

Psalm 77 – Remembering to Pray

Good morning church.

Let's pray.

If you were with us last Sunday, you'll remember we've launched into a new summer series – **God in Real Life: Praying our Lives through the Psalms.**

And, as Glen mentioned then, the premise of the series flows out of a simple observation about the book of Psalms... (One that Walter Breuggemann – a Old Testament scholar – has noted in his work on the Psalms)

Here's the observation:

The Psalms begin with blessing – with a ***promise*** of blessing.

Psalm 1 – “***Blessed*** is the one who... delights in the law of the LORD... That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.”

The Psalms ***begin*** with blessing – with a promise of blessing.

And the Psalms end with praise – bold, rapturous, all consuming praise.

Psalm 150 – “Praise the LORD... Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness... Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.”

The Psalms ***begin*** with the promise of blessing and ***end*** with praise.

And **in between** – we find the whole of life... the whole of life’s experiences – all of life in its’ epic beauty and shocking tragedy, exile and homecoming, the mundane and the surprising, the confusing and the breath-taking – **all lived, named and voiced to God in prayer.**

Which is to say that in between this promise and this praise, **we find ourselves... our lives... our world... our** experiences and longings and aches and joys – all named and voiced to God in prayer.

Which is a gift. *I know it’s been a gift to me.*

To know that God – *the God revealed in the Bible and in Jesus* – is God in and over the real stuff of our lives. Which is all of life.

Not just the dressed-up bits or the religious bits. Not just when the family is all gathered around the dinner table in their Sunday best holding hands, but **when life is as it is** – when things falling apart, or making no sense, or are more complicated than we ever thought possible.

The breadth of life named in the Psalms affirms to us that all of life is to be understood and embraced and faced as **life with God.**

Hence the title of this study in the Psalms: **God in Real Life.**

Not “God on the Mountain”. Or “God in the life we thought we’d have”. But “God in **Real Life**” – the one life we’ve got.

Which means then that the whole of **our lives** are invited into prayer.

Here and there I’m sure we’ve all had the experience of coming to God in prayer, or maybe being invited to pray with someone else, *and not knowing what to say – not knowing what to pray about.*

Racking our brains to find something, anything of real depth to voice to God in prayer – *a holy longing, a lofty ambition, a 3-point petition.*

Which is fine. There is nothing wrong with praying our holy longings, our lofty ambitions, our 3-point petitions.

The Psalms include this.

But they also include **everything else** – which invite us to do the same – to not only know that God is a God of real life, but to voice the stuff of our real lives to God in prayer...

To bring to God our questions and our confessions, our thankfulness and our bewilderment, our desolations, our confusion, our praise, our complaints, our joys, and our disappointments.

The Psalms voice it all – and invite us to the same. To turn to God **in** it all and to turn to God **with** it all – in faith that He is **God over all**... (That is what it means to be God, right?)

All that to say, **the Psalms are a gift that we need.**

Which is why we’re spending the summer in the Psalms – learning to pray through the Psalms.

And before we dive into **one particular Psalm** this morning, I want to take a moment longer to talk practically about ***how to pray the Psalms.***

Maybe Glen’s invitation last Sunday to spend the summer praying the Psalms caught you, but you don’t really know it means to actually “*pray the Psalms*”. Reading them is one thing, but *praying* them? **What does that actually look like?**

So let me just distill a few different ways to “pray the Psalms” – (and I’m drawing from other in this and my own experience).

1. **Pray through them** – take their words as your words... say them out loud – *slowly, thoughtfully, and acknowledge where the psalm gives voice to something you need to say to God...*
2. **Pray with them** – let your prayers run alongside the prayer of the psalm, or let the psalm prayer send you off running in prayer... *Think of the Psalms like a Christmas tree and as you read – add your own decorations, your own words, fill them with your own prayer.*
3. **Paraphrase them** – *Take out a pen and paper and put the psalm into your own words... as a way to grapple with and internalize the psalm.*
4. **Learn them by Heart** – *memorize a psalm and let it become a prayer that lives in you.*
5. **Follow their lead** – *If the psalm says to praise God, then do it. If the psalm laments, voice your lament. If the psalm confesses, then take time to confess your sin.*

6. **Lastly, pray them for others** – *Not every Psalm you read will express what's going on in your life, but it is expressing someone's experience and a prayer they need. So instead of dialing out, or moving on, why not spend your time praying the prayer of the Psalm for the sake of another.*

In the end, I love **the simple advice of Eugene Peterson:**

“Open your Bibles to the book of Psalms, and pray them – sequentially, regularly and faithfully across a lifetime. Practice these prayers so that you will learn the full range and the vast depths of your lives in response to God. This is how most Christians for most of the Christian centuries have matured in prayer. Nothing fancy. Just do it.”

