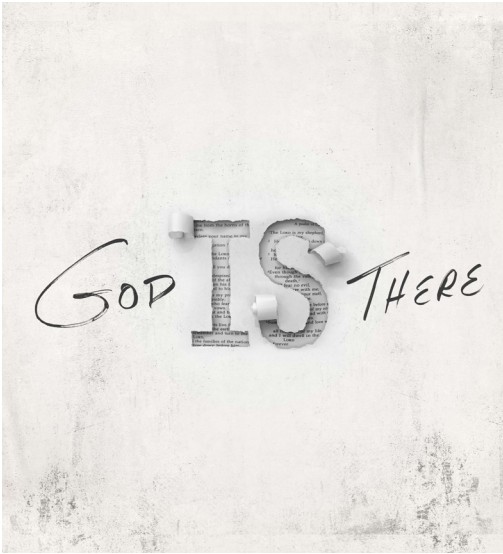


Sermon Growth Guide

July 30, 2023

When You Are Depressed



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God Is There - When You Are Depressed

Psalm 77

Key Verse: Psalm 77:1 “I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me.”

Big Idea: Even when I don't *feel* God, God is there.

Foundations

This week, we look at Psalm 77 and the theme of depression, distress, grief and sadness. Most of us have felt depressed for short periods of time, but many wrestle with depression at a chronic level. My hope for this discussion today is that each person would be able to share vulnerably on this topic. Psalm 77 gives us language for expression and reminds us that depression is normal in the life of a believer. Suffering is part of our journey.

The great preacher, Charles Spurgeon, suffered chronic depression and shared openly in his sermons about his situation. For him, there wasn't a cause he could pinpoint. He spoke this in one of his sermons:

“You may be surrounded with all the comforts of life and yet be in wretchedness more gloomy than death if the spirits are depressed. You may have no outward cause whatever for sorrow and yet if the mind is dejected, the brightest sunshine will not relieve your gloom. ... There are times when all our evidences get clouded and all our joys are fled. Though we may still cling to the Cross, yet it is with a desperate grasp.”

The psalmist writes Psalm 77 with a “desperate grasp.” We don't know the story behind this, but this psalm of lament is included in the songbook of Israel. It's important for the life of the church.

Understanding God's Word

Together, read Psalm 77:1-9.

What words, phrases or ideas resonate with you? What is the psalmist articulating?

Read Psalm 77:10-20.

How does the Psalm change in verb tense, subject matter and resolve?

Applying God's Word

The Psalmist appeals to his memory of God's great deeds (verse 10). Share a Scripture or a personal memory you have that proclaims the greatness of God—a deed, a miracle, a work of God.

Witnessing God's Word

In John 16:33, Jesus tells his disciples, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Where are you seeing suffering right now in your neighbor's life? Do you know someone suffering depression right now—or maybe it's you.

Pray for one another and those you know who cannot feel God's presence. How might you encourage them in Jesus' name today?

GOD IS THERE • Psalm 77 • Jennifer Holz • July 30, 2023

Good morning. Good to be with you. **God Is There.** That's the series we are in. And where is our "there" today? Depression, distress, despair, sadness. God is right there with us in the middle of our distress. When we are emotionally and mentally tapped out, God is there. When we can't feel God's presence, God is there. Sometimes it's a day or a season. Sometimes it's a lifetime of depression. God is there.

Psalm 77 is our text today. The great 19th century pastor and theologian, Charles Spurgeon, opens his comments on Psalm 77 with these words:

"This psalm has much sadness in it..." (Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, Vol. 1). Have you ever perplexed about depression and Christian life? Spurgeon was. Spurgeon suffered acute depression for most of his life. He lived his life in a place of darkness—the sort that has no known reason behind it. His voice was a comfort to many as he talked openly about his own struggles and his suffering. In one of his sermons, he writes these words:

"You may be surrounded with all the comforts of life and yet be in wretchedness more gloomy than death if the spirits are depressed. You may have no outward cause whatever for sorrow and yet if the mind is dejected, the brightest sunshine will not relieve your gloom. ... There are times when all our evidences get clouded and all our joys are fled. Though we may still cling to the Cross, yet it is with a desperate grasp." (Diana Gruver, *Christianity Today*, February 26, 2021)

