

DYSFUNCTIONAL PROBLEM SOLVING

PSALMS 77

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We all know that we will face times of trials and tribulations in which perseverance is necessary to obtain spiritual maturity (James 1:1-3). Living in a fallen world one can't help but feel the pain and groans of creation (Romans 8:22-24). Even though thoughts of our seal of salvation brings us inexpressible and glorious joy (1 Peter 1:8), these jars of clay (2 Corinthians 4:7) are fragile, easily broken and shattered. When faced with some of the most difficult trials and tribulations that life has to offer we cry out to God to hold us in His arms. When Jesus knocks at the door of our souls and invites us to dine with Him (Revelation 3:20), or to lie down in the green pastures (Psalms 23:2) or to drink from the spring of living waters (John 4:14), we can't help but feel like we can persevere through anything. How our hearts leap for joy when His Spirit explains the spiritual realities (1 Corinthians 2:13) and blessings that we as His children have already received (Ephesians 1:3) and cannot be taken away by life circumstances. His love, acceptance, mercy, compassion and promises are part of His very nature and as such are eternally given to those He has chosen before the creation of this world to be blameless in His sight (Ephesians 1:4). Secure in our Fathers arms only to be reassured that He does good to those who love Him (Romans 8:28) is like food and water that nourishes our soul to persevere and face another day with rejoicing in our hearts!

That being said, deafening silence from God during times of distress can bring even the most of mature Christian to their knees. When these jars of clay start to crack under the pressure cooker of tribulations what is one to do when God refuses to answer one's cry for mercy? Asaph, one of the three musicians appointed by David for worship, finds himself in this very predicament. All day long and all night he cries out for mercy to no avail. The former days when God's presence was near and his heart leapt for joy while singing was now only a distant memory that crushed his soul and threw him into a well of depression so deep that there seemed to be no light or way to escape. So he lay on his bed, drowning in his fear that God had broken His promises to always love and show him grace and mercy.

We have all felt like Asaph from time to time. Within God's loving arms of reassurance dare we say that we can persevere through anything, YES, but in deafening silence can these fragile jars of clay really retain unspeakable joy during tribulations or are they more likely to deeply drink in the seeds of depression? Left without any hope Asaph seeks and finds the way of escape to be found in the very character of God Himself. Overcoming spiritual depression for Asaph and for us is found not in personal prayers of "I want" this or that but in reflection on God's providence to justly take care of His Creation! Let's take this exciting journey with Asaph in hope that his path to escape spiritual depression might be the key to all of us feel joy, even in silence!

Attempt 1: Crying out to God

I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands, and I would not be comforted. Psalms 77:1-2, NV

When faced with tribulations that can crush our very souls the first response is to see our situation as a problem that can be solved. There are often many possible resolutions to life's problems that the world will try and sell to those who seek relief from pain. 1 Corinthians 1:25 states that when Christians face overwhelming tribulations they should not seek the proposed solutions of those whose wisdom is foolishness in God's sight, but instead should cry out to God for His help. While we do not know what Asaph's tribulation was that was vexing his heart, we do know that his first response was not to seek the council of the ungodly (Psalms 1:1) but to cry out to the Lord. The term lament means to appeal to God for aid in overcoming present calamity. With Matthew 7:7 "ask and it will be given unto you" or John 14:14 "you may ask anything in My name and I will do it" in one's hand, many persons of the faith have boldly approached God with their cry; the natural, unaffected, unfeigned expression of pain in hope that God will grant them a path of escape (C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David: Psalms 56-87*, vol. 3 (London; Edinburgh; New York: Marshall Brothers, n.d.), 312).

