

Psalm 77: “I Was in Distress... Then I Thought....”



By Sue Nicewander

Jeri walks into the room and sits down quietly. She and I have been meeting for a short time and seem to have made good progress in dealing with a difficult set of circumstances. Yet something is very different this week. Her usually bright eyes have lost their determination. She is filled with a sadness I have not seen before. It is as if she has folded in on herself.

Jeri describes the most recent and particularly painful encounter with a chronically adversarial person. “I’m just so depressed,” she says simply, her eyes brimming with tears. “Nothing changes. It’s all so hard. I just can’t do this any more.”

Because Jeri is a dedicated Christian woman, she examines herself, works at obeying God, and cries out for His help in her distress. Yet her hard circumstances continue, seemingly beyond her control, through no apparent fault of her own. She suffers personal losses, both real and perceived, that give rise to a nagging sequence of questions: Why does God fail to answer? Why does pain run unceasingly through the long dark night? Where is the comfort promised to those who love God?

A lump rises in my throat as I remember a time when I felt that way, too. Recalling God’s instructions to encourage the fainthearted, we

turn to Asaph’s Psalm 77. The distressed psalmist recorded the guttural cries of his anguished soul as he dreadfully anticipated the captivity of Israel. His tormented heart repeatedly voiced itself with earnest appeals for divine mercy. Though God gave ear to that cry, the day of distress persisted. Asaph found no peace. But though in great distress over the impending destruction of Israel, he continued to call out in faith to his God. He questioned God’s judgment, yet his faith remained strong. Jeri, in contrast, does not call out in faith when her daily troubles overwhelm her. Asaph has some lessons for her.

Folding In

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 my soul refused to be comforted.

I remembered You, O God, and I groaned;
I mused, 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
long ago;

I remembered my songs in the night.
My heart mused and my spirit inquired:

“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?

*Sue Nicewander is a counselor at Biblical Counseling Ministries, Cakvary Baptist Church, Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin.

Has God forgotten to be merciful?
Has He in anger withheld His
compassion?"

Then I thought, "To this I will appeal:

The years of the right hand of the Most
High." Psalm 77:1-10a

1. Lost Confidence

When I was in distress, I sought the
LORD... Ps. 77:21

The Israelites lived confidently and without remorse in rebellion against God for generations. Their willful self-confidence brought them to ruin as they turned their backs on their sovereign Lord to chase the desires of their own hearts. Blindly disregarding God's warnings, the people pursued idols and misinterpreted God's longsuffering as divine impotence. Only Asaph recognized the dangerous path his nation had taken. He could see that God's hand was moving against them, but he had no power to change the situation by himself. Although it seemed he had lost confidence in his God, Asaph faithfully cried out to God for mercy. Contrary to the Israelites who placed their confidence in themselves alone, Asaph placed his confidence in God. In his godly confidence and faith, he questioned God's plan. He sought out God even though his cries of mercy for the Israelite nation went unanswered.

For Jeri, though, the rebellious self-confidence and antagonism of her work adversary leads her to question God's goodness and provision. She suffers persecution even though she pursues a godly life. Jeri questions God, but from a position of weak and immature faith. She presupposes that the righteous always prevail. When her expectations are not met immediately, nor according to her desires, Jeri turns away from a disappointing God. She seeks emotional relief, personal significance, purpose, and satisfaction in other ways. As she withers under the weight of her ongoing struggle, Jeri bemoans a stinging loss of self-confidence. But that loss still reflects the merciful nature of God. He redirects her to place her confidence where it really belongs: in God Himself.

2. Lost Comfort.

And my soul refused to be comforted.
Ps. 77:2b

The soul that focuses on its "distress" refuses to be comforted. But the character of the "distress" is of great significance. Asaph's distress developed when he recognized the true danger of sin and wanted his nation to turn to God to save their lives. Impending doom caused torment for his soul, yet he faithfully continued to call out to God in his misery.

Jeri, on the other hand, struggles to come to terms with the character of a God that claims to be good, but who allows evil and suffering to come upon those He says He loves. Her assessment of God's nature is based upon a wrong presupposition that God is only good and effective when evil and suffering do not touch His people. Her distress is partly the product of unbiblical thinking.