This morning we arrive at Psalm 77, and some of you are coming this morning with a desperate grasp. I will invite you to listen to this psalm. I'm not going to put the words on the screen. I'm going to divide it in two parts. This first part is the psalmist describing the darkness he is living in. We don't know the story behind it, we don't know if his despair is short lived or extends for years. But he begins by crying out to God for help, and Spurgeon affirms that beginning with a desperate prayer to the Lord is always the right place to start (*The Treasury of David*, Vol 1). I'm going to pray for us. And then just keep your eyes closed and listen to the psalmist's cry for help:

I cried out to God for help;

I cried out to God to hear me.

*2 When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;
at night I stretched out untiring hands,
and I would not be comforted.*

*3 I remembered you, God, and I groaned;
I meditated, and my spirit grew faint.[b]*

*4 You kept my eyes from closing;
I was too troubled to speak.*

*5 I thought about the former days,
the years of long ago;*

*6 I remembered my songs in the night.
My heart meditated and my spirit asked:*

7 "Will the Lord reject forever?

Will he never show his favor again?

8 Has his unfailing love vanished forever?

Has his promise failed for all time?

9 Has God forgotten to be merciful?

Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"

Open your eyes. I don't know what words or phrases connected with you, but we hear the deep distress of the writer. He is in a desperate situation. He cries to God for help. He pleads for God to hear him. *We read, I sought, I stretched, I remembered, I meditated, I sang.* The psalmist did all the things that a faithful follower of the Lord is instructed to do, and yet he feels no relief. He is distressed, he finds no comfort, he groans, his spirit is faint, he can't sleep, he has no ability to form sentences. And then the questions begin to come. Often our deep spiritual questions arise out of despair.

Has God changed? Is He now rejecting me? Has He removed His favor? Has His love vanished? Did He forget that He is merciful and that He has promised to be with me?

Have you been in that place? Maybe you are there right now. Or perhaps you are walking next to someone in this place. The empty feeling of divine absence. For some of you, this is a daily occurrence.

What do we do when we can't feel God's presence? Is there some way to fix that? To solve the puzzle? To crack the code? To unravel the mystery? To find peace when peace cannot be found? Depression is real. John of the Cross wrote about God's absence as "the dark night of the soul." But what if the night turns into day and day turns into months, years, and a whole life?

Last week we looked at David's sin through Psalm 51 and learned that hidden sin can be one cause of distress. In biblical times, this was the big conundrum. Sin must be the cause of all suffering. Job's friends asked him what had he done to deserve his suffering! In John 9:2, the disciples ask Jesus, "who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" Sin and suffering were tied so closely together, that one necessitated the other. Here's how the suffering syllogism worked: If I sin, I will suffer. So, the reverse has to be true: if I suffer, I must have sinned. Simple enough. Until you start re-working the equation.

Let's pull it into present day. "If I live in Colorado Springs, I live in Colorado." True. Yes. So, let's flip it. "If I live in Colorado, I live in Colorado Springs." True? Maybe. But there are a thousand other places I could live as well. Colorado Springs is only one of those places.

Sin does lead to suffering, but it's not the only pathway to suffering. Sometimes, as in Spurgeon's case, there isn't a clear reason for our suffering. Why depression? Why suffering? In a broken world, suffering of all kinds exists. And sometimes there isn't a clear why. Perhaps my

GOD IS THERE • Psalm 77 • Jennifer Holz • July 30, 2023

goal today with this psalm is simply to normalize distress. To affirm that depression in followers of Jesus is not unusual. John Calvin, Martin Lloyd Jones, Mother Theresa, Elizabeth Eliot... all suffered from depression. Today, we are not trying to fix it or attempt to solve it. Sometimes we don't feel God. Period. We wonder if something is wrong with us. *Why do others talk so freely about feeling the presence of God when we only know absence?*

