking, “Faith doesn’t work. God doesn’t respond to my prayer.”

It’s not good enough simply to “muddle through” a time of doubt. These are times that God can use to help us grow stronger in Him. He allows these painful experiences in our lives because they are designed to teach us something. If we do not find God’s solution to our trial of doubt, then our faith may not survive the testing.

The psalmist in Psalm 77 comes perilously close to that point of collapse in his own faith. Desperately hoping to shore up his faith, the psalmist tries an approach that was probably suggested by a well-meaning friend or
counselor. He reflects on the past:

\[ \text{I thought about the former days, the years of long ago;} \]
\[ \text{I remembered my songs in the night. My heart mused and my spirit inquired (vv.5-6).} \]

In other words, “I’m looking for answers so I go back over the past. I recall the times when I’ve been troubled at night and unable to sleep, but God put a song in my heart. I meditate, and my spirit asks questions and ponders the past.” The psalmist remembers past blessings and God’s goodness. He remembers the songs and psalms that God has given him to sing in previous nights of pain and affliction.

Does it help him to go back over the past? No. Even as he remembers the former days and the songs in the night, his spirit insistently inquires, asks questions, and doubts. In fact, doubts continue to assail him from every direction. In one way or another, these doubts are all about the same question: “Why doesn’t God answer me?” This questioning drags him to the depths of despair in the next few verses:

\[ \text{Will the Lord reject forever? Will He never show His favor again? Has His unfailing love vanished forever? Has His promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has He in anger withheld His compassion? Selah (vv.7-9).} \]

These are logical questions: “If God has blessed me in the past, then why doesn’t He bless me now? Why do I seem to be forgotten and abandoned? Has His mercy come to an end? Is He angry with me?”

Finally the psalmist states the terrible conclusion to which he has come. It is an honest conclusion—and a painful one. The New American Standard translation
offers a clearer rendering of verse 10 than the New International Version: “Then I said, ‘It is my grief, that the right hand of the Most High has changed.’”

In other words, “I’ve analyzed my situation. I’ve prayed all night long. In the past, God answered my prayers, but this time He’s given me no help. I’ve searched my heart, and I can’t answer these questions. There is only one conclusion I can draw: I was mistaken about God in the past. I thought that He was changeless, that He would always respond every time I came to Him, but He hasn’t. So I’m forced to conclude that God has changed. You can’t count on Him, and that’s the most disturbing conclusion of all.”

This man faces the loss of his faith. He sees this possibility as the tragedy that it is. All that he once rested in, all that was a comfort to him, is now crumbling beneath his feet. What can he do? How can he be delivered from his crisis of doubt?

THE UNTHINKABLE THOUGHT
Psalm 77 takes a sudden turn at verse 11. Asaph writes:

\[I \text{ will remember the deeds of the L ORD; yes, I will remember Your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all Your works and consider all Your mighty deeds (vv.11-12).}\]

The psalmist has undergone a radical rethinking of his crisis of doubt. He voices a new sense of confidence and peace, which he expresses to God in prayer. What changed? What happened between verse 10 and 11 to move the psalmist from doubt to faith? Just this: He suddenly saw where his thoughts were leading him!

The psalmist had reached the brink of unbelief. He had concluded that God can change, and the next step

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in his thinking would be to believe something horrible, something unthinkable: God is not really God.

After all, if God can change, then He is nothing more than a manlike being with godlike powers. The steadfastness and unchanging character of God is essential to the psalmist’s understanding of who God is. If God can change, if He can be unloving and unjust, then God is not really God. That is the brink where the psalmist stands in verse 10. One more step, and he will go over the brink and tumble into the abyss of unbelief. Seeing where his thinking is leading, the psalmist draws back from the brink. At verse 11 we see him moving in a completely different direction.

The psalmist understood that one of the most fundamental truths of Scripture is that God cannot change. As the apostle James puts it in his New Testament letter, God is the “Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (1:17). He is absolutely reliable and dependable. His love for us never changes. His mercy toward us never changes. These truths are fundamental to the biblical concept of God.

