

PSALM 77

This psalm, according to the method of many other psalms, begins with sorrowful complaints but ends with comfortable encouragements. The complaints seem to be of personal grievances, but the encouragements relate to the public concerns of the church, so that it is not certain whether it was penned upon a personal or a public account. If they were private troubles that he was groaning under, it teaches us that what God has wrought for his church in general may be improved for the comfort of particular believers; if it was some public calamity that he is here lamenting, his speaking of it so feelingly, as if it had been some particular trouble of his own, shows how much we should lay to heart the interests of the church of God and make them ours. One of the rabbins says, This psalm is spoken in the dialect of the captives; and therefore some think it was penned in the captivity in Babylon.

I. The psalmist complains here of the deep impressions which his troubles made upon his spirits, and the temptation he was in to despair of relief (v. 1-10).

II. He encourages himself to hope that it would be well at last, by the remembrance of God's former appearances for the help of his people, of which he gives several instances (v. 11-20). In singing this psalm we must take shame to ourselves for all our sinful distrusts of God, and of his providence and promise, and give to him the glory of his power and goodness by a thankful commemoration of what he has done for us formerly and a cheerful dependence on him for the future.

PSALM 77:1-10

PREVAILING MELANCHOLY

To the chief musician, to Jeduthun. A psalm of Asaph.

We have here the lively portraiture of a good man under prevailing melancholy, fallen into and sinking in that horrible pit and that miry clay, but struggling to get out. Drooping saints, that are of a sorrowful spirit,

may here as in a glass see their own faces. The conflict which the psalmist had with his griefs and fears seems to have been over when he penned this record of it; for he says (v. 1), *I cried unto God, and he gave ear unto me*, which, while the struggle lasted, he had not the comfortable sense of, as he had afterwards; but he inserts it in the beginning of his narrative as an intimation that his trouble did not end in despair; for God heard him, and, at length, he knew that he heard him. Observe,

I. His melancholy prayers. Being afflicted, he prayed (^{45B3}James 5:13), and, being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly (v. 1): *My voice was unto God, and I cried, even with my voice unto God*. He was full of complaints, loud complaints, but he directed them to God, and turned them all into prayers, vocal prayers, very earnest and importunate. Thus he gave vent to his grief and gained some ease; and thus he took the right way in order to relief (v. 2): *In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord*. Note, Days of trouble must be days of prayer, days of inward trouble especially, when God seems to have withdrawn from us; we must seek him and seek till we find him. In the day of his trouble he did not seek for the diversion of business or recreation, to shake off his trouble that way, but he sought God, and his favour and grace. Those that are under trouble of mind must not think to drink it away, or laugh it away, but must pray it away. *My hand was stretched out in the night and ceased not*; so Dr. Hammond reads the following words, as speaking the incessant importunity of his prayers. Compare ^{45B5}Psalm 143:5, 6.

II. His melancholy grief. Grief may then be called melancholy indeed,

1. When it admits of no intermission; such was his: *My sore*, or wound, *ran in the night*, and bled inwardly, and it ceased not, no, not in the time appointed for rest and sleep.

2. When it admits of no consolation; and that also as his case: *My soul refused to be comforted*; he had no mind to hearken to those that would be his comforters. *As vinegar upon nitre, so is he that sings songs to a heavy heart*, ^{45B1}Proverbs 25:20. Nor had he any mind to think of those things that would be his comforts; he put them far from him, as one that indulged himself in sorrow. Those that are in sorrow, upon any account, do not only prejudice themselves, but affront God, if they refuse to be comforted.

III. His melancholy musings. He pored so much upon the trouble, whatever it was, personal or public, that, 1. The methods that should have relieved him did but increase his grief, v. 3.

(1.) One would have thought that the remembrance of God would comfort him, but it did not: *I remembered God and was troubled*, as poor Job (~~1825~~ Job 23:15); *I am troubled at his presence; when I consider I am afraid of him*. When he remembered God his thoughts fastened only upon his justice, and wrath, and dreadful majesty, and thus God himself became a terror to him.

