

This is one of my favorite psalms. From the way it's written to how it's structured, what the Psalmist is struggling with, how he responds to it, this Psalm is so real and so pertinent that it feels like a mirror in a lot of ways. I am really excited to dig deep into this challenging and wonderfully encouraging Psalm.

This Psalm starts by letting us know that Asaph wrote the Psalm, and he requested that it be set to music according to Jeduthun. Beyond what's literally given in the Psalm, it's pretty hard to place Psalms within a specific historical context. Obviously, we know the general context; it's written for Israel's congregational worship and teaching. Even more than that, 1 Chronicles provides enough information about both Asaph and Jeduthun for us to be **highly confident that Psalm 77 would have been sung in David's court**. Those are good details, but what about the specific circumstance? It's a very hard Psalm at first. What is going on in Asaph's life that he is reaching such a low point? In some ways, it doesn't matter the specific circumstance, does it? For one thing, even from a casual reading of verses 1-9, we all know whatever "it" is that's happened, it's bad. **After reading this Psalm, because of how non-specific** the trial is, we are invited in to see ourselves in Asaph's struggle.

Psalms are worship tools that draw us into them in a personal way by using emotionally evocative language. I love the Psalms for this reason, I feel with the Psalmists, and they give me words to use for the things (both good and

bad) going on inside. One key point to keep in mind as we begin to dig into **this Psalm is that it isn't only feelings. This Psalm has a foundational heart behind** it that I want us to see, and also, there was a tremendous amount of thought put into how this Psalm is organized. The words used are not accidental, not just because it's Holy Spirit inspired Scripture, but also because Psalm 77 isn't Asaph's diary. It is full of feeling, yes, but **don't miss the fact that Asaph was writing this already aware he wanted** Jeduthun to write the score, and that he was giving it to the choirmaster for use in congregational singing, lament, and instruction. This Psalm is a very carefully constructed teaching tool that gives great help and insight to hearts full of pain, affliction, & even sin. We can all derive enormous help if we apply ourselves to studying this Psalm.

**. We begin Psalm 77 with a heartbeat of affliction and despair. And Asaph gives us wonderful words to put to this struggle.**

**I cry aloud to God, aloud, and He will hear me.** When the trouble hits, I run to God. Great! This sounds good, and it is. When we experience trials, our first response should be to run to the Lord. This is a common refrain in the Psalms. And in the vast majority of the Psalms, the psalmist cries out to God, "Please help me!" The psalmist begins a worshipful cadence, revering the might and holiness of God, and finds that God is already beginning deliverance. But in

Psalm 77, we see the cry for help that doesn't turn immediately to worship and trust,

v2 "In the night my hand is stretched out without wearying, my soul refuses to be comforted"

**Asaph is desperate, and like we said, verses 1 & 2 on their own are not necessarily a bad response to desperation.** It's good to ask the Lord for help; we are actually commanded to, but in verse 3, we get more information that begins to reveal what Asaph is desperate for.

**3** When I remember God, I moan;  
when I meditate, my spirit faints. *Selah*

God hasn't answered Asaph's prayer for deliverance yet, and now **Asaph isn't just petitioning the Lord; he is demanding deliverance, but not just that God help him. He is demanding a very specific fix to his problem, and he refuses to be comforted with anything less than immediate relief.** This is just like in Genesis when Jacob thought Joseph had been killed. They surround Jacob, and he refuses to be comforted. He was refusing anything less than the reversal of his circumstances, and that's the perfect picture of Asaph. We see his cry out to God turn into a refusal to be comforted with anything less than the

reversal of his circumstances. **With Asaph's heart in this position, when he applies himself to meditation in verse 3, his spirit faints;** when He remembers God, he moans. Woah. That is such a real indicator of a serious heart issue. When he remembers God, he moans!