It’s important to understand that the psalmist’s doubts were not answered at this point. His decision to believe God was not an emotional decision or an intellectual decision. It was a determination he made purely in his will. He made a volitional choice to step back from the brink of unbelief, and that choice saved him.

This is a good thing to do when you struggle with doubt. Look to the end of the road you are on. See where your steps are taking you. When you see the destination of that road, you will probably be appalled, but taking that hard look will force you to
proceed with care. What's at stake here is nothing less than your fundamental philosophy of God and meaning. The conclusion you reach will affect every aspect of your life. So take a good, hard, honest look. Don't be afraid to face your doubts squarely. The Bible is true, God is alive, and the Christian faith is strong enough to withstand your honest inquiry.

If you examine Scriptures, I believe you'll come to the same conclusion the apostle Peter reached. In John 6, Jesus made some demanding statements to His disciples. At that point many of them turned away and left Him. When Jesus saw the crowds leaving Him, He turned to the Twelve and said, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” And Peter responded: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn. 6:67-68).

In a sense he was saying, “Lord, the things You've said are disturbing, and we have a hard time understanding it all. Just when we think we have You figured out, You make a statement that shocks and baffles us. But we've examined the alternatives, and we've asked ourselves, ‘Who else speaks the truth as You do? Where else can we go?’ We've decided to follow You, because You have the words that lead to eternal life.”

So it is with the psalmist. His doubts drove him to think unthinkable thoughts. He stood at the brink of unbelief and stared into the abyss, then he resolved in his mind and will to continue believing that God is God.

THE PLACE TO BEGIN
And what about the psalmist's unresolved doubts? We cannot live our lives in a state of tension between faith and doubt. Ultimately we must come down on one side or the other. When we doubt, we
need to take action to resolve our doubts. If we fail to settle the questions of our faith, if we try to live in a state of unresolved doubt, then those doubts will pull on us until we finally tumble into the abyss of unbelief and become enemies of faith.

How did the psalmist avoid this fate? He began by thinking about God. Let’s look again at these two verses:

*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 all Your mighty deeds* (vv.11-12).

Notice that the psalmist begins by saying, “I will.” Those two words show us that he has made a decision to act. He has chosen to stop being a victim of his feelings. His mind and his will now enter the picture. The control of his life shifts from his heart to his head. The moment he makes this decision, the psalmist stops focusing on himself and his circumstances, and he starts focusing on God.

You’ll recall that earlier (on page 6) I said that prayer is not the first thing to do when you are in trouble. Did you find that surprising? I’m sure you’re wondering what we should do before we pray. Here is the answer: Before you pray, meditate on God. Before you pray, make sure you understand who God is. Focus on God Himself before you focus on your petitions, your hurts, your needs, and your feelings through prayer.

Our tendency is to pray first, then meditate (if we meditate at all). When we pray before we meditate, we pray about our problems, our suffering, our anxiety, and our worries. When we pray before meditating, we put ourselves at the center of our prayers: “I’m in trouble! I’m in pain! I’m depressed! I need You to save me from my problems, God!”
We need to learn to put God at the center of our prayers. We need to meditate on the Scriptures that speak to us about God. We need to meditate on the nature of God, the person of God, the wonder of God, the activity of God in human history and in our own lives. Then when we pray, we can put God in the center of our prayers instead of ourselves. “God, You are the Lord of my life and my problems. You are holy and merciful. You are unchanging and dependable. You are all I want and all I ever need in life.”

Do you see how meditating on God completely changes the way we pray? Do you see how it shifts our focus away from ourselves, our problems, and our feelings? Do you see how it causes us to focus on who God is, what He is like, and what He can do? Do you see how meditating on God moves us out of our natural thinking and lifts us to a spiritual way of thinking?

Now perhaps you begin to see what Psalm 77 is all about. The psalmist begins by describing a natural view of his problems. He prays from a natural and self-centered mindset. He begins with the thought, “See how afflicted I am! See how I cry out and nothing happens!” When self is at the center, the heart takes over and the mind is governed by feelings.

