

Israel's Hymnal
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PSALM SEVENTY-SEVEN

[Pss 77:1] I will cry unto God with my voice, Even unto God with my voice; and he will give ear unto me.

[Pss 77:2] In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord: My hand was stretched out in the night, and slacked not; My soul refused to be comforted.

[Pss 77:3] I remember God, and am disquieted: I complain, and my spirit is overwhelmed. Selah

[Pss 77:4] Thou holdest mine eyes watching: I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

[Pss 77:5] I have considered the days of old, The years of ancient times.

[Pss 77:6] I call to remembrance my song in the night: I commune with mine own heart; And my spirit maketh diligent search.

[Pss 77:7] Will the Lord cast off for ever? And will he be favorable no more?

[Pss 77:8] Is his lovingkindness clean gone for ever? Doth his promise fail for evermore?

[Pss 77:9] Hath God forgotten to be gracious? Hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies? Selah

[Pss 77:10] And I said, This is my infirmity; (But I will remember) the years of the right hand of the Most High.

[Pss 77:11] I will make mention of the deeds of Jehovah; For I will remember thy wonders of old.

[Pss 77:12] I will meditate also upon all thy work, And muse on thy doings.

[Pss 77:13] Thy way, O God, is in the sanctuary: Who is a great god like unto God?

[Pss 77:14] Thou art the God that doest wonders: Thou hast made known thy strength among the peoples.

[Pss 77:15] Thou hast with thine arm redeemed thy people, The sons of Jacob and Joseph. Selah

[Pss 77:16] The waters saw thee, O God; The waters saw thee, they were afraid: The depths also trembled.

[Pss 77:17] The clouds poured out water; The skies sent out a sound: Thine arrows also went abroad.

[Pss 77:18] The voice of thy thunder was in the whirlwind; The lightning's lightened the world: The earth trembled and shook.

[Pss 77:19] Thy way was in the sea, And thy paths in the great waters, And thy footsteps were not known.

[Pss 77:20] Thou leadest thy people like a flock, By the hand of Moses and Aaron.

DISCOVERING THE LORD'S PRESENCE WITH HIS PEOPLE

- I. An eclipse of faith (vss. 1-9).
- II. A wise decision (vss. 10-15).
- III. An example of divine deliverance (vss. 16-20).

Asaph was the human author of Psalm 77. A glance at various psalms shows that he wrote Psalms 50, 73-83. Who was Asaph? He was a Levite who lived in the days of David and undoubtedly was a great musician. From I Chronicles 16:4,5 we learn that David appointed him as the minister of music, the choir director of the Temple singers. He was not only a musician, but was also a poet. At least one would judge this to be true from the fact that God used him in writing twelve of the psalms. Men select people who have qualifications for the positions which they wish filled. God uses the same wisdom. When He wanted certain portions of His Word put in the form of poetry, He selected men who had poetical talents to do the writing. But let us remember that the Holy Spirit inspired the biblical writers, giving them the thoughts and the very words by which the thoughts were expressed—combining spiritual things with spiritual words. While all of this is true, we may conclude that God used the poetical talents of Asaph when He wished these twelve psalms written. We may conclude from the data which we have that he was, to a certain extent at least, temperamental. This we conclude from a careful study of Psalms 73 and 77, for in these poems are reflected the human frailties of this great man. In Psalm 73 we see that jealousy and envy got the upper hand of him and his mind became so warped that he reached erroneous conclusions—until he went to the house of God and laid his situation before the Lord; when he saw facts and truths as they are. It is certainly a great encouragement to us to know that, notwithstanding our shortcomings and failures, God can and will use those who, even in a limited way, desire to do His will. With these introductory remarks, let us now turn to the investigation of Psalm 77.

This psalm falls naturally into three main divisions which are: (I) an eclipse of faith (vss. 1-9); (II) a wise decision (vss. 10-15); (III) an example of divine deliverance (vss. 16-20).

I. The eclipse of faith (vss. 1-9)

77 "I will cry unto God with my voice,
Even unto God with my voice;
and he will give ear unto me.

2 In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord:
My hand was stretched out in the night, and slacked not;
My soul refused to be comforted.

3 I remember God, and am disquieted:
I complain, and my spirit is overwhelmed. (Selah)

4 Thou holdest mine eyes watching: I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

5 I have considered the days of old, The years of ancient times.

6 I call to remembrance my song in the night:

I commune with mine own heart:

And my spirit maketh diligent search.

