

Reflect on Trouble Psalm 77

Introduction:

Summer time has officially begun. What have you already planned? There are the kids' activities and camps; extra time at the gym; revisiting a long, forgotten hobbies, more time with friends and let's not forget about the all-important vacation. As Americans, summer holds a certain mystic. I think this is largely due to the hopes we have for the perfect, summer vacation.

In my own memory bank there are flashes of trips hustling around the great big USA in our tankish, yellow Buick station wagon that are truly special to me. Places seen like the Grand Canyon, family members visited and memories made. Vacations can be great. But they can also be hard. Many times we come back more tired, more behind and more stressed. We spend too much time, we spend it the wrong way and we spend too much money.

All of this begs the question, "What are we seeking from our summer vacations?" **If I were to quickly answer, I would say we're seeking at least four things: relief, rest, escape and the absence of responsibility.** Nevertheless, because our search is not shaped by God and his word, such things elude us.

Key Question: So, what would it look like this summer if our time was more intentionally shaped by God and his word? How does God intend for us to cease from our labors and recharge our lives, yet not check out in our relationship to him, others or the world he has made? This is the question I want us to answer during four different sermons this summer. **Let's start with relief.**

When it comes to summer, we imagine a season where life's stresses and all its strife are supposed to come to a close. Isn't this one of our chief temptations when it comes to summer? **We want summer to grant us relief from trouble—trouble with relationships, work and family.** Such longings set in motion our plans for perfect, backyard barbecues, sunny trips to white, sandy beaches and high mountain escapes.

Still, like the oil slick now growing off the Gulf Coast, trouble doesn't take the summer off. Many of us, due to unforeseen expenses or job insecurities may not have the resources to plan those sorts of trips and activities. This is often all it takes to trouble our hearts. Yet even those who are blessed with wealth, plans are met with disappointment. The cell phone and email keeps us "connected" to voices that disturb our peace and remind us of the world's brokenness. *Seeming random tragedies occur right as vacations begin. I remember getting news of my uncle's suicide on day 1 of a long anticipated vacation. I would be the one to make most of those first phone calls, perform the funeral and give pastoral care.* Not only this, during vacations we see the weaknesses within our families—the arguing, lack of thankfulness, connection and communication. Relief from trouble seems hard to come by, even during the summer.

So, try as we might to find relief from trouble during the summer months, we know that it cannot be escaped or ignored; it already lurks. Reality forces us to face up to the trouble that won't go away. Therefore, instead of making plans that we know will not grant the fulfillment we seek, let's make room to reflect on the troubles we will encounter that won't stop during this year's summer.

Main Idea: **Still, that pursuit could be pretty reckless, even desperate, were it not for Psalm 77. Thankfully, Psalm 77 guides our efforts to reflect on the troubles we encounter, no matter the season in which we live. Here, God gives us both permission to struggle and a prescription for hope.**

1) Permission to struggle with the trouble in our path (1-9)

Psalm 77 sees difficulty, abandonment and depression as real things—not things to avoided or escaped, but to faced. It may surprise you, but the first 9 verses are an invitation to do something we feel afraid to do often and that is struggle with the troubles in our lives.

Far too often, we flee from the hard questions and the difficulties that give rise to them. We can't admit to ourselves that things are well because we know that "good Christians" don't struggle and don't encounter real trouble. Instead, we "give it over to God" or try to have more faith. Or, during the summer we go on vacation or send our kids to a Christian camp in the hopes somebody else will figure it all out. This doesn't work. Our feelings can be covered over, but the trouble festers beneath the face of a cheesy and false happy Christianity.

Key Question: Does the Bible give us the freedom to cry out, where are you God? Can we exclaim, "God, what are you doing in these struggles?" Does the Bible give us reason to expect that all of us will have seasons of unexplained and unasked for confusion, doubt and questions?

Yes! Such questions are answered right here in Psalm 77. Psalm 77 grants permission for our struggle to find a voice. Consider how specific the Psalmist is:

a) When times are desperate (4-5)

The struggle is not named by the Psalmist, but its effects could not be clearer. He can't sleep.

"² ...in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. ...⁴ You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak."

I'm actually glad that the struggle is not named because it makes room for the great variation of struggles we all face. No matter whom you are, the struggles come and we wonder what is going on?

b) We ask, "Where is God?"

Of course, in such seasons we all ask "Where are you God?" Still, we all expect a fairly quick reply to the struggles we face. A quick answer was not given for the struggles faced by the one who wrote this Psalm, however.

Instead, the thought of God frustrated him further. Verse 3 reads, "When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints." His enquiry of God goes deeper when he considers his circumstances in light of God's promises. Read beginning in verse 5, "I consider the days of old, the years long ago. ⁶ I said, ¹ "Let me remember my song in the night; let me meditate in my heart." Then my spirit made a diligent search: ⁷ "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? ⁸ Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? ⁹ Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?"

Dan Allender and Tremper Longmann in their book, *The Cry of the Soul*, explain how this kind of language is important, "Most of us would be scared to death to talk to God this way. But do we do instead? We repress our strong emotions....we bottle it up within ourselves. The problem continues to exist, and our fear festers and grows inside of us, alienating us...from God." (p. 149).

