

Remembering in the right direction

Psalm 77

Some things must never be forgotten. Because if we forget them, we lose ourselves. This afternoon, those of us gathering at the service here at 3pm will be rededicating a memorial stone, and rededicating ourselves to remembering the sacrifice that people from this community made in two World Wars. On the 11th of November, the world will remember again.

As I'll say more about this afternoon, the remembering matters not just so that we can honour those who fell for us, but so that we can live more gratefully and joyfully. And the way the remembering happens is for a community to tell itself, and others around them, to remember these things. To help each other to remember in the right direction.

Psalm 77 is filled with the language of remembering and forgetting. We read at the top of it that it was written by Asaph. And we read about Asaph going through a time when he's really, really struggling. The first nine verses are a man expressing the suffering he's going through and the wrestle with God that comes with it.

He starts by calling out to God in vv.1-2. More literally, you'd translate that as 'shrieking at God.' He's shouting for help, but that's about as far as he can get in prayer. Have a look at the first few verses. He's literally losing sleep over his struggles (vv.2 and 4). And he can't pray (vv.3 and 4). Sure, he can shriek 'God, help! Make it stop!' But as he 'remembers God' in v.3, he can't do anything but groan. He can't bring himself to find any other words for God.

By vv.5-6, Asaph has turned his mind to remembering something else. He remembers how things used to be better. He remembers how he used to have this joyful, song-filled faith in God, and it feels to him like the God He knew like that once just isn't there any more. The Old Testament scholar Alec Motyer describes these as the 'memories that tease.' Memories of a fired up faith that calling to mind only grates at the heart.

So he gives vent to these questions for God in vv.7-9. 'Will the Lord reject for ever? Will He never show His favour again? Has His unfailing love vanished forever? Has His promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has He in anger withheld His compassion?'

Asaph's bold enough to say out loud (and even put in writing) this pondering: Is God doing the opposite of all that He has revealed to us? All that we've learned to say about Him - that He welcomes forever, shows us favour, loves unfailingly, that not one promise of His ever fails, that He's merciful, and He withholds anger in favour of compassion?

That's what's truly in his heart when he remembers to cry out to God about his circumstances, and when he remembers the way things used to be so much better in life and faith. And if that's how you feel, then why not pray the way Asaph did?

Read your Bible, (particularly the Psalms), and you'll learn to pray like this - honestly, openly, giving vent to every feeling that's really there without hiding or pretending. Pouring out the doubts and pouring out the questions. The Old Testament scholar Warren Wiersbe agrees. But he also points this out:

'As Christians, we do not live on explanations; we live on promises. Suppose God started to answer these questions. Will the Lord cast off forever? No. Will He be favourable no more? Of course, He's going to be favourable. Is His mercy completely gone forever? No. If God answered all of these questions, would it make any difference? It might ease your mind a little bit, but it wouldn't really change your situation. Live by faith, not by sight.'

When we're suffering, we want things to change. And, failing that, a good explanation from God for what is going on would be in order, thank you very much. But these things aren't where Asaph actually finds his hope and help. In v.10, he tells us that he tried a new approach. 'Then I thought, "To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High."'

And what follows in vv.11-20 is a deliberate remembering of the things that God has done in history. Incredible, powerful, earth-shattering and community-saving things. Things of matchless and unique power, poured out on behalf of people whom God had called to belong to Him. Things that only God Himself *could* do, and has done.

Basically, Asaph starting remembering in a different direction. Alec Motyer puts it like this: 'It's as if the psalmist said to himself "That's it! That's the way forward - not prayer for circumstances to be changed (vv.1-4), nor fretful recollection that things are not what they used to be (vv.5-9), but remembering the works of God and the God who performed the works.'"

Instead of remembering the awfulness of his struggles this year, or how much better things were in his life and faith many years ago, he looks *way back* - to ancient times recorded in his Bible. And remembering in this direction seems to bring Asaph the peace and shift in his soul that he'd been lacking as he was losing sleep.

