

## When Despair runs Deep: Psalm 77

**Video Illustration:** *Deep thoughts on Happiness*

Happy is the man verses - Blessed is the man

**Matthew 5:1-12**, "Blessed **are** the poor in spirit, For theirs **is** the kingdom of **heaven**. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, For they **shall be** comforted. 5 Blessed are the meek, For **they shall** inherit the earth. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For **they shall** be filled. 7 Blessed are the merciful, For **they shall** obtain mercy. 8 Blessed are the pure in heart, For **they shall** see God. 9 Blessed are the peacemakers, For **they shall** be called sons of God. 10 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs **is** the kingdom of **heaven**. 11 "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. 12 "**Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven**, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

We are blessed in the sense that God has reserved for us now blessings that will be fully realized in Heaven.

Happiness is happening based. Happiness comes from the good things that happen in our lives.

There is a fine line between the two but the slight difference is important. Though the present state of affairs seems bleak, God has blessed us with a promise of better things to come.

Paul understood this. In **Romans 8:18** he said,

*"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."*

The Apostle Paul, as a Christian, was able to understand the struggles others face because he too was acquainted with hardship, suffering, feelings of powerlessness, and even despairing of life.

**2 Corinthians 1:6-8**, "If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. 7 And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. 8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life." (NIV)

**Elijah**, God's man of steel in the Old Testament became so **discouraged** that he sat down under a juniper tree and prayed to die.

Many of the world's and the church's greatest leaders have been given to despair.

**Winston Churchill** confessed that he was often, "*hounded by the black dog of despair.*"

**Charles Spurgeon**, "*fought continually bouts of depression as a result of gout that finally killed him at age 58.*"

If you suffer from depression, are in despair, or discouraged in your life it may help to know that Asaph, a celebrated musician in David's time, and one of the leaders of the temple music, wrote about his despair in **Psalm 77**.

**Psalm 77** is a Psalm that helps all of us regain perspective on life by offering to us **6 life lessons** that reestablish our spiritual and mental equilibrium.

I'm convinced that Asaph, could have also easily been Asaph, the pastor who was trying to overcome discouragement. This Psalm was more than likely set to music and used in the Temple worship services.

A man's private prayer life in the midst of His struggles became the song of the assembly.

People took ownership of this song as easily as they would a nice warm blanket on a cold day lent to them by a friend.

We too, find comfort knowing that there are others of God's servants who have gone through cold dismal days in their lives. *I hope that will be true for you & I.*

*I will not go into detail anytime soon about what I have been dealing with over the past 5 months, but suffice it to say that I and my family have been struggling with the despair and difficulties of the past and present, and wondering how and when God will mend our future. I relate to Asaph in many ways.*

Asaph bore all the marks of what would be diagnosed today as depression. He was looking at life through dark colored glasses.

He felt forgotten and forsaken by God.

He couldn't sleep.

He couldn't articulate his thoughts because of emotional exhaustion.

He was tired all the time.  
He lived in the past longing for days gone by.  
He remembered when he was happy and had a song in his heart, but no more, and he couldn't seem to get back there no matter how hard he tried.

The Asaph's **first life lesson** is found in verses 1-4.

**Psalm 77:1-9**, *"I cried out to God with my voice — To God with my voice; And He gave ear to me. 2 In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord; My hand was stretched out in the night without ceasing; My soul refused to be comforted. 3 I remembered God, and was troubled; I complained, and my spirit was overwhelmed. Selah 4 You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak.*

### I. **Life Lesson 1: Cry Out to God**

Asaph is saying, *"God, I'm hurting down here. I'm confused. I am having such a hard time I can barely speak to you or anybody else for that matter. All I can say is help, God, please help me?"*

Asaph is validating our hurts here. Sometimes, life can be so confusing and exhausting that we can't even speak or put thoughts together in a way that makes any sense.

In those times, it is important to cry out to God, even if all you can do is cry and shake your head in bewilderment and say, why God? Please help me!

**In a recent sermon, Bill Hybels shared this story:** *A friend of mine has a daughter who has suffered brain-damage. Sometimes the sadness she feels over her daughter's condition overwhelms her, as it did recently. She wrote me this letter and gave me permission to quote from it:*

*"I can hardly bear it sometimes. My most recent wave of grief came just last year before her sixteenth birthday. As the day approached, I found myself brooding over all the things that she would never be able to do... What did I do? What I've learned to do again and again: I did what I believe is the only thing to do to conquer grief, and that is to embrace it. I cried and cried and cried, and faced the truth of my grief head on." **Preaching Today.***

For us men, let me share another example.

*Not long after the Gulf War, real-life hero General Norman Schwarzkopf, appeared on television in an interview with Barbara Walters. In the course of that conversation, something touched him deeply. The eyes of this career soldier with four stars glazed over and*

*tears formed. Ms. Walters, with well-practiced bluntness, said, "Why, General, aren't you afraid to cry?" Stormin' Norman replied without hesitation, "No, Barbara. I'm afraid of a man who won't cry!"*

**Application:** Perhaps, the greatest thing we can do to get beyond discouragement is to allow ourselves to access your emotions. Stop acting so tough. Allow life to soften you, to cause you to act gently, to recognize that you need God.

