

A 'controlled explosion' for the soul

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[0 : 00] Our text then tonight is Psalm number 77. You'll find this on page 488. Let's pray before we read. Dear Lord, we come into your presence this evening in the name of your Son, the Lord Jesus.

And we come to thank you for your word. We thank you that this book we have open in front of us is different from every other book in this world. We thank you that it truly is your word to us and it comes to us this evening warm with your very breath.

Father, we ask you to speak to us throughout this evening. We pray that your Holy Spirit will open our hearts and our minds and that through it we will encounter you, the living God.

Father, please give me all the resources I need to serve you this evening as your servant. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Psalm 77 then, beginning at verse 1.

I cry aloud to God. Aloud to God and he will hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord. In the night my hand is stretched out without wearying.

[1 : 13] My soul refuses to be comforted. When I remember God I moan. When I meditate my spirit faints.

Selah. You hold my eyelids open. I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I consider the days of old, the years of long ago.

I said, Let me remember my song in the night. Let me meditate in my heart. Then my spirit made a diligent search.

Will the Lord spurn forever? And never again be favourable? 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? Selah. Then I said, I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.

[2 : 17] 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.

Your way, O God, is holy. What God is great like our God? You are the God who works wonders. You have made known your might among the peoples.

You with your arm redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph. Selah. When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid.

Indeed, the deep trembled. The clouds poured out water. The skies give 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. Your way was through the sea. Your path through the great waters. Yet your footsteps were unseen.

[3 : 19] You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. I'm sure that most of you know this evening that I'm originally from Northern Ireland.

And when I was growing up in the 1980s, the troubles were at their peak and the six o'clock news had a vocabulary all of its own. Words and phrases like Armalite and Semtex and Car Bomb were recited evening by evening.

But there's another phrase I want to tell you about this evening. One with which we're probably all now familiar given recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. It's the controlled explosion.

If the police received a tip-off from an informant and they managed to find the bomb before it went off, they carried out a controlled explosion. They cleared the streets, they brought in the bomb disposal experts and they examined the device and set it off in a way that caused minimal damage. And so the police gained vital intelligence about how the terrorists made their bombs and made the streets safe again. Why do I tell you that? Because Psalm 77 is a controlled explosion for the soul.

[4 : 47] How often have you heard someone say, I was a Christian until my wife left me. I used to go to church until my father got cancer.

I used to believe in God until my parents divorced. And these are the difficult times in life and they're just like bombs with the potential to go off and cause immense spiritual destruction and grief. And yet the Psalms of Lament are here for us to carry out controlled explosions on these emotions. They honestly face up to our doubts and our questions and our frustrations and they see explicitly what we're feeling in our hearts.

They detonate our doubts. But they do so in a controlled environment of Holy Scripture. And as they do we gain vital intelligence about ourselves, about this broken world we live in and about the gods we worship.

Psalms 77 is a psalm of Asaph. One of a collection of 12 psalms that were used in temple worship. Asaph was a contemporary of David but he didn't personally write all the psalms that go by his name.

[6 : 06] And this psalm number 77 comes much later thought to be about the time of the exile. And it describes one man's experience. But it was used by the whole congregation in their worship of Yahweh.

Every single worshipper of Yahweh will have this kind of experience in life. And we all need to know how to deal with it. For the fact is that the shadow of hard times pain and suffering must fall on all of our lives.

It's not all of the time but inevitably some of the time. And we all need to know how to deal with hard times and how to deal with other people who are suffering.

And God has given us this psalm to read to sing and to understand a controlled explosion for the soul. You'll see it's been written in four stanzas each roughly the same length.

But tonight I don't want to follow exactly the structure of the psalm. Instead, first in verses 1 to 6 the psalm expresses our emotions. Secondly, in verse 7 to 9 the psalm detonates our doubts.

[7 : 21] And third in verses 10 to 20 the psalm brings us back to God. And fourthly and finally again 10 to 20 the psalm points us to Jesus.

First then, verses 1 to 6 the psalm expresses our emotions. Look at the first stanza in verses 1 to 3. These are not the kinds of words that we are accustomed to singing.