Jeri does not see how God's wisdom and mercy are active in the adversarial actions of her work associate. God is neither absent nor impotent. He continues to work out His divine plan to give Jeri new opportunities to honor Him through her suffering. She must live the truth in faith and love—amid suffering, knowing she will likely suffer more negative interactions for doing the right thing.

But how will Jeri "turn a soul away from sin"? When Jeri recognizes her adversary's mistreatment of her as a reflection of his lost spiritual condition, she will become concerned about his stand before God and will respond with the gospel. Emulating the example of her Savior, she will seek to rescue the soul of her enemy rather than seeking relief for herself. She need not fear the loss of comfort when she experiences suffering because of her work associate. True comfort does not come out of an easy life, but out of the knowledge that God is glorified in the faithful perseverance of His children.

3. Lost Faith

I remembered You, O God, and I
groaned... Ps. 77:3a

Asaph remembered God's past deliverance, but his personal suffering as part of Israel's suffering continued to trouble him. He was helpless to

change the situation through his own efforts. Instead he placed his trust squarely in God. The One who judged is the One who promises mercy.

Jeri faces a situation she is unable to rectify on her own. Past experience has taught her to have hope, but her hope rests upon a desire for God's will as she defines it. She wants what she wants. And it is a good thing to have friends, not adversaries at work. She is troubled because God does not give her what she desires. She prays every day. But when God does not meet her expectations, she wrongly assumes that He is either helpless or simply inactive. Her faith shaken, she seeks help from such shaky resources as psychotropic drugs, sympathetic friends, natural abilities and ambitions, recreation, and counselors. But she finds no lasting answers. Eventually she comes to the end of herself. Her choice has always been between faith in God and faith in her own way. Now God, by grace, brings her face-to-face with that central issue: whom will she worship?

4. Lost Perspective

I mused and my spirit grew faint...
Ps. 77:3b

Though Asaph felt overwhelmed by his circumstances, and his spirit grew faint, he continued to call out to God. Jeri complains about her circumstances instead of acknowledging God's goodness during her times of trouble. She thinks she is entitled to feel good about herself and her relationships. She believes that God is withholding what is owed to her. She feels overwhelmed with disillusionment at God's perceived failures. Jeri considers numbing her intense pain with alcohol, prescription drugs, an extravagant vacation, or even adultery.

5. Lost Goal

You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak. Ps. 77:4

Asaph was sleepless and speechless at the horror of Israel's fate. He knew that God's goal was to purify His people and draw them back to Himself, but that thought brought no comfort as he continued to focus upon the coming threat.

Jeri does not understand that her goal fails to align with God's. She wants relief from her pain and suffering. She is unaware that relief is

not the ultimate prize. In fact, God clearly states that His sovereign plan involves painful circumstances in the lives of His children in order to make them more like Christ. The Son of God Himself was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (Isa. 53:3). The biblical record exemplifies Paul, who cried day and night for three years out of concern about sin in the church (Acts 20:31). The apostle Peter declares that Christians will be persecuted when they follow Christ, and that God is pleased when they patiently suffer for doing what is right (1 Pet. 2:20-24). God's faithfulness is not proven by the absence of struggle, but by His sustenance and fellowship through the trial.

Jeri finds no peace as she ignorantly attempts to displace God's goals with her own desires. Because she fails to recognize that God does not promise to fulfill her expectations, she nurses a growing disappointment in God's character, bitterly believing that He cannot be trusted. Jeri can barely tolerate the thought that God would let her down like this. She lays awake all night in anguish, wondering if she is a fool to believe in Him at all.

6. Lost Discipline

I thought about the former days, the years
of long ago;
I remembered my songs in the night.
My heart mused and my spirit inquired.
Ps. 77:5-6

God's deliverance during the "good old days" mocked Asaph as he faced the certainty of captivity. He was perplexed by God's lack of response to his intense prayers.

Emotional pain is God's warning system. When heeded as God intended, powerful emotions lead us to God in accurate need. Powerful emotions lead to a careful search of Scripture to find the heart of the problem and God's answer. But in her problems, Jeri forsakes the faithful pondering of the Word. She follows her own desperate emotions instead. Forgetting God's faithfulness, she remembers her own song in the night. She communes with her own heart rather than the heart of God. Her spirit searches itself, not the Holy Spirit's guidance and illumination. As a result, her faith weakens further, and she begins to voice nagging doubts about God.

