

Psalm 77

"Has God Changed?"

July 19, 2009

Introduction

*When Lloyd C. Douglas, author of *The Robe* and other novels, was a university student, he lived in a boarding house. Downstairs on the first floor was an elderly, retired music teacher, who was infirm and unable to leave the apartment. Douglas said that every morning they had a ritual they would go through together. He would come down the steps, open the old man's door, and ask, "Well, what's the good news?" The old man would pick up his tuning fork, tap it on the side of his wheelchair and say, "That's middle C! It was middle C yesterday; it will be middle C tomorrow; it will be middle C a thousand years from now. The tenor upstairs sings flat, the piano across the hall is out of tune, but, my friend, THAT is middle C!" The old man had discovered one thing upon which he could depend, one constant reality in his life, one "still point in a turning world."*

Source Unknown.

For those with faith in God of course, we have a theological, intellectual understanding that the everlasting God of the Universe is the one 'still point in our changing world'. From our studies of God, we know He is immutable, unchangeable, the same from 'everlasting to everlasting'; He is the One who lives outside of time. However, sometimes the events of life turn so fast and unexpectedly and in such difficult directions that it is difficult for us to feel in our hearts what we believe in our heads.

In the early part of our psalm for this morning (77), the psalmist is exactly in that space. The question he raises is, 'Has God changed?' Has He forgotten to be faithful, merciful and compassionate like He promised to be so long ago? Judging from my current circumstances it sure seems like this is the case!

During our summer months we are doing a series of reflections on the Psalms under the title, 'Finding Life in the Psalms'. We do this with the understanding that the psalms are down to earth, sometime gritty reflections of real life. They are poetic works of art and music that seek to express honest and authentic views about the realities of life.

Last week, Rob Wood opened up our series in the psalms by looking at **Psalm 73**. Both that psalm and our psalm today are attributed to the musician by the name of Asaph. In both psalms, Asaph is dealing with some thorny questions of life – questions which we may not even give ourselves permission to ask. In Psalm 73 he was caught up in the perspective that those who ignore God and embrace evil often seem to enjoy lives of wealth, ease and comfort while he, carefully submitting himself to the service of

God so often endures hardship, pain and suffering. The question: ‘Is it really worth it to follow God?’ Why should I put up with all this garbage when those guys over there seem to enjoy all the perks!?

I wonder if you’ve ever gone through periods in your life where you’ve wondered whether this Christian faith is really worth holding on to. These psalms encourage us to realize that it’s OK to ask such questions with integrity. God invites us to be honest with Him and to wrestle deeply with the real questions. Asaph finds resolution, as we saw last week in the bigger picture of life – as He entered into the sanctuary of God he could place the question in the eternal context where He realized that, of course, in the perspective of eternity it is absolutely worth it to follow the eternal God.

Psalm 77 follows a very similar pattern, but the question is different. Once again we observe that Asaph is depressed. He is in distress – the circumstances of life have crashed around him and he is truly in a funk. He cries out – ‘whatever happened to the goodness, the kindness, the graciousness of God?’ ‘God has forgotten to be merciful and compassionate!’ ‘Has God changed?!’

Walter Brueggemann, in an exposition of this psalm calls it a ‘speech pilgrimage’. He says:

“I take the Psalm not simply as a devotional or liturgical residue of faith, but as an actual "speech pilgrimage" of one whose self spoke through to new faith. Specifically, the Psalm shows the route by which this life was moved from a *preoccupation with self* to a *submission to and reliance upon God*.”¹

This is a journey from despair to hope. Asaph is arguing with himself and with God and you and I have the distinct privilege to not only listen in, but also to enter into the debate. In fact, I want to suggest that Asaph may lead us to ask some questions that we might not dare to ask ourselves. Perhaps, like me, you grew up in a good Christian home. You were encouraged to ask questions but not to express doubt. Questions need to be kept respectful and within certain boundaries. I invite you to let Asaph lead you in some serious questions this morning – ‘Has God Changed?’