(2.) One would have thought that pouring out his soul before God would give him ease, but it did not; he *complained*, and yet his *spirit was overwhelmed*, and sank under the load.

2. The means of his present relief were denied him, v. 4. He could not enjoy sleep, which, if it be quiet and refreshing, is a parenthesis to our griefs and cares: “*Thou holdest my eyes waking with thy terrors, which make me full of tossings to and fro until the dawning of the day.*” He could not speak, by reason of the disorder of his thoughts, the tumult of his spirits, and the confusion his mind was in: He *kept silence even from good while his heart was hot within him; he was ready to burst like a new bottle* (~~1829~~ Job 32:19), and yet so troubled that he could not speak and refresh himself. Grief never preys so much upon the spirits as when it is thus smothered and pent up.

IV. His melancholy reflections (v. 5, 6): “*I have considered the days of old*, and compared them with the present days; and our former prosperity does but aggravate our present calamities: for we see not the wonders that our fathers told us off.” Melancholy people are apt to pore altogether upon the days of old and the years of ancient times, and to magnify them, for the justifying of their own uneasiness and discontent at the present posture of affairs. But *say not thou that the former days were better than these*, because it is more than thou knowest whether they were or no, ~~2070~~ Ecclesiastes 7:10. Neither let the remembrance of the comforts we have lost make us unthankful for those that are left, or impatient under our crosses. Particularly, he *called to remembrance his song in the night*, the comforts with which he had supported himself in his former sorrows and entertained himself in his former solitude. These songs he remembered, and tried if he could not sing them over again; but he was out of tune for

them, and the remembrance of them did but *pour out his soul in him*,
⌘484 Psalm 43:4. See ⌘550 Job 35:10.

V. His melancholy fears and apprehensions: “*I communed with my own heart*, v. 6. Come, my soul, what will be the issue of these things? What can I think of them and what can I expect they will come to at last? I *made diligent search* into the causes of my trouble, enquiring wherefore God contended with me and what would be the consequences of it. And thus I began to reason, *Will the Lord cast off for ever*, as he does for the present? He is not now favourable; and *will he be favourable no more? His mercy is now gone; and is it clean gone for ever? His promise now fails; and does it fail for evermore?* God is not now gracious; but *has he forgotten to be gracious?* His *tender mercies* have been withheld, perhaps in wisdom; but *are they shut up*, shut up in anger?” v. 7-9. This is the language of a disconsolate deserted soul, walking in darkness and having no light, a case not uncommon even with those that *fear the Lord and obey the voice of his servant*, ⌘2100 Isaiah 50:10. He may here be looked upon,

1. As groaning under a sore trouble. God hid his face from him, and withdrew the usual tokens of his favour. Note, Spiritual trouble is of all trouble most grievous to a gracious soul; nothing wounds and pierces it like the apprehensions of God's being angry, the suspending of his favour and the superseding of his promise; this wounds the spirit; and who can bear that?

2. As grappling with a strong temptation. Note, God's own people, in a cloudy and dark day, may be tempted to make desperate conclusions about their own spiritual state and the condition of God's church and kingdom in the world, and, as to both, to give up all for gone. We may be tempted to think that God has abandoned us and cast us off, that the covenant of grace fails us, and that the tender mercy of our God shall be for ever withheld from us. But we must not give way to such suggestions as these. If fear and melancholy ask such peevish questions, let faith answer them from the Scripture: *Will the Lord cast off for ever?* God forbid, ⌘5111 Romans 11:1. No; *the Lord will not cast off his people*, ⌘1944 Psalm 94:14. *Will he be favourable no more?* Yes, he will; *for, though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion*, ⌘2182 Lamentations 3:32. *Is his mercy clean gone for ever?* No; *his mercy endures for ever; as it is from everlasting, it is to everlasting*, ⌘1937 Psalm 103:17. *Doth his promise fail for evermore?* No; *it is impossible for God to lie*, ⌘5085 Hebrews 6:18. *Hath God forgotten to be*

