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Psalms 77 "God's Great Track Record" July 1, 2018

All right. Let's open our Bibles this morning to Psalm 77.

The introductory portion there says this was written "To the chief musician. To Jeduthun. A Psalm of Asaph." Asaph was a great singer and had a musical family that served during the days of King David and his son Solomon. In fact, I think it says in I Chronicles 16 that the very first Psalm that David ever wrote, a Psalm of thanksgiving, he delivered to Asaph and his family to put music to it. Jeduthun was a musician that was also appointed by David, it seems from I Chronicles 16, to lead the public worship services. So he's kind of the choir director. And he would -- I should say, he shows up in a couple of the other Psalms as well.

Verse 1 tells us, Asaph, "I cried to God with my voice; and He gave ear to me. In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord; my hand was outstretched in the night without ceasing; my soul refused to be comforted." We don't know in what occasion this Psalm was written, but we do know

that it was written after the fact. David makes very clear -- or I should say Asaph, in verse 1, that he cried out to the Lord. He mentions it twice. He spent some time praying. God eventually answered his prayer. But the rest of the Psalm is really to go back and look at what happened to him and how he survived God not listening or answering his prayer. And he focuses on this one truth: God has a great track record.

I think it is normal, natural for any child of God to cry out to the Lord in the day of trouble. Peter will write that we should cast our cares on the Lord, that He cares for us. We read in Psalm 55 that we should cast our burdens upon the Lord; that He would sustain us; that He never will permit us to be moved as His righteous people. So it is natural, I guess, to go and to pray when we are going through it. The problem is when God doesn't answer. And I think that's really the thrust of this Psalm.

When we get down to verse 7, 8, and 9 in a minute, Asaph will ask six questions of the Lord that on the surface would be obvious to answer, but they are questions borne in him out of despair. He's been praying. He's been calling on the Lord, and God hasn't had any answers

forthcoming. He seems to have closed up shop. There's not even a hint that maybe the Lord is listening, or listening at all.

So here Asaph finds himself again looking back, according to verse 1, with no relief in sight, trouble that persists without letup. Nothing has changed. All of his prayers and all of his hopes have been challenged by the reality that he's facing, which is that things aren't changing at all.

I don't know if you've ever found yourself praying out of a position of panic. I think a lot of times our prayers are just prayers of ease. Lord, if you can just take care of that. Whether He does or not, we really don't care. We're not really moved. But then there's those places that you come to where you just need God to listen, and you can't survive without God responding. Physical ailments that aren't getting any better, financial pressures that keep mounting, families that are turning away from the Lord and all, and you've been praying for years and God hasn't seen fit to answer.

Spurgeon writing on verse 1 of this Psalm wrote in his study guides, "Days of trouble must be days of prayer.

Especially when God seems to have withdrawn himself, we should seek Him until we find His grace. Trouble of mind, when it comes, should not be sought to be drank away or laughed away or ignored away. It needs to be prayed away." So Asaph prayed, but he prayed with waning confidence, because every day that passed, things weren't getting better at all.

I have a prayer journal in my office that I've kept since 1986. There's volumes now. I could show them to you. I don't know if it would matter to you. But I've kept all of the prayers that I've prayed and then gone back and put what God did in result. I started it only because some guy in 1986 made me feel guilty. He preached and said, "You know, you pray all the time and then you never acknowledge God answers because you're off to the next thing you need, and so you should write them down." And so I did. But what I've discovered over the years besides that God is very good at answering prayer, not always in my time frame, is that I now have a whole book filled with unanswered prayer; stuff that I have prayed for, some of it, for 25 years. Absolutely no idea what God's doing with them. I've got -- I'm going to take this to heaven with me, this one book, of unanswered prayer. And I really don't know why, but because I have

all of these other books filled with answers to prayer, I'm sure that He's going to take care of these as well.

It's hard to wait upon the Lord, or to have an unanswered prayer section in your journals. Asaph writes in verse 2 that he had spent long nights praying. That he had stretched out his hand, that he was active in his prayers, that he had prayed persistently without ceasing, and it had all gone for naught. When everyone would come, friends, and tell him about the goodness of God or the faithfulness of God, or the fact that you could count on the Lord -- Asaph, it's going to be all right -- Asaph writes, "I refuse to let my soul be comforted." Nothing you could say. And nothing you could tell me at this point was helpful. The platitudes about God weren't enough. I want answers. I need God's wisdom. I need the Lord to touch me and move and to respond. Because his prayers had gone unanswered for so long and they were -- they were prayers of his greatest needs, he found himself formulating false responses or conclusions based only upon the length of time that he had been praying. I wonder if this will ever change. Will I always hurt like this? Will my family never come around to believe? Will my body ever heal? Will this cloud ever dissipate? Unanswered prayers have you viewing the problem as

endless, the solution as improbable. And you find Asaph there. He refused to be comforted. Nothing had helped. Long nights suffering without relief, mind unable to rest, can't resolve anything, just getting worse.