As we read the text, I want you to notice there are 2 distinct parts to the poem. The first part is the lament; the questions; the complaining; the griping. The second part is the discovery of a place of hope

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Psalm 77--the "Turn" from Self to God* Journal for Preachers, 6 no 2 Lent 1983, p 8-14.

and encouragement. Your assignment as we read through the text is to pick out the transition point between these 2 distinct sections... **Psalm 77**

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

[NOTE: see 1 Chron 25 for info on Asaph, Jeduthun and Heman]

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.

Selah

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?"

Selah

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.

Selah

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*

What verse marks the transition? (10)

Observations from verses 1-9, the Lament

1. Asaph has 'I' trouble

- a. If you look at verses 1-6, the 'I' pronoun is used an excessively – 'I cried out... I was in distress... I sought the Lord... I stretched out untiring hands...
- b. This is indicative of what Brueggemann called the psalmists 'preoccupation with self'. There seems to be a serious case of the 'poor me' syndrome'.
- c. We need to be careful to hold this in its right perspective.
 - i. I firmly believe that when we do go through times of trouble and uncertainty, we need to acknowledge and admit the pain, confusion and discomfort that it causes us. We must not live in denial of suffering and pain.
 - ii. However, we must also be careful not to become so preoccupied with our own troubles that we fail to look around us at the trials of others or at God Himself.
- d. Asaph here seems to have fallen deeply into this self-focused way of viewing the world and this leads him to the significant questions of verses 7-9.

2. Asaph questions God's covenant promises

- a. Asaph is a musical director among the people with whom God had made many covenants. Over and over again in these covenants God had described Himself to them as a Gracious, Compassionate and Ever-Loving God.
- b. In these verses Asaph clearly calls into question whether God is holding up His end of the bargain. Walter Brueggemann helpfully points out that he uses 3 of the key 'covenant words'

i. Loyalty (lovingkindness; unfailing love; *hesed*)

ii. Graciousness (merciful)

iii. Compassion

c. All of these are key words in the covenants God made with them but now Asaph is wondering out loud, 'Has God forgotten to be loving, gracious and compassionate'?

3. I wonder how many times we might have come to this point in our life experience but just been afraid to say it out loud. Here it is – Asaph has led us in this very question.

Observing the Turning Point

Verse 10 is a key verse in the psalm but it is also one of the most difficult to translate. This may clearly be seen by comparing a few translations. I'll just give you 3 examples for the sake of simplicity.

NIV

10 Then I thought, "To this I will appeal:
the years of the right hand of the Most High."

New American Standard Bible

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

Young's Literal Translation

10 And I say: 'My weakness is, The changes of the right hand of the Most High.'

We don't have time, nor is this the time and place to go into an in-depth study of the Hebrew words and how they are translated into English. I only give these examples in order to point out that I believe there is a case to be made here that verse 10 is a verse which emphasizes and clarifies the questions of verses 7-9. Asaph is deeply concerned by the reality that God appears to have changed His mind – He seems distant; aloof; impersonal. This is a cause of great grief in Asaph's mind.

Observations from the song of hope (11-20)

We don't really know how Asaph makes the leap from the grief and despair of the early part of the psalm to the expressions of hope in the final part here. What we do know is that his attention shifts and his perspective broadens.

In fact what happens is that he lifts his eyes to look at God, but more specifically he looks at the wonderful works that God has accomplished in the past. As you read through the language of this section the particular event that comes to mind is the event of Exodus, where God miraculously brings His people out of Egypt.

Assignment: Notice the ‘water’ imagery as he looks back at the works of God in verses 16-19:

*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.*

Turn to the person(s) next to you and answer these questions:

1. Name some of the major ‘water events’ you can think of in the Bible.

- a. Creation
- b. Flood
- c. Exodus
- d. Jonah
- e. Jesus calming the storm

2. What do we learn about God through these events?

The sea has a reputation for being unpredictable, powerful and able to cause mass destruction. God has a reputation for being the One who controls the seas.

Do you see what Asaph is doing here? He is reminding himself about the nature of God as seen through His miraculous works in the past – especially in the Exodus! If God is able to control and indeed has shown His willingness to control and bring good out of a force in our world that is so unpredictable, powerful and potentially destructive, then surely He has the power, authority and

willingness to control the circumstances in my life even though at the moment they seem totally out of control!