7 Will the Lord cast off for ever? And will he be favorable no more?

8 Is his lovingkindness clean gone for ever? Doth his promise fail for evermore?

9 Hath God forgotten to be gracious? Hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies? (Selah)" (vss. 1-9).

According to verse 1 the psalmist declared his intention to bring his case before the Lord and was confident that his prayer would be answered. The basis for such a conviction is expressed in verse 2, where he recounts a past experience. At this former time, Asaph had been in trouble. He turned to the Lord in dead earnest, looking intently to Him to answer his petition and to deliver him. Though he does not tell us that the petition was answered, we may assume that it was from the fact that he uses this instance as a basis for praying at the time of which he in this psalm is speaking.

Notwithstanding the psalmist's intention to bring his case before the Lord and to leave it there in faith, we see from verse 3 that there was an eclipse in his faith. As he remembered God, he became disquieted. Fears began to grip his soul. Because the prayer was not answered immediately, it seems that he began to complain. When he did this, his spirit was overwhelmed. It appeared to him that there was a vast gulf between him and the Almighty. In fact, he seems to have fallen into a state of despair. To him the fellowship seemed to have been broken and he felt that there was no approach to God. Such an experience of this type is quite frequent. Many of God's noblemen today are brought to their extremity at times. They become baffled. They pray, but no answer comes. Many of them are not conscious of sin in their lives separating them from God or disrupting their fellowship with Him. They appear helpless and bewildered. God seems afar off. They are unable to get a grip upon themselves and continue to "wrestle with the Lord" in prayer until the day dawns and the light of His presence again shines upon them. Such experiences are, doubtless in many instances, the result of some special attack by Satan. Again, it may be due to physical weakness; or again it may be the result of one's letting up in his devotional and prayer-life.

In verse 4 the psalmist has his eyes focused upon the Almighty. Though he cannot see the Lord physically, he is looking upward and trying by faith to see Him. Notwithstanding this attempt to get in touch with the Almighty, he is so very much overwhelmed that he cannot talk. In his great anxiety he looks toward heaven, but seems to be staring into blank space. Doubt seems to be getting in its deadly work. Questioning God's existence and His love for one is the work of Satan, as we see in the case of Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen., chap. 3).

After staring into blank space as he looked toward heaven, the psalmist breaks his silence by asserting that he has "considered the days of old, the years of ancient times." It is not quite clear as to what he meant by these expressions. It is possible that he was referring to the early primeval times, the beginning of the human race. Again it is altogether possible that he was referring to the early years of his life. The implication of this verse possibly is that during these former times, God had not been afar off and that He had been in touch with His followers. When everything is taken into consideration, it is quite likely, however, that the psalmist was speaking of his earlier days when he was in close touch and fellowship with the Lord. This thought is confirmed by the next verse in which he tells us that he called to remembrance his songs in the night. The suggestion of this past is that he had been living in close touch and fellowship with God and that his joy at that time was abounding. As he continued in this retrospective mood, he examined his own heart and made diligent search concerning his spirit.

The questions which he put to himself are found in verse 7-9. To him it seemed that the Lord had cast him off forever and that He would be no longer favorable to him. If the Lord had cast him off forever, what would be the use of praying? The answer is that there would be none. As he mused upon his condition,

he asked whether or not the loving-kindness of God had gone forever and would God fail to keep His promise? From verse 9 we see that Asaph was in doubt as to whether God had forgotten to be gracious anymore. "Hath he," he asked, "in anger shut up his tender mercies?"

From these questions we can see to what depths of despondency Asaph had plunged. Do you, my dear Christian friends, or I, ever have our faith eclipsed and give utterance to such doubts concerning the grace, mercy, and love of God? Do we ever question His faithfulness? Do we ever conclude that in His anger He has shut up His mercy against us forever?

These questions, found in verse 7-9, are to be answered in the negative so far as the truly born-again children of God are concerned. The Lord may, for good and sufficient reasons, seemingly turn from a genuinely saved person and cause him to pass through trying experiences which seem for the time being to indicate that God has completely forsaken him. The Lord tested Abraham's faith by commanding him to offer his son Isaac upon the alter. That was a supreme trial, the like of which the Lord has seldom given to any of His children. But the patriarch wavered not through unbelief. On the contrary, he marched forward confidently in the path of obedience, prepared to carry out the divine command. When he had thus demonstrated his unswerving faith and his loyalty to the Lord, the Almighty prevented his going any farther. Thus Abraham received a wonderful blessing.