**But Asaph isn't remembering – Oh my goodness, the vacation is ending tomorrow,** or ahh it's Sunday night and work is in the morning, or oh no I forgot that big project is due and I'm not ready, no, Asaph is remembering something else he has shut out of his mind for a time. When God crosses his mind, he moans. And when he starts to meditate, when he starts to read God's Word, when he hears about who God is, he moans and faints, because at this point, Asaph wants relief and relief only. Relief is a fine thing to want, and a good thing to ask for, but wow, this psalm has preached to me many times in my life, **don't make refuge, your refuge.** (“God is my refuge and Strength, a very present Help in times of trouble” Psalm 46:1, God is the help, God is the refuge) We see in verses 1 and 2 when Asaph is demanding help, and asking for God to bring his good times back, he says that he was tireless, he literally says in the night I stretch out my hand without wearying. **His genuine request for help has turned into a tireless prioritization of self. And when his relief-centered, numbed mind finds a sharp focus on God, suddenly he moans and faints.** We see this play out in our lives, or maybe it's just me, but we see this heart posture that says “I know what needs to be done, I know the fix to this, I know

what deliverance looks like, I know, i know, me, me me” no matter how good or right sounding what we are demanding looks, its wrong coming from a heart set on self. We can see with Asaph a very real example of this coming from a heart set on self, and when that heart comes into contact with a holy God, it moans and faints in pain.

**For Asaph, this contact began the wheels turning, and in verse 4, he asserts to God, “You hold my eyelids open, I am so troubled I cannot speak.”** He understands, rightly, that he is still in this trial because God wants him here; God is not incapable of relieving his suffering. Said differently, God is fully able to deliver Asaph from this suffering, and God has not yet delivered him. God is holding him in his trial because He has a bigger, more gracious work to do. However, **Asaph’s heart continues to be set on self, so he sees his trial as a simple affliction from God. And that is partially right, it is from God,** but it’s not simply affliction. **God isn’t just sovereign over part of life; God is working all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph1), including our suffering,** but as long as Asaph’s heart is set on anything other than God, this continued affliction just feels like senseless or unfair pain. But in **all of Scripture from Job to Paul, we see divinely orchestrated suffering, designed to work out God’s purposes in His people.**

Why?! Some good news believers can take from this is that we know for a fact that no matter what suffering we may be under, the **suffering is NOT punishment for our sins**. Romans 8 makes it clear, we do not stand under threat of punishment; in Christ, there is no condemnation left for us. This is biblical truth, but it is also beautifully logical, put in this song written by Augustus Toplady

"The whole of wrath divine

God will not payment twice demand

First at my saviour's dying hand

Then again at mine"

**Once we see this, it becomes obvious and scripture is clear, in Christ we are no longer under the threat of condemnation and punishment, Jesus indeed paid it all!**

So for believers it's not punishment, So What's going on? Asaph leads us to some helpful examples later, and we will look at the m, but for now we are left with - **God brings trial- why? That's a big Question. In this Psalm, Asaph is drawing us into this struggle.** So why does God do this? There can be lots of reasons, but arguably, for believers, all the unique reasons fall under the broad heading of the Hebrews 12 discipline of the Lord. Which, at the time, seems

painful, but yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. So, is this just a semantic difference, punishment, discipline, either way, I'm just being afflicted for my sin? No, there is a gigantic difference between punishment for sin and discipline for sin. Even further, the discipline of the Lord is not always in response to my specific sin; discipline is a broad tool that the Lord uses to shape us in love. Even so, if you are like me, you can hear the pain in Aspah's voice.

When I remember God, I moan; When I meditate, my spirit faints. You hold my eyelids open. I am so troubled, I cannot speak.

Have you been there? Man, that is a desperate place, and **part of the antidote that this Psalm leads us to is what God is doing while we are suffering**, and why He is doing it. Like a really deep why. When we dig deep into the why and really start to understand the truth, it begins to put down roots in our hearts. So understand, this is not a game of words between Punishment and Discipline, the difference means the world. **Understand if you are in Christ, Christ absorbed all of God's wrath for your sin, so when we are so troubled we can't speak, we can take comfort that we are experiencing God's discipline as a beloved Child, not his wrath as an enemy.** I really hope that by the end of this Psalm study, I will have deep roots.