I'm a pretty forgetful person. I can't remember much about my childhood actually! My sister's got a really good memory though, and I'm pretty reliant on her stories of our past that start with, 'Do you remember when...?' My answer's usually the same - 'Oh yeah - I'd forgotten that!'

As a church - a community of God's people - we can help each other to remember what God has done amongst us. Last Saturday, we celebrated 190 years of Dores Church, and we'll be celebrating that again in a service here in November. It's a great time to be looking back and saying, 'Do you remember when God did *this* in our church... *this* in our community...?'

I've found that it really, really helps when in our church families, people begin to struggle with their faith in God because of their sleepless circumstances. 'Do you remember when that money was miraculously provided at the right time?...' 'Do you remember when God stepped in with that unusual medical intervention?...' 'Do you remember when that person came to faith in Jesus and how different they were after that?...'

God has done, and is doing, things of power that He uniquely can do, in our living memories as church communities and even now in our day. Does remembering that help you? Remembering the powerful works of God, and worshipping the God who performs them, helped Asaph. Helped him *in* the sleeplessness. *Past* the bitterness. *Through* the questions.

When you look back at what God's done in your life and in this church, what do you remember?

The truth is though, Asaph was looking way, way further back than living memory. He was directing his memory right back to ancient times. The time of the Exodus of God's people from Egypt, and the things his Bible told him about what God had done for His people then. He talks about acts of God's incredible power in vv.14-18. He speaks of those powerful acts of God being motivated by a compassionate shepherding of His people in v.20.

But how does *that* help? How does reading an old book from well before your time about God's miraculous power lifting His people out of slavery help *you*? Especially when you don't see God doing *anything*, never mind anything miraculous, to lift you out of the struggles you're in?

Well, for one thing, let's not write off remembering things that happened before we were born. We'll be doing more of that this afternoon, and on 11th November. Because if we don't, we lose ourselves - to entitled, ungrateful lives so unaware of the freedom we live in and the cost there was for it. It takes a deliberate effort to remember, especially the things that happened before we were born. But those things have changed our destinies, and when we realise it, we're set free.

Actually, the same sort of thing happens when we remember the mighty deeds of God long ago. The things that God did in the Exodus - rescuing His people from slavery to Egypt, setting them free to have life and freedom and land and dignity and purpose and identity in this world as those who belong to God and are especially treasured by Him - all of that stuff shaped Asaph's reality.

He was living as a free man because of what God had done, which his bible reminded him of. He was reminded that although God didn't change circumstances with a click of the finger (Israel waited 400 years before they were delivered) - He did love His people and have a plan to rescue and adopt them as His forever. Asaph looked back to his bible, and remembered that hundreds of years before him, God had done powerful, earth-shattering things to give His people identity, hope and a future.

'Great - so that helped Asaph. I'm very pleased for him. How does any of that help *me* now that *I'm* losing sleep?!?' Well, there's something that we can look back to that Asaph couldn't. Asaph looked back to the first exodus where God moved mightily to set His people free. But we can look back to the second one.

There's another 400 year silence between the end of the Old Testament and the announcement that 'God's Son has been born to you this day in the town of David.' Another long wait for God's people through desperately difficult circumstances. But then the New Testament tells us about an exodus that even surpasses the miraculous power and the loving, freedom-bringing work of the first one.

Paul writes in Galatians 5:1 - 'It is for *freedom* that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.' Jesus' life, death and resurrection was about freeing us from slavery.

Later on, Paul filled out this idea more when he wrote Romans. He explained in that book how Jesus set us free from being slaves to sin and death. How Jesus set us free from being under the power of living a life that denies, ignores or rejects God. How He frees us from the death that is the ultimate end of such a life.

Jesus lived a perfect life introducing people to something called 'The Kingdom of God' - how life would look so much better when everyone bowed the knee to God as King. He preached about being free from slavery to sin and death, and free from slavery to all sorts of other things too - worry, money, ambition, materialism, bigotry, immorality, being a prisoner to your circumstances...

