

GETTING A PIERCING

PSALM 77:10-15 MAY 2, 2018

We are at the turning point of Psalm 77 this evening: Verse 10. This is the one that makes all the difference. If you've been with us for the first two portions of the song, you know that Asaph, the writer, was in some of the darkest days of his life. He felt forsaken and tortured, with absolutely no hope on the horizon. His despair came to a climax in verses 7 through 9 where he fired off 6 despondent questions toward God, *accusing* Him of failing, changing and being unfaithful to His promises.

Well, tonight, we turn a corner. From here on out, the sorrow of the first 9 verses gives way to omissions of worship as Asaph sings the praises of God's mighty actions. In fact, the change in tone between the first half of the song and the next half is so dramatic and so rapid, it jolts us as we read along. In one moment, Asaph is as emotionally low as one can get. We read the first 9 verses and, I'd say, it's time to get this guy on suicide watch. Then, suddenly, he's celebrating and adoring the very God he had just accused of being a cruel enemy. So, what is going on? What is the pivot point here? Is Asaph just schizophrenic? Is he just lying to himself? More importantly, when I find *myself* in the valley of the shadow of death, how can I claim the kind of victory that comes over Asaph here?

Some Bible commentators go to verse 11 and say, "Ah, well, *there* it says Asaph chose to remember the works of the Lord and *THAT* is what pulled him out of his depression." It seems easy - neat and tidy. And while that *is* what Asaph did, for me there's a problem with that explanation. The problem is that Asaph has been doing a *lot* of remembering, even from the start of the Psalm. You'll see there in your Bible that, back in verse 3, Asaph *was remembering* God, but in *that* stanza his thoughts did more harm than good. He was *more* troubled. It wasn't that Asaph had spiritual amnesia and just forgot to think about God which led him into discouragement. We should remind ourselves that this is a mature servant of God we're talking about. He's a longtime believer who was *deep* in thought and prayer during this period of his life. He was a 'seer' and one of Israel's greatest spiritual men. So, I don't see how we can just say, "Well, in verse 11 he finally remembered God and everything felt better." There has to be something more than that, because when he *remembers* in the first stanza: Things get worse. When he *remembers* in this third stanza, he then evidences immediate relief and comfort and is able to once again enjoy his relationship with God.

The turning point is found in verse 10. After the previous stanza, with those 6 angry questions toward God, we're given a Selah - a musical interlude where we're to pause and reflect on what has been said. It seems natural that Asaph *himself* would have been answering his own rhetorical questions after he asked them, like we did in our last study. And, in the interlude between verse 9 and 10, Asaph's heart is changed. Not his *circumstances*, not his *suffering*, but certainly his understanding and then his feelings toward God. And in the last half of the Psalm, it's like he's a new man, having come out of a dark tunnel and back into the warm light of day.

So, let's look at verse 10 together and talk about this transformation.

Psalm 77:10 - ¹⁰And I said, "This *is* my anguish; *But I will remember* the years of the right hand of the Most High."

If you have the King James or New King James version, you'll notice "but I will remember" is in italics, indicating that this phrase was not in the manuscripts, but was added by the translators for clarity and to interpret the thought.

If you have a different version (ESV, NIV, or NLT for example), verse 10 is going to look a lot different than what I just read.

Bible scholars agree that this verse is pretty hard to translate. There are 3 or 4 different ways that it can be rendered. And, depending on which you get, the differences in meaning and implications are significant.

Let me show you the 3 prominent ways this verse comes to us. The first is what I read. It suggests that Asaph identifies something he calls “his anguish” and then, after identifying that, he determines to remember the right hand of God. That’s demonstrated for us in the New King James version.

The second way this verse comes to us, in the NASB and NLT for example, is like this:

Psalms 77:10 (NLT) - ¹⁰ And I said, “This is my fate; the Most High has turned his hand against me.”

This is a much different story. Here, the suggestion is that Asaph is *still* defeated and he is convinced that God is actively working against him.

The third way the verse comes to us, in the ESV and NIV for example, is this way:

Psalms 77:10 (NIV) - ¹⁰ Then I thought, “To this I will appeal: the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.

The suggestion here is that Asaph will make one, last-ditch effort to overcome his grief and convince God to do the right thing, and he will do so by reminding himself and his God about those past years when the Lord actually did things for His people.

So, 3 pretty different ways of taking this verse. Now, I am not a linguistic scholar and, clearly, there isn’t widespread specific agreement on how to get this particular verse from Hebrew to English. But I think we can look at the context here, look at the flow of thought, keeping in mind what we know to be true of God, and look at the transformation in Asaph’s heart in order to make some decisions about what our author is trying to convey.

Let’s think through the “I will appeal” translation. A problem with that is that Asaph *had* been appealing over and over to God in prayer. All of the first stanza was about him crying out to God over and over, all night stretching out his hand without ceasing. So, I don’t follow how this would be the reason for his pivot toward joy in the rest of the song. I guess it would just fall under some sort of ‘third time’s the charm’ theology. “Try hard enough, pray enough times and you’ll finally get it.” While it’s true that God wants us to keep on asking and keep on seeking and keep on knocking when it comes to our spiritual lives, the Bible reveals the Lord to be a Helper and a Comforter, not some sort of withholding Scrooge who only responds when you annoy Him into action.