**We know that sometimes discipline isn't a result of any specific sin; the discipline is God shaping us more and more into the image of Christ. But even when discipline does come as a result of sin, the motivation is completely different from the motivation for punishment.**

Punishment is the extraction of payment; punishment is getting even. Discipline is actually only possible when you are motivated for the good of the one being disciplined. **God holds Asaph's eyes open**, not to get even with Asaph for his sin, but because God loves Asaph enough to give him true relief, not the cheap, fleeting relief that Asaph is demanding. This loving discipline is like tilling the soil and exposing the roots of the weeds, or my dad's favorite example when I was growing up, when something is squeezed, whatever is on the inside comes to the surface. What a loving patient God to not leave us where we are!

**This motivation goes way deeper than making us "act right".** Don't hear me wrong, one of the results, even purposes, of discipline will be fruit bearing. John 15 makes that explicit. If we love him, we will keep my commandments. Even further, he tells us that he chose us so that we would bear much fruit! But also in John 15, Jesus explicitly tells his disciples why he commands us to obey. **He explains how affliction, pointing us to obedience, isn't just a slap to get us to act right.** He says, "I have spoken these things to



you that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.” WHAT. What unbelievable love undergirds the importance of obedience. So Asaph, suffering, eyelids held open, is experiencing this trial so that his joy in God may be full. That's 1000 miles away from being punished; that is unbelievable love.

**This is the loving purpose for which God brought Asaph to this point, but as we continue, we will see that Asaph doesn't see it that way.** Asaph does not see the heart-filling

love of God in his trial, and that is so so helpful because neither do we. So let's learn from where Asaph's heart is.

**In verse 5, Asaph turns to what I turn to. “Remember how good it used to be?”** You can hear this in the psalm, this yearning for how it used to be, the wanting to just meditate on how sweet it was before this trial ruined all my happiness. This is so natural to us. This is so quick in my heart, it is startling to see it so plain in black and white. As soon as Asaph starts to meditate on how good it was to not be afflicted, his heart begins to seek it. This is exposed more and more fully in the next few verses; he desires relief so much that it becomes his right.

Do you ever think, “I don't deserve this”? That's where Asaph has landed, **and this gives us a beautiful, painful picture of why we have to be so**

**careful with that thinking. When Asaph's heart is finally dominated by his desire, no, his right, to be free from his trial, he begins down a mental path in verses 7-9 that exposes the roots of serious idolatry.**

Will God never again be favorable?

Has his steadfast love forever ceased?

Are His promises at an end forever?

Has God forgotten to be gracious?

Has God in anger shut up his compassion?

Do you feel the slide down into indictment? My mind immediately runs everywhere answering these questions, no, no, no! Asaph, the answer is no! I have scripture, you have to stop! **But the amazing part about reading and studying the Psalms is that they are a teaching tool.** Asaph wrote this Psalm after the trial had passed; he knew the resolution, and the resolution is not meant to be here just yet. Asaph isn't just journaling his hard thoughts. He has composed a rich congregational teaching tool and set it to a very specific tune, the same tune prescribed for Psalms 39 and 66. Read them, it's amazing how similar they are in feeling to this psalm. Very heavy. **We don't know what the tune sounded like, so we don't know how it sounded when the congregation got together and sang through Psalm 77, but what's amazing is we know what it felt like!** Not only do we have other psalms giving us an idea

that it was a very somber tune, but we have another easily glossed-over tool of the Psalmists, “selah”. I’m not even sure how to say it right, and the meaning isn’t precise, but what everyone agrees on is its use in the psalms. It’s generally used to induce a pause and reflection. This may not seem all that helpful, but think with me about what Psalm 77 must have felt like when you sang it with the reflective pauses that Asaph wrote into it!

