

# How to pray when you are Anxious or Depressed

Sermon for April 30, 2023

Psalm 77

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This week we are looking at Psalm 77, the second psalm in our six-week sermon series:

## "How the Psalms Teach us to Pray."

Psalm 77 was written by Asaph, a man who lived at the same time as King David.

David appointed Asaph as the leader of worship music in Jerusalem.

Asaph's job was similar Andrew's job in our church, leading our praise band.

Asaph was a composer and publisher of psalms.

He wrote 12 psalms himself, and he collected and distributed King David's poems and songs.

Asaph's name means "gatherer."

The king gave his songs to Asaph to preserve, perform, and teach to others.

Asaph was also a teacher, and his children continued his ministry after his death.

500 years later, "the sons of Asaph" praised the Lord with music and song at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem.

Asaph's ministry lived on long after he died.

I am sharing all of this with you because it will make the psalm more meaningful as we study it.

To do his job well, Asaph needed to have a close relationship with the Lord.

Keep that in mind as I read Psalm 77 now.

For the director of music; For Jeduthun; Of Asaph; A psalm.

1 I cried out to God for help;

I cried out to God to hear me.

2 When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;

at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted.

3 I remembered you, O God, and I groaned;

I mused, and my spirit grew faint.

4 You kept my eyes from closing;

I was too troubled to speak.

5 I thought about the former days, the years of long ago;

6 I remembered my songs in the night.

My heart mused and my spirit inquired:

7 "Will the Lord reject forever?

Will he never show his favor again?"

8 Has his unfailing love vanished forever?

Has his promise failed for all time?

9 Has God forgotten to be merciful?

Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"

10 Then I thought, "To this I will appeal:

the years of the right hand of the Most High."

11 I will remember the deeds of the LORD;

yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.

12 I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds.

13 Your ways, O God, are holy.

What god is so great as our God?

14 You are the God who performs miracles;

you display your power among the peoples.

15 With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

16 The waters saw you, O God, the waters saw you and writhed;

the very depths were convulsed.

17 The clouds poured down water, the skies resounded with thunder;

your arrows flashed back and forth.

18 Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your lightning lit up the world;

the earth trembled and quaked.

19 Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters,

though your footprints were not seen.

20 You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

*Together we read Isaiah 40:8:*

*The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.*

## **Please pray with me.**

Father in heaven, we come to you because you are the source of life and truth.

Jesus, we worship because you are full of mercy and love.

Holy Spirit, please open our hearts and minds to be transformed by the word of God, amen.

This is one of my favorite psalms.

Asaph provides us with a beautiful model for our prayers when our circumstances are difficult.

Listen to verses 1 and 2:

1 "I cried out to God for help;

I cried out to God to hear me.

2 When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;

at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted."

We don't know why Asaph is "in distress."

Maybe he is anxious about an illness, or a rebellious child.

Maybe he has financial problems, or conflict in his marriage.

The psalms in our bible communicate the feelings of an author, without all the details of his life.

This allows us to pray the psalms for ourselves, in our circumstances today.

In Asaph's prayer he cried out to God for help.

He was so worried about his problems that he could not sleep.

But when Asaph called out to God, his soul did not find comfort.

Listen to verses 3-6a:

3 "I remembered you, O God, and I groaned;

I mused, and my spirit grew faint.

4 You kept my eyes from closing;

I was too troubled to speak.

5 I thought about the former days, the years of long ago;

6a I remembered my songs in the night."

When Asaph thinks about the Lord, it doesn't help.

He remembers God, and groans with despair.

Lying there awake, Asaph remembers "his songs in the night."

Maybe he is thinking about the days when things were fine, when he sang cheerfully with a light heart.

But that memory just makes his current pain feel even worse.

Listen to what he prays next in verses 6b to 8:

6b "My heart mused and my spirit inquired:

7 "Will the Lord reject forever?

Will he never show his favor again?

8 Has his unfailing love vanished forever?

Has his promise failed for all time?"

I want you to feel the feel the pain and confusion in Asaph's heart.

This man's life is dedicated to singing the praises of God each day of his life.

Asaph's head is full of the knowledge of God.

But his bad circumstances make his heart feel far away from God.

That's why Asaph asks, "Will the Lord reject me forever?"