A Song

The psalmist doesn't offer a solution. He offers a song, a musical lament, placed in the songbook of Israel. It's not the only one. Musician Yena Choi, an accomplished cellist and recent graduate of Fuller Seminary, discovered that God was leading her to play lament in times of tragedy (Translating Lament (fuller.edu)). While wrestling with how God was calling her to use her cello for ministry, she eventually discovered that she could intercede for others in her playing. Sometimes words fail to express our deepest grief, but grief can be translated through music. I love the idea of music as intercession. She recently performed a beautiful lament on her cello with a pianist and ballet dancer for the community at Sandy Hook. She wanted to give sound and movement to the depth of suffering that had been experienced by so many. Musical lament helps us know we are not in isolation in our grief. Lament carries our sorrow to God on our behalf.

In the time of trouble, our psalmist sings in the night. *I remembered my songs in the night (verse 6)*. We don't know the tune to which Psalm 77 was sung, but I imagine it was placed in a minor key and it likely didn't resolve to a major key. In the Hebrew, there is this little word that appears after verse 9 in the psalm, Selah. We don't know exactly what it means, but it seems to be some sort of pause. I imagine there would be a long interlude in this psalm between verses 9 and 10. Music only; no words. I imagine when this psalm was used in worship, this instrumental interlude was played over and over to give space for grief and sadness and the deep question of "Has God forgotten me?" to simply be expressed. I asked our cellist, Ben, to record a lament for us. Perhaps it sounded something like this...close your eyes, let your mind rest as you listen.

I Will Remember

That space for lament, that selah (however long it goes on) gives way to a new thought for the psalmist. Sometimes we need to be still before God and give space to our discomfort. In that space, let the Spirit of God guide our thoughts. The psalm continues in verse 10 and the whole structure of the psalm begins to change: verbs move from past to future, the tone moves from agony to wonder.

10 Then I thought, "To this I will appeal:

the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.

11 I will remember the deeds of the LORD;

yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.

12 I will consider all your works

and meditate on all your mighty deeds."

"Then I thought...I will remember the deeds of the Lord." The psalmist steps outside his situation and thinks about his thinking. There is a disruption in this thought pattern. He resolves to think for a moment, to reflect, on something other than himself. The object of reflection changes from sad psalmist to most high God. And not in an abstract way, but in a very concrete way. I will remember the deeds, the miracles and the works of the Lord.

Our pediatrician reminds us about a very simple practice to relieve anxiety and distress. Speak out loud every day three specific things you are thankful for. And they need to be concrete. You see, it's in the concrete naming of gratitude that our minds can rest. The psalmist is about to recall the concrete actions of God. The way Eugene Peterson paraphrases this in *The Message* is wonderfully imaginative:

Once again I'll go over what GOD has done,

lay out on the table the ancient wonders;

I'll ponder all the things you've accomplished,

and give a long, loving look at your acts.

Picture your dining room table or any table in your house. Imagine yourself pushing everything aside, and then carefully laying out on the table the miracles and deeds of God in your life and in Scripture. You remember, I'm sure, that scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, when Indiana Jones is trying to explain what the Ark of the Covenant is to these Intelligence operatives who just stare at him blankly. They have no idea what the Ark is. They are sitting around a huge wooden table. Jones says with high irritation—"Didn't you ever go to Sunday School?" *I love this scene*. Indiana Jones went to Sunday School! Of course, he did. You can't be a history and archeological expert and not know your Bible. He then opens a massive Bible on that huge table (right to the place in Exodus) with a big picture of the Ark of the Covenant and he starts explaining the greatness of God. That's what I'm talking about. Where does your Bible fall open, what stories help you recall the greatness of God? What are the ancient wonders of God that you might lay on your dining room table, the stories you learned in Sunday School?" And what you have experienced of God in your own life?

- The creation of the world
- God calling Moses at the burning bush
- The crossing of the Red Sea
- The forgiveness of King David
- The baby in the manger
- The pictures of my family and my friends
- The day I said yes to Jesus for the first time

GOD IS THERE • Psalm 77 • Jennifer Holz • July 30, 2023

- My baptismal certificate
- I place my journal on the table—because there are a lot of answered prayers in there.