**Imagine** you’re in the congregation and you start singing Psalm 77: The pain of trial, crying out to God, he will hear me, no relief, no comfort, I don’t even want to think about God anymore, every time God crosses my mind, I moan. PAUSE, sit with that. Then you start singing again. Now that I’ve thought about God, yes, he is responsible for not delivering me yet, I can’t even think about that it troubles me so much, relief, relief, I’ll think about the good times instead, man, I want that back, this is too much for me, where is God? Is he not loving? Has he gone back on His word? Has he forgotten to be who He said he was? PAUSE.

PAUSE?! Please let me out, I can’t stand the tension, it’s all too real, and it’s convicting. This Psalm sets you up to read and feel this and then stop and apply it directly to your heart. We’ve talked about Asaph’s heart a lot. **Is this not the temptation we all face? Speaking for myself, when trial comes, I pray for deliverance,** I may even pray for the Lord to shape me with it and show me more of himself through it, but the longer the trial goes, the more my strength

fades, and soon the desire for relief begins to outrun every other desire. The trial wears on, and my desire for relief begins to eat everything until I'm so focused on and desperate for relief that I come to a cliff and I say, "God, you know what I'm asking for and you won't give it, so either you aren't in control of this at all, or you aren't good."

Asaph leads us down this path that is so common to us all and shows us that on that cliff, God grabs Asaph's heart. **This heart set on self experiences a miracle within this pause, and suddenly the focus of his heart is totally transformed.** What?! What is this transformation? How? We see ourselves convincingly mirrored in the psalm until now, and here is where Asaph begins to experience the antidote to his (and my) suffering! **His heart and mind become laser focused on the goodness of God, This I will appeal to years at the right hand of the Most High, but this isn't just a hesitant or grudging acceptance that God is good,** this is a full confession that God is holy, other, set apart, completely different from us and always right, always true, not just God is good, but no matter how it feels in my flesh, God must be good! **So Asaph moves from Verses 5 & 6 - remembering the good old days with a focus on self and lamenting loss and being crushed to v 11-13**

11

I will remember the deeds of the LORD;  
yes, I will remember your wonders of old.

**12**

I will ponder all your work,  
and meditate on your mighty deeds.

**13**

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

**Now his focus is on the Lord, and he is rejoicing!** He changes from laying accusations at the heart of God to questioning his own heart, and then bringing his heart into submission to God, rather than demanding that God submit to his plan for deliverance.

**This radical change is, to be sure, a miracle of God, but we also see Asaph make a practical change that begins the new trajectory.** Right before Asaph makes this change, he lists questions leveled at God, and now we see Asaph beginning to comb through Scripture to find the answer to his most desperate question. Who is God? This is the key to deliverance from trial, the searching of Scripture, relentlessly pursuing, not pursuing relief like at first, no, that desire has been silenced by an overpowering thirst for God. We see the old pursuit of Asaph's heart turn him bitter; now we see this new pursuit turn Asaph to joy, thanksgiving, and worship. This is a radical focus shift- no matter how it

feels in my flesh, God must be good, then combining through Scripture to work that truth into our hearts.

The first specific deed Asaph proclaims is God's redemption of his people out of Egypt. He gives allusions to the flood and to the Exodus through the Red Sea.

**14** You are the God who works wonders;  
you have made known your might among the peoples.

**15**  
You with your arm redeemed your people,  
the children of Jacob and Joseph. *Selah*

**16** When the waters saw you, O God,  
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;  
indeed, the deep trembled.

**17**  
The clouds poured out water;  
the skies gave forth thunder;  
your arrows flashed on every side.

**18**  
The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;

your lightnings lighted up the world;  
the earth trembled and shook.

These events give undeniable testimony to the Power and Faithfulness of God, but Asaph is an Israelite; he was historically closer to these mighty acts, and he had heard about them his whole life! He may be tapping into something deeper than we see at the surface level. He is in a prime position to benefit fully from the testimony of these mighty wonders of God, so let's dive into how we can share in his view of this powerful testimony of God. Like I said, his first example is of the redemption of the children of Jacob and Joseph. He even adds a "selah" here that can lead us into lingering on the significance of this example. **Asaph doesn't just say God redeemed his people; he adds a mention of Jacob and Joseph! I think that has a really helpful purpose here. Asaph's whole situation has been characterized by suffering, and he mentions Joseph.** Joseph's story is one of affliction at the hands of evil men, in which God had a world-saving purpose. **I have to think of Asaph's meditations on the deeds of the Lord; he heard Joseph's words to his brothers echo in his ears.** Joseph says, "What you meant for evil, God meant for good." When we suffer in this life, even when someone is obviously acting maliciously to us, God doesn't just make an omelet with broken eggs. No way! Joseph says that with the same willfulness, people may mean me harm; God willfully means good from the same act. This comforting aspect of who God is must be in view for Asaph.