7. Lost Truth

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? Ps. 77: 7-9

Asaph questioned God’s character. But Asaph’s questions were asked from a position of faith in God. Though he questioned, his faith did not waver. Jeri’s questions are like Asaph’s, but they are not asked from foundation of faith. An unbiblical interpretation of her life leads her to false beliefs about God, so she continues to fold in on herself.

she continues to be miserable.

She believes that the past is all she has; the future holds no hope (verses 5-6). Assurance of salvation and future victory is missing. She has lost sight of the promise of His appearing. Her heart seeks only temporal relief rather than longing for His glory (2 Cor. 4:17-18). She has few (if any) eternal goals. She ceases to lay up treasures in heaven.

Because of her continuing rejection of the truth, she feels guilty. Now she wonders if God has rejected her (verse 7). Her questions reflect her insecurity: “Has He thrown me away? Is there any hope for me?”

Because Jeri has not dealt biblically with her sin, she continues to find no peace. She doubts whether God’s promises apply to her any

Asaph’s Questions	Jeri’s Assumption/Interpretation
Will the LORD reject forever?	God has rejected me.
Will He never show His favor again?	God does not care about what happens to me.
Is His unfailing love vanished forever?	God does not love me.
Has His promise failed for all time?	God is not faithful. His promises cannot be trusted. God is a liar. He does not keep His word.
Has God forgotten to be merciful?	God’s mercy has failed. God is inattentive and sloppy. He does not take good care of His people. He shirks His responsibilities.
Has He in anger withheld His compassion?	God is vindictive. He stands with a raised hammer just waiting for opportunities to lower it on His children. He delights in watching them suffer.

Jeri assumes that her heavy burden is unjustly piled upon her by God (verse 3). In part, she is correct. God loves her too much to give her inner peace while she harbors an ungodly attitude. But the crux of the problem lies in her belief that her “rights” have been denied. And she believes that God is neither good nor faithful. She judges God’s ways and finds Him at fault. Her self-centered focus leads her to presume to know better than God, so she places her will above His.

When her will is not done, she believes that God arbitrarily makes her miserable (verse 4). She bases this conclusion upon her persistent feelings of discomfort, rather than upon God’s own words of promise. Self-righteously, she assigns blame to God, in essence calling Him “a bad God.” She then wonders why

more (verse 8). Will His mercy ever return? She dares to conclude that God has forgotten to be gracious, that He has withdrawn His love and has made a victim of her. Now she voices uncertainty at her place in His plan. Her very salvation is in question. She perceives a vindictive God with a raised hammer ready to strike her down (verse 9).

8. Lost Focus

Then I thought, “To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High.”
 Ps. 77:10

Asaph foresaw the inevitable judgment of his nation. In his cries to God, his heart and mind focused on the coming misery of the Israelites’ suffering in captivity. He voiced his fears in his distress, but he continued to appeal to God’s

power to change all this.

In contrast, during this week, Jeri has been gazing long and hard at her own suffering rather than at the promises God has set before her in Christ and her heart fails in the time of adversity (Prov.24:10). God ordains suffering in order to teach her to trust Him and to grow in faith, but Jeri has a different agenda. She wants something for herself: comfortable circumstances, easy answers, and a convenient timetable. She wants God to do her part as well as His. She does not want to have to exercise strenuous faith, and she resents God for putting her in such a position.

Jeri can learn to give God glory and honor, regardless of the circumstances. He will help her to make the right decisions, keep the right perspective, plan properly, grow in faith and persevere with joy during the hard times. And the rest of Psalm 77 is part of this help. But Jeri does not consider these points. If she becomes more and more self-focused, she will fold in on herself in despair. In that state, she comes to me for counsel. As we look at Psalm 77:1-10a together, I point out that the first half of the chapter reflects the effect of trouble when the focus seems to be strictly on one's own misery.

Jeri looks up, startled to realize that is exactly what she is doing.

Unfolding

Then I thought, "To this I will appeal;
the years of the right hand of the Most High."

I will remember the deeds of the LORD;
Yes, I will remember Your miracles of long ago.

I will meditate on all Your works and consider all Your mighty deeds.

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.

With Your mighty arm You redeemed
Your people,

The descendants of Jacob and Joseph.
The waters saw You, O God,
The waters saw You and writhed;
The very depths were convulsed.