Ok, so with all that said, let's actually spend some time in a Psalm. If you have a Bible, open it with me to **Psalm 77**.

And I'll say right away why we need to spend time with this Psalm, and others like it. Because there is a danger **in prayer**. There is a danger in the **honesty** of prayer in the psalms... Particularly in the darker, harder, more desolate seasons of our lives...

The danger of forgetting. The danger of ***forgetting God***. . . .

Which might seem the exact opposite of what we would expect – especially *when it's often **in the hard or dark or discouraging circumstances or seasons of our lives** that **we pray the most**.*

Often it's the hard stuff that gets us praying, isn't it?

But the Psalms witness to the reality that though prayer may be common *in dark places, in the hard times, in the land between*, for many it is **forgetful** prayer – which, though fervent, will increasingly lead to despair and not hope.

Let me say that again: though prayer may be common in *the land between*, for many it is **forgetful** prayer – which, though fervent, will increasingly lead us to despair and lose heart, rather than lead us to hope.

Let me explain...

Or rather, let’s listen together to the psalmist in **Psalm 77:1-9** and I think you’ll start to see what I mean...

Psalm 77:1-9 (read the bold parts with me)

*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.***

*I remembered you, God, and I groaned;
I meditated, and my spirit grew faint.
**You kept my eyes from closing;
I was too troubled to speak.**
I thought about the former days,
The years of long ago;
I remembered my songs in the night.
My heart meditated and my **spirit asked:**
Will the Lord reject forever?
Will he never show his favor 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?**

We'll stop there.

There is a tension in this Psalm, isn't there? A tension – that can seem confusing. Even discouraging. The witness of the Psalmist praying – **and it bringing no comfort.**

He says,

(v.2) ***I sought the Lord***; *At night I stretched out untiring hands,*
And I would not be comforted.

(v.3) ***I remembered you***, *God, and I groaned;*
I meditated, and my spirit grew faint.

This seems counter to why many of us turn to the Psalms. This testimony that *prayer made no difference – that praying actually made his spirit grow faint.*

But notice something with me. And it will seem small, ***but it's not.***

As you scan these verses (vs.1-9), as you attend to his prayer, tell me: ***to whom*** is the Psalmist praying?

God (v.1,2,3,9). ***Lord*** (v.2,7).

Note that **both of these** are **generic** terms for God.

God (*Elohim*). ***Lord*** (*Adonai*). The same words the pagans would use. In other words, **empty terms** – that say nothing of who this God is, or what He's like.

Now, the people of Israel have many names for God that speak of His character (I'm sure we could think of many here), but there is

one above all that embodies so much – a Name that tells a story –
God’s Story – and it’s the name **YAHWEH** – represented in our English
Bibles as LORD with all caps.

YAHWEH – the God who created all and who delights in all He’s
made. YAHWEH – the God who comes near and makes Himself known.
YAHWEH – the God who calls a people to Himself and for Himself –
who bind Himself to them. YAHWEH – the God who makes promises
and keeps His promises. YAHWEH – the God who hears the cry of the
oppressed and who comes to save... YAHWEH – the God of the
Exodus... That’s the **particular** story that the name YAHWEH tells,
and calls to mind. . .

But here, the psalmist, in all his honesty about his own
experience, refers to God, prays to God, cries to **God – in the**
abstract, in the generic. . .

Though he prays – with great honesty, fervency and passion –
he speaks **of God** in the abstract... His meditation increasingly leads
him to **forget God**.

And you can hear it. You can hear him losing heart. You can
hear him losing the hope he once had.

(v.2-3) “**And I would not be comforted... and my spirit**
grew faint...”

I’m sure many of us have been there. We know this experience. In truth, it’s incredibly common. **I’ve** watched it in others. **I’ve** been there myself.

In times of desolation, when God’s blessing seems so far off – it is easy and all-too common to end up so caught up in, fixated on the pain, the ache, the confusion, the silence – that though we may keep praying, we increasingly **lose sight of God.** Our vision becomes **consumed** with ourselves and our trial, our desolation, our questions.

And we begin to forget God. . . .

Not that we forget **about** God, but we begin to forget **who He really is**. We forget His character. And he becomes **just “God”** – the God we address in prayer. The God to whom we cry.

But no longer a God who can do anything, or who even cares – as far as we can see.

Again we hear this movement in the psalmist – as he begins to meditate on his own “song in the night” (v.6) – and as he does, God increasingly fades from his sight... and so does his faith...

Will the Lord reject forever?