In verse 16, we see a reference to the parting of the Red Sea. This exclamation from Asaph preaches to his heart the truth of who God is and how he deals with his people! God did miracles in Egypt, **and rather than just leading them out, God led them to a Sea and put them in a hopeless situation. And now Asaph calls back to that and proclaims, My God has dominion over hopeless situations.** An ocean and an army both set against helpless families, felt beyond hopeless, this was certain death, but Asaph remembers, You oh God, oh when those waters saw you, they were afraid. Even the deep trembled at your coming. My God takes hopeless situations and parts the sea and wipes out the enemy.

**This God Asaph is praising, I hope it sounds familiar to you.** In Ephesians 2, Paul paints a parallel picture of a more hopeless situation than a sea and an army. He says we were children of wrath, enemies of God, not just maybe about to die, but already dead with a certain fate,

**“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—”**



We can begin to resonate with Asaph's proclamations of our great and awesome redeemer, our holy and good God.

**You serve the same unchanging God that Asaph does! If you are a believer, you share in the same Gospel that Asaph did! Remember talking about discipline and punishment?** Asaph wasn't able to see it at first, but God was afflicting out of a heart of love and for a great joyous purpose. That's great for Asaph, and an encouragement to all who trust in Christ, **but if you aren't trusting in Christ**, the promises of Ephesians and Romans, and John 15, don't apply. The hope Asaph has is not yours. More clearly, God's just wrath hangs over everyone who is without Christ, and there is no helpful discipline to anyone who isn't a son or daughter through faith; there will only be punishment from a Holy God. Please hear what God has provided and run to Him!

**Romans 3:23-26**

**23** for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, **24** and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

(With God's arm, he redeems his people!!) **It's amazing that we get this new testament image of God's redemption of all his people, but we also get God's reasoning behind it!** Look at v 25, God put forward Christ as a propitiation by his blood. **This was to show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance he passed over former sins! Showing God to be Just, and the Justifier!** Don't miss what it's saying- Paul says the redemption Christ bought for

us is applied backwards in History to show God was not being unjust by having divine forbearance and passing over former sins. **In the act of the cross, God demonstrated his necessary just wrath against sin and became the justifier of all who trust in Him for their salvation, Past and Future!**

Asaph is operating under this exact future bought grace! All of the amazing stories Asaph is recounting are examples of a sinful, grumbling Israel in need, God forgiving and not just forgiving, but working unbelievable miracles to provide all the things necessary for these adulterous people! In the first half of this psalm, Asaph himself begins a slide into idolatry and indictment, and God forgives! But God doesn't just forgive, God pays for it! God then sent Christ as the propitiation in order to demonstrate His justice in having grace on a people that don't deserve it! That's why, Asaph, is beginning to celebrate! Asaph is still in the middle of affliction, but his growing awareness of who God is and how he deals with his people picks Asaph up from despair and plants him firmly in joy and trust! Remember- We serve this same God! **This deepening understanding of who God is is also why we can join with Asaph in rejoicing over who God is and how He deals with his people! We are saved by the same grace! But I think it gets richer!**

At the end of the psalm, Asaph finally mentions Moses. This may also be something you've been waiting for, but as I said before, I was desperate for a

resolution to all the indictments Asaph made right before he made us Selah and sit with the mirror of conviction. I'm so desperately thankful for Asaph. He says the things out loud that he struggles with, but he isn't just journaling like I said. Asaph has proven to be a masterful teacher. The list of complaining questions he gave right before the heart shift wasn't random. It was Asaph writing very relatable questions that strike at the very heart of who God is. Asaph draws us into this, and we have to realize at some level we all experience temptation here, anxiety, hardship, suffering, and sickness; all of us can see a glimmer of reflected conviction in Asaph's list of questions, but after he draws us into this, he mentions that God leads his people by the hand of Moses. I think it's crucial we not miss this connection, because the way the Holy Spirit constructed this sheds even more light on our antidote to suffering, Knowing God. Do you remember the list?