Not wanting to rely on the foolishness of this world to find possible resolutions, the lament was a common way for believers of the Bible to seek council from God on how to escape the hardships of life. Out of the 150 Psalms of the Bible approximately 1/3 or 59 of them are laments. Prayer we are told in Scripture is powerful and effective and often leads to the recipient receiving a miraculous escape from life's calamities. Who could ever forget God's response, the Ten Plagues of Egypt, to Israel's cries of oppression? Who could ever forget God's response to Hezekiah's lament, the tearing of his clothes, putting on a sackcloth and going into the temple of the Lord to pray for deliverance; to put to death 185 thousand of the Assyrian army (2 Kings 19)? Who could ever forget the king of Nineveh taking off his robes and sitting down in the dust to plead and receive relief from God's hand of destruction? Who could ever forget in response to the earnest prayers of the church and angel of the Lord freed Peter from prison the very night before his trial and most likely his execution (Acts 12)? Since God alone establishes a person's footsteps (Proverbs 16:9), Asaph started out his lament correctly by asking the only one who could solve his problem of afflictions to do so!

The problem for Asaph was that God's response was not the miraculous removal of his tribulation but silence! All day long Asaph prayed to the Lord into the wee hours of the night and still no response. With untiring hands outstretched to His creator Asaph pleads over and over again to hear even the slightest whisper in the wind of God's voice (1 Kings 19:11) but unlike Elijah, God remains silent. We all know what it is like to go through both physical and spiritual hardships. Truthfully, we do not handle pain of any kind very well. When faced with overwhelming situations like a terminal illness, losing our job or death of a loved one, we cry

out to God because He alone is sovereign and capable of removing our circumstances and misery. So we plead and cry out to God for escape but when not even His voice is heard what are we to do, drown in our own misery? Tribulations are hard enough to endure when God has His arms wrapped around us but His silence can truly crush our souls back into the dust in which they came! How is one to feel unspeakable joy when comfort seems so very distant?

Attempt 2: Meditating on Better Days

³ I remembered you, God, and I groaned; I meditated, and my spirit grew faint. ⁴ You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak. ⁵ I thought about the former days, the years of long ago; ⁶ I remembered my songs in the night. Psalms 77:3-6a, NIV

Since God remained silent, Asaph goes onto attempt number two, meditation. As he lies on his bed he begins to remember what it was like to walk and talk with God in the past. He remembers the former days when God used to speak to him continuously. How amazing it was to feel God's presence while leading the nation of Israel to sing songs and express their genuine love for God! He loved singing these songs so much that he often continued praising God into the late hours of the night. Instead of these memories bringing comfort to Asaph they became a source of profound fear and anguish. Being one of the three musicians appointed by David for worship it must have been terrifying to have one's object of faith, the God of Israel, no longer talking to you! How would king David, a man after God's heart (1 Samuel 13:14), feel about having a worship leader whose soul is barren from God's presence? How could he get in front of Israel and lead them in worship when God's voice and maybe even His favor has been removed from his very soul? In response to these fears of abandonment, Asaph engages God both outwardly ("voice" and "hands") and inwardly ("soul"). When God remains silent to these cries, fear overwhelms Asaph that instead of a solution or a path of escape he has been abandoned to drown in his own misery.

This particular lament by Asaph has resonated in the heart of some of the most mature Christians in history. Charles Spurgeon, who experienced overwhelming physical and spiritual anguish during his lifetime, could certainly relate to how Asaph was feeling. During his studies of the Psalms from 1865 to 1885 Spurgeon experienced neuralgia and goat that left him swollen, red and so painful that often he could not walk or even sit and write a single word! Debilitating headaches combined with these physical ailments often led Spurgeon to experience bouts of depression and despair. From this standpoint Spurgeon writes the following statement in relation to Psalms 77: "Some of us know what it is, both physically and spiritually, to be compelled to use these words; no respite has been afforded us by the silence of the night, our bed has been a rack to us, our body has been in torment, and our spirit in anguish. ... Alas, my God, the writer of this exposition well knows what thy servant Asaph meant, for his soul is familiar with the way of grief. Deep glens and lonely caves of soul depressions, my spirit knows

full well your awful glooms” (C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, vol. 2a, Psalms 58–87 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1966), 312–13). When Job lost his entire family (except his wife), his possessions and even his health he responded by saying: “May the day of my birth perish, and the night that said, ‘A boy is conceived!’ That day—may it turn to darkness; may God above not care about it; may no light shine on it. May gloom and utter darkness claim it once more; may a cloud settle over it; may blackness overwhelm it. That night—may thick darkness seize it; may it not be included among the days of the year nor be entered in any of the months (Job 3:3–6, NIV). Like these two gentlemen, we can relate to their words for we all have gone through times when death seems like the only relief to a life without God’s voice!

