

From Man's Wretchedness to God's Greatness

Psalm 77.

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Introduction.

One of the attractive things about the Psalms is the way they present to us experimental truth. We are permitted to see the practical working of the truth in the experience of favoured saints of old, so that, no matter what our experiences may be, we can always find in the Psalms some allusion to feelings of a like kind. We are made to feel that after all our experiences are not absolutely unique, and that there are others who have tasted the same things.

Now this 77th Psalm is as highly experimental as any we can find. You will notice it is a Psalm of Asaph. There are a group of these Psalms, all written by the same sweet singer. They begin with the 73rd. The second Book of Psalms ends with that magnificent millennial Psalm, the 72nd; the Psalm which gives us such a wonderful view of the glories of the coming kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, that the Psalmist himself felt he had nothing left to pray for. He saw the consummation of all his desires in the day of the King who was coming. The glimpse he got by the Spirit of the coming kingdom was so satisfying that it left him without a prayer on his lips. The next Psalm opens in a very different strain. It is the perplexity of Asaph, the godly man, at the apparent prosperity of evil on the earth. He could not understand it. The godly seemed to be perplexed and plagued, and the wicked to flourish. He felt tempted to utterly abandon all faith in God; his steps had well-nigh slipped. But at last he went into the sanctuary of God, and there, in the presence of God — as far as he might know it in those days — he found the solution of the problem.

I think you will find there is a distinct progression in these Psalms. Psalm 74 is a lament. It is the kind of lament which the godly Jews in a coming day will take on their lips, when they see the devastation wrought on the earth by the powers of evil, headed up in Antichrist. Then we pass on to Psalm 75, which announces God's judgment, and Psalm 76., which anticipates the divine triumph at the beginning of the millennial age, when "the stout-hearted are spoiled . . . they have slept their sleep . . . and none of the men of might have found their hands." This probably had a preliminary fulfilment in the great deliverance wrought in the days of Hezekiah, but its exhaustive fulfilment will be in the coming day. That will be the time, as the ninth verse says, when "God arises in judgment, to save the meek of the earth," to make manifest before men at large the truth which Asaph says he learned in the sanctuary of God in Psalm 73.

Mental and Spiritual Difficulties.

In Psalm 77 Asaph unfolds to us the mental and spiritual difficulties through which he passed. He went through a very depressing and trying time, and he rehearses the matter to us from the beginning. "I cried unto God, with my voice, and He heard me." A saint never does cry to God without being heard.

From verses 2 to 6, Asaph tells us what was the state of his mind. The fact is, he was afflicted with a dreadful attack of introspection, which is only another word for self-occupation. Some of us may get occupied with ourselves because we are naturally of that turn of mind and therefore very apt to turn in upon ourselves. We think that in doing so we are seeking the Lord, as Asaph did, for he says, "In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord." As a matter of fact, however, he was seeking some point of rest and comfort in himself, for he goes on to tell us, "My sore ran in the night, and ceased not; my soul refused to be comforted. I remembered God, and was troubled." Think of that! You would expect that a saint could not think of God without a song on his lips. No, he remembered God, and was troubled, because, although he remembered God, what was filling the vision of his soul was simply himself. "I complained, and my spirit was overwhelmed."

He felt absolutely at the end of his resources; sleepless by night, and as though he could not speak to anybody by day (ver. 4). We might well have asked, "Asaph, what have you been dwelling upon?" If we want to be happy, we must dwell on happy subjects. If you come across one who is always dwelling on unsavoury things, you will find such a one a very unsavoury individual. A person who is always dwelling upon mournful subjects, invariably goes about with a long face. You may say, "I do get so depressed and cast down." Do not dwell on the gloomy side. Is it not possible to have the eye of your heart lifted off to that which is bright?

He tells us in verses 5 and 6 the things that had been occupying his thoughts. "I have considered the days of old, the years of ancient times." I have been thinking about bygone history. Old Christians are very apt to be troubled like this. They think the former days were vastly better than these. It is doubtless true that twenty-five years ago there was more interest among the saints of God, and in the work of God. We look back, and say, "Ah, those bright days of twenty-five or thirty years ago." We find Asaph had known brighter days personally. If conditions had been better, as connected with his circumstances, conditions had also been brighter in his soul. "I call to remembrance my song in the night." I was so happy; I remembered when I could have laid awake on my bed, and sung to God." "I communed with my own heart." "My spirit made diligent search." Yes, but in what direction? Evidently *within*.