But when the psalmist’s perspective changes at verse 11, his prayer changes as well. Instead of being focused on his own pain and self-pity, he focuses entirely on God. There is profound psychological insight contained in this account. Psalm 77 begins with a man who is a slave to his emotions. His anxiety and despair color his outlook on his problems as well as his outlook on God. His emotions have actually brought him to the brink of a total collapse of his faith. When the psalmist
takes himself out of the center of his prayers and puts God there instead, his perspective is changed. You and I are limited beings. If we begin by praying about ourselves, our problems, and our feelings, we are starting out with limited thinking. When we start with God, we start with the fact that God knows no limits. He is the Creator of the universe, the Author of life. All knowledge and all truth are His. By focusing on Him instead of ourselves, we remove all limitations from our thinking and our prayers. All things become possible when you begin with God.

**EXPLAINING THE SILENCE OF GOD**

Before we leave this section of Psalm 77, there is one more question that demands an answer: “Why was God so unresponsive to the psalmist’s cries? Why was God silent?”

This is a question that we often ask ourselves. In one sense the answer is obvious and perhaps shocking: God is silent because He chooses to be. His silence is deliberate. We don’t like to think that God would deliberately ignore our pleas for help, especially in our times of physical, emotional, or spiritual suffering. We know that God is loving and merciful, and it seems a violation of His nature for Him to treat us with silence just when we need Him most.

Why then would God deliberately allow the psalmist to go through such a time of trial, doubt, and despair? There is only one answer: God wants the psalmist to move to a deeper level of faith. This time of trial and doubting is part of the process that makes us grow spiritually strong and wise.

Here’s a spiritual principle that we can’t deny: If God always responded instantly to our cries for help, we would
remain spiritually immature forever. We would always be mastered by feelings and moods. Our prayers would always be self-centered rather than God-centered. Our outlook would remain natural, not spiritual.

One sure mark of maturity in a Christian's life is that he or she is no longer controlled by circumstances, emotions, and moods. Yes, mature Christians still have feelings, but their feelings no longer rule their lives and govern their relationship with God. Their lives are no longer a roller-coaster ride of mood swings, of soaring highs and depressing lows. They are stable and strong in their faith, regardless of circumstances, just as Jesus our Lord was.

We would never reach that place of spiritual maturity if God always responded to us the instant we called upon Him. We will never achieve Christlike faith and character as long as our trust in God is subject to our moods, emotions, and circumstances. So God deliberately hides Himself at times so that we will grow to become more like Christ.

If you are going through a trial and God seems silent, I want you to know that He is there with you, hurting and weeping with you. But He is also helping you to grow in your character and your faith. Through this painful experience, you are learning lessons that you could never learn any other way.

God may seem silent right now, but He is alongside you in a deeper way than you have ever known before. He is leading you into a richer, more rewarding, more exciting experience of faith than you ever dreamed possible. The momentary trial you are going through is designed to build in you a Christlike character, a steadfast soul, and a believing spirit.

Soon you’ll be able to
rejoice with the psalmist and say, “I will remember the deeds of the Lord!” You have God’s Word on that.

THROUGH THE DEEP WATERS
(Psalm 77:13-20)

If there is one moment that defined Israel as a nation blessed by God, it was the time God led the people of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt. This Old Testament event established Israel’s national identity for all time. The book of Psalms continually refers to this event when God brought the plagues upon Egypt then miraculously opened the Red Sea and led the people to safety from the Egyptian army. God fed them in the wilderness and went before them in a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day.

Thousands of people witnessed these events, including the people of other nations. The details of these events were well known throughout the ancient world. When the people of Israel came to the edge of the Jordan River and were about to enter the Promised Land, they found that word had gone before them. Israel’s enemies were already frightened of them, and that paved the way for Israel’s conquest of the land. The Gentile nations had heard the stories of the plagues in Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea, and these nations could not deny that Israel served a great God.

These are the events that the psalmist Asaph recalled when he wrote:

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 all Your mighty deeds (vv.11-12).

As Christians, we have a similar heritage of New Testament history on which
to reflect. We can remember the mighty deeds of the Lord Jesus and His miracles of long ago. We can meditate on His works of teaching, healing, and raising the dead, as well as His work of dying on the cross and rising from the tomb. These events are historical facts.