What is happening during desperate times and in the face of intense struggle? Well, when we refuse to bottle it up or explain it away we are drawn into a struggle with God himself. Herein lies the important purpose for God allowing trouble into our lives. Trouble pushes us to a deeper relationship with the Lord.

When this happens, God no longer is the “Genie in the bottle” or the one who makes things happen for me. When God does not bring quick resolution to the struggles we face, he forces us to stop relating to him as a means to our end. In the face of prolonged struggle, God cannot be merely the one who helps me get the job, achieve success, gets me a spouse or makes things turn out nice.

Instead, when we have intense struggles we must ask, “What kind of God would allow so much pain, fear and struggle?” It must be a God who wants us to know him more deeply and not only what he can do for me.

The truth is many of us feel that our lives will reach some imagined plateau where trouble will have somehow been conquered. Yet the reality of Psalm 77 is born out time and time again by those most mature in the Lord. Consider the words of this renowned seminary professor:

“I write these words at the age of fifty-five. During the past ten or twelve years, I have often—and with greater seriousness than ever before—reflected upon the course of my life. Certain patterns of thought and attitude and conduct have come to light, some of them quite disturbing. I look back upon repeated failures in my efforts to subdue inner conflicts and fears to combat immaturity and self-centeredness, to build genuine and enriching relationships with other people, to conquer besetting sins, and to grow in holiness and communion with God. I now see that every period in my life has been marked by . . . struggle...” (K. Chamblin quoted by J. Bridges in *Disciplines of Grace*, p. 41.)

How great is it to know that God has given us permission to enter deeply into our struggles, rather than ignore, escape or try to bypass them? For in so doing, we are drawn into a deeper relationship with him. But what does that look like? To answer that, we have to look at verses 10-20.

2) Prescription to maintain hope in the midst of trouble (10-20)

Three dramatic shifts occur in the Psalm, all starting with verse 10. It is with these shifts that give God’s prescription for hope in the midst of our trouble. Listen again to verses 10-15,

¹⁰ Then I said, “I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.”¹¹ I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old.¹² I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds.¹³ Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God?¹⁴ You are the God who works wonders; you have made known your might among the peoples.¹⁵ You with your arm redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph.

a) A shift from focus on self to God.

In v. 1-6 there are 18 references to the self (I or me) and 6 references to God by name, title or pronoun. In the last 8 verses (13-20) there are 21 mentions of God and no personal references at all. The transition from self to God is definite in verse 10 and shows a shift in his mindset. Now, life and all of its trouble is seen in relation to the Lord and not the shifting self.

b) A shift from circumstances, which confuse, to the deeds of God, which clarify. (11)

In the face of trouble the variation can be endless. That is why it is so important for us to get our bearings. We may not have clarity on everything that’s in front of us, but if we have our bearings we can be sure of the direction we are headed. That’s what trouble

does for us. It disorients us in the moment. When this happens, it is so important for us to remember the markers of God's grace along the way. We remember his deeds, because our deeds have gotten so confused!

The importance of "markers" on your journey. **Illustration: hiking on balds on the A.T.**

c) A shift from despair to confidence (16-20)

The Psalmist doesn't suggest that the trouble ceases, but that God is with them through the trouble. God's way is not around the trouble, but *through it*.

Application:

The prescription for hope, then is to realize that God's purposes for suffering are bigger than relief. He aims at our redemption. Unless he draws us in through struggle we will never know his redemptive ways.

This truth is supremely illustrated for us in the life of Jesus Christ. He was abandoned by the Father in a way that you or I never have to fear. Still, his suffering also explains our suffering. God has a purpose in our confusion, abandonment and struggle. Through it we know more of our own salvation and the God who saves. Trouble is the pathway wherein we are enabled to enter to know God in a deeper, more intimate way. Apart from it our Christian lives would be impoverished.

Conclusion:

Another seminary professor that I have spoken of on occasion is David Calhoun. He has battled cancer for years. In one of those struggles he wrote, "If I did not have cancer, my life would be a failure forever. Whatever comes, the Christian doesn't despise this life. There are green valleys and quiet waters. But even in the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord is with us. He is our joy and comfort." (David Calhoun, "In Covenant Magazine," V. 13, N. 3, 1998, 7)

This is so contrary to how most of us approach struggle. Our first thought is to fix the problem, heal the disease or take a pill to make it go away. In relationships we either cut people off or give in to their desires to ease the burden. Yet God's way is no quick fix. He often allows relationships to get to the breaking point and problems to reach incredible levels of difficulty so that we reach out to him.

What's the encouragement for us this summer? Let's not forget that sometimes troubles are greatest during the times we want it least. Sleepless nights, wayward children, financial difficulty and disease can all come during these months. Trouble doesn't take a vacation. However, here is the encouragement. Neither does our God. God is with you in the struggle and he is revealing himself to you in its midst. Will you take his hand as he walks you through whatever difficulty he presents?