gracious? No; *he cannot deny himself*, and his own name which he hath proclaimed *gracious and merciful*, ^{Exodus 34:6}. *Has he in anger shut up his tender mercies?* No; they are *new every morning* (^{Lamentations 3:23}); and therefore, *How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?* ^{Hosea 11:8, 9}. Thus was he going on with his dark and dismal apprehensions when, on a sudden, he first checked himself with that word, *Selah*, “Stop there; go no further; let us hear no more of these unbelieving surmises;” and he then chid himself (v. 10): *I said, This is my infirmity*. He is soon aware that it is not well said, and therefore, “*Why art thou cast down, O my soul? I said, This is my affliction*” (so some understand it); “This is the calamity that falls to my lot and I must make the best of it; every one has his affliction, his trouble in the flesh; and this is mine, the cross I must take up.” Or, rather, “This is my sin; it is my iniquity, the plague of my own heart.” These doubts and fears proceed from the want and weakness of faith and the corruption of a distempered mind. note,

(1.) We all know that concerning ourselves of which we must say, “*This is our infirmity*, a sin that most easily besets us.”

(2.) Despondency of spirit, and distrust of God, under affliction, are too often the infirmities of good people, and, as such, are to be reflected upon by us with sorrow and shame, as by the psalmist here: *This is my infirmity*. When at any time it is working in us we must thus suppress the rising of it, and not suffer the evil spirit to speak. We must argue down the insurrections of unbelief, as the psalmist here: *But I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High*. He had been considering the *years of ancient times* (v. 5), the blessings formerly enjoyed, the remembrance of which did only add to his grief; but now he considered them as *the years of the right hand of the Most High*, that those blessings of ancient times came from the Ancient of days, from the power and sovereign disposal of his right hand who is *over all, God, blessed for ever*, and this satisfied him; for may not the Most High with his right hand make what changes he pleases?

PSALM 77:11-20

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS OF THE DIVINE MAJESTY

The psalmist here recovers himself out of the great distress and plague he was in, and silences his own fears of God's casting off his people by the remembrance of the great things he had done for them formerly, which though he had in vain tried to quiet himself with (v. 5, 6) yet he tried again, and, upon this second trial, found it not in vain. It is good to persevere in the proper means for the strengthening of faith, though they do not prove effectual at first: "*I will remember, surely I will*, what God has done for his people of old, till I can thence infer a happy issue of the present dark dispensation," v. 11, 12. Note,

1. The works of the Lord, for his people, have been wondrous works.
2. They are recorded for us, that they may be remembered by us.
3. That we may have benefit by the remembrance of them we must meditate upon them, and dwell upon them in our thoughts, and must talk of them, that we may inform ourselves and others further concerning them.
4. The due remembrance of the works of God will be a powerful antidote against distrust of his promise and goodness; for he is God and changes not. If he begin, he will finish his work and bring forth the top-stone.

Two things, in general, satisfied him very much:

I. That *God's way is in the sanctuary*, v. 13. It is *in holiness*, so some. When we cannot solve the particular difficulties that may arise in our constructions of the divine providence, this we are sure of, in general, that God is holy in all his works, that they are all worthy of himself and consonant to the eternal purity and rectitude of his nature. He has holy ends in all he does, and will be sanctified in every dispensation of his providence. His way is according to his promise, which he has spoken in his holiness and made known in the sanctuary. What he has done is according to what he has said and may be interpreted by it; and from what he has said we may easily gather that he will not cast off his people for ever. God's way is for the sanctuary, and for the benefit of it. All he does is intended for the good of his church.

II. That God's way is in the sea. Though God is holy, just, and good, in all he does, yet we cannot give an account of the reasons of his proceedings, nor make any certain judgment of his designs: *His path is in the great waters and his footsteps are not known*, v. 19. God's ways are like the deep waters which cannot be fathomed (^{<BR06}Psalm 36:6), like the way of a ship in the sea, which cannot be tracked, ^{<TR08}Proverbs 30:18, 19. God's proceedings are always to be acquiesced in, but cannot always be accounted for. He specifies some particulars, for which he goes as far back as the infancy of the Jewish church, and from which he gathers,

1. That there is no God to be compared with the God of Israel (v. 13): *Who is so great a God as our God?* Let us first give to God the glory of the great things he has done for his people, and acknowledge him, therein, great above all comparison; and then we may take to ourselves the comfort of what he has done and encourage ourselves with it.