Suffering in the 21st century church has become like death in a 21st century hospital. Something embarrassing. Something that we try to avoid discussing or mentioning.

And death becomes a negative patient outcome. And death doesn't fit with our 21st century medical advances. And suffering doesn't fit with our 21st century ideas about Christianity.

We try to persuade people to become Christians by telling them that Jesus is the answer to all their problems. And we measure our success as Christians by the success of our careers or the success of our children at school or the success of our social lives.

[8 : 59] Really, we're not a lot different from our 21st century friends and neighbours that surround us. But whether we sing them or read them, the words of this psalm confront us with the reality of Christian life in a broken world.

This man is in a crisis. He's in trouble. He needs help. And it's thought this psalm was written when Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians and the Jews were carried off into exile.

And you can imagine the psalmist looking around the smoking ruins of the city, the city of David, the empty streets, the devastated countryside. And he weeps as he writes his lament.

I don't know what you're looking at this evening. It may be the smoking ruins of your marriage. It may be the emptiness of life alone without the husband or wife that you've prayed for.

It may be the devastation of the illness that you've contracted or the slow attrition of old age and failing health. Life in a fallen and broken world is painful.

[10 : 12] And when the present is so hard it's always tempting to take refuge in the past. Look at verse 5 and 6. The psalmist says to God, I consider the days of old, the years of long ago.

I said, let me remember my song in the night. Let me meditate in my heart. He might as well be singing, now I need a place to hide away.

Oh, I believe in yesterday. But the memories of yesterday, the days of old, the years of long ago, they only make the pain of the present even more intense.

Perhaps he thinks about the days of old when Jerusalem was peaceful and prosperous and he wandered his streets and worshipped in the temple. Days that always seemed to be filled with

sunshine and friendship and laughter.

Have you ever done that? You think about the days of old, the years of long ago. Days that, looking back, always seemed to be filled with friendship and sunshine and laughter.

[11 : 20] Days of happy family life. Days of prosperity and success. The years of long ago when you were fit and well and healthy. The years of long ago before your hopes and dreams and ambitions all crumbled and turned to dust.

The years of long ago when our churches were full and Scotland was saturated with the gospel. The days of old. The years of long ago.

And what's the psalmist doing in his distress? Verse 1. He cries out to God. Verse 2. In the day of his trouble he seeks the Lord.

Verse 3. He remembers God and he meditates. But the result? He isn't comforted.

He moans. He feels faint. He can't sleep. How does that make you feel this evening? Perhaps you think that when trouble comes your way you'll simply pray and it'll all be okay.

[12 : 32] Or perhaps you've said to someone else in their trouble just take it to the Lord in prayer. Well the psalmist is praying but it doesn't seem to be working.

Well perhaps understanding the theology of suffering will help. Listen to some first century theology about suffering from Peter. Dear friends do not be surprised at the painful trial that you're suffering as though something strange were happening to you but rejoice in that you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

Or James even says consider it pure joy my brothers when you face trials of various kinds because you know that the testing of your faith brings perseverance.

perseverance. Why if only Esau had had the New Testament surely he would have been comforted if he'd realized that he was participating in the sufferings of Christ.

Surely he would have stopped weeping if he'd realized that he was developing perseverance.

Surely he could have got some sleep if he could have counted his sufferings as pure joy. But you know it's not like that don't you?

[13 : 48] We need to be real. Christianity has to work in real life in every day. It works in that it predicts suffering. It gives us a theory of suffering.

It certainly doesn't promise us a life filled with a life empty of pain and a life without suffering. You know a previous generation of Christians used to sing about the cross.

It was there by faith I received my sight and now I am happy all the day. But that simply isn't true. It isn't biblical. In fact it's a cruel lie.

But does Christianity work in practice for those going through hard times and suffering pain? The reality is that when we suffer it's often so bad that we can't concentrate to read or pray.

We can't pray and if we do God doesn't seem to answer. sometimes it's even as if he didn't exist and doubts come into our mind and fear overwhelms us.

[14 : 54] I was talking to one of my patients recently who has been a Christian for many years and she's currently going through a painful family situation and we talked about how she was coping.

