

# Sermon: Where is God when life hurts

## Psalm 77:1-20

*Rev Dr Jos M Strengolt*

### **Intro**

How can we pray to God when we are in trouble, down and depressed? Where can we find God in our darkest moments?

The Psalms in the bible are a beautiful help for people in need of God. These songs and prayers are very individual expressions of the struggles, the problems, and the joys of our brothers and sisters in ancient days in Israel. They expressed their most personal feelings and experiences in prayers and songs to God.

Their personal prayers became part of the liturgy of Israel, to be used in the temple service – because we can learn from them how to think about God, how to live, and how to pray.

### **1 When we are in days of trouble**

Psalm 77 is the heart cry of a lonely distressed soul who suffered deep problems. In 77:1 he begins, “I cried out to God for help, I cried out for God to hear me...”

The beginning of this Psalm is a true lamentation. And, frankly speaking, rather egocentric. It is all about I, I, I... At least 15 times in the first 12 verses we come across the word ‘I’.

And that is fine. If you are in need, come to God as you are, with your troubles. ‘Lord. I need your help!’

This Psalm is the normal prayer of a person in need. In need of help, in need of forgiveness, in need of the presence of God. And he comes across as rather depressed.

Feeling down can be caused by many things; it can be death in the family or among friends, sickness, unemployment, moving to another house, being abused sexually, losing the person you really love... Any of those things can make our lives so miserable and make us really depressed.

And the situation in our land is not making our life easier. How shall we live? What will happen? What happens tomorrow, this week?

And often as Christians we do not dare to admit that we feel so bad. Should we not be strong and good Christians? We think, ‘I should not focus on myself, but on God only!’ That is a very unhelpful attitude because it denies our painful reality, and it denies our right to really grieve over our problems.

Acting as if you are fine is like putting paint over a damp wall. You may hide the problem

for a while, but the problem will come back to haunt you...

If you are suffering you are invited by this Psalm to complain and to lay your complaint before God. There is nothing wrong with that.

And it is also good to talk with a trusted person about your needs. So many people do not dare to, because it may make you look weak maybe? Well? So what? Who is strong? Listen to this Psalm... ‘I cried to God...’

Some people express their depression by withdrawing from people, or by eating much, or by staying in bed too long. For Christians it also almost automatically leads to a feeling of being distant from God. And when we lose that sense of intimacy with God we feel even worse because we may feel guilty to God and we miss Him.

Do you feel as if God left you alone? You are so lucky that the writer of the psalm, in his dark mood, was honest enough to write it down. This may help us, when we are in dark mood...

The man was in a day of trouble, he writes, and felt far from God. ‘Has God forgotten me?’ And in his pain and sorrow he cries to God. Loud. In those days prayer was always out loud, people did not pray silently. And they raised their hands, as we see this brother of us do. At night he stretched out his arms to God.

Jesus gave us the same example. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was fearful and He asked God, to please ‘remove this cup from me’. Was he strong or weak? In any case, when he was in his time of gravest need, just before his crucifixion, he ‘prayed with loud cries and tears’, we read in Hebrews 5:7.

The writer of the psalm prayed in the night. He could not sleep. In the past, singing in the night used to work for comfort. Not now, he writes. He is a broken man. He longed for a solution to his problems, and for renewed communion with God – but he could not find it.

God seemed so far. And even thinking about God did not help – he just groans. ‘God where are you...’ But God seemed silent. He may also seem to be far from you.

### **2. Where is God in days of trouble**

So where is God in our day of need! Why does he seem so silent?

I guess you know some of those Christians who actually deny that God is ever silent; they focus on how near He is. He seems to speak with them all the time, He is like their best friend, He whispers all answers to life's problems in their ears whenever they need it.

The writer of the Psalm did not have such answers. For a long time, he felt awful and he did not know where to find God. And He did not understand God's behaviour either.

Other Christians give up on expecting anything from God, because life is tough and answers are not easy to get. He is in heaven, and we are here, and our lives seem to not be of much interest to him. We have to live our lives as good as we can, and one day, in heaven, all things will be made well. But today, God is just far away and we have to live with that.

That is also not the sort of answer that the writer of our Psalm accepted. He continued to knock on God's door for help, for an answer, for his presence, and not for later, not just in heaven, but for today, in this life.

He does not doubt God's existence. He does not doubt that God can work today, in this life, in this world. He knows God is able to intervene and to solve his misery. He does not question God, but he questions why God does not act at this very time of need.

In his prayer, our brother actually made some dreadful accusations against God. Listen again to verse 7-9:

Will the Lord reject forever?  
Will he never show his favour again?  
Has his unfailing love vanished forever?  
Has his promise failed for all time?  
Has God forgotten to be merciful?  
Has He in anger withheld his compassion?

