

“Etude”

THE LANGUAGE OF THE HEART (3)



PSALM 77

Grief and distress come at different times in our lives: sometimes we experience physical pain, or loss when a loved one dies, but surely there can be no greater distress for the Christian than to feel that God has abandoned him because of his sin.

Psalm 77 records the words of a man who was in great agony of spirit. It would appear, however, that his distress had not arisen from personal problems, but because of a momentous event in the life of the Israelites, possibly their exile in Babylon. Fearful Israelites were perplexed and worried that God had forgotten them, and their grief is beautifully expressed in Psalm 137: 1-4. Asaph so identified with the people that their grief became his too.

His ordeal was lengthy and intense, as we see in vs. 1-3:

- “I *cried out* to God for help, I *cried out* to him to hear me.” Asaph certainly knew who *could* help him.
- “I *stretched out* untiring hands”. What a picture this paints of entreaty! Crying out to God, seeking Him in the day of distress and praying through the night with lifted hands are familiar themes in laments.¹
- “My soul refused to be comforted”.
- “I *remembered* you, O God, and I *groaned*; I mused and *my spirit grew faint*.” He recalled happier times when he had been able to sing in the night.

Sometimes it is necessary to cry aloud to God, so great is our distress. We read that Jesus Himself “offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death and he was heard because of his reverent submission.” (Heb.5:7)

Asaph’s distress was so bad that he couldn’t sleep. He even blamed God for that (v4)! Things became so bad that he couldn’t even talk about his trouble. Have you

¹ Cf. Psalms 6:6, 22:1-2, 102:1-2, 120:1, 141:1-2, 142:1-2

ever felt like that? Have you been in a situation where you felt so overwhelmed that you gave up crying out to God? You thought back to earlier times when you were happy as a Christian, active in the Lord's service, enjoying singing His praises and you now wonder where it all went wrong.

The reason for Asaph's sleeplessness was doubt. *Doubt!* Now that's a surprise, coming from such a man. As a result of their sin, God was angry and had withdrawn His favour and mercy from His own people. He was estranged from them. We can almost feel the torment this man is experiencing as he fires off questions about the Lord's commitment to His people (vs.7-9). We know, however, that those questions can elicit only one reply – a resounding **NO!** Although God's anger and wrath are certainly aroused by sin, we have the promise of forgiveness and restoration when we confess our sin².

There is value in confessing our doubts to God. As we put them into words, somehow we give Him an opportunity to speak to our troubled minds and reassure us.

The first nine verses of this psalm remind me of listening to a piece of music in a minor key, or one where there are discordant notes. Sometimes a phrase is repeated again and again, or a note is held so long that it almost becomes painful to listen to, and I want to cry out "resolve it!" I know that there *is* a resolution and that the music will continue in a major key, but it is hard to wait for that moment.

Asaph needs to resolve his torment, so what does he do? He remembers the deeds of the Lord (v11). He reminds himself of the mighty works of the Lord and what He did on behalf of his people in days gone by, and as he meditates on what God has done, he is filled with awe at the greatness of the Lord. In vs.13-15, he reminds God that the display of His power and miracles was, in fact, on behalf of the Israelites, Asaph's own people!

Then follows a most majestic and poetic section as Asaph's mind is fired up as he remembers the deeds of the Lord in rescuing His people from the Egyptians. As the psalm rises to a crescendo, we fully expect Asaph to shout that of course God will not forget His people - but how does it end? "*You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.*" It's almost a whisper!

Is this an anticlimax? I don't think so. This is Asaph's affirmation that the great and mighty God, who did such wondrous deeds as those he has been describing, is a tender, loving shepherd to those who are His own.

We are left to draw our own conclusion. "Can we doubt His tender mercy, who through life has been our guide."³ May we, like Asaph, consider the works of the Lord, and in times of doubt and failure, remember that our Shepherd went to great lengths to bring His wandering sheep home.

² 1 John 1:9

³ Fanny J Crosby