What did she say? Was it God is with me every day? He's upholding me with remarkable strength. I find that he's closer to me than ever before and my relationship with Jesus is getting deeper and stronger.

You know that's the answer we're comfortable with. That's the answer that's easy to hear. But the real life answer Dr. Stewart nobody understands.

I keep praying and asking God why? And sometimes I just get out on the hills and walk and cry out to God and ask him why are you doing this? I know why.

Up here I know why but the pain is down here. I still go to church but there they expect you to be happy. The only thing songs about being joyful.

[16 : 01] Nobody understands how I'm hurting inside. And when they ask how are you I say do you really want to know? she's been a Christian longer than I have.

She knows the theology of suffering and as she says I know why up here I know why but the pain is down here. Asaph's pain was down here.

Your pain tonight may be down here but the Bible addresses our pain and our suffering. The Bible addresses our pain down here. This psalm expresses our emotions.

Second then in verse 7 to 9 the psalm detonates our doubts. It's an explosive mix.

Pain, grief, trouble, no answer to prayer, nothing but sleeplessness, tears and silence. And you begin to doubt and to question and to wonder if all those things you've believed in for years are really true.

[17:12] But if you pray this psalm with Asaph verse 7 is where he detonates our doubts. Look at verse 7 Will the Lord spurn forever and never again be favourable?

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?

And there it goes. An explosion of doubt and pain and grief and despair. Those questions you thought you shouldn't ask. Questions you thought you'd never voice.

Questions you thought you shouldn't ever let slip to anyone. This psalm doesn't allow our doubt and frustration and despair to smoulder and fester. Instead it brings it right into the open and detonates it in this explosion of questions.

These very questions tell us that Asaph believed in a God who was favourable verse 7 and a God who has steadfast love verse 8a and a God who makes promises verse 8b and a God who is gracious and compassionate verse 9 Asaph had believed in a God who had revealed himself to Moses.

[18:35] Remember the Lord the Lord the compassionate and gracious God slow to anger abounding in love and faithfulness maintaining love to thousands forgiving wickedness rebellion and sin and yet what the psalmist is experiencing is driving him to question all of this.

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?

Perhaps that's what you're feeling though you've never dared to voice your doubts. Has his steadfast love toward me forever ceased? Perhaps that's what gnaws at your soul in the early hours of the morning.

Has God forgotten to be gracious to me? Perhaps that's what casts a shadow over all your days. Has he in anger shut up his compassion towards me? If you let that smoulder away unspoken in your heart, it will eventually consume you and destroy you.

Instead, as you read this psalm and sing it, you find the very questions in the deepest recesses of your heart forming on your lips as the psalm detonates our doubts.

[20:01] And third, verse 10 to 20, verse 9 is not the end.

We've got to read on. To change the metaphor for a moment, a torrent surging down a hillside can be dangerous and threatening, but it can be diverted and channeled and managed so that it becomes a gentle stream or a deep reservoir.

And this psalm channels the torrent of raw grief and pain towards God, not away from him. I used to believe in God, but I used to go to church until I used to read the Bible and then.

And those painful experiences, those torrents of grief ran hard and fast and away from God. God. But here the psalm gently challenges us back, back to God.

Look at the dramatic change between verse 1 to 9 and verses 10 to 20. In the first part of the psalm, the psalmist is remembering the former days, the years of long ago.

[21:15] But in the second part of the psalm, at verse 10, he's remembering the years of the right hand of the Most High. But what does he mean by the years of the right hand of the Most High?

Back in Genesis, Jacob called his favourite son, Benjamin, son of my right hand. And in Psalm 17, David sings, you save by your right hand those who take refuge in you.

And in the Bible and other ancient literature, your right hand was a metaphor for strength, strength, and favour, and love. And so Asaph is looking back to times in history when God showed his power and his love and his favour.

You know, when you're under pressure, sometimes you revert to things you learned in childhood. I suppose more than one teenager under the pressure of exams has unconsciously sucked their thumb.

And like a devout Israelite, what does Asaph do? He remembers the greatest event in Israel's history that he'd learned about from his very youngest, the Exodus.