Will God never again be favorable?

Has His steadfast love forever Ceased?

Is He unfaithful to His promises?

Has He simply forgotten to be gracious?

Has he in anger shut up His compassion?

Let's look at Exodus 34. Moses is leading the people, and He has gone to the top of Sinai to receive the revelation of the Law, and God descends to proclaim who He is.

The LORD the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and sin. Do you see this? God led Asaph through Moses to know exactly who God is to His people. The List Asaph gives in verses 7-9 is answered in every point in Exodus 34. The absolute core of Asaph's need in this trial is provided for by the truth of God's Word. God doesn't just randomly operate this way; this is God's specific revelation of how He deals with all who have faith in God's provision, namely, the eventual final propitiation, Christ! God also says in Exodus 34 that he will by no means clear the guilty! This is an unbelievable demonstration of the sovereign grace of God declaring, "You are mine, I will forgive, and have steadfast love and faithfulness and grace!" and none of your sins will go unpunished, 1500 years later, I will send my Son, and I will prove to be Just and the Justifier of my people.

This is the core of the heart change. This is our God. v20 We are led like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. **Not only did God reveal Himself to his people, but he tells us here how He is deals interacts with those who are His. Like a shepherd of a flock! God leads his sheep. This is a powerful**

**image. Sheep are messy. Scripture is full of the image of us as sheep, and sheep are always getting lost. Also, sheep can always cry out to a loving Good Shepherd. Isaiah 53 illustrates this best: God the Father is sending a redeemer for his people, and all we like sheep have gone astray, every one to his own way, and God's provision for his sheep's failure is that He lays on Christ the iniquity of his wayward sheep.** God leads me and you and Asaph like sheep; he reveals himself through Moses as characterized by love and grace for His sheep! We were totally without hope; in fact, we were dead, but God, being rich in mercy, made us alive together with Christ! But this gift of grace through Christ doesn't just buy us heaven one day! **Through the blood of Christ, we are bought from our Old master and now, all the promises of God in Exodus 34 are yes and Amen in Christ!**

When the trial comes, we can say with Paul, If God is for us, who can be against us!? God, who did not spare His own son, but gave Him up for us, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things! So we are commanded and empowered to rejoice in our suffering! Because suffering will come! And if you are like me and Asaph, you will still be tempted down the path of idolizing immediate relief, but God has provided a way out for our hearts. He has revealed His heart to His people. And in the trial, so that we do not lose heart, though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day! How? Asaph said in v19, when God led his people out of captivity, they got to a sea, It

looked hopeless, they were wasting away, melting in fear, asaph says **“your way was through the sea..., yet your footprints were unseen”** we are wasting away and yet we are renewed day by day not by looking around at the impossible circumstance, the unbearable affliction, the Hopeless sea in front of us, but by looking at the things that are unseen. **Jesus came to reveal the unseen God.** He says to endure trial in obedience that your joy may be full! This light and momentary affliction is working for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison with any affliction. When the trial comes, don't fall into the trap of demanding relief NOW Ask to be renewed day by day, pray humbly for deliverance, and with single-minded determination, dive into truth like Asaph, & through the Spirit, like a balm to your wound, God will begin to show you who He is. Seek the God that gently leads His Flock. A God that is sovereign over your suffering, abounding in steadfast love, faithfulness, and grace, A God before whom the waters are afraid, a God that didn't even withhold His own Son from you, but gave Him up to save you. After making you his beloved child, he won't withhold any good gift from you. In trial God is our refuge, Trust in Him.