Gregory Stevenson puts it this way: *“Faith, according to Psalm 77, is to be the foundation of deliverance rather than the result of it. When faced with suffering and the apparent absence of God, we learn from the exodus that he always remains faithful, so that a remembrance of God’s past deliverance can provide hope and trust that he will continue to deliver in the present and future.”*

In other words, from our places of grief, confusion, loss and uncertainty, this psalm calls us to look back to see the works of God and in those works we discover and remind ourselves about the nature of God – He IS loving, gracious and compassionate after all!! Even when we don’t see it in the midst of our current circumstances. Remember the People of Israel were in Egypt under hard labour for 400 years before they saw the deliverance of God. And yet God’s true character was shown in the event of Exodus. God is trustworthy after all!

Conclusion

Two observations to conclude:

1. Look carefully at the words of verse 19

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

- a. I find these words very profound and highly applicable
- b. We may not always see clearly what God is doing; we may not see His footprints; but we can be confident that He is doing His good work in our lives.

2. Look carefully at verse 20

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

- a. What a tender picture of our great God – leading His flock like a shepherd.
- b. We may hear the voice of David here... ‘The Lord is my Shepherd...’
- c. The promise of God is ultimately a promise of being with His people – He is not an absentee Shepherd, even though at times He seems to hide Himself.

Asaph would want us to take the same pilgrimage that he did – from a place of preoccupation with self to a place of amazement and wonder at the tender mercy, compassion and never-ending love of our God. May this truly be your experience. [blank screen here]

Transition to Communion

Shortly we will participate in Communion. The act of Communion was originally rooted in the celebration of Passover which is the remembrance of God's powerful work in delivering His people from Egypt.

We will do our Communion celebration in a slightly different fashion today. If Barb were able to, she would be the one introducing the idea to us because this is something that has been on her heart for some time. When we lived in England in the early '90s we had the privilege of worshipping in a great little Anglican church which was our parish church. In that community of believers we found many friends who with whom we maintain contact over many years and many miles. The Anglican tradition is to use liturgy to help guide the worship time. Oaklands is not a liturgical church, nor do I believe we will ever become a liturgical church. However, our experience was that if you really stop and pay attention to the words of the liturgy, they are most often very profound, meaningful and helpful in guiding our thoughts to the worship of God.

So, this is Barb's plea to us today – pay attention to the words that will be up on the screen. Chris Newcombe will lead us in the readings and responses. As he does so, I pray that each of us will be drawn to focus our thoughts on the One whom we have already been worshipping today.

Here's how it will work:

- Worship Team will lead us in a few songs
- Chris will lead us in several readings, responses and prayers leading to Communion.
- In the readings we will reflect on both the Bread and the Cup together and so when it comes time to distribute the Bread and the Cup we will do so one after another with no extra prayer in between.
- Chris will lead in a prayer of thanks before the offering
- Final song during offering
- Chris will lead us in a final responsive reading
- I will close with a few words.

Final Word...

On a personal level, I would like to say that I have found the study of Psalm 77 to be dynamic, deeply meaningful and very timely. For any who may be visiting and not aware of our own personal situation, my wife Barb is living with deteriorating health and a cancer prognosis which is not good on human terms. I have made a decision this week and notified the Leadership Team that the time has come when I need to step back from staff and leadership responsibilities at Oaklands Chapel. On the one side this is an easy decision – I know that the time has come when I need to be with Barb. On the other hand it has been a difficult decision just to step back from responsibilities here. I would like to make a couple of comments related to this decision:

1. I am not going anywhere and I am now no more or no less a member of the Body of Christ at Oaklands Chapel than I have ever been.
2. This has not taken God by surprise nor should we consider it a step backwards. I want to urge every one of us to embrace the opportunity that this presents to us. The Leadership Team will be talking further with you about ideas and conversations that have begun regarding possible people to come and help out in the role of Interim Pastor, but in the meantime I want to challenge all of us to think carefully about what is going on here. This has never been ‘my church’ as pastor, nor Clint’s church as Associate Pastor. Oaklands Chapel is God’s church; it is our church. We are the Body of Christ – my challenge to you is to ask perhaps in a more powerful way just now, ‘what is my part in the functioning of the Body of Christ?’ I urge you to step forward, volunteer for something that you know needs to be done. Jesus will be lifted up and many good things will happen as we seek for His leadership in our midst!