People who face their feelings and express them freely begin the journey toward hope.

The Asaph's **2<sup>nd</sup> life lesson** is found in verses 5-7.

**Psalm 77:5-6**, *"I have considered the days of old, the years of ancient times. 6 I call to remembrance my song in the night; I meditate within my heart, and my spirit makes diligent search.*

### II. **Life Lesson 2: Recall Past Blessings**

The Psalmist was so baffled by his situation that he didn't really even know how to describe his problem.

Unable to sleep or focus, the Psalmist came up with an idea, *"I'll search my memory banks for better times. I'll think about what I do know and have known."*

He was able to reflect on his personal history. He began to sing the song that brought him comfort and rest in his former dark days. He thought and rethought about the reasons that song comforted him and then diligently searched for more reasons to be uplifted spiritually.

**Application:** For those who are discouraged with the difficult circumstances life is presenting you, look back over the past and write down every possible blessing. If a month isn't enough, try a year or 5 or 10! Recall your blessings and find strength in them.

The Asaph's **3<sup>rd</sup> life lesson** is found in verses 7-9.

**Psalm 77:7-9**, *"Will the Lord cast off forever? And will He be favorable no more? 8 Has His mercy ceased forever? Has His promise failed forevermore? 9 Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has He in anger shut up His tender mercies? Selah [a meditative or instrumental pause]."*

### III. Life Lesson 3: Ask God the Hard Questions. (cry our and recall blessings)

These are profound searching questions. Asaph invites us to ask our deepest questions to God.

And these questions have been recorded here to let us know that God welcomes those questions; He doesn't resent them.

In fact, these questions are repeated throughout the Psalms. Try taking a look at just a few like Psalm 42, 44, 55, 60, 69, 74, or 88.

Matter of fact, David, another great Old Testament leader, a man after God's own heart, pens these opening words in **Psalm 22**...

*"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, And from the words of My groaning? 2 O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; And in the night season, and am not silent."*

Sound familiar? Like David, Jesus too, asked the hard questions of God while he bore the burden and guilt of our sin on the cross.

Even during that moment when He was suffering His greatest agony as a human, He was still God in the flesh. That identity never changed. God couldn't forsake Him anymore than He could forsake His own Divinity.

It was in that moment as sin bearer that God, in fact, looked upon His suffering and was pleased with His loving sacrifice made on behalf of His creation.

**Isaiah 53:10-11**, *"Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, And the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand. 11a He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied."*

**Ephesians 5:2**, *"And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma."*

As a matter of fact, I submit to you that God and Jesus were one and that their connection was so intimate that Father too felt the agony of the cross.

**Application:** Jesus asked the hard questions. He and the Father understood our pain and forsakenness experientially that dark day 2000

years ago. And since we are now one with Christ, He feels ours today as we ask the hard questions. **He can handle them!**

Now, while verses 1 to 9 are all about the Psalmist and his difficulty. **The Selah or meditative pause after verse nine** begins a mental shift in verses 10 to 20 toward God and His power.

Asaph's **4<sup>th</sup> life lesson** is in verses 10-12.

**Psalm 77:10-12**, *"And I said, "This is my anguish; But I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High." 11 I will remember the works of the LORD; Surely I will remember Your wonders of old. 12 I will also meditate on all Your work, And talk of Your deeds."*

### IV. Life Lesson 4: Choose to Redirect Your Thoughts.

*Cry out to God - Recall blessings – Ask God the Hard Questions – And Redirect Your thoughts)*

There's a sense of **resolve** in these verses. He's not merely recalling past blessings. He is resolute. Notice the **"I wills..."** of the verses.

He is determined to redirect his thoughts rather than be totally defeated in despair.

**Illustration:** *Many of us know about the Lance Armstrong story. At age 25, he was sidelined by testicular cancer that had spread to his lungs and brain. What followed was a very aggressive series of treatments in order to save Lance's life and also allow him to ride his bicycle again. I like how Bernadine Healy, M.D. assesses this kind of situation in U.S News & World Report:*

*"One cannot underestimate how debilitating cancer and its long months of treatment can be, both physically and mentally. When sturdy muscles melt away and grinding fatigue interferes with everyday tasks, it's easy to get discouraged, even depressed. But what's not so obvious is that the body and the mind powerfully benefit from a right attitude. That means no wallowing. The winning mind-set has faith that one can fight off the nasty cancer cells, appreciation of the importance of emotional support, and determination to get back on the bike and win a few Tours, so to speak. Our minds can't cure cancer, but the right attitude improves our odds."*

**Healy concludes her article:** *"In his intimate medical autobiography, It's Not About the Bike, it's clear that Lance Armstrong always chose hope."*  
**She quotes him:** *"Fear should never fully rule the heart, and I decided not to be afraid."*

**Application:** This is what the Psalmist had done. He had a definite resolve to not be afraid because of who God was and the care that God had already provided. He was going to redirect his thoughts and we must do the same. *And to what do we redirect our thoughts?*

This is Asaph's **5<sup>th</sup> life lesson** in verses 13-18.