The apostle Paul testified to this same historical heritage before King Agrippa when he said of the death and resurrection of Jesus, “None of this has escaped [the king's] notice, because it was not done in a corner” (Acts 26:26). In other words, the historic fact of the death and resurrection of Jesus was a well-attested event that took place before many witnesses. The risen Lord didn’t appear to only one or two people but to dozens, and to over five hundred people at once on one occasion. These people all bore witness to the resurrection.

When we read the words of the psalmist, “I will remember the deeds of the LORD,” we can say, “Yes! Amen! God has done great things! He has led Israel out of Egypt through the depths of the Red Sea, and He has taken our Lord Jesus through the darkness of death itself and has raised Him up to live and reign forever!”

It is a fact that God has acted in history. The story of Jesus is not a myth. The Word became flesh and lived among us, was crucified, and rose again. The Bible is grounded in history. The church could never have survived those early years of persecution if so many people had not witnessed the resurrection of Jesus. The early Christians would never have withstood such fiery, bloody persecution for the sake of a lie. The resurrection is the central fact of human history. That is why we can say along with the psalmist, “I will remember the deeds of the LORD.”
THE GREATNESS OF GOD

The psalmist has shown us the present-day value of remembering what God has done in the past. He goes on to tell us what will result when we meditate upon who God is and what He has done:

*Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God? You are the God who performs miracles; You display Your power among the peoples. With Your mighty arm You redeemed Your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. Selah* (vv. 13-15).

As we saw in the first half of Psalm 77, the psalmist had experienced a period of doubting that brought him to the brink of unbelief. But then he arrived at the conclusion about God that is so wonderfully expressed in these verses. His conclusion is that God is holy and great.

Our faith will stand firm as long as we are convinced of the two towering truths the psalmist expresses here: God is holy, and God is great. The psalmist is filled with a sense of awe regarding the moral perfection and utter majesty of God.

We human beings like to applaud our own greatness. We think we are powerful beings because of technological terrors such as the hydrogen bomb. This device, which releases energy by fusing the nuclei of hydrogen atoms, is capable of destroying a city of several million people in a single flash. But how does the power of an entire arsenal of hydrogen bombs compare with the power of God?

Our sun works on the same principle as a hydrogen bomb, generating energy by fusing the nuclei of hydrogen atoms. But did you know that our sun unleashes the equivalent of 100 billion hydrogen bombs every second? What’s more, the sun,
which is more than 300,000 times the size of planet Earth, is just one of 100 billion stars in the Milky Way Galaxy, which is just one of 100 billion galaxies in the known universe! In other words, at any given split-instant of time, God’s universe is unleashing trillions and trillions of times the energy of humans’ most powerful invention!

The next time you hear someone boasting of human greatness, remind that person of the greatness of a God who could create such a universe as ours! It helps to keep things in perspective.

THE REALITY OF MIRACLES
The psalmist writes: “You are the God who performs miracles; You display Your power among the peoples” (v.14). This was a profound statement when it was written, a thousand years before the birth of Jesus. It is still a profound statement today.

The miracles of God reveal a power beyond human comprehension. I know many people today would consider a belief in miracles to be superstitious. Yet these events we call miracles have convinced men and women of faith for centuries that God is at work. It is precisely because these events are supernatural that people find them convincing evidence of the reality of God.

Take, for example, the crossing of the Red Sea. Here is an amazing event that shaped the course of history. Nations exist today as a result of that supernatural occurrence. The waters were rolled back so that the Israelites could walk across the seabed on dry land, but when the Egyptians followed, the waters collapsed on them and they were drowned.

Humans have never done such a thing. It is humanly impossible. People can’t duplicate such a feat; they can
only belittle it. As one agnostic put it, “Miracles cannot happen; therefore miracles have not happened.” Some skeptics manage to argue in a complete circle: “There is no God, so there can be no miracles. Since there are no miracles, there is no God.”

Such arguments prove nothing. Logicians call such thinking “begging the question.” It’s the fallacy of basing a conclusion on an unproven assumption. You can’t logically say, “Miracles can’t happen; therefore miracles have not happened.” You first have to prove that miracles can’t happen. If you can’t prove your assumption, then any conclusion you base on that assumption is unproven as well.