[22:34] Every year at Passover, Hebrew children asked their parents, what do you mean by this service? And every year their fathers replied, it is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt when he struck the Egyptians, but spared our houses.

Well, had Asaph seen Jerusalem sacked by the Babylonians? Had the gods of Babylon appeared to triumph over Yahweh of Israel? Asaph appeals to the years of the right hand of the Most High. Verse 13, Your ways, O God, are holy. What God is so great as our God? You are the God who performs miracles. You display your power among the peoples.

Yahweh is holy, entirely different from any pagan god. And in a display of his power, back at the Exodus, he crushed the Egyptian gods in plague after plague after plague.

How then could these Babylonian gods fare any better? Had Asaph seen columns of his countrymen march off into exile in Babylon? He appeals to the years of the right hand of the Most High.

[23 : 53] Verse 15, With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. God's people had been slaves in Egypt for 400 long years.

The situation couldn't have been any more hopeless. Israelites were weaponless, penniless, and powerless under the oppression of the Egyptians. But you know, God delights.

He delights to deliver the hopeless. He delights to intervene when we're at the end of our resources. And redeem them he did. And he set them free and brought them out.

And when God decides to act, how will these Babylonians ever resist his power? And then Asaph appeals to the right hand of the Most High again.

Verse 16, When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid. Indeed, the deep trembled. Then on to verse 19, Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters, yet your footprints were unseen.

[25 : 03] Yahweh is so holy, powerful, and mighty, that he's even able to roll back the waves of the sea, so his people can walk through and dry land. Who or what can possibly thwart his purposes, or stand in his way?

Neither Babylonians nor Glaswegians, neither relationship problems nor health issues, neither exams nor redundancies, can possibly limit a God who can roll back the sea.

But there's a hint here, of something more. How would you have felt with Pharaoh's armies behind you and the sea in front of you? Exhausted?

Terrified? Full of doubts? Cumbering with fear? Well, so were they. Exodus records, they were terrified and cried out to God.

They said to Moses, was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? God. But God still acted in love and grace and mercy and delivered a doubting and questioning people.

[26 : 14] And God's path for them led through the sea. It wasn't plan B. Pharaoh's change of heart hadn't taken God by surprise. That was his plan for them, terrifying though it was.

But when they looked back from the other side of the Red Sea, they saw that God had triumphed over their enemies and they sang, the Lord is my strength and song and has become my salvation. God's path for Asaph led through the sea. Asaph couldn't see God's footprints in the smoking ruins of Jerusalem. God's path for you may lead through the sea.

It may lead through somewhere that fills you with dread. It may lead through the mighty waters. You may not be able to see his footprints. But if it is truly his path for you, then he'll be with you.

And one day you'll look back and you'll say and you'll sing, the Lord is my strength and song and he has become my salvation. So appeal to the right hand.

[27 : 24] Appeal to the ears of the right hand of the Most High. The psalm brings us back to God. Fourthly and lastly, the psalm points us to Jesus.

Remember, the exodus was just a hint, just a foreshadowing, just a picture of the greater exodus that was still to come. And this psalm was written about 1500 BC, before Christ.

We live today in 20 AD. Anno Domini, the year of our Lord. Now after Christ, when we remember the years of the right hand of the Most High, we don't remember the exodus from Egypt.

We look back to the real event that the exodus only foreshadowed. Remember Luke's account of the transfiguration. Luke writes this, two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus.

They spoke about his departure, his exodus, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. Jesus' exodus was Calvary.

[28 : 41] Now you might think, what can a man on a cross, crucified between two thieves, possibly have to do with Israel coming out of Egypt? It. But just like the Israelites, every man and woman

born into this world is enslaved by sin, and we need God to break the power of sin and set us free. And at Calvary, the Bible tells us that he did do just that. God sent his own son, Jesus Christ, into this world. He lived the life we should have lived. He died the death we should have died. And at the cross he was punished for the sins of God's people. And all our sins past, present, and future were charged to his account. And he paid the price of our sin in full. And God raised him from the dead to proclaim to the world that Jesus had truly triumphed. And so Paul writes to the Colossians, having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. And Calvary's victory is history's greatest display of God's power. It was the supreme act of the right hand of the Most High. And what then does that great triumph assure us of?