Is it acceptable to question God in such a way? Should we not piously and humbly speak sweet of God all the time? No, I do not think so.

We see a clear example here of the value of confessing one's doubts, maybe even one's anger at God. The formulation of very concrete questions, accusations really, had great therapeutic impact.

Doubts and questions are not bad; make them concrete and you can get concrete answers! The greatest of men asked questions, even in the Bible. Even Jesus. 'My God why have you forsaken me...' The secret is, I think, that we have to address these questions and doubts to God himself and never give him rest.

And by talking to God honestly, the heart of the writer of the Psalm actually comes to rest. By expressing his doubts and questions care-

fully, their inconsistencies come to light, and in his time of prayer to God he finds some real answers.

If God's love is unfailing, if he is merciful, if he made promises, if he is compassionate, of course this can never change. It is God's nature to love, to be compassionate, to do what he promised!

God's mercy and his covenantal promises are much bigger than our sins, more powerful than our problems, better than any miseries we face. He knows how to handle all this!

Light begins to dawn in the depressed mind of the writer of the psalm. He knows that the God of Abraham cannot deny himself and his mercies. So asking these quite negative questions is not so bad after all. They open the window to a fresh look at God.

We all need the experience of the unfailing love of God. We all have our areas of need - for forgiveness, for renewal of our churches, for renewal of our nation. We need him to solve our personal problems, our poverty, sickness, and loneliness. That's why we seek him and we will not give up.

### **3. God reveals himself in the end**

And if we do not give up, we may experience what also happened to the writer of the psalm. The psalm changes into a joyful song; the 'I' disappears while God takes the centre stage!

It starts in verse 10, when our depressed brother decides *to think*. That is not always easy in times of depression - but it is important to do a reality check, even when you feel so down.

The psalmist decides to use his brain and remember God's saving acts in the past. The psalmist changes, not God! He comes to realize that it is dumb to think that God will change. Or that prayer is useless. Or that God has left him. God does not change. His eternal mercies are aimed at his people and history proves it!

He begins to mediate on *Gods acts in history*, not on God as some philosophical idea. He does not speculate about the existence of God, but he looks purposely at 'the years of the right hand of the Almighty'. That is, the time when God acted strongly in the history of Israel. So he focuses on God's saving acts in the history of his own community.

Our Jewish brother looked back at God's most magnificent saving acts - that is when he brought his people from Egypt through the Red Sea, safely into their Promised Land.

God is the redeemer of his people. That word, in Israel, implied a family relationship.

In Israel the redeemer was normally a near family member who was obliged to buy a suffering person out of trouble if all other solutions failed. God is family, that is how close he is to us.

Our brother in the Psalm is reminded in verse 13 about Gods holiness and of his power, as displayed in the past. 'Your ways o God are holy. What god is so great as our God?

This holiness and power is not something to be feared, but it gives us comfort: For this God is our Father, He is the redeemer of us, his people!

This is what we see in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and this reminds the psalmist: 'We are as it were family of God. He will never leave me alone in my problems.'

In the Gospel of Luke we read of Moses and Elijah who come to speak with Jesus about the exodus he is going to accomplish in Jerusalem. We as Christians look back to a much bigger exodus than Israel experienced when it left Egypt.

We look back at God's most important saving act in history - in Jesus Christ He died for us and he rose again.

Israel's exodus from Egypt is an image of our salvation. St Paul describes Israel's escape through the Rea Sea with our baptism. Through the water we are saved from our sins, and we have entered into new territory - into the world of God.

He made us enter into a new life in communion with the Holy Trinity. That is truly amazing. Would this God leave us alone in our problems?

His grace, shown very intensely in that saving act of the incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection, is unchanged. He has shown, once and for all, that He is here. He is with you and we are with Him. God's mighty hand is in your life. Even if things are not going as we like them to go.

### **Conclusion**

If we are in need, we do not stop hammering on Gods door. He is our Father who will not leave us alone. We will not give up trusting in Him, even if we do not understand why our life and our circumstances are not as we like them to be.

Life can be so hurting. But we experience God's strong right hand, his saving arms, when we remind ourselves of his great acts in history.

In Holy Communion God comes to you; his mighty hand stretches throughout time and space, from the cross and the resurrection, to you now, today. Today we are reminded once again of this saving love of God.

*This* is really Gods answer to our questions; to our 'why' do you not act now and help me! He does not always give us what we want, and he does not always offer a rational explanation, but he offers himself to you, to be with you all the time.

**Amen**