FCCOE; 9/16/18; Psalm 77; Rev. T. Ziegenhals

“#NeverForget”

Introduction: Hear the numbers, 9/11, and I’m sure a flood of images, memories, and emotions come to mind. That is an event we remembered as a nation last Tuesday that, for many reasons, we never want to forget. Last Tuesday I remembered another event as 9/11 is also the date on which married what I thought was a rather amazing woman, who just keeps getting more amazing as each year goes on! That, too, is an event, and a day, I never want to forget.

A similar remembering took place among God’s people when the word “Exodus” was mentioned. In that event, God rescued a people, who were utterly and completely beyond human help, from social and political bondage. It is an event that God’s people would bring to mind when they found themselves in difficult and distressing situations that they had come to realize were completely beyond their control.

As we look at the collection of prayers known as the Psalms, and the “on-ramp” these prayers provide for our own prayer life and deepening of our relationship with God, Psalm 77 introduces us to the prayer of a man who needed to remember, who needed help in moving from darkness to light, from distress to confidence and hope. It is a prayer, a lament, that I suspect all of us will need at one time or another.

I. Cries in the Night (vv. 1-9)

A. The man’s name, the title to the psalm indicates, is Asaph. Asaph was the director of music in the temple, and Jeduthun, for whom the psalm seems to have been written, was most likely one of Asaph’s musicians, a soloist perhaps. It reminds us that the psalms were not only meant to be prayed, but also sung. Singing can actually help our times of meditation as there is nothing like music to help work a truth down from our head and into our heart.

B. But the opening lines of the psalm suggest that Asaph was not feeling much like singing, nor could he sleep, or even speak. Instead, he was groaning. He was troubled. His spirit had grown faint. All he could do was reach out with his hands. And when he was able to think about God, at least at first, it seemed to make things worse because all it brought to mind was the happy days of the past, the times when he had actually been able to sing songs in the night.

C. The cause of his distress and depression is not specified, but this is helpful to us as it allows us to insert whatever distress we may find ourselves in. Can you relate, in any way, to the cries of Asaph, as he gives voice to his distress? Can you relate to the rapid fire questioning that Asaph then unleashes, questioning God’s favor and love and faithfulness (vv. 7-9)? The fact that Asaph doesn’t get struck down by God for giving voice to these questions invites our honesty before God. It was an honesty appreciated by Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

Illustration: Spurgeon was a prolific preacher and an extremely devout man who lived in the late 1800’s. During the last twenty years of his life, he suffered terribly from neuralgia and gout, accompanied by debilitating headaches and bouts of depression. Frequently, he could not walk, or write. He loved this psalm, for it helped him cry out to God. As he said, “Some of us know what it is, both physically and spiritually, to be compelled to use these words; no respite has been afforded to us by the silence of the night, our bed has been a rack, our body in torment, and our spirit in anguish…Deep glens and lonely caves of soul depression, my spirit knows full well your awful glooms!”

This psalm, and other laments like it, can help us give voice to our awful glooms, whatever they may be. But importantly, we’re not left in the gloom. Asaph also gives us a strategy to help us move from darkness into light.

II. From Darkness to Light (vv. 10-20)

A. The turn actually begins to happen, I think, with Asaph’s string of questions. They are questions that bring God back into the picture and seem, actually, to help Asaph begin to take his eyes off of himself and put them on God. They are questions that reflect on the covenant keeping nature of God and really, when he thought about it, became more rhetorical than anything else. Even though Asaph didn’t know why he was suffering so, and why God didn’t seem to be bringing any relief, of course God’s favor and mercy and unfailing love and compassion had not, and would never, fail.

B. Having articulated these questions, Asaph was then able to move from stretching out his hands in grief and distress, to remembering a time when God had stretched out *His* hand toward his people, dramatically rescuing them from slavery in Egypt. In that event, known as the Exodus, when completely beyond human help, God saved his people and led them out of bondage into safety through his infinite power as Divine Warrior, and through his tender love as Good Shepherd. While his circumstances had not changed, Asaph was able to take the focus off of himself and put it on God (note all the personal pronouns in the first half of the psalm and how they are replaced by God’s name in the second half).

C. How does this happen for Asaph? How does he go from peppering God with hard questions to celebrating God’s holiness and greatness?! How might it happen for us, as we despair over our own personal circumstances, or over the state of the church in the west, or over our political infighting and hostility, or over the injustice that still rages throughout the world? Hear again the strategy he recommends:

 I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will consider all your works and meditate on all your mighty deeds (vv. 11-12).

Do you see his strategy? It is a strategy of intentionally and actively nourishing his soul with the Word of God. It is the same strategy with which the entire collection of Psalms begins, as we shared together in our Call to Worship. For, Psalm 1 declares right up front that the strategy for living is delighting and meditating on the Word of God. It is the Word of God that nourishes us, like a tree that has been planted by streams of water. The Word gives us the resilience we need, and helps us to produce fruit, even when we cannot see it happening (cf. Ps. 77:19). The Word is a source of living water that will never dry up, no matter how dry or distressing our life may seem.

D. I appreciate the way John Piper refers to this strategy of living on the word. He calls it “the fight for delight.” The Christian life, he wants us never to forget, is not something that just happens to you, like the weather. The lure of walking with the wicked, or standing with the sinners, or sitting with the mockers is truly tempting, and must be strongly resisted. Day and night, our best strategy is to deepen our fellowship with God through his word. As we read and remember and consider and ponder and meditate and pray through that word, we become like that strong tree that brings forth fruit. It’s why we begin our “6 Habits of Discipleship” with reading the Bible regularly. Living on the Word of God won’t just happen; it takes resolve and it needs to become a habit. Asaph didn’t just ride his donkey past a billboard with a catchy Bible verse that changed his life; he was intentional, and so must we be. What will you read? When will you read? How will you read? [see “Daily Devos” on website]

E. As we do so, it’s important to remember is that as Christians, we have so much more history and truth than Asaph and his choir had to feed on and sustain us. We have all that God has now revealed in and through his Son, not the least of which is the death and the resurrection of that Son, an event of rescue from sin and death that the Exodus anticipated, as we recall each time we gather at the communion table. It is an event, as we meditate on the cross, and feed on the bread of life, that helps us never to forget that God often works his gracious purposes and promises through what looks at first glance like utter defeat. It is an event, as we look back and reflect on it, that can help us find confidence for our present and hope for our future.

III. Pointers to Prayer

1. Let ‘er rip! Or rather, is there anything you might be holding back from expressing to God about a difficult circumstance, either because you think he won’t understand, or that you might be afraid to voice? Psalm 77 gives you permission to be honest.

2. Is there a question you have for God, even a hard one? Feel free to ask it and add it to the list. It’s likely God knows what’s bubbling in your heart anyway!

3. Do you need God to fight for you like a Divine Warrior, or lead you like a Tender Shepherd?

4. Pray for your strategy.