The clouds poured down water.
The skies 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 not seen.
You led Your people like a flock
By the hand of Moses and Aaron.
Ps. 77:10-20

1. Biblical Confidence

Then I thought, "To this I will appeal; the years of the right hand of the Most High."
Ps. 77:10

The words "Then I thought" marked the transition of Asaph's thinking from questioning and despair to trust, remembrance, and hope in God. He deliberately recounted the sovereignty and grace of God. He displayed his faith. No longer did he sink under the current distressing situation. His eye was on the God who was bringing it all to pass.

Indeed, as Jeri and I discuss the second half of Psalm 77, the change in her countenance is remarkable. Her focus moves outside herself to see the faithfulness of Asaph's mighty God who commands everything.

2. Biblical Comfort

I will remember the deeds of the LORD.
Ps. 77:11a

Asaph recalled the years of God's longsuffering and provision for Israel. Now his soul revived as he chose to trust God to be faithful in the future as well.

Jeri has forgotten the many ways God has helped her in the past. Now we remember and talk specifically about the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that bought her salvation. We talk about the cost of her redemption and the willingness of God to pay that price on her behalf. Her memory is jarred by God's grace. She remembers many instances when God has intervened for her, or has caused her to learn so much that she counted negative experiences as joy in the end. She finds true comfort as she draws close to God. She is renewed by His goodness. God

comforts her—not to make her comfortable—but so she can be a comforter, even to those who hate her (2 Cor. 1:3-4; Luke 6:31-36). She learns to extend God's goodness to her adversary through kind speech, a tenderhearted attitude, forgiveness, good deeds, and generosity.

3. Biblical Faith

Yes, I will remember Your miracles of long ago. Ps. 77:11b

Asaph drew assurance and strength from the wonderful Old Testament record of God's miracles. But today believers remember the wonder of the cross of Jesus Christ that freely flowed out of God's extravagant mercy and magnanimous grace. That incredible mercy eradicates the death we deserve, and His grace provides abundant life instead. As the precious gospel message comes into focus, self fades and Christ is magnified. God's awesome character comes rightfully to the forefront.

When Jeri considers the wonders of God, She recognizes that her view of God's character was skewed, as evidenced by the ignorant questions she previously asked. She repents to Him. In a fresh way, she decides to serve and trust Him. With faith redirected by truth, she chooses to dwell upon Christ instead of herself, to abide in Him rather than to make demands of Him, and to humbly accept His will as supreme, even when she is called to suffer for His sake.

4. Biblical perspective.

I will meditate on all Your works and consider all Your mighty deeds. Ps. 77:12

Biblical living is seldom warm and fuzzy. The Israelites' situation was grim. However, even though the situation did not improve, Asaph meditated upon the strength of God and found refreshment for his weary soul. He accepted the circumstances without trying to dictate to God how He should accomplish His plan. Leaving God's responsibility where it belonged, Asaph's fear dissolved as he talked of God's work. He carried assurance with him through the troubled times.

Jeri finds that same principle in effect today. A long look at the sovereign power of God refreshes her soul with renewed confidence in His willingness and ability to fulfill His

promises. Together, Jeri and I list some of the ways God has demonstrated His love and power both in biblical history and in her personal history. She uses that list to offer prayers of thanksgiving. She brings fresh enthusiasm to studying her Bible. She learns more of God's attributes. She writes these down and meditates on them. Her daily prayer now begins with praise and adoration for God's character, followed by thanks for specific evidence of His enduring faithfulness. She lifts God up, rather than herself, extolling His attributes and strength. Such prayers form the basis of faith-filled supplication, petition, and intercession that delights in God's works.

5. Biblical goals.

With your mighty arm You redeemed Your people. Ps. 77:15

God set Israel apart to bring glory to Himself. Asaph knew from history that God had physically redeemed His people in many times and in many ways. Because of that certainty, the psalmist chose to trust that God would personally fulfill His promises to care for the nation in the future as well, even if this meant captivity in a foreign land. Asaph saw the situation differently when he focused upon God's character and agenda instead of on the distressing situation with Israel's enemies. Even in the face of terrible threats, the psalmist could articulate assurance in God's ultimate redemption of Israel.