In verse 8a you can see the internal conflict boiling within Asaph:

"Has his unfailing love vanished forever?"

I love that line so much.

Asaph is asking, "Has God's unfailing love failed?"

Asaph's mind knows that God's love cannot fail, but his heart says it has failed.

Asaph expresses faith and doubt--all in the same breath.

And God put those words of honest wrestling in your Bible.

That means God invites us to pray with the same honesty, my friends.

Next, in verse 9, Asaph starts to blame himself, and doubt God's character:

9 "Has God forgotten to be merciful?

Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"

Asaph thinks maybe God was too busy and forgot to help him.

Maybe God didn't notice Asaph's suffering, and ignored his prayers.

Have you ever felt like that?

"Hello, God...Do you remember me?

I am the person who keeps praying for the same thing, and you don't answer.

Are you still there?"

Asaph's heart asks another question in verse 9b:

"Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"

Asaph wonders if God is punishing him.

Maybe God's forgiveness has limits, Asaph thinks, or maybe he did something unforgiveable?

Asaph wonders if his problems are all his fault.

Have you ever felt like Asaph, my friends?

I have.

When we are anxious and depressed, it can be difficult to pray.

It can be difficult to hear the Shepherd's voice.

We panic, like lost sheep who don't know where our Shepherd is.

Where do you run when you are overwhelmed with anxiety?

In my work as a pastor, I have spoken with a lot of people who struggle with addictions.

Many people addicted to alcohol, drugs, bad relationships, food, pornography, or gambling.

They try to quit, but disappointment and anxiety often lead them back into their bad habits.

When life gets hard and things don't go right, we all look for answers, comfort, or escape.

Where do you go when you are anxious and depressed?

When dark days come, we ask the same questions as Asaph, and we wonder:

7a "Will the Lord reject forever?"

No, he won't, my friend.

On our darkest days, Christians can know with confidence that our Father in heaven will never reject us.

Because he was willing to reject his own Son on the cross.

Romans 8:32 reminds us:

32 "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--

how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

The good news of the gospel became possible through a very dark day for Jesus.

God the Father watched while Jesus was hanging on the cross.

An innocent man was dying a criminal's death.

The Father did not intervene to save his beloved, innocent Son.

Because the Father, Son and Holy Spirit had made an agreement.

They wanted to save you, and me, from our guilt, sin, and shame.

It was all poured out on Jesus, and the Father did not spare his own Son.

He gave him up for us all.

Jesus died the death we deserve, so we could receive the blessings he deserves.

Because your Father in heaven loved you that much, you can have confidence that he will give you whatever you need.

How can we hold onto these truths on dark and difficult days?

Asaph teaches us the power of remembering.

Asaph felt anxious and depressed about his present circumstances.

He felt doubt and fear about his future.

That's why Asaph looks to the past, and begins preaching to himself.

Look at verses 10-11:

10 "Then I thought, "To this I will appeal:

the years of the right hand of the Most High."

11 I will remember the deeds of the LORD;

yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago."

Asaph points his heart to "the years of the right hand of the most High."

Asaph thinks about God's power and wisdom.

It was God's strong right hand that created the universe, and crafted human beings, and parted the Red Sea.

Asaph forces himself turn the focus of his heart from his needs to God's deeds.

In verses 1-9 of Psalm 77, the pronouns are all "I, me, and my."

But from verse 10 to 20, Asaph turns his thoughts from himself to God.

Asaph does more than remember past events, he marinate his heart in God's goodness.

Listen to verse 12:

12 "I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds."

To meditate you think hard about something.

You contemplate deeply and continuously.

Asaph was thinking hard about his problems in verses 1-9.

But he was also praying hard about his problems, and prayer changes things.

Sometimes God changes our circumstances when we pray.

But often, God's primary goal is to change us through prayer.

Asaph's problems did not disappear, but the focus of his heart changed.

Listen to how Asaph begins to preach to his own heart in verse 13:

13 "Your ways, O God, are holy.

What god is so great as our God?"

Asaph is challenging himself here.

Are any of the false gods worshipped around the world like Yahweh?

Of course not.

Asaph continues to pray about God's character in verses 14 and 15:

14 "You are the God who performs miracles;

you display your power among the peoples.

