

Psalm 77
Your Way Was Through the Sea
June 21, 2026

A visit to grandmother's house always proved to be a pleasant suggestion. No matter which of the two options was intended, either was sure to live up to a grandson's expectation. On the one hand, my maternal grandmother, who served as a houseparent at the Baptist Children's home, consistently provided a pantry-full of sweet treats and plenty of kids to play with. On the other hand, my paternal grandmother had preserved every toy, every action figure, every board game my father ever owned, and safely stored them away in closets just waiting to be resurrected.

Upon expedition into one of those closets, I discovered the game of Life—the boardgame “where players make their own exciting choices as they move through the twists and turns of life... from Start to Retirement, [experiencing] unexpected surprises related to family, career, and other milestones of life.”¹ I played that game many times as a young person, but you know what I didn't learn? Life.

Sure, career and family require important decisions. But the boardgame's “unexpected surprises” fail to acquaint anyone with the setbacks and dangers, griefs and losses, struggles and crises players will face in the world where life is no game. And anyone who assumes life is determined simply by “their own exciting choices” probably hasn't reached the recommended age to even play the boardgame.

Control eludes us and our outlook is sometimes so uncertain, so tenuous, that after all our other efforts prove powerless, only prayer endures as long as the grief. And we continue our appeals to God, expecting that He is able to deliver. God's people have known this approach for generations.² In fact, we know it better than anyone else. We know what it means to be separated *from* God but also what it means to be restored *to* God.³ He has delivered us from the worst-case scenario and promised a life cured of the curse. It is sensible, then, even proper, to be dissatisfied with misery and evil, because we know the alternative. But we're not home yet, so we appeal to Him who can alter our circumstances.

The psalms of lament give us a framework for how to deal with such tension—the tension of believing the good promises of God, and yet still living in the world of Adam's fall.⁴ But the lament psalms are more than a kind of therapy, more than a coping mechanism for hurting people. Lament is genuine pleading with God.⁵ Godly lament is in itself an act of faith. Faith appeals to God for the help only He can provide based on the help He has already promised to provide. Psalm 77 shows us faith working through a dreadful situation in three stages: troubled, searching, settled.

Matt reminded us last week that no set formula defines lament.⁶ There are many common features, but not a typical pattern. So, while this is one sequence, it's not necessarily *the* sequence. Verses 1-3 describe, first, a troubled faith.

¹ From the manufacturer's product information. <https://instructions.hasbro.com/en-us/instruction/the-game-of-life-game>

² Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 43-44, identifies lament as the most common type of psalm.

³ Morales, *Exodus Old and New*, 7-16, seems to point in this direction while describing redemptive history as demonstrating a pattern of moving from exile to restoration to God.

⁴ Godfrey, *Learning to Love the Psalms*, 23. Book 3 of the Psalms (73-89) is occupied with this tension. Book 2 ended with blessing God for a thriving Davidic king. But in captivity, the Psalmists begin to question how the current situation lines up with God's covenant promises. 89, the last of Book 3 asks, “where is your faithfulness you swore to David?”

⁵ Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 43-44.

⁶ Sliger, *Yet God, My King, From of Old*. <https://southwoodsbc.org/media/777qbbd/psalm-74-yet-god-my-king-from-of-old>

I. A Troubled Faith (1-3)

What kind of faith is troubled? The kind that keeps pleading with God but receives no answer. The psalmist describes a desperate descent in the first three verses. First, a kind of zeal, **I cry aloud to God, aloud to God**. Not that volume helps, but he's using his voice—crying out loud. He cries out with confidence, **he will hear me**. See the writer's persistence in v. 2, **day and night** he seeks the Lord, and stretches out his **hand** to God. But by the end of 2, persistent effort turns into a persistent let-down. His **soul refuses to be comforted**, he **moans**, his spirit **faints**.

He's praying, and fervently, and it's going nowhere. The crisis isn't averted; he doesn't even feel better. In fact, the more he looks to God, the *worse* he feels. Like a weary warrior, he moves beyond fighting through prayer, to moaning from the injuries he's received in the battle. Prayer has become a wearying task, not a hopeful one, reminding him of what's missing more than what is present. He's taken the posture of Moses (Ex. 17:11), arms raised to God, but he's not prevailing. He's growing weaker.

We don't know what trial the psalmist is facing, in fact we don't even hear his petition. But we don't need to know. Can't you relate? How many times have words like these described your pleas to God? If the answer is "often," don't be ashamed to sympathize with Asaph. Sometimes, prayer torments the heart, especially when the pleas are pointed in the right direction.