He says in verse 3, "I remembered God, and I was troubled; and I complained, and my spirit was overwhelmed." Whenever I thought of the Lord, I was reminded of His lack of doing anything and that just made it worse. Where am I supposed to go when He won't speak to me? So often the answer to despair in a Christian's life is to remind yourself of how good God is, of His love, but what happens when you have lost sight of that like Asaph here? When the very thought of God troubles you? Well, I've been praying, I've been seeking, I've been looking for answers. But no, He hasn't done a thing. "I complained, and my spirit was overwhelmed." I found no peace anywhere. And all the troubling thoughts just brought more troubling thoughts, and the struggle between the truth and my emotions just grew. He knew God heard his prayer. He wondered why He wasn't responding.

From a biblical standpoint, at this point God's answer would be easy to know, but it would be hard to receive because it is challenging. In every place that you find

people in this kind of dilemma, the Lord's answer is always the same: They just should live by faith. But that's not easy to do. These are precarious situations for Asaph. And the very thought that, just trust me, my child, was bringing chills to his spine. I want to know what's going on. I want to know why this is happening.

I must tell you personally that if I had a choice between accepting God's dealings by faith or having an opportunity to sit down with Him and argue about it, I would take the meeting every time. Yet the truth be known, there is no Bible verse that I'm aware of that says that God will give you an explanation for His actions. Not one. And I've looked. I hope to find just one. It is the call to rely upon God's goodness in times past. His track record, if you will. And if you ever find yourself living constantly with the whys of God -- why isn't God this, why didn't God that -- you're never going to have rest. You'll never have victory over the plaguing doubts that are going to haunt your steps.

I think most kids early on learn that there's no satisfactory answer to the question "why." Why is the sky blue? Why is water wet? My answer to the kids was always the same: Because. To which they say "Because

why?" There really is no way to win the argument. As a believer, we can't really hold out for answers to the whys of God. Faith must declare I don't get it, but I don't need to get it, as long as You've got it. And to know that He loves you and has things in control and He will handle it will allow you to rest. But Asaph finds himself in deep despair. He doesn't know where to turn. God hasn't chosen to respond.

Five books back from the book of Matthew is a small book called the book of Habakkuk. His name means to wrestle. He was given the job as a prophet by the Lord to speak to the nation of Judah just before the Babylonian captivity that would take them 70 years and 700 miles away to be kept in bondage for their idolatry and disobedience. Habakkuk worked inside the government, and so he saw all of the corruption from the vantage point of his authority; the self-serving, the wickedness. And it drove him crazy. In fact, it broke his heart.

The book starts off in chapter 1 with Habakkuk saying to the Lord, I don't want You to show me anything else. I don't want to see another horrible thing in my life. And here's why, Lord: I've I been praying about it. You've done nothing about it. Why should I know about it? So

hide me from it from now on. All I see, he said to the Lord, was evil. The nation is in a tailspin. There is violence at every turn. Justice is a distant memory. The righteous are dominated by the wicked. Perverse judgments are the rule of the day. And every time I raise my voice to You to complain, You don't listen. Why show me all of this, break my heart, move me to tears, keep me on my knees, and You do nothing? Stop it. I don't want to know anything more about it. I don't know if you've ever complained to the Lord about His seeming inactivity, or His slowness of action, or His ear that doesn't seem to hear. You may not verbalize it. I'll bet you've thought it. Habakkuk just happened to write it down.

To his surprise, the Lord responds to Habakkuk in Chapter 1, verse -- I think verse 5 of Habakkuk, and He said, hey, young man, don't accuse Me of being indifferent to your needs. I know what's going on. In fact, I'm busy at work doing a great work, but if I tried to explain to you what I was doing, you'd never buy it. To which this cocky young man said, try me. And the Lord said, fine. I'm going to bring the Chaldeans, the wicked Babylonians, to bear upon you, My people. I'm going to have them overthrow the lands of Judah. I'm going to have them

take many prisoners and drag them 700 miles away and keep them in bondage for a generation. They're going to learn not to worship idols. And the Lord was right, Habakkuk didn't understand. He immediately responded, Chapter 1, verse 11 of Habakkuk, hey, time out. That's not right. And you're a good God, so that can't be right. You're just pulling my leg. The Babylonians are horrible. Oh, yeah, we haven't done well, but they've done a whole lot worse, and you can't use the worst to just, punish the bad. It's a bad idea, Lord. In fact, he goes on to say, they're going to scoop us up like fish in a net. In their cruelty, they are going to mistreat us. They're going to attribute the victory they're going to find to their gods. And if Habakkuk had problems with God not answering prayer, he had even more problems now that God was answering. Lord, that's not right.