Attempt 3: Questioning God

My heart meditated and my spirit asked: ⁷ “Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again? ⁸ Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time? ⁹ Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?” Psalms 77:6b-9, NIV

Since God continued to remain silent, Asaph goes onto attempt number three: out of a deep well of depression he questions God’s attributes. As his depression overwhelms him his faith fractures into a million pieces. He wanted to scream at God “I trusted you but now your words mean nothing to me, because your actions spoke the truth.” For Asaph this lack of action came in the form of deafening silence. He wanted to scream out to God Your silence has broken Your promise to never leave nor forsake me! While Asaph states in verse three that he was remembering God, the fact that the first half of Psalms 77 contains 22 personal pronouns points to Asaph as being the true object of concern. Since his faith was grounded in what God could do for him and not on God being his Creator, silence for Asaph meant betrayal.

In an attempt to try to force God to break His silence, Asaph asks God six rhetorical questions. Will God really reject His own forever? While there were seasons in which God left His people to their own devices, did He ever truly abandon them? Did not God hear the cries of Israel for over 400 hundred years but in the end ushered in the Ten Plagues Egypt? Yes He certainly did! And if God had gone silent because of sin Asaph had cherished in his heart (Psalms 66:18) would not a compassionate God withhold his anger long enough to tell him of his sin so that he might repent? After all, each time Israel cried out to God did he not send them a judge to help them identify their sins so that they would repent and be rescued? Yes He certainly did! Or was God’s silence saying that his sin so grievous that it could not be forgiven? If that is the case then why did David’s appeal to God’s hessed for having killed Uriah and having committed adultery lead to God’s mercy and forgiveness? Asaph is asking these rhetorical questions not because his mind does not know the answers but because his broken heart is so desperate to hear from God that provoking His anger seems to be the only means of getting God to break His silence.

To demand God to justify His silence is never a good approach! Job, the blameless, upright man who feared God and shunned evil, soon came to realize that demanding God to justify His actions was not in his best interest. Tribulation for Job began the moment that God asked Satan “did you consider my servant Job?” (1:8) To start out in the story we learn that the tribulations that Job had received was not due to any sin that he had done! When reading the book of Job, you can’t help but feel compassion towards a man who Satan is permitted to kill his entire family (except his wife), take all of his possessions and to give him sore boils all over his entire body. Like Asaph, did Job lament? As we have discussed earlier he certainly did! And like Asaph did Job fall into a well of despair so deep that he felt death was his only escape, absolutely YES (3:20-22).

While Job refused to curse God, most of the book of Job consists of a debate between Job and his friends concerning whether or not God has been just in His treatment of Job. After having thoroughly examined his own heart to find there was no unrepentant sin that exists, Job decides to challenge God’s ability to be a fair judge (23). After all, in response to his words, “I cry out to you, God, but you do not answer, I stand up, but you merely look at me” (30:20), God has chosen not to act or even speak to him but to remain silent. So at the end of the story Job gets an audience with God and soon finds that silence is better than facing the One he has provoked. In chapter 38 God appears in a whirlwind and says the following: “Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me” (38:1-3). I can only imagine the fear that Job had at that very moment! By asking God to come down and justify Himself Job was assuming his knowledge was sufficient to question God.