It’s amazing to see how otherwise intelligent people simply dismiss with a wave of the hand the evidence that miracles do happen. If we look at the events of the Bible as a record of eyewitness accounts made by honest, sincere men and women, then the Bible becomes a compilation of strong and convincing evidence for miracles.

Another foolish thing that otherwise intelligent people do is that they reserve all of their skepticism and cynicism for the Bible alone. They accept as trustworthy the accounts of Suetonius, Philo, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Tacitus, Eusebius, Herodotus, Xenophon, Polybius, Livy, and Flavius Josephus, but they regard the accounts of the Old and New Testaments as highly suspect, if not downright dishonest. On what basis do they draw this distinction? Purely on the basis that the Bible records miracles, and “everybody knows that miracles can’t happen.”

On the basis of prejudice alone, many historians and scholars simply dismiss the miracles of the Exodus, the miracles of the prophets,
and the miracles of Jesus. Yet in the days when these events occurred, even hostile witnesses had to admit that they were real.

We see an example of this in Matthew 28. After the resurrection of Jesus, the guards from the tomb ran to the chief priests and told them that the stone had been rolled away from the opening and the body of Jesus was gone. The chief priests bribed the guards and told them to say, “His disciples came during the night and stole Him away while we were asleep” (v.13). So the guards went out and circulated the false story.

Why did the priests and the guards have to fabricate such a story? Because the empty tomb demanded an explanation! The location of the tomb was no secret. Anyone could go out to the tomb, look inside it, and see that Jesus wasn’t there. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people did just that. There was no question that the tomb of Jesus was empty. The only question was why it was empty—and what did the empty tomb mean?

To an unbiased mind, the most reasonable explanation was that Jesus truly was alive again.

The God of the psalmist is a God who creates a universe out of nothing, a God who leads a nation out of bondage by taking them through the depths of a parted sea. This same God opened a sealed tomb and breathed life back into the dead body of our crucified Lord. He is a God who displays His awesome power among the peoples.

**THE GOD OF REDEMPTION**

The psalmist goes on to make another profound observation about the deeds of God. His deeds are not merely great, but they are redemptive as well. God did great works that saved His people and restored
them to a central place in His eternal plan. The psalmist writes, “With Your mighty arm You redeemed Your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph” (v.15).

The psalmist always placed the word Selah at a crucial point in the psalm. The word means, “Stop and think. Pause and reflect on what this means.”

So what does the psalmist mean by “You redeemed Your people”? The word redeem means to restore to usefulness something that has been rendered useless. Let me give you a practical example.

When I was a seminary student, I spent 3 years as a summer intern in two different churches in Pasadena. Each spring I arrived in town completely broke, with nothing to hold me over until my first paycheck. How did I get by? I picked up the most valuable thing I owned—my typewriter—and took it to the pawnshop and hocked it.

The money the pawnbroker lent me was just enough to carry me through the next 2 weeks. When my paycheck arrived, I’d hurry down to the pawnshop and redeem the typewriter.

While my typewriter was in the pawnshop, it was absolutely idle. I couldn’t use it. The pawnbroker couldn’t use it. The typewriter was useless to anybody until I returned to the pawnshop and paid the price of redemption. Once the typewriter was redeemed, I put it back into service.

That’s what redemption does. Redemption is a special work that only God can do. I can’t redeem you from your sins. I can’t even redeem myself. Redemption is God’s special work, and everything He does in our lives is focused on our redemption, on restoring us to usefulness for Him.

The miracles of the Bible are redemptive in nature. The
miracles that God did in Egypt redeemed the people of Israel from bondage and moved them to a place of usefulness for God in the Land of Promise. The miracles that Jesus did in the Gospels—the transformation of water into wine, the healings, and the feedings—were all designed to impress people with truths that would transform their hearts and redeem their lives.

The miracle of the resurrection was, of course, the most redemptive miracle of all, for it was the supernatural event that made it possible for us to be saved from sin and death. In the crucifixion and resurrection, God paid the price of our redemption. He bought us back from the pawnshop of sin and death, and He restored us to usefulness for Him.