To his credit, he was a godly man. And as such, he shot off his mouth, argued with God, and then said, well, I better just shut up before I get in worse trouble. I'll just have to sit back and watch what God's going to do. And so he did. He just figured the Lord would speak eventually and he'd probably get rebuked, but at least he got it off his chest. In Chapter 2, verse 4, the next time the Lord speaks He speaks to Habakkuk, hey,

Habakkuk, the just shall live by faith. You're just going to have to trust Me on what I'm doing. And the rest of the book, and it's just a small three chapter book, find the prophet broken and willing to let God be God, though he absolutely doesn't understand His way. He gets to the end of the book and he declares his trust in the Lord, and finally says in Chapter 3, I think, verse 19, God has in this experience given me feet like a deer. I can now go up and down very steep hills, and nothing's going to stumble me now, because I know who God is, and I've trusted in what He can do. And he forms a new category in that book at the end, a trust without question, faith that is implicit, and it is certain.

I cried out to the Lord. I cried out with my voice. He heard my prayer, but for a long time before that I was troubled. I couldn't sleep. I wouldn't find comfort. I complained. I was overwhelmed. I didn't know where to turn. He writes in verse 4, "You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I can't speak." I lay and stare at the ceiling in the middle of the night trying to will my mind to shut down, searching for answers, down one dead-end road after the other, and there's no answer to be found. Alexander Maclaren, a noted Bible commentator years ago, wrote in the margin of his Bible in this

verse, "Sorrow, like a beast of prey, devours at night,
And many wearied eyes have gazed into the dark to see
dreadful things hidden there." He just couldn't rest.

And then he went on and he said, I can't even speak about
it. Psychologists might call that having disruptive or
intrusive thoughts. They are debilitating. He's
noncommunicative. He's withdrawn. He couldn't put into
words what he was feeling. It's a dangerous place to be,
all bottled up at the bottom of the barrel. But he
didn't know where to turn. He couldn't articulate.

We are told in verse 5, "I have considered the days of
old, and the years of the ancient times. To call to
remembrance my song in the night; and meditate within my
heart, and my spirit has made a diligent search." In his
desire to find out why God wasn't speaking, Asaph had
committed himself to looking into the past, to God's
response and His dealings with people in years that had
come and gone. He had even looked into his own heart, to
try to find sin or some reason for the delay. He hadn't
been able to find it. Nothing in me that would say that
God shouldn't answer, and I don't know what the problem
is.

So he asks himself six questions. Verse 7, "Will the Lord cast off forever? Will He be favorable no more? Has His mercy ceased forever? His promise failed forevermore? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has He in His anger shut up His tender mercy? Selah." Six questions that strike at the heart of unbelief that pushes it to ridiculous lengths so that he could discover the truth that he needed to stand by faith. I think this is the -- a good way to deal with discouragement. You ask yourself the obvious question that you can dwell upon the obvious answers. Will God cast off His favor or His goodness forever? Isaiah would write, "Can a woman forget her nursing child? Can she not have compassion on the son of her womb? Maybe she can forget, but I'll never forget you." God hasn't forgotten forever, or quit on any of His own. He can allow deep water, but always with purpose. I think Job wrote in chapter 23, "He knows the way that I should take; and when He has tested me, I'm going to come forth like gold."

Will He cast me off forever? We read in the book of Lamentations God's character: "In this I have hope. Through the Lord's mercies I'm not destroyed, His mercies and His compassions fail not. They're new every morning." Will He be favorable no more? Oh, no. He's

always favorable. Has His mercy ceased forever? Of course not. Go to Psalm 130 -- well, it's ahead of us here. 136 I think, and 26 times you'll read these words, "His mercy endures forever." Cease forever? No way. No way. The issue is not a lack of mercy. Has His promises failed forevermore? No. God is not a man that He should lie. That's what we read in Numbers. Or the Son of Man that He should repent. Has He not said, will He not do, has He not spoken, will He not make it good? Of course He will. His word can be counted upon. Heaven and earth may pass away, but His word will never pass away. See, the answers are obviously and clearly in the negative, but sometimes you need to ask yourself those questions when you begin to draw conclusions about God that aren't right.

And if you'll look through verse 7 and 8, he uses the words "ever" and "forever" and "no more" and "forevermore." Those are terrible words to use when it comes to conclusions. You always say that to me, you never seem to care what I think. Exaggerations of distress, not reality.