When I remember God, I moan. Asaph points out a strange irony that some of us know. Thoughts of God can at one time refresh, and at another time exhaust. He's the One who can change things, but continuing to plead for His response means He hasn't changed them yet.

The Lord's not answering, so he keeps turning over his thoughts, aiming to think rightly. Verse 3 introduced the word, **remember**, which the writer will do for three cycles in this psalm. Each time, what he remembers changes. God is working in him, moving his thoughts into deeper waters as he persists in prayer. And that's the right move—to persist. But he's not settled yet.

II. A Searching Faith (4-9)

A troubled faith turns into a searching faith in v. 4. The symptoms of distress grow worse as this stanza digs out the roots of trouble in the psalmist. Sleeplessness becomes speechlessness becomes suspicion. He hasn't finished praying, he's just not praying aloud. His heart is so burdened that he can't articulate what's inside him. But he can **consider** and **remember** and **meditate** on his past experiences.

He's transitioned from simple reflection on **God** in v. 3 and moved into the realm of history in vv. 5-6. **I consider the days of old, the years long ago**. Later we'll see some of these same words in a positive light, but Asaph is suffering in v. 5 from a bout of nostalgia. He's turning over in his mind the "good ol' days," when God's blessing was apparent. When all is well, it's easy to sing praise to God. He has the portfolio to prove it. He's searching through memories that he might sing again, even this night as he lies awake. **Let me remember my song in the night, let me meditate in my heart**.

How had God provided? How had God protected? How had God strengthened? What opportunities did God once grant? Those can be comforting reflections. Indeed, we should remember and give thanks for all God's providential care. It is evidence of God's generous character. But recognize those kinds of reflections are like my grandmother's sweet treats—better in small quantities. The heart is ready to transform yesterday's blessings into today's envies. Meditating on God, who is generous, might decay into a focus on the gifts or the experiences themselves, which God once generously provided. But when God's providence changes course, does that then mean that God's character has changed? No, but a grieving heart might be tempted to think so.

The psalmist measures his current trouble by the comfort of yesterday and his conclusions are risky. **Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable?** He's worried: will it always be as bad as it is right now? **Has His steadfast love forever ceased? Are His promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has He in anger shut up His compassion?**

To utter those questions is practically to answer them. We would, unanimously, deny such conclusions. Whatever the occasion, no matter the trouble, on a Lord's Day morning, assembled with God's people, singing and praying together, with one voice we'd affirm that God remains true to His Word and to His character. But at 2:00AM, alone with your thoughts, after weeks of heavy burden with no relief, no solutions, no end in sight. What then? Maybe Asaph's questions aren't so foreign.

Notice what these questions are suspicious of in vv. 7-9. April and I have been talking recently about a project at the house that involves a bit of concrete. At our house, all the walkways are the *washed* variety of concrete, where the rocks show through the surface. Some sort of rocks or stones are present in every mixture of concrete, they are just exposed by taking a few extra steps in the process. Those rocks, called aggregate, add strength to the mix. If you remove them, you'll end up with something other than concrete, something that will crumble away much more quickly. The subjects of those 5 questions in vv. 7, 8, 9 are like aggregate in God's covenant: **favor, steadfast love, promises, grace, compassion**. If you could wash away the surface, you'd find those stones, based on the character of God,⁷ as the underlying strength of His covenant. Take those away, and the covenant, the foundation of Israel's relationship with God, crumbles.

These late-night speculations drive the psalmist to question whether or not he has been abandoned by God, whether God has forsaken him. Though once the object of God's covenant love, is he now the object of God's anger?!

The psalms of lament often mention some sort of enemy. Their threat to God's people is frequently the very thing that provokes the lament. But Psalm 77 doesn't mention a human enemy like other laments. So, for a while, when I read this psalm, I thought, he's looking upon God as his enemy. He confesses no sin or guilt to warrant God's anger, but he is questioning whether God has traded his compassion for wrath. He thinks God is against him. But then I read through Psalm 74 again, where we recognized another feature common to the enemies in laments. They pose a threat to God's people, but also, they mock and scoff at God. And I couldn't help but think that, in Psalm 77, if the writer doesn't answer these questions properly, his enemy will be his own heart—leading him to believe things about God that just aren't true. If he sinks to the bottom of this pit, he'll be scoffing at God, too.

If there is anything positive in this segment of the psalm it's his persistent attitude. Persistence is what we need to grasp in this second stanza. The psalmist's way of thinking certainly isn't right just yet, but he is still wrestling for resolution. He asks questions, questions formed within, but he doesn't accept the implications. He keeps searching in faith. As he keeps searching, he uncovers dark corners in his heart where unbelief may be lurking.