Will he never show his favor 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?

Though he keeps praying, his heart fails within him...

Why? Because he has forgotten God. Because He no longer sees and knows God **as He is**. He is just **God – in the generic –** existing, but lacking any sure qualities and character. A generic God. A non-specific God. He is just *God* – unknowable, unnamable, impersonal, impotent and heart-less. *He might as well be praying to the stars or the clouds.*

This is the danger of prayer *in the dark times, in the hard times, in the desolate seasons of our lives.*

It can tempt us to forget. **To forget the God who is** – who was, who is and who is to come.

Which is why one of the recurring themes in the Psalms is the simple yet essential invitation – command actually – to **remember**.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the late Jewish philosopher and theologian once wrote: “Much of what the Bible demands can be comprised in one word – **Remember.**” (quoted by Trevor Hudson)

And in particular: **Remember your God. Remember who God is.**

Don’t let your time in the wilderness – in the land between – cause you to forget...

Just as the Psalmist in **Psalm 77** seems to have forgotten.

Until verse 10!

In v.10f, something shifts. Everything shifts actually.

(join me again for the bold text)

*"Then I thought, '**To this I will appeal:
the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.***

I will remember the deeds of the LORD – [YAHWEH!]

Yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.

I will consider all your works

And meditate on all your mighty deeds.

Your ways, God, are holy.

What God is as great as our God?

You are the God who performs miracles;

You display your power among the peoples.

With your mighty arm you redeemed your people,

The descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

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 unseen.

You led your people like a flock

by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

With poetic language, Asaph, the Psalmist, **chooses to remember God - to meditate not on his circumstances and his grief, but on God - on all that God has done.** And in particular, he remembers **the Exodus**. When God – Israel’s God – heard the cries of His people and came near, acted in power, to save them...

v.16f – *The waters saw you and writhed; the very depths were convulsed... Your path led through the seas, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen.*

Everything changes in the latter half of this psalm and V.11 is

the turning point: “*I will remember the deeds of the LORD.*”

He doesn’t just say, “*I will remember what God has done.*”

No. He says, “*I will remember the deeds of **the LORD***” –

YAHWEH - all caps!

I will remember the deeds of Yahweh! I will remember that God is Yahweh! I will remember that God is the God who saves. That God is the God who hears the cries of his people. God is the God who makes covenant with His people, and keeps His covenant...

In this moment, nothing changed in the circumstance of the Psalmist – ***and yet, in his soul, so much has changed.***

Because He remembers. He remembers that the God to whom he cries is **Yahweh** – *a God who **hears** the cries of His people. A God who will not reject His people. A God who rules over the forces of chaos (represented by the waters in this Psalm).*

This is the God to whom the psalmist prays...

And as he remembers, his heart is revived.

We hear it in the psalm.

(v.11f)

*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.*

(v.13) Your ways, God, are holy.

*What God is as great as our God?
You are the God who performs miracles;
You display your power among the peoples.
With your mighty arm you redeemed your people,
The descendants of Jacob and Joseph.*

It’s amazing **how far** the Psalmist has come in such a short amount of verses. From questioning the goodness and kindness of God to confessing and celebrating that all of God’s ways are **holy – good, great, perfect.**

Not that we should conclude then that this journey – from faintness of heart to a heart full of hope – is something that happens as quickly as it takes to read this Psalm. The Psalms are not descriptive of **real-time** transformation, but they are *descriptive and prescriptive* of what it takes.

Psalm 77:11

*“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.”*

So, **what do you need to remember?**

As you walk through the trials of your life, what do you need to remember, to call to mind, to hold in your heart and mind about God...?

What do you need to remember?

How has God shown up in your life?

How has God shown you His character?

And what does the life, death and resurrection of Jesus mean about the God who is with you today.

What do you need to remember as you walk with God through this season of your life and soul?

Let me close with one last reflection from this Psalm.

Glance back with me to the inscription of this psalm and note what it says... How does it start?

“For the director of music.” Or “For the choirmaster”.

Why does this matter – for us?

Well it matters because it tells us that this call to **remember** is not simply a personal, private or individual task. It’s not something that you need to do on your own.

No, it’s actually something **we are called to do together** – to share in together... to help one another remember.

What a beautiful vision of the church – a community of people helping one another remember who God is and what He has done – ***and is doing – and will do...***

This is why I love **Psalm 107** – another psalm of remembrance - because it’s an invitation to do just this – to tell our stories – to share our stories – so that others, all of us in fact, will find reason, even in the hard spaces of our lives – to “*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever...*”

“Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their stories...”

Pray...

----- [offer handout – remembering to pray] -----