A collage of miracles and grace. Gratitude and greatness. The stories we learned in Sunday School as kids, at VBS, are so important. The simple spiritual practice of remembering God's work. And if you didn't go to Sunday School as a kid, you can start now to create a record of God's deeds. Perhaps start a journal of the things God has done in your life. And if you have trouble remembering things in your life, start with the Bible: Genesis 1 and the creation of the world. Or Exodus 19 and the crossing of the Red Sea. Or Luke 2 and the birth of Jesus.

My husband often describes his depression as "folding in on himself." He loses perspective, the lights go off and he can't see any progress in his life. Maybe that's your experience, too. This psalm helps us to change our thinking patterns. It gives us a new starting point, a re-frame. The subject of the psalm shifts from the word "I" to the divine "you." In fact, for the rest of the psalm, the word "I" does not appear.

Your ways, God, are holy.

What god is as great as our God?

*14 You are the God who performs miracles;
you display your power among the peoples.*

*15 With your mighty arm you redeemed
your people,*

the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

And then the psalmist shows us what deeds, stories and miracles he is pondering about God, what he is laying out on his table..

*16 The waters saw you, God,
the waters saw you and writhed;
the very depths were convulsed.*

*17 The clouds poured down water,
the heavens resounded with thunder;
your arrows flashed back and forth.*

*18 Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind,
your lightning lit up the world;
the earth trembled and quaked.*

- For him it's storms and oceans and earthquakes.
- It's the crossing of the Red Sea.
- It's the waters of creation. It's Jonah's journey to the bottom of the ocean.
- It's Job's experience of God—who says to him, "where were you when I created the world?"
- It's God the creator who spoke the seas and the land into existence and orchestrates all of nature.

I think of Jesus in the storm in Mark chapter 3. Before the great storm, the disciples are thinking of Jesus as just another "hand on deck" to steady the boat. But in the storm, Jesus sleeps as if the storm is nothing to him. They wake him up and he calms the storm...and in that moment (perhaps they are recalling Psalm 77) they see more of Jesus...***who is this that even the wind and waves obey him?***

By the end of the psalm, the writer knows exactly where God is. God is there.

*19 Your path led through the sea,
your way through the mighty waters,
though your footprints were not seen.*

God Is There

God is walking through the sea. He is in the middle of the wreckage. He is Lord of all, and He is right there in the deepest, darkest places where the depths convulse and the lightning rips through the sky. It all belongs to God. Sometimes, all I can see and feel is the storm, writes the psalmist, but I know you are there.

Charles Spurgeon wondered if he would be able to keep preaching. His wife worried for him: his anguish, she writes, was so deep and violent. He was a young preacher. At 22 years old, he was in charge of a large church in London. He and Susannah had just had beautiful twins added to their family. Stress, worry, darkness, over-work, pressure, responsibility. Spurgeon felt it all and it was paralyzing. Near the end of his life, Spurgeon preached a sermon on the compassion of Jesus. Referring to his own depression that day, he spoke about Jesus drawing near to us in our weakness and suffering: "... Jesus is touched, not with a feeling of your strength, but of your infirmity. Down here, poor, feeble nothings affect the heart of their great High Priest on high, who is crowned with glory and honor. As the mother feels with the weakness of her babe, so does Jesus feel with the poorest, saddest, and weakest of his chosen." (*Christianity Today* article)

Sometimes we can't feel God, we can't find God, all we can do is cry out. Jesus draws near and lifts us up when we can't even lift ourselves. This morning, some of you showed up today—and it was hard. But you came because here we "rehearse" every week together the greatness of God, the tenderness of Jesus and the healing of the Holy Spirit. Together, we move our thoughts from ourselves to the glory of the Lord, who is with us. We need this time.

The psalm ends with these words:

*You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.*

We are God's flock. He is our good shepherd, and He is always leading us, finding us, carrying us. But we also need to take each other by the hand and remind one another of who God is and where He is. We need each other to help us remember those three concrete things for which we are grateful. Some of you aren't in a dark place today, but someone near you is. Ask God today who you might encourage and remind them that ***God Is There***. Amen.