There is no hour so dark and no experience so grave that we cannot by faith look up into the face of our God and see His smile. When, however, such testing times come, we should call in other good Christian friends to unite with us in approaching the throne of grace. First, however, we should search our own hearts to see whether or not there is anything between us and the Lord. If we discover something, we should confess it and turn from it. Then in the strength of united prayer, having agreed as to the thing for which we should pray, we should bring our petition to the Lord who guarantees that He will hear, answer, and deliver.

II. A wise decision (vss. 10-15)

10 "And I said, This is my infirmity;
But I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High.
 11 I will make mention of the deeds of Jehovah;
 For I will remember thy wonders of old.
 12 I will meditate also upon all thy work,
 And muse on thy doings.
 13 Thy way, O God, is in the sanctuary;
 Who is a great god like unto God?
 14 Thou art the God that doest wonders;
 Thou hast made known thy strength among the peoples.
 15 Thou hast with thine arm redeemed thy people,
 The sons of Jacob and Joseph" (vss. 10-15).

In these verse just quoted, we see a changed attitude on the part of the psalmist, and an entirely different outlook on life is apparent. It seems evident that Asaph had "prayed through" in regard to his own case; for he tells us that "This is my infirmity." What is his infirmity? The answer is, The experience which he had just narrated, found in the first nine verses of his hymn. One may judge that he was more or less

temperamental and that he often fell into these moody states during which times he questioned the goodness of God and the continuance of His mercy and loving-kindness toward His people. Those, who are temperamental and by nature are subject to times of introspection and consequent reactions of doubt and despondency, should take their eyes off themselves and center them upon God, earnestly imploring Him to deliver from their evil case. Too much attention to self is always disastrous. Comparisons are not only odious but are also detrimental to the spiritual development of the child of God. Asaph was given to doing these very things; "For I was envious at the arrogant, When I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (Ps. 73:3). May the Lord deliver us from all the juniper-tree experiences like that of Elijah! He can and will do this for us if we will trust Him.

According to the first nine verses it would seem from verse 10 of Psalm 77 that Asaph was coming out from behind the cloud of doubt which was seemingly enveloping him. He seems to have gotten hold of himself and to have recognized that he was again in one of his moody, complaining states of mind. Realizing this, he admitted that this was a weakness of his. It is well for us to examine ourselves honestly and conscientiously in the presence of God to learn our weaknesses and to ask the Lord to deliver us. He will give power and ability and enable us to rise above all such experiences.

In the Revised Version there is a marginal reading of the first part of verse 10 which is as follows: *This is my grief that the right hand of the Most High doth change.* Of course, the Hebrew does yield this translation, as well as that which is found in the text. If we accept the marginal rendering, we see that Asaph simply said that this was his "grief," or, expressed in the parlance, his "hard luck"—that "the right hand of the Most High doth change." In other words, he said that it was just too bad for him that God changed His tactics and methods in dealing with him. The implication of this statement is that God had been good to him in the past, but that he was no longer treating him thus. If this is the meaning, we can understand why it was that the Lord was no longer dealing graciously and bountifully with Asaph and pouring out the riches of His blessing upon him. The trouble was with *him* and not with the Lord. Whenever the Lord ceases to bless one of His children, such a one may come to the conclusion that something is wrong in his life, right-about-face, come back to the Lord, learn what the trouble is, rectify the wrong, and allow God to bring back into his life the fullness of His blessing. In this connection let me say that I am inclined to believe that the text reading of verse 10 is to be preferred above the marginal note. As stated above, the psalmist was coming to his senses, seeing his mistake, and admitting his sin.

Taking his eyes off himself and God's dealings with him, he looked into the distance past—back to the time of Exodus—and began to enumerate God's dealings with His people Israel. He declared,

"I will make mention of the deeds of Jehovah; For I will remember thy wonders of old."

In the first part of this verse Asaph speaks of God in third person, "of Jehovah," but in the latter part he changes quickly to the second person, addressing Him and saying, "I will remember THY wonders of old." Such a change of pronouns is common in the Book of Psalms, and this shift from one to another should occasion no difficulty in interpretation. This custom is easily understood when we remember that in our ordinary daily conversation a father, speaking to his child, says "Come to me, son; come to Daddy." In such an instance the father speaks of himself first as "me," (first person), and then as "Daddy," (third person). The child, however, understands perfectly what his father means.