2. That he is a God of almighty power (v. 14): *"Thou art the God that alone doest wonders, above the power of any creature; thou hast visibly, and beyond any contradiction, declared thy strength among the people."* What God has done for his church has been a standing declaration of his almighty power, for therein he has made bare his everlasting arm.

(1.) God brought Israel out of Egypt, v. 15. This was the beginning of mercy to them, and was yearly to be commemorated among them in the passover: *"Thou hast with thy arm, stretched out in so many miracles, redeemed thy people out of the hand of the Egyptians."* Though they were delivered by power, yet they are said to be redeemed, as if it had been done by price, because it was typical of the great redemption, which was to be wrought out, in the fulness of time, both by price and power. Those that were redeemed are here called not only *the sons of Jacob*, to whom the promise was made, but *of Joseph* also, who had a most firm and lively belief of the performance of it; for, when he was dying, he made mention of the departing of the children of Israel out of Egypt, and gave commandment concerning his bones.

(2.) He divided the Red Sea before them (v. 16): *The waters gave way, and a lane was made through that crowd instantly, as if they had seen God himself at the head of the armies of Israel, and had retired for fear of him.* Not only the surface of the waters, but *the depths, were troubled*, and opened to the right and to the left, in obedience to his word of command.

(3.) He destroyed the Egyptians (v. 17): *The clouds poured out water* upon them, while the pillar of fire, like an umbrella over the camp of Israel, sheltered it from the shower, in which, as in the deluge, the waters that were above the firmament concurred with those that were beneath the firmament to destroy the rebels. Then *the skies sent out a sound; thy arrows also went abroad*, which is explained (v. 18): *The voice of thy thunder was heard in the heaven* (that was the sound which the skies sent forth); *the lightnings lightened the world* — those were the arrows which went abroad, by which the host of the Egyptians was discomfited, with so much terror that *the earth* of the adjacent coast *trembled and shook*. Thus God's way was in the sea, for the destruction of his enemies, as well as for the salvation of his people; and yet when the waters returned to their place *his footsteps were not known* (v. 19); there was no mark set upon the place, as there was, afterwards, in Jordan, ⁽⁴⁰⁹⁾Joshua 4:9. We do not read in the story of Israel's passing through the Red Sea that there were thunders and lightning, and an earthquake; yet there might be, and Josephus says there were, such displays of the divine terror upon that occasion. But it may refer to the thunders, lightnings, and earth quakes, that were at Mount Sinai when the law was given.

(4.) He took his people Israel under his own guidance and protection (v. 20): *Thou leddest thy people like a flock*. They being weak and helpless, and apt to wander like a flock of sheep, and lying exposed to the beasts of prey, God went before them with all the care and tenderness of a shepherd, that they might not fail. The pillar of cloud and fire led them; yet that is not here taken notice of, but the agency of Moses and Aaron, by whose hand God led them; they could not do it without God, but God did it with and by them. Moses was their governor, Aaron their high priest; they were guides, overseers, and rulers to Israel, and by them God led them. The right and happy administration of the two great ordinances of magistracy and ministry is, though not so great a miracle, yet as great a mercy to any people as the pillar of cloud and fire was to Israel in the wilderness.

The psalm concludes abruptly, and does not apply those ancient instances of God's power to the present distresses of the church, as one might have expected. But as soon as the good man began to meditate on these things he found he had gained his point; his very entrance upon this matter *gave him light* and joy (⁽⁴¹⁰⁾Psalm 119:130); his fears suddenly and strangely vanished, so that he needed to go no further; he *went his way, and did eat, and his countenance was no more sad*, like Hannah, ⁽⁴¹¹⁾1 Samuel 1:18.