[30 : 05] First this, as we read earlier in Romans 8, if God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

Whatever your doubts, whatever your frustrations, whatever your pain, whatever your questions, appeal to this, that God didn't spare his own son, but gave him up for you. And if he valued you that much, if you mean that much to him, then listen again. Has his steadfast love forever ceased? No. Are his promises at an end for all time? No. Has God forgotten to be gracious? Never. Has he in anger shut up his compassion? Never, ever, ever. It doesn't matter how it looks in the streets of Jerusalem. It doesn't matter how it looks in the streets of Glasgow, on Biles Road, the Cannon Street, or George Square. Appeal to the right hand of the Most High.

[31 : 17] Appeal to Calvary. If God is for us, who can be against us? And yet, and yet our path may lead through the sea.

In a world of funerals, hospitals, broken families, you may lose sight of his footprints. Yet, you will never go anywhere that he hasn't been before. His own path led through the sea. The hurt of betrayal, the agony of crucifixion, the indescribable pain of separation from God his Father. We will never experience anything in this broken world worse than he's gone through. Eudonald MacLeod writes, let us never imagine that God doesn't understand. God's son took our nature. He stood in outer darkness, in the place where there's no comfort. He stood in the place of the absolute why, where needing God as no man has ever needed God.

[32 : 26] He cried and God was not there. We never go beyond his pain. Our darkness is never more intense than his. Our whys are never more bewildered.

Sometimes when we have to ask, why me? Part of his answer is, me too. And that moment on the cross of grace's pain wasn't just so that he could identify with us. It wasn't just so that he could empathize with us. It wasn't just so that he could share our pain. Some of you may be familiar with St. Matthew's Passion. Back setting of St. Matthew's account of the crucifixion to music. And a couple of years ago I went along to see a production of St. Matthew's Passion by an opera company. And they were trying to be very modern and avant-garde. They set the production in the aftermath of a school massacre like Beslan or Dunblain. And the choir were playing the role of travelling singers who were singing the story of the crucifixion to the bereaved parents. You see the point they were making was this.

[33 : 46] That Jesus in his suffering and crucifixion knows the pain that bereaved parents go through. And that is true. But it's more than that.

Jesus didn't just go to the cross to share our sufferings. He went to the cross to end our sufferings. He went to the cross to pay the price of sin and reverse the fall and inaugurate a new age altogether. A world where revelation tells us that there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away. Appeal to the years of the right hand of the Most High. Appeal to Calvary. It's proof that God will one day end our sufferings and we shall be with him forever and ever. And have you stood recently in a cemetery or a crematorium choked with hurt and grief at the loss of a loved one?

Appeal to the years of the right hand of the Most High. Appeal to Calvary. Appeal to the empty tomb. When Jesus rose from the dead and was ascended into heaven and sat down in his father's right hand, it was proof that the last and final resurrection of all Christians has already begun. [35 : 09] And that empty tomb is the proof that every last Christian who has died will one day rise again. Appeal to the years of the right hand of the Most High.

Appeal to the real exodus. Appeal to Calvary. Appeal to the empty tomb. The psalm points us to Jesus. In closing then, Psalm 77, a controlled explosion for the soul.

It expresses our emotions. It dedicates our doubts. It brings us back to God and it points us to Jesus. Carl Truman writes, read the psalms over and over again.

Until you have the vocabulary, the grammar and the syntax, to lay your heart before God in lamentation. For if you do this, you will have the resources to cope with your own times of suffering and to keep on worshipping and trusting through the blackest of days.

Amen. Let's pray together. Almighty God, again we come into your presence to thank you for your word, to thank you for the resources it gives to us, to thank you that it is everything we need for life and godliness, to thank you that there's no experience in this world that you haven't given us the resources to cope.

[36 : 38] Father, we thank you for your son, we thank you for his redemption, for his victory at Calvary that assures us of new life and hope and heaven with you. We thank you for this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.