**Psalm 77:13-18**, *“Your way, O God, is in the sanctuary; Who is so great a God as our God? 14 You are the God who does wonders; You have declared Your strength among the peoples. 15 You have with Your arm redeemed Your people, The sons of Jacob and Joseph. Selah 16 The waters saw You, O God; The waters saw You, they were afraid; The depths also trembled. 17 The clouds poured out water; The skies sent out a sound; Your arrows also flashed about. 18 The voice of Your thunder was in the whirlwind; The lightnings lit up the world; The earth trembled and shook.”*

**V. Life Lesson 5: Remember God's Powerful Victories in Your Life.**

Having redirected His thoughts away from his problems he focuses in on God's presence and power in past victories.

In light of God's Holy presence among his people in the sanctuary, Asaph remembers how God was powerfully present in the entire Exodus experience from the plagues of Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the meeting with Him at Sinai, and the arrival into the Promised Land.

Redirecting our thoughts to distractions other than God may temporarily help us ignore the pain but it will not heal the wound.

We self medicate with all the wrong things: alcohol, drugs, sex, pornography, and sometimes things that would be perfectly fine if we were right with God. It may be sports, hobbies, relationships, entertainment, or a number of other things. But they become nothing more than distractions when we are using them to nullify the despair while running away from our God.

In my anguish, I had come to question, like Asaph, the provision, power, and protection of God.

I had to deliberately redirect my thoughts to the power He had demonstrated in my life prior to my despair – I slowly saw my tunnel vision

for what it was. To stay planted in my despair I have to ignore and take for granted all that He has done before my crisis.

Asaph is referring to one of the greatest acts of God's delivering power known to Israel. You know the story – the parting of the Red Sea. They were caught with a sea in front of them and an army behind them. They had no place to go! But God met them in that very spot. God showed up just at the right time.

Asaph's **6<sup>th</sup> life lesson** is in verses 19-20.

**Psalm 77:19-20**, *“Your way was in the sea, Your path in the great waters, And Your footsteps were not known. 20 You led Your people like a flock By the hand of Moses and Aaron.”*

**VI. Life Lesson 6: Trust that God Will Deliver you From Your Present Crisis.**

*Cry out to God - Recall blessings – Ask God the Hard Questions – And Redirect Your thoughts – Remember God's Powerful Victories – Trust that He Will deliver Again)*

***“Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.”***

Question: How many times has God done that for you? Totally hemmed in with no place to turn and God shows up. Though His footsteps are not seen, He used just the right people in your life to help you get out of your dilemma. God often uses people to demonstrate His power and that is why we must always be open to being used by God.

It is often in the sanctuary He has made among His people that we hear of His powerful deliverance and it instills the hope we need to face our own despair.

***Jill Briscoe wrote a poem entitled, “Fear sees Faith Coming.”*** I have cut out this portion cause it speaks to where we find ourselves at times.

*When we are busy drowning in a sea of sad despair,  
When those we love have hurt us and our soul needs God's repair,  
When loneliness o'er-whelms us with an ache that none can touch,  
And we're crushed with disappointments and life is just too much.  
When danger threatens loved ones, when death stalks near to home,  
When war shall rise against us, when panic's on the throne,  
Remind us of your promises, renew our hearts in grace,  
And help us live in righteousness and truth before your face.*

*So Jesus be our comfort and remind us in your Word,  
That our small voice in the tempest incredibly is heard..."*

### **CONCLUSION:**

Like Psalm 22 where Jesus' words from the cross are first felt and penned by David. In Psalm 77 Jesus is the right arm of God that redeems His people and the Great Shepherd who is greater than Moses or Aaron.

Jesus is there crying out to God on your behalf. He's in Gethsemane with you as you face the hardest battles of your life. He is there in your deepest pain as you cry out to God, "*Why have you forsaken me?*"

He hears us and understands our hearts. He's there walking us through our past blessings. He's there while we grapple with life's hard questions and enigmas. He's there to help us regain equilibrium when chaos has broken loose in our lives. He's there to help take us through the toughest problems.

He wants to be our Deliverer in our present crisis too.

As **Corrie Ten Boom** has eloquently stated,  
*"Joy runs deeper than despair,"*

Trust Him, joy will return! To begin the process implement these 6 Life lessons:

Cry out to Him - Recall Past Blessings – Ask God the Hard Questions – Choose to Redirect Your Thoughts – Remember God's Powerful Victories in Your Life – And Trust that He Will Deliver you From Your Crisis!