Asaph mentioned "the deeds of Jehovah"—the works—His "wonders of old." He was talking about the miracles at the time of the Exodus. This is clear from verse 15, which we shall consider presently. The

biblical writers frequently recount God's wonders which He performed at the time of the Exodus. For instance, Moses in his final orations—the Book of Deuteronomy—constantly referred to what God had done in bringing Israel out of Egypt. Certain Levites, the leaders of Israel in the days of Nehemiah, did the same thing (Neh. 9:5-38). Of these mighty acts Asaph sang of in Psalm 78. The same deeds of Jehovah are recounted in Psalms 105 and 106. In his great prayer (Jer. 32:16-27) Jeremiah spoke largely of these wonders. Ezekiel, a contemporary of Jeremiah, likewise recounted God's dealings with Israel in delivering her from Egyptian bondage (Chap. 20).

Although the wonders which God performed in behalf of Israel when He delivered her from Egypt were indeed marvelous, those which He will perform in behalf of the faithful remnant in the end of the Tribulation will far eclipse those which he performed at the Exodus (Jer. 23:7-8).

As Asaph meditated upon God's works and mused upon His doings, he came to this conclusion: "Thy way, O God, is in the sanctuary ..." The marginal reading of this wording is, "Thy way, O God, is *in Holiness*." The word rendered *sanctuary* also means holiness. This intrinsic characteristic of God, which is apparent in all of His dealings, was emphasized by the solemnity and reverent atmosphere of His house—the Temple. Everything connected with the Tabernacle and the Temple emphasized the holiness of God. The sacred structure was, figuratively speaking, God's house, in the midst of Israel. He resided among the people and dealt with them upon the principles of holiness. Such seems to be the thought that is expressed here. God's way with His people, which He directed from the sanctuary, was in holiness. Shall not the Lord of all the earth do right? He is righteous, just, and holy. There is no one like unto our God.

In verses 14 and 15 the psalmist tells us that he was speaking of God's wonders which He performed when He, in loving-kindness, delivered Israel from her servile bondage. He performed such miracles that the surrounding peoples recognized the presence of Jehovah and His superiority to their gods.

III. An example of divine deliverance (vss. 16-20)

16 "The waters saw thee, O God;
The waters saw thee, they were afraid:
The depths also trembled.
17 The clouds poured out water:
The skies sent out a sound:
Thine arrows also went abroad.
18 The voice of thy thunder was in the whirlwind;
The lightnings lightened the world:
The earth trembled and shook.
19 Thy way was in the sea,
And thy paths in the great waters,
And thy footsteps were not known.
20 Thou ledest thy people like a flock,
By the hand of Moses and Aaron" (vss. 16-20).

Having in verses 14 and 15 spoken of God's wonders in delivering Israel, Asaph now mentions some of these details. For instance, in verse 16 he speaks of God's separating the waters of the Red Sea in order that Israel might pass through. He thinks of the waters as persons who, terrified by the presence of God, ran from Him affrighted. God caused a strong east wind to blow which separated the waters and opened up the path for Israel to pass through. The waters congealed, as we see from Exodus 15:8. After Israel had crossed over to the opposite side, the Lord caused the waters to roll back upon the Egyptians who were attempting to follow them, thus drowning Pharaoh's host in the sea—a mighty deliverance by divine power.

In verse 17 Asaph mentions God's having sent rain at that time. The inference is that these rains were sent for Israel's special benefit. Those who have been in the Sinaitic Peninsula can appreciate the cooling effect of the rain, especially during the hot summer. We should read this portion of the Psalm in connection with the record found in the Book of Exodus. When we take all the facts into consideration, we might speak of God's "air-conditioning" the desert by sending the clouds by day and the pillar of fire by night—the clouds as an umbrella protecting Israel from the heat and also reducing the temperature by falling rain. The pillar of fire by night was to warm the desert in the winter. In verse 17 and 18 the psalmist speaks of the rain, and of the lightning and the thunder that accompanied it.

Although the Lord was present in mighty power, working various miracles for Israel's good, the people did not have spiritual vision enough to recognize His footsteps and presence with them. Not only did the Lord air-condition the desert, but he gave them, water from the rock and provided them manna, as well as quail. Their clothing did not wear out. Everything that was necessary for their life was provided bountifully for them.

According to the last verse God led His people like a flock, "By the hand of Moses and Aaron." They had an efficient leader, who had been trained especially for forty years in the wilderness for the job of leading Israel during the forty years of her wanderings.

When we are discouraged, thinking all is lost, let us take our eyes off self and look at the wonders of God as He works in behalf of others. Let us praise Him, over and over, for His eternal goodness to us and for His guiding providence.