In the New Testament, we are told that everything about the life of our Lord Jesus was focused on our redemption. The apostle Paul wrote, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). Note that phrase “for your sakes.” That is an expression of our Lord’s redemptive love. For our sakes He left heaven and became poor. For our sakes He was beaten and crucified.

“God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). God the Father made the Sinless One, Jesus, become sin in our place so that we could be redeemed to live for Him. Jesus was crucified and raised so that we might be set free from sin. Scripture tells us that at this very moment Jesus is interceding for us in heaven—again, for our sakes! As we read in Hebrews, Jesus “is able to save completely those
who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them” (7:25).

Notice that the psalmist writes, “With Your mighty arm You redeemed Your people” (v.15). He didn’t say that God redeemed the entire human race. Those who are God’s people are redeemed; those who are not God’s people are not redeemed. Redemption is not just for anyone. No people are ever redeemed without their knowledge or against their will. Redemption is for God’s people, for those who respond to His invitation and act upon His Word.

The proclamation of God’s redemptive love demands a response. The book of Hebrews tells us, “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him” (11:6). You might say, “But I don’t know if God exists. I can’t find Him. How can I believe in Him if I don’t know if He is real or not?”

Answer: Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. That is always the promise of Scripture. If you sincerely and earnestly seek Him, you will find Him. Those who truly want to find Him will find Him.

Are you responding to God’s redemptive call upon your life? Or are you sitting in sullenness, waiting for God to do something to you in spite of yourself? With His mighty arm, He has redeemed His people, and He is still redeeming His people today. I urge you to seek Him, draw near to Him, and respond to His invitation so that you can say with the psalmist, “What god is so great as our God?” (v.13).

**THE THING YOU FEAR**

This psalm opened with a cry of doubt and despair. But the psalmist has traced his way
to faith and triumph. Now in the closing lines of Psalm 77 he writes:

The waters saw You, O God, the waters saw You and writhed; the very depths were convulsed. The clouds poured down water, the skies resounded with thunder; Your arrows flashed back and forth. Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, Your lightning lit up the world; the earth trembled and quaked. Your path led through the sea, Your way through the mighty waters, though Your footprints were not seen. You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron (vv.16-20).

The psalmist returns to that pivotal event in Israel's history when God led His people out of Egypt by parting the Red Sea. What truths does the psalmist discover in that event?

First, he recognizes God's sovereign control over all human events and over nature itself. He observes that the waters of the Red Sea saw God and trembled in fear before His might. This is a powerful poetic image of how the waters responded to the mighty power of God.

You can imagine the fear of the Israelites when they reached the edge of the sea. The Egyptians were behind them, and the impassable sea was before them. Their plight seemed hopeless. Yet the very thing that terrified the Israelites—the water of the sea—was afraid of God! In the psalmist’s poetic imagery, the water saw God, and it writhed and convulsed in fear.

God commanded Moses to stretch forth his rod. Moses obeyed and the sea parted. The waters stacked up on either side, held back by the hand of God. The Israelites went down into the dry channel between the waters. They were afraid of the
waters, but the waters were afraid of God. The sea didn’t dare touch those whom God protected with His hand.

There is a parallel incident in the New Testament. On one occasion, Jesus was in a boat with His disciples on the Sea of Galilee. A storm arose and the waves beat against the boat so that it began to fill with water. Yet Jesus was so calm in the midst of the storm that He slept on a pillow in the back of the boat. The disciples, afraid that they were about to perish in the storm, woke Him and said, “Don’t You care if we drown?” (Mk. 4:38).

Jesus arose and spoke to the wind and sea, saying, “Quiet! Be still!” (v.39). And the wind ceased, and the sea instantly became calm. Though the disciples feared the wind and sea, the wind and sea feared Jesus even more.

This is a lesson you and I need to learn for the times of peril and fear in our own lives: The very powers and forces that frighten us are themselves under the command of God. The thing you fear fears Him.

**THROUGH THE DEPTHS OF THE SEA**

Next the psalmist tells us that the forces of nature are nothing but instruments in God’s hands. He writes:

*The clouds poured down water, the skies resounded with thunder; Your arrows flashed back and forth. Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, Your lightning lit up the world; the earth trembled and quaked* (vv.17-18).

