

Psalm 77 – Week of May 29

Memory Verse: Psalm 77.11

I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old.

Have you ever attended a “wake” or a receiving of family and friends after someone dies? If you have, then you know that much of the conversation is focused on remembering the deceased. Telling funny stories. Recalling memories. This time of sharing often brings comfort to the bereaved. But, in times of deep grief and crushing sorrow, memories of the “good ‘ol day” are just not enough to sustain our faith. Snapshots of the past can only bring temporary salve to the sting of sorrow. When our hearts are full of pain and our souls are crushed with disappointment, grief or despair, we need more than stories of happier times to bring solace.

In Psalm 77, the psalmist is in a miserable state. We do not know what circumstance led to such despair other than he describes his current situation as “a day of trouble” (vs2). In this day of trouble, he cries out to God day and night (vs1-2). Yet in his earnest and unrelenting petitions to God, he refuses to be comforted (vs2b). Although as a child of God, he is entitled to all the comforts of heaven, he turns them all away. As the psalmist tries to direct his attention on God, it only leads to further spiritual anguish (vs3). He can’t sleep (vs4) and is at a loss for words to describe his dejected condition (vs4). Here is a picture of a truly miserable, depressed person.

To lift his spirits, the psalmist thinks back to the good ‘ol days, happier times (vs5). In his recollection of former days, he recalls times when he had a song in the night, a peaceful meditation in his heart (vs6). Yet as he thinks back to these more joyful times, it only leads to greater despair. Why were things so good then, and so bad now? There can only be one answer. The unchangeable God has changed. In verses 7-9, he questions the very nature of God. Has God’s steadfast love ceased? Have his promises come to an end? Have God’s grace and compassion run out? In his heart, the psalmist sinks lower into inconsolable despair. Truly, he is experiencing the dark night of the soul.

Suddenly, in verse 10, there is a change of course. Instead of trying to find solace in remembering the days of old, the psalmist determines to direct his attention towards “the years of the right hand of the Most High.” The only thing that can lift him from the depths of despair is a solid meditation and determined focus on past expressions of God’s power on behalf of his people.

Writing with beautiful poetry, the psalmist describes the redemption from Egypt (vs14-15), through the Red Sea (vs16), to the storms at Sinai (vs17-18). He recognizes that in every act of redemption and deliverance, God was at work. Sometimes the work of God was visible and sometimes mysteriously hidden (vs19). In these things, God’s people were never alone. Like a gentle shepherd leading the flock, through human agents (Moses and Aaron), God led his people (vs20).

In remembering the mighty deeds and works of the Lord, the psalmist also remembers the very character of God. God had not forgotten his promises. God's mercy had not run out. God's love had not ceased. Why? Because God is holy (vs13). He is the only, incomparable God (vs13). He is the revealing God, choosing to make himself known (vs14). He is the electing, loving God redeeming people as his own possession (vs15). He is the sovereign and omnipotent God exercising power even over the waters of the deep (vs16). He is the God ordering and ruling all creation (vs18).

When sorrow robs us of peace, when tragedy shatters our security, when disappointment crushes our dreams, when sickness steals our health, when death takes our loved ones, what can we do? We remember. We remember who God is, and we remember the great deliverance he has accomplished for us. Just as God rescued his people from their captors in Egypt and brought them through the dangers of the Red Sea, he has rescued us from our captivity to sin, Satan and death. In the death of Christ, we have passed safely through the waters of God's torrential wrath and billowing judgment to the land of promise. By his mighty hand, God has crushed the ancient foe. By his Spirit, God has given us spiritual life now, and he will give us resurrection life later.

Psalm 77 ends abruptly. But, as the psalmist turns his thoughts towards God's great acts of deliverance, he was lifted from despair. He could rise from his despondency and move forward with renewed commitment and confidence and hope in the everlasting God. Did his circumstances change? We do not know. But, his heart changed. God never promises that our trials will end in this life. Instead, Jesus promises the opposite. "In the world, you will have tribulation" (Jn 16.33). You can count on that. You can also count on the fact that this tribulation will never change who God is or what he has done for us in Christ.

In 1873, Horatio Spafford, a prosperous lawyer and devout Presbyterian church elder lost his wife and four children in a tragic shipwreck. Spafford was originally scheduled to be on the ship with his family, but in God's providence he was delayed from travel due to a business responsibility. On that horrific day, November 21, 1873, Spafford's life forever changed. Following this terrible tragedy Spafford would write the hymn *It is Well*. *

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

*Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.
It is well with my soul,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

How could Spafford come through such tragedy with unshakeable assurance? Spafford remembered the nature of God. He remembered his great rescue through the cross. He appealed "to the years of the right hand of the Most High." In those truths, his soul found peace. May the same be said of us. When sorrows like sea billows roll, it will be well with our souls as we remember who our God is and what he has done.

-Written by Jeff Porter