Now this is most depressing work. Some of us have experienced it. Some of us may not be as bright to-day as we might have been, because of this habit of looking within. We consult our own feelings, and are occupied with ourselves or our circumstances. There are many dear children of God being robbed of their birthright in the way of spiritual joy, and happiness and power, because of that habit. Such is the subtlety of this kind of thing that its effect is to make us doubt, not ourselves — not to make us so conscious of our own utter worthlessness that we say self is no longer worthy of being cultivated — but to make us doubt God.

This was the effect with Asaph. It raised a whole host of questions — not about himself, but about God. He says, "Will the Lord cast off for ever? Will the Lord be favourable no more? Is His mercy clean gone for ever? Does His promise fail for evermore? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Hath He in anger shut up His tender mercies?" Here are six questions, all casting reflections upon God. You will find that is the spirit in the world around. All these calamities that have come upon the

civilized world are being seized upon and made an excuse to blame God. Here Asaph actually doubts the Lord. There may be some one here who has had an experience of that kind. You have felt you would almost doubt God Himself.

Then there comes that little word "Selah" — stop! It is about time we did stop when we can actually question the mercy and graciousness of God.

In verse 10 Asaph appears to start as a man awakening out of sleep, and he says, "This is my infirmity." Perhaps he had been thinking previously that all this self-occupation with its attendant misery was very pious and very right. There are dear Christian people who are in a state of inward misery, and they in a way pride themselves on being in that state. If they were not miserable, they would begin to be miserable because they were not miserable. The fact is that all this kind of thing is our *infirmity*. It is a great thing to label things by their right names. This is INFIRMITY, and not *piety*!

The Cure.

Now what is the cure? I am afraid our circumstances have occupied a great deal of our thoughts, and we get no strength whatever from being so occupied. Look at the contrast in verse 10: "I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High." This is something which stretches far outside the little course of time's history. The mind of Asaph was lifted up to things beyond the stars. He left himself with his wretchedness and littleness behind him when he began to remember the years of the right hand of the Most High. "I will remember," he says, "the works of the Lord: surely I will remember thy wonders of old." He is speaking of the God who marches through the circumstances. "I will talk of thy doings."

Suppose, brethren, we could walk a little bit in Asaph's footsteps, what a transformation it would produce. Suppose we fix the eye of our hearts, not on the seen things, not on the failings of our brethren and on the peculiar things they say and do, but on the God who marches through the circumstances, who works His sovereign will, who has revealed Himself in the Lord Jesus Christ, who is going to let the right hand of His power be seen in a way we have never yet seen it: we should be transformed! There could not be a greater contrast than between the spirit of these early verses of the Psalm and the spirit of verse 13. He says, I will get before my soul the works of the Lord. "Thy way, O God, is in the sanctuary. Who is so great a God as our God." The man begins to triumph. If I may adopt the language of Romans 7, he was previously saying, "Who is so wretched a man as I am?" Now he says, "Who is so great a God as our God?" We see here the change that was wrought in a man when he got the eye of his heart off his circumstances, and on to God. It is like Psalm 73, where Asaph went into the sanctuary and got the problems and difficulties solved. So he says here, "Thy way is the sanctuary." If we seek the presence of God, we shall understand His way. Then he tells us God's way is a redeeming way: "Thou hast with thine arm redeemed thy people, the sons of Jacob and Joseph. Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and thy footsteps are not known."

Let us take it to heart. God's way is in the sea. Amidst the masses of mankind, amidst all the jangle and strife of the various races that inhabit Europe, so like the sea, which represents people in unrest and anarchy; God's way is there. His path is in the great waters. When men are agitated, and start their movements, not in the least knowing where they are going, God moves through all the conflict. His footsteps are not known. In another way they *are* known, because He has led His people "like a flock, by the hands of Moses and Aaron." Moses and Aaron have been superseded, as the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us, by One who is infinitely greater than Moses and Aaron, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus. He is the true Moses, the true Revealer: and the true Aaron, the true

Priest who holds up His people and leads them on.

These are His footsteps through the raging billows of Europe today. While His people are here, He leads them. If you and I get into the sanctuary with God, if we get our eyes on God and His things — the eternal things, we shall see more clearly what His way is. We shall learn His strength — that which will supply us with the energy we need.