If you have ever been through an electric storm, you know what the psalmist is describing: the soul-shaking roar of thunder, lightning flashing across the heavens like fiery arrows, the earth trembling in response. All of these forces are under God’s command. No power, natural
or human, can operate except by permission of the Almighty. That’s the great truth the psalmist reflects on as he thinks back to the crossing of the Red Sea.

We see this truth illustrated in the last hours before Jesus went to the cross. Forsaken by His friends, betrayed by Judas, and denied by Peter, Jesus stood alone and seemingly powerless before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. When Pilate tried to question Jesus, the Lord gave him no answer. Exasperated, Pilate asked Him, “Do you refuse to speak to me? ... Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above” (Jn. 19:10-11).

How our lives would change if we truly lived by that great truth: All of the world’s forces, systems, and authorities are under God’s control. All power belongs to God. Nothing can touch us without the express permission of God Himself.

The psalmist goes on to say:

*Your path led through the sea, Your way through the mighty waters, though Your footprints were not seen (v. 19).*

God led the steps of the Israelites through the depths of the sea. The people of Israel didn’t know where God was leading them, but God had prepared the way. He knew what He was doing. As the psalmist ponders this miraculous event, he discovers a second great truth: The fact that we can’t understand what God is doing does not mean He isn’t at work in our lives.

This is a difficult concept for us to wrap our minds around. We are impatient beings, and we want God to explain all of His plans and purposes to us now. Unless God constantly reassures us, we fret and panic, just as
the Israelites did when they reached the edge of the Red Sea.

In Exodus 14 we read that the Israelites were camped in the desert near the sea when they saw a cloud of dust and heard the thunder of horses' hooves and chariot wheels. Pharaoh's army was coming after them. The people cried out to the Lord; then they panicked and blamed Moses for their peril. “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!” (vv.11-12).

The people of Israel lost faith in Moses and in God. Moses had to give them a pep talk: “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today” (v.13).

It’s hard for me to criticize the Israelites very harshly. If we had been in their sandals, would we have reacted differently? Whenever things go wrong and we can’t see the solution to our problems, aren’t we just as quick to hit the panic button? In desperate situations haven’t you often prayed, “Lord, there’s no way out! I’m trapped! Why don’t You do something?” I confess that I have prayed that way many times, and that is not a prayer of faith. That’s a prayer of panic.

What the people of Israel didn’t understand and couldn’t imagine is that God had planned all along to lead them through the Red Sea. His path led through the sea; His way led through the mighty waters. God’s plan of deliverance never even entered their minds! But though His footprints were unseen and His people were unable to understand His plan, God knew exactly
what He was doing. His plan, though inscrutable, was perfect.

This is a principle we all need to rely on in those times when our back is against the wall, when our enemies are closing in or the obstacles in our lives seem insurmountable, when hope is fading fast and there is no way out of total disaster. We need to place our confidence in Him, trusting that He has a plan that, though inscrutable, is perfect. We can’t imagine what God will do, but we can trust that whatever He does will be the best thing for us, and it will be amazing!

A RED SEA EXPERIENCE

Psalm 77 began on a heartbreaking note of crisis and despair. Early in this psalm, the writer Asaph wrote:

I remembered You, O God, and I groaned; I mused,

and my spirit grew faint. Selah. You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak (vv.3-4).

He groaned, his spirit failed, he was too depressed and anxious to sleep or even speak. He was haunted by questions about God that he couldn’t answer:

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? (vv.7-9).

The psalmist looked at his desperate circumstances, took stock of his anxious and depressed emotions, and concluded that God was doing nothing. He told himself, “Here I am in deep trouble, and God is silent and remote. He won’t act for me.”

But by the closing verses of Psalm 77, the writer comes to a different conclusion.
Why? Because he remembers a parallel experience in the history of Israel, a time when God seemed for a while to be doing nothing. The Israelites found themselves trapped between Pharaoh’s army and the waters of the Red Sea. There was no way out of their deadly predicament, and God seemed to be silent. His footprints were unseen. Yet God had a plan that led through the sea, an unseen path through the great waters. He led them out of certain death and brought them to safety on the far shore.