"Has God forgotten," verse 9, "to be gracious?" Does God forget anything? The only thing that I read in the Bible

that God forgets is that He forgets my sin willfully after I turn to His Son, because the payment for them has been made so he can lay them aside.

"Has He in His anger shut up His tender mercies?" No. The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in mercy. These are questions that Asaph struggled with in the night to help him come back to the reality that had stormed out of his thoughts because of his fears. Paul will use the same argument, by the way, the same tactic, in Romans Chapter 8, when he begins to write, you know, "If God be for us, who can be against us? Who's going to lay any charge against the Lord's elect?" And he begins to ask those questions and comes away saying that we're good in the Lord. When's going to separate you from the love of God?

Asaph had to learn, as Paul had to learn, that when you strain your anxieties through God's word, you'll come out standing on your feet, because God has a tremendous track record. He doesn't fail. And this self-imposed exam did that. Selah is almost the -- here's the brutal honesty that fuel, vocalize, but you need to think it through.

In fact, in verse 10 at the beginning there, he said,

"This is my anguish." I learn that the problem doesn't lie with God. The problem lies with me. My dilemma is this disconnect between what I believe and how I feel, that the lack of trust in God's caring goodness leads me to then worry about why my prayers aren't being answered in the way that I want. When we are under the pressure of these kind of things, it is easy to go into blame mode, and God's a pretty easy target. The alternative is almost unthinkable. Maybe it's me that's the problem. But that's what he says, I go through and I realize it's my issue, not His. God's always been good.

Beginning in the middle of verse 10 and then going through the rest of the chapter, Asaph decides through all of this to make three resolutions that will help him to get a balanced look at life again. And these are the three words: I will remember, I will meditate, and I will tell. Verse 10 in the middle, "But I will remember the years of the right hand of the most high. And I will remember the works of the Lord; and surely I will remember Your wonders of old." In one and a half verses, three times, Asaph determines to do this: I'm going to take back my mind and recall and purposefully go over again the things that God has done. Make a thorough list, take inventory. And I think when you're up against

the why hasn't God answered yet, you might want to make a list of what He has done. Maybe you can start a prayer journal yourself.

Maclaren, who I mentioned earlier, wrote in this verse: "Memories supply the colors with which hope paints her truest picture." It is important that you and I remember what God has done. He has brought us through. He has delivered us often, through deep water, through great crises, from fiery furnaces, to roaring lions, to being outnumbered, to raging demons. You'd find in the scriptures God's people, and they don't lose, they win. They have victory. I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High and the works of the Lord. Start with that when you're questioning why God hasn't worked. God has done great things.

Don't ask me why He hasn't answered. I have no idea. As a pastor the worst question you ever hear from people is why has God, or why did God, because it's easy to say "I don't know" and you're off the hook. I will remember.

Second of all, verse 12, "And I will also meditate on all of Your works." The one thing to remember. That is the starting point. It's another thing to take them to heart

and to keep them in focus until they move you.

Meditation is the application of remembering. I put into practice the truths of what I remember. It is the doing that accompanies the hearing. I will remember and then I will meditate. I'll apply what I know God has done to the situation and I'll find myself there. It's the application of the remembering.

And finally, verse 12, at the end, "And I will talk of Your deeds." I remember, I'm hopeful. I meditate, I apply it to my situation, and then thirdly, I turn around and begin to tell others of the confidence that I've discovered in the God that I serve. I'm going to own what I know, believe what God has done, and share it with others.

In fact, he will say in verse 13, "Your ways, O Lord, are in the sanctuary; who is so great a God as our God?" You see, now he's on the road to recovery, isn't he? We've got the greatest God ever. Confidence instead of confusion, hope instead of despair, peace for depression. Instead of why God, he now sings of the God who no one can compare themselves to. In verses 13, 14, and 15, he compares the great God to being the God of the sanctuary, the place of fellowship.

In verse 16 to the end of the chapter, he uses the greatness of God as put on display by the parting of the Red Sea, which is, still in the minds of those people certainly then in that day.

May we this morning look not through the eyes of fear and unbelief, but through the eyes of faith. There's no greater God than the God that you serve. I don't know why He hasn't answered the prayers that are on your list that are important to you. I don't know why He hasn't healed, why He hasn't delivered, why He hasn't chosen to do what you're asking. But I know this: He's doing it right. And when all is said and done, you are going to know He did it right, and you're going to be thankful, as Asaph was, looking back. I cried to the Lord and He answered my prayer. He responded to my cry.

If the Lord would help us to have faith when our understanding cannot fathom His doing, when we can rest in faith when no answers are forthcoming, that we might remember and meditate and tell. It's a good to way to live, don't you think?