But remember why he lies awake. Verse 4, **You (God) hold my eyelids open**. It is God who keeps him awake. God is, once again, taking him through these deep waters to flood any recesses of doubt. God is still with him, just in a way different than the good ol' days—in a way that might possibly bear more fruit than the **days of old**.

I'm grateful that the psalm doesn't end at verse 9. That might signal that the crisis ruined him—that he gave up. But we have more than half the psalm remaining, and, honestly, it's the better half. The questions that have surfaced in his heart have served their purpose. Do those terminal phrases describe God's interaction with the psalmist? **Never again, forever ceased, at an end for**

⁷ See Exodus 34:6-7.

all time? Is life showing him that God has given him up? Certainly not! Then what is God doing? The pendulum swings with v. 10,⁸ so that we see the psalmist's settled faith.

III. A Settled Faith (10-20)

Then marks a change that has occurred somewhere between vv. 9 and 10. **Then I said, I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.** Asaph had to look back further than his own unreliable experience.⁹ The good ol' days weren't old enough, nor good enough, to interpret the Lord's present work. Again, the psalm isn't clear what his crisis is, but even if it is of national proportion, he receives it very personally. And what we see in this third stage is a change in Asaph, not only from one season of life to another, but from a focus on "I" to a focus on the Lord.¹⁰ He moves his attention away from his feeble circumstances in the present and renews his confidence in the testimony of God's strong work in the past. That memory, in turn, settles his perspective on the present.

He takes the same pattern of mulling over these realities in a third cycle of remembering, but with a renewed sense of vigor, and certainly "with a better outcome."¹¹ **I will remember the deeds of the LORD, yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds,** leaving fruitless thoughts behind. "What has God already accomplished?" he asks. "How has He already worked?" he probes. "Let's review the wonders of God's redemption!" This comforts the soul, not attending to *my* condition, but attending to my God's work.

Asaph has used several names to refer to God in this psalm, but just once, in verse 11, he uses a form of the divine name.¹² You'll see it's in all caps, unlike the other times he writes **Lord**. That's not accidental. Verses 11-20 tell us the great works of redemption which the covenant God of Israel has accomplished. He remembered His covenant (which He remembers forever! Psalm 111:5) and acted in reply to His people's grief (Ex. 2:23-24). They waited centuries, and He did not forsake them. Is not the psalmist right to wait on the Lord? Are not we?

For He has moved in ways transcending comprehension. **Your way, O God, is holy,** like God Himself is holy. He is beyond finding out and His ways are like Him, which prompts the psalmist to ask, like generations before him, **What God is great like our God?** That's a much more restful question than the ones we read earlier, but likewise needs no answer. We are reminded of Moses' song in Exodus 15. The people sang (15:11), **Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?** They too emphasized the uniqueness of their Deliverer.

This whole segment hearkens back to Exodus 14-15, in fact.¹³ The exodus—that Old Testament monument of God's redemptive work—is just what Asaph is reflecting on. Psalm 77 resorts to that history to highlight that God is neither weak, not forgetful, nor faithless. The God who is unique in His being and unique in His commitment, worked in uniquely powerful and unexplainable ways to bring one people among all peoples to be *His* people. Go back and read

⁸ Bible versions disagree on how to translate v. 10. One stream (e.g. NASB, ESV note) translates v. 10 as the depth of the despair in v. 1-9. Another form (e.g. ESV) translates v. 10 as if the head of the resolution coming in v. 11-15. Either form can make sense of the psalm. But, considering the divisions marked by *Selah*, and the contrast between v. 5 and 10, v. 10 is best as translated as an introduction to 11-15, as in ESV.

⁹ Motyer, *Psalms by the Day*, 213.

¹⁰ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 277; Goldingay, *Psalms*, 2:472.

¹¹ Ash, *The Psalms (Volume 2, Psalms 1-50)*, 342.

¹² Hebrew *Yah*, a diminutive form of *Yahweh*.

¹³ Recall the events of Exodus 14; notice the language parallel to Exodus 15.

Exodus 1-15, and you'll find what Asaph remembered—thinking some limitation in God sustains a current trouble is simply an imagination. God is not limited in His ability to care for His people, as proven by the fact that God is not limited in His ability to deliver His people. That was true for Asaph as he reflected on the exodus, and it's true for the church as we reflect on the cross and resurrection of Christ.

Asaph remembers, not only the *truth* of redemption, but God's *way* of redemption. Verse 16 sets out on a wet trajectory. **When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; indeed the deep trembled.** In more poetic terms, the psalmist personifies the water of the Red Sea, and what an image! As if the walls of water were not a mechanical reaction but a powerful creature brought restrained by the strong arm of the Lord. **The waters were afraid, the deep trembled. And the clouds poured out water.** The waters below, and the waters above were all subservient to the Lord's designs.