Can you identify with the psalmist and the ancient Israelites? Have you ever been in a situation so desperate you could see no way out, and you prayed and prayed and God seemed silent—until He provided an answer from a completely unexpected source? I think most Christians have had that experience at one time or another.

Annie Johnson Flint was born in 1866. She and her sister were orphaned at an early age and raised by Christian foster parents who led them to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. When Annie was a teenager, both of her foster parents died, leaving Annie and her sister orphaned once again. Only 2 years after she completed high school, Annie was diagnosed with painful, crippling arthritis. By her early twenties, the arthritis was so advanced that she could no longer walk.

Annie supported herself by writing inspirational poetry. Her meager earnings barely covered her living expenses, much less her medical bills. Some friends told her that her suffering was due to a lack of faith or hidden sin in her life. Annie wondered if those friends were right. After weeks of prayer and searching the Scriptures, she concluded that problems and afflictions are a normal part of life, even for
the Christian. Sometimes we pray and God lifts us out of our afflictions. Other times God leads us through our afflictions.

One of the Bible stories that comforted her in her suffering was the story of how God led Israel out of Egypt. She saw the way God led the people through the deep waters of the Red Sea as a metaphor of her own life.

God's path leads through the sea, through trouble and trial. His plan does not take us around trouble but through the depths of it. You may not be able to see His answer before it comes, but when it arrives you'll rejoice and praise Him for the marvelous way He has delivered you.

THE SHEPHERD OF HIS PEOPLE
The final truth the psalmist discovered was this: The Lord is the Shepherd of His people. He writes: “You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (v.20).

I don’t think there is any figure of speech so beautifully descriptive of the relationship of God to His people than that of a Shepherd with His flock. The closing verse of Psalm 77 reminds us of the opening verse of Psalm 23: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.” Because the Lord is our Shepherd, we lack nothing. He leads us as His own flock, and He supplies everything that we lack in ourselves.

What does the Lord supply to His sheep? First, He supplies a sense of meaning and purpose for our lives. A shepherd always has a goal in mind for the flock. If he leads his sheep to the mountain pastures, it’s because he has something he wants to accomplish there. If he leads them beside the still water, he has a reason for doing so. If he leads the
sheep out in the midst of wolves, it’s because he wants them there. It’s the shepherd who supplies the purpose.

Meaning is an essential ingredient of life. Why are so many people depressed and suicidal today? Their lives lack meaning and purpose. Why are alcohol abuse and drug abuse rates skyrocketing, even among people who are wealthy and successful? They have no reason for living. They use chemicals to numb the pain of their meaningless existence.

A man once came to me for counseling. He said, “I have everything I want, but I don’t want anything I have.” He was suffering from “destination sickness,” the sickness of having achieved all of his life goals only to find that none of his achievements brought him peace and satisfaction.

God, our Good Shepherd, supplies us with meaning, purpose, and a reason for living. He makes life worthwhile.

Second, the Shepherd supplies love, another desperate need in our lives. Our Lord loves His sheep. He gives us everything that love entails: caring, protection, and provision. As the apostle Peter writes, “Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7). We matter to Him. He cares about our needs. That is the heart of a shepherd.

Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd, and He said that what defined Him in that role was His self-sacrificing love for the sheep:

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The*
man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know My sheep and My sheep know Me—just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father—and I lay down My life for the sheep (Jn. 10:11-15).

Our Lord portrayed Himself as a loving Shepherd who gathers His lambs to His bosom and leads straying and faltering sheep back to the right path—always gently and tenderly—because of His love for them. This is the essence of God's relationship to His people.

Whenever we feel abandoned or neglected by God, we need to remember that He is our Shepherd. We are always in His protective care, even when we are not aware of it. God always shepherds His own.

That's the conclusion that the psalmist comes to. Have you come to that same conclusion? Are you able to trust God, even through times of doubt and pressure, trial and temptation? Have faith in God! He will lead you through the deep waters and bring you safely to the other shore. Once there you'll be able to say with the psalmist, “Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God?” (v.13).

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