God goes on to ask Job some extremely difficult and humiliating questions: “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone — while the morning stars sang together and all the angels j shouted for joy (38:4-7)? God continues to point Job’s inadequacies in the rest of chapter 38 and 39 and finishes by saying: “Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him? Let him who accuses God answer Him” (40:1-2). In verse 40:8 God sums up his charge against Job: “would you discredit My justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?” In the end Job admits he was unfit to question God and says the following: “Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (42:6). The reason why I tell this story is that from Job we learn that provoking God to break the silence by questioning His sovereignty will not remove the well of despair but provoke Him to anger! There must be a better way!

Final Attempt: Faith Grounded in our Sovereign God

¹⁰ Then I thought, “To this I will appeal: the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand. ¹¹ I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. ¹² I will consider all your works and meditate on all your mighty deeds.” ¹³ Your ways, God, are holy. What god is as great as our God? ¹⁴ You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples. ¹⁵ With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. ¹⁶ The waters saw you, God, the waters saw you and writhed; the very depths were convulsed. ¹⁷ The clouds poured down water, the heavens resounded with thunder; your arrows flashed back and forth. ¹⁸ Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your lightning lit up the world; the earth trembled and quaked. ¹⁹ Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen. ²⁰ You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Psalms 77:10-20, NIV

Asaph goes onto the final attempt to break his chains of despair: to base his faith in a sovereign God. He was not wrong to cry out to God for help in calamity, nor was he wrong to meditate on what God had done for him in the past. Where Asaph went wrong was that he failed to remember rightly. In the first half of the chapter he was remembering what God had done for HIM in the past. This of course only produced pain because his present situation was grim with no hope of relief. From verse 10 onwards Asaph comes out of his depression by remembering that God speaks through what He done for humanity. He states: “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” (Psalms 77:11-12). By remembering the attributes of God as seen in Israel’s history, Asaph is once again able to feel unspeakable joy. The first attribute he examines is God’s holiness. After having meditated on God’s dealings with Israel Asaph says that “Your ways, God, are holy.” In other words, whatever the reason for my calamities You God are doing right by me! The second attribute he examines is God’s sovereignty. God’s promise to extend mercy can be clearly seen throughout Israel’s history when God performed miracles on their behalf. The last attribute that Asaph looks at is God’s everlasting love. After having reflected on God delivering Israel from Egyptian bondage Asaph concluded that God can be relied on to carry out His everlasting love by actively controlling all of history!

In the last part of Psalms 77 Asaph concludes that God is our redeemer. Echoing the words of Moses’ great Song of Exodus (ch. 15): “The waters saw you, God, the waters saw you and writhed; the very depths were convulsed. The clouds poured down water, the heavens resounded with thunder; your arrows flashed back and forth. Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your lightning lit up the world; the earth trembled and quaked. Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen.

You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (Psalms 77:16-20). In describing the account of the Red Sea crossing in Exodus 14, Asaph’s heart can’t help but leap for joy for God, His Creator has and will continue to act in and throughout history. Like Job, Asaph came to learn that while God might be silent from time to time He knows exactly what He is doing, He is always just and merciful. While one might not know the reasons for tribulations in the present, one can be rest assured they will be reviewed either in this lifetime or the next one!

Conclusion

We all know that we will face times of trials and tribulations in which perseverance is necessary to obtain spiritual maturity (James 1:1-3). When faced with some of the most difficult trials and tribulations that life has to offer we often cry out to God to hold us in His arms. When these jars of clay start to crack under the pressure cooker of tribulations what is one to do when God refuses to answer one’s cry for mercy? Asaph, one of the three musicians appointed by David for worship, finds himself in this very predicament. Overcoming spiritual depression for Asaph and for us is found not in personal prayers of “I want” things to be the way they were in the past. After all, faith cannot be based on our emotions which change like the shifting sands of time, but on God’s providence to justly take care of His Creation! While there will be many times when we, like Job, will not understand God’s dealings with us; we can firmly stand on His promise to continue to take care for His Creation with love, mercy and justice. By keeping our faith firmly grounded in the attributes of God it is possible to go through the harshest of tribulations with inexpressible joy, even when God remains silent!