Then He went to the cross to destroy our sin in His body with His death, taking the punishment for all the ways we have lived other than with God in charge - ourselves in charge, hurting others, ourselves, our world. Then He did *more* - He rose back to life, defeating the death that would claim every one of us except for this rescue.

Like the first exodus, Jesus has called people out of a life of slavery, and on a journey into unknown territory trusting God to lead. Like the first exodus where God made a way through the waters when there was no other way; Jesus has made a way - through death itself - where there is no other way.

Now, the stuff that Asaph looks back and remembers in the Bible about the first exodus is mighty - thunder, lightning, waters parting; the earth trembling and quaking at this work of God. But the stuff that Christians look back to in our Bibles to remember about the second exodus is even mightier. Jesus crying, 'It is finished!' The sky going dark at midday. The rocks splitting and the temple curtain torn. The stone rolled away. The good news that changed the world - 'He is not here - He has risen!'

The risen Jesus appearing to frightened disciples. The Holy Spirit coming in power to give birth to a community of people who would help each other to keep remembering all of these earth-shattering, world-changing, destiny-shaping things.

When you remember Jesus (in Bible reading, communion, prayer/reflection), what effect does that have on you?

So here's how to learn from Asaph in Psalm 77. *Remember in the right direction.* He switched *from* remembering how rubbish things were right now. He switched *from* remembering how much better he used to find things. He switched *to* remembering way back to the history of what God had done in power for His people in the exodus; that actually shaped way more of Asaph's past, present and future than any of his circumstances, old or new.

If you're shrieking at God but can't say much more, asking Him to get you out of your circumstances and finding no change, finding you can't pray and can't sleep and all you've honestly got is question after question about whether God is really who you used to think He was, here's what God's Word here points you towards.

Switch *from* yelling and screaming until God changes your circumstances. We never read in Psalm 77 that Asaph gets past his sleeplessness or his woes. But then, in the bigger plan, that might be what's needed. Alec Motyer even suggests: 'God Himself withheld the balm of sleep (v.4), bringing His child deeper into exhaustion till he could learn the precious lesson of resting upon revealed truth.'

And switch *from* asking God why it's not like it used to be or whether He's really like He says He is. You can ask your honest questions; I think this passage and many other parts of Scripture encourage you to do that. But don't expect to get all the answers. And don't assume that getting the answers is where you'd find your hope, peace, help and salvation anyway.

Where you get *that* is in the *promises* of God. And those promises He offers in Jesus Christ - that your sins are all forgiven, that you are welcome and adopted by God and made part of His family, that He will never leave or forsake you, that you might run from Him but He will never run from you, that death itself is defeated and this is not the only life, nor is it even a fraction of the life we're going to have...

All of those promises are rooted in the powerful, incredible things God has already done hundreds of years before our living memory. Things we need to deliberately remember, so we don't lose ourselves. Things of the Kingdom of God coming with Jesus - life to the full, an empty cross and an empty grave.

Reading of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and all that God reveals to us through it - that's what shapes your heart and mind and soul and strength when you struggle. It leads you to worship and love God with all of it - heart, mind, soul and strength. So remember in the right direction.

We are to help each other to do that. In v.19, Asaph says of God and the exodus He led through the waters, 'Your path led... though your footprints were not seen...' God left no physical testimony to the powerful salvation He had brought to His people. No footprints on the ground. No blue plaque on a wall. Just this - His Word and His family. The Bible recording the mighty deeds of God, and the Church to remind one another as a community of who they were and what God had done for them.

This afternoon, the war memorial stone outside will be rededicated to testify to what fellow human beings have done that has changed our destinies. There's something written to remind us. But there's also a community rededicating ourselves to remembering, to reminding each other, what we have and what we are because of them.

So let's be people of faith in our God. People who look often to what is written about what Christ did for us in this second exodus long before our living memory. And people who remind each other as a community that this defines what we have and who we are - not just now, but forever. With those two memory aids - the Word and the Church - let's remember in the right direction. Amen.