Now let’s think for a minute about the “This is my fate, God is against me” translation. A problem here is that, if this is his fate and God is against him, what sense does it make that he would then start *immediately* talking about how great God is to rescue His people and to help them? No, something in his perspective and his understanding must have changed, because before the interlude in verse 9 we saw a man on the brink of total collapse, complaining and accusing God.

Now, after the interlude, that same man is suddenly overflowing with praise and confidence in the Lord.

What changed? Well, there's the third translation option. We see in the New King James he says this: "And I said, 'This is my anguish.'" So, first, Asaph has a realization. Biblical dictionaries point out that this word for "anguish" is a word that was *typically* used when a person sustained a mortal wound in battle - that they were pierced through. Asaph has been so discouraged and defeated about the circumstances of his life and he was asking these big questions of God: "Why are these bad things happening? Why am I and Your people suffering?" And he comes to the profound conclusion of verse 10: "Oh, because this life is *not* just a picnic at the beach. It's a *battle* at the front." And not only was it a hard battle, it was one where he was going to receive a mortal wound.

We shouldn't see that as pessimistic, it's simply reality. I was watching an interview with a professor the other day and here was his assessment: He said, "Life is a fatal disease...it's a concern!" Now, he wasn't coming at it from a Christian perspective, but even as Bible believers, we need to square up to what God's word says about life and what we should *expect* in life. *This* life is not meant to be defined by the pursuit of pleasure or an obsession with ease. Rather, our lives are to be defined by the piercing of the cross. What does the New Testament tell us? We're to willingly, willfully, take up our own cross, to die to self. To go through life as a *living* sacrifice, laying down on the altar to be spent to the glory of God. Remember what the writer to the Hebrews said when *they* were wondering why they were suffering. He said, "You know, you haven't bled out yet." That pre-supposes that they were in a situation where (either literally or metaphorically) they were going to be under fire and taking hits.

You see, Asaph must have had a breakthrough moment where he realized that even though his life's circumstances weren't what he wanted or what felt good at the moment or what he would've designed for himself, that *didn't* mean God had failed or that everything had gone wrong in his fate. Rather, he was able to get his thinking *out* of the fog of the earthly level and get it back on the heavenly level and to realize that this was a suffering he'd have to endure, but a suffering that would eventually give way to splendor.

As I said, scholars point out this word 'anguish' typically refers to a fatal wound. The good thing about fatal wounds is that once you die, they're done. They can't keep hurting you. And all our suffering in this life is, at best, a fatal wound that's resolved once we step into eternity. Where we'll sing praises like this:

Psalm 30:11-12 - ¹¹You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, ¹²To the end that *my* glory may sing praise to You and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You forever.

And so, my suggestion for us tonight as to *how* Asaph was able to come out of his intense despair and get back into a place of satisfaction in his relationship with God was not that he just prayed harder or thought better, it's that he came to the end of his own understanding and was able to think using what we would call the mind of Christ. He could look at his life through the perspective of heaven rather than the perceptions of earth and that's what made all the difference. Immediately his affection for the Lord was restored. Immediately appreciation for God started pouring out. We'll see next time that he starts publicly testifying about God's faithful and holy greatness and how He consistently moves with power and might on behalf of His people. He says in the second half of our verse:

Psalm 77:10b - *But I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High.*

The name he uses for God there evokes the idea of overwhelming majesty. And he draws our attention to the Lord's "right hand." This is a great topic in the Psalms. A variety of authors talk to us about God's right hand. David, Asaph (not just here but in Psalm 80 as well), Ethan the Ezrahite, the Sons of Korah. They tell us things about God's right hand, like how it is full of righteousness (Ps. 48:10) and how it is strong and high (Ps. 89:13). How with it God planted a vineyard and how it teaches awesome things (Ps. 45:4). How with His right hand God will save us (Ps.138:7) and hold us (Ps. 139:10) and show marvelous lovingkindness (Ps. 17:7).

What a difference the heavenly perspective makes. The state of Asaph's circumstances hadn't changed, but once Asaph allowed his soul to be comforted by the proper spiritual mindset, he was no longer stuck in an emotional tailspin. Instead, he was able to pull up and get properly oriented again. He got the panorama back in view where he could see hope on the horizon. This spiritual calibration allowed him to have objectivity. To understand the context of his suffering.

That's what we need still today, because life isn't a cake walk. It's not a long boulevard of green lights. The Bible is clear: You are going to experience difficulty and suffering in this life, even if you're a faithful servant of God. Peter said:

1 Peter 4:12 - ¹² Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you.

It's not a secret, so it shouldn't be a surprise. We live in a fallen world, with dying bodies, facing enemies who are intent on breaking us down. That shouldn't discourage us, because we know that God has already won and we know the loving and tender character of our God. The God Asaph will go on to describe in wonderful ways. How he loves and how He works and how He rescues us and shepherds us.

This life will one day give way to eternal glory, but until then we need to remember that we are deployed into a very real spiritual battle, with a cross to bear, because (as Peter also said):

1 Peter 2:21 - ²¹ For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps.

This is a message not just for Asaph or for Jeduthun, who the Psalm is dedicated to. This is our story, this is our song. It's been given so that we can better understand what the Christian life is all about and so that we can walk in victory and satisfaction no matter what terrain we find ourselves in. May the Lord help us to see what it means to bear the cross and how it can shine the light of truth and hope into the darkest experiences of our lives.