15 With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph."

Asaph's heart was anxious and depressed when he only thought about his problems.

To change his heart, he changed his focus, preaching to himself about God's character and faithfulness.

Next, Asaph repeats to himself the story of the Exodus in verses 16-20.

Asaph wasn't there when God parted the Red Sea, but he meditates on the event.

He imagines in great detail what it was like in verses 16-17:

16 "The waters saw you, O God, the waters saw you and writhed;

the very depths were convulsed.

17 The clouds poured down water, the skies resounded with thunder;

your arrows flashed back and forth."

Have you noticed how many times the Exodus from Egypt is mentioned in the Bible?

Until the death and resurrection of Jesus, it was the most monumental event in the history of God's people.

God opened a path through the Red Sea and swallowed up Pharaoh's army.

Then, God sustained his people in the Sinai Desert, feeding them and journeying with them for 40 years!

I've been to the Sinai Desert, and it doesn't take 40 years to walk from the Red Sea to Israel.

Why did God make them wander around in the desert for so long?

One reason, I think, was to prove his ability to care for his people in dark and difficult circumstances.

God was showing that generation, and us today, that he is faithful even when we are faithless.

Asaph was anxious and depressed about his situation in the present.

He does not know what will happen in the future.

But, by remembering God's past faithfulness, Asaph can move into the future with hope.

Because God is a faithful Shepherd who leads His people in love.

Look at verses 19-20:

19 "Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters,

though your footprints were not seen.

20 You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron."

How long do you think Asaph wrestled with his emotions, before he prayed this last line?

I don't think Psalm 77 describes a change of heart that happened to Asaph in one day.

I think he struggled and prayed for a long time.

Maybe you've had that experience?

We need to have patience with ourselves, and also with others when they are struggling.

Here's something to try next time you are feeling like Asaph.

Read the beginning of Psalm 77 to yourself in the present tense.

"I am crying out to God for help;

I cry out to God to hear me.

I am in distress and I am seeking you, Lord;

at night I stretch out untiring hands but my soul refuses to be comforted."

Tell God all about your sadness and confusion, because he invites you to pray your pain to him.

When you are ready, move your attention down to verses 10-11 and make this your own prayer:

10 "Then I thought, "To this I will appeal:

the years of the right hand of the Most High."

11 I will remember the deeds of the LORD;

yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago."

After the sermon we are going to tell each other about some deeds of the Lord.

We are going to remember, together, God's faithfulness in the past.

We are more blessed than Asaph in some ways, when we look to the past.

We have a Bible full of testimonies and stories that we can read and re-read.

And we can remember the greatest deed of the Lord--the death and resurrection of our Savior.

The Exodus is the primary redemptive event in the Old Testament.

And the cross is the primary redemptive event in New Testament.

In the Exodus, God brought his people out of slavery in Egypt, into the promised land.

By the cross, God brought his people out of the slavery of sin, he carried us from death into life.

Our brother Asaph lived 3,000 years ago.

But his prayer teaches us how to pray in difficult times.

When you are awake in your bed, unable to sleep like Asaph, cry out to God.

Tell him what you are feeling.

Be honest with yourself and with God.

It's okay to tell him that you feel abandoned, angry, and confused.

Pray those feelings out to God.

And when you are ready, begin preaching truth to yourself.

What has God done in your life?

Remind yourself of God's goodness, in distant and recent history.

And spend time in God's Word.

Your bible is full of true stories about God's mercy and love throughout history.

Verse 12:

12 "I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds."

The most-helpful thing to meditate about is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

His suffering and death proved the depth of God's love for you, freeing you from guilt and shame.

And Christ's resurrection proved that eternal life is available and real.

These truths give us light and life and hope on our darkest days.

That's why we sing, preach, and pray about them every week.

Let's pray together now about these things.

Father in heaven, we struggle with doubt and anxiety in our lives, just like brother Asaph.

Thank you for thousands of years of your faithfulness described in our Bibles.

Thank you for the testimonies we can share with each other today.

But we thank you and praise you most highly for the best thing you ever did.

You allowed your beloved Son Jesus to die on a cross of sin and shame, for us.

You rejected Jesus on the cross, to give us eternal security.

Therefore, we can face hard times knowing you will never reject us.

For this we pray with confidence and hope, in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, amen.