

Psalm 77: The Center of the Psalms of Asaph

(Pss. 50 and 73-83)

The Inward/Outward Journey From Self-Preoccupation to God-Centeredness

Where is God when everything seems lost? That's the question the Israelites must have asked when they were exiled from their homeland, Their world as they had known it was shattered; their lives uprooted. For about 20 years, the powerful and ruthless Babylonian Empire invaded Judah, destroying homes, killing and starving people, and taking the survivors off to distant lands.

1. The first of the *Psalms of Asaph*, **Psalm 50**, presented God as judge of his people, calling them back to the heart of worship—trust, gratitude, and obedience—and warning the ones who were “faking it.” The *Psalms of Asaph* provide the Old Testament theology of worship that Jesus taught, lived, and fulfilled and now wants us as his followers to practice. **Psalm 50** probably was separated from the other *Psalms of Asaph* because its content linked Psalm 49 to Psalm 51 and guided its readers to cry to God for help in trouble and offer their sacrifices with praise from their hearts. (Pss. 49:7-9, 50:8 and 14, 51:17)

Read **John 4:24**. What does it mean to you in fall of 2021 to worship God “in spirit and in truth?” How is worship “in Christ” spiritual and true? Also read **Hebrews 13:15-16**, noticing how you are part of the praising community and are asked to worship with and to share with others.

2. Review **Psalms 73-83**, recalling the main focus of each psalm and pondering how these psalms guided the covenant people through the turmoil of unthinkable crises in the fall of both Israel and Judah and the 70-year Babylonian Exile.

Mark verses that give you words you need now to express your questions, your laments and praises, your understanding of who God is, who his antagonists are, and your intention to move forward in trust and obedience.

Psalm 73—wisdom psalm—Reality is not as it is supposed to be because it is the wicked who prosper. The “wicked” described in Psalm 73:3-12 could be King Solomon in his decline or later kings of Israel and Judah who did “what was evil in the sight of the LORD.”

Psalm 74—community lament—description of the destruction of the sanctuary seen in **Psalm 73**

Psalms 75—community song of thanksgiving—hope in celebrating God as judge

Psalm 76—hymn, song of Zion—hope in celebrating God as the One who chose Judah/Israel, dwelled with them in Jerusalem and Zion, and remains the judge of the earth

Psalm 77—communal lament spoken by a representative individual—the way forward, on the brink of giving up faith, with new questions; the needed “turn” from self to God (foreshadowing Jesus’ model and teaching, “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.” Mark 8:35)

Psalm 78—a storytelling/historical psalm based on the Davidic covenant—a call for the people to remember past mistakes

Psalm 79—another community lament that faces God’s anger and asks for deliverance because of who God is (“your name...your name’s sake”) and their identity as his sheep

Psalm 80—community lament recording the people’s cry for God to turn and restore them

Psalm 81—a covenant renewal liturgy recording God’s response to the cry of **Psalm 80**, urging the people to turn once again and listen and follow the LORD

Psalm 82—more liturgy as a prophetic oracle with God as judge, especially the judge of unjust human leaders who mistreat the vulnerable

Psalm 83—a final community lament with a cry for God to take vengeance and exercise judgment upon all those who threaten God’s covenant people so that those enemies/antagonists will seek God and know that he is “Most High over the whole earth”

3. All but one of the psalms in Book 3 (Ps. 86) are ascribed to Levitical authors, the first 11 of them to Asaph, four others to the sons of Korah and one to Ethan. The Temple where these Levites had ministered was now in ruins.

“What would be more natural than for them to spend time in the composition, compilation and arrangement of psalms? It may well have been the Levites (musicians and singers of Israel) who were actually responsible for the eventual shaping of the Book of Psalms as a whole. (Grogan, *Prayer, Praise, and Prophecy: A Theology of the Psalms*, 210)

How might these *Psalms of Asaph*, apparently grouped together purposefully, have helped you rethink your life during and after the exile?

4. How might they *now* help us deeply consider what it is that we long for more than peace with God, peace within, and peace for the sake of the world?

5. Like many people of faith, the psalmist of **Ps. 77** discovered that prayer for current circumstances to change is sometimes *not* the way forward. What stands out to you in **77:1-6**, as the psalmist pours out his troubles to God?
6. Notice how the psalmist frets in **vv. 5-9** that things are not what they used to be. What do you think about the psalmist's questions in **vv. 7-9**? Do you think they are rhetorical, real, or a mixture? What 5 changeless *covenant realities* do these new questions introduce?
7. Read **77:10** in as many translations as possible. The ESV footnote for this difficult Hebrew translation is "This is my grief: that the right hand of the Most High has changed."

After the psalmist's unanswered prayers for the adversity to stop, his recollections of happier times in life, and his questioning of God and God's ways, perhaps the psalmist comes to the end of himself and his fretful refusal to accept and grieve his reality.

In his exploration of **Psalm 77** as a "speech pilgrimage," Walter Brueggemann sees **77:10** as:

...the crucial turn in the psalm, exceedingly difficult to translate. This verse clearly looks both ways, back to the "I" statements of vv.1-6 and forward to the rest of the psalm (vv.11-20). Verse 10 consists in two elements. The first element is the statement about *grief* or *trouble*. The second element is a statement of *change*, presumably that God has changed. The translation is difficult and there is some variation of nuance...

Kraus comments: "God's works and ways are for human beings out of reach (Isa 55:8 ff); they lie in an inaccessible consuming brightness. He himself, YHWH, is the Holy One, the 'wholly Other.' His salvific deeds prove his incomparability."

Brueggemann calls this psalmist "a wounded partner," and states:

We do not know how this speaker moves from v. 10 to v. 11. But we can surmise it was not an easy move. We do not know how any faith-speaker makes the leap from the preoccupation with self to an imaginative acknowledgment of the primacy of the other...The dramatic move concerns the abandonment of self as the primal agenda for the Thou who is out beyond us in freedom...This psalm models the very move of faith that our cultural ideology wants to prevent...The speaker could have moved to Ps. 14 and concluded, there is no God."... (Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith*, 51-52)

8. How is the move from vv. 1-10 to v. 11 like the move envisioned by Jesus in Mark 8:35?

For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. (Mark 8:35)

The speaker of **Psalms 77** shifts from being focused narrowly on “my present” and re-enters “our past,” in which he remembers the “deeds and wonders” (v. 11) and “work and deeds” (v. 12) of YHWH.

What key point is made in **77:13**?

9. In **77:15-20**, the psalmist recalls the the great deeds of the past (Exodus, wilderness wanderings) and then ends abruptly, leaving its readers to draw their own conclusions. This psalm knows that we all live in this struggle of being *trapped or on the move*.

Of course, in our struggle we have the wonder of Jesus Christ's crucifixion and death, resurrection and ascension to recall and contemplate.

What conclusions do you draw from the struggles and wonders presented in **Psalms 77**?