More than that, all those powers of creation that make us hide in a closet, bowed in obeisance to God's direction. **The skies gave forth thunder; your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lighted up the world; the earth trembled and shook.** Back in v. 9, Asaph was concerned about the **anger** of the Lord. His conception pales in comparison to the sight on that fateful day at the Red Sea. Exodus 14:10 tells us the people **cried out** in grief, longing for their former condition in Egypt. But that day, they saw the salvation of the Lord, who turned all creation against His enemies and theirs, enemies which Psalm 77 signifies in the **waters**. Afraid, trembling, and we know also, divided (Exodus 14:21), conquered (Exodus 14:26). That's what God, in his anger, does to His enemies. **He disarms the rulers and authorities, puts them to open shame, by triumphing over them in Christ** (Col. 2:18).

His way with his people doesn't lead to shame. It may yet be unexpected, but not destructive. The psalm is leading to a climactic vista, reminding us that **He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion** (Philippians 1:6). Trouble enters the picture when God's path to completion takes a different route from the path a person would choose.

Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters. If you'll recall Exodus 13:17–18, the sea was not the only route available for escape. **When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, "Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt." But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea.** At that moment, the way of the Red Sea was the safer, wiser, better route according to God's wisdom. Though staring at the Sea, Israel hardly grasped God's wisdom, trembling with fear instead. Pharaoh behind them, the sea before them, death on both fronts¹⁴...of course, this is the better route...

But what Israel did not see was Israel's safety. They didn't see the whole picture, they didn't see the future, they didn't see the Lord's plan, they didn't see His **footprints**. But the Lord was present. Along the path of several miles¹⁵ through walls of water, *never* was Israel alone. *Always* they occupied the precise place God wanted them to be. Israel's limited view in no way reduced that reality. In faith, if they would see their deliverance finalized, they must follow His path. His **way**—of deliverance—**was through the sea**. He doesn't build a bridge *over* troubled waters; He divides them and leads his people straight through.

He led them through **like a flock, by the hand of Moses and Aaron**. A pair of under-shepherds, faithfully guiding God's flock the way the Chief Shepherd leads.

The exodus and all its uncertain details give us a paradigm for trusting God. Is He committed to His people? Yes! Do we know all that He's doing? Not a chance! Is that troublesome?

¹⁴ Slinger, *From Death to Life*. <https://southwoodsbc.org/media/ywqk6qq/exodus-14-15-31-from-death-to-life>

¹⁵ Stuart, *Exodus*, 345.

Yes! Does that trouble mean He's forsaken us? Not a chance! Is He with us, even in the midst of grief? Yes! Shall we give up trusting Him when our circumstances shift? Might we all say—not a chance!

Psalm 77 leaves us on the way. Arrival at the destination is not in this history. Because that's not the main concern. The Promised Land is a worthwhile destination to anticipate. We, too, await the day when the sea will be **no more** (Revelation 21:1). But maybe that's not the first counsel in moments of grief. In His mercy, the Lord gives us something tangible at this very moment—right now, not alone, not forgotten, He redeemed His people, and He leads them like a flock, through seas of grief which he commands “this far, and no further.” And just as they did at the Red Sea, those deep waters tremble at His sight.

Jesus' disciples learned the same lesson one night on the Sea of Galilee. In Mark 4, they were on the boat with Jesus. **And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling** (4:37). But where was the Lord? **In the stern, asleep on the cushion.** Out of sight to His disciples, seemingly silent, seemingly powerless, seemingly unconcerned about their well-being. In a moment of crisis, they cry out, **Do you not care that we are perishing?** Ever composed, He gives a brief word of rebuke, **Peace! Be still! And the wind ceased and there was a great calm.** They were not alone, not forgotten, not without the strong care of a Shepherd for His sheep. What did they learn in the storm? Faith.

His purposes He will accomplish, though the means are often hidden to us.¹⁶ **Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!** (Romans 11:33) Even our troublesome situations are **from him and through him and to him, who gets the glory forever.** (Romans 11:36)

Conclusion

The Psalm ends rather suddenly. What began as a troubled time of pleading with God, turned into reflections on God's providence, and concludes with being settled about the Lord's way with His people. That doesn't mean Asaph is smiling, or delighted, or looking forward to tomorrow; maybe a day of trouble will become a year of trouble. At this point, in most laments, we might expect to hear some hymn of praise, some vow of worship, some blessing to God. But we don't. I'd like to think he finally fell asleep.

¹⁶ Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 316.