Now Jeri also chooses to place her confidence and praise in God, even in the face of difficulty, especially because she does not know what the future will bring. Trusting in God's redemptive plan, she seeks to glorify God by pressing on to do what she knows God wants of her, regardless of the cost.

One of Jeri's objectives is to seek the mind of Christ toward her adversary, to love Him enough to keep an eternal perspective on their problems. For example, she knows her enemy needs Christ. In order to best reach him, anything Jeri does about earthly circumstances must uphold the Biblical principles she says she believes. To do so, she must set aside her own needs and wishes and concentrate her verbal and nonverbal energies toward reaching her enemy with the gospel. Thus, her goal is

reframed to give God glory in measurable ways (Isa. 43:7).

Jeri first seeks to know God's will from Scripture, then makes plans to act upon that knowledge. She knows that God is not willing that anyone should perish spiritually (2 Pet. 3:9). Therefore, she learns Scripture regarding evangelism. She also discovers that she is responsible to go to her work adversary and talk about their problems in communication. (Matt. 5:23-24). So Jeri thinks through the conflicts in her life and writes out a couple of viable alternatives that may lead to resolution. She then carefully follows through with a dialogue and formulates detailed alternatives based upon what she learns.

As she works at this, Jeri finds that many factors are out of her control and things do not go as anticipated. She sees that she cannot place her trust in her own plans. But we conclude that the biblical goal is not to solve the problem or even to bring her enemy to Christ; the goal is to glorify God. Jeri learns to trust in God who works all things together for good. Even when her plans do not seem to succeed and her enemy does not change, she can reach the greater goal of bringing honor to Christ.

Another objective involves Jeri's general testimony at work, at home, and at church. She sets biblical goals to demonstrate godliness in word and deed. We talk about ways she can develop godly friendships for accountability, encouragement, learning, and ministry opportunities. She learns to rejoice as she acts responsibly and leaves the results in God's almighty hands.

6. Biblical Discipline

The waters saw You, O God,
The waters saw You and writhed;
The very depths were convulsed.
Ps. 77:16-20

Fear and trouble reveal our allegiances and the disciplines of our faith, as Asaph reminds us in this reference to the parting of the Red Sea. God had called Israel to fear Him, but instead Israel saw the threat of Pharaoh's army and chose to fear that. Even the waters knew better; they saw God for who He was and instantly responded to Him. Asaph eventually recognized the parallels to his situation. He experienced despair when

he looked at the impending doom of his nation. But as soon as he began to fear God he saw deliverance at the hand of a Sovereign more powerful than any earthly circumstance.

Jeri finds her threatening situation gives rise to fearful thoughts such as "What will happen to me?" or "What if I lose what I have?" She learns that these selfish thoughts must be rejected; however, she must also guard against complacency. Like the depths that were troubled at the power of God, Jeri should find herself unsettled and repulsed by sin; the fear of our omnipotent God should move her to the disciplines of biblical change.

Jeri is called to discipline her mind to firmly rely upon God's sovereign goodness. She must learn to resolutely choose to fear Him instead of the storms that rage around her. Exercising careful self-examination and diligent repentance for any failure to trust and obey Him, she is called to walk faithfully through the night knowing He is with her, no matter how she feels.

7. Biblical Truth

The clouds poured down water,
The skies 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.
Ps. 77:17-18

Truth endures the storms of life. Asaph's fear and trouble gave way before the glorious display of the might and power of God as He parted the Red Sea. The word pictures are stunning, and Jeri and I find our jaws dropping as we read the passage together. Imagine standing before such a scene! Better yet, the God of then is the God of now, and He has made Himself accessible. Jeri need never despair.

Jeri begins to memorize Scripture so that she will remember the truth in moments of crisis. We find relevant passages from her studies of God's character and New Testament passages on suffering.

She lifts up prayer many times a day and refreshes her memorized verses at that time also. In so doing, she learns to pray Scripture, and she finds that her prayers are often

answered very clearly. This exercise grounds her in truth concerning her Savior, and fills her with confidence in Him.

8. Biblical Focus

Your path led through the sea,
Your way through the mighty waters,
Though Your footprints were not seen.
Ps. 77:19

Logic and faith led Asaph to conclusions about the future, even though he was unable to discern the purpose and presence of God. He recognized that God's footsteps are sure and sound, especially through the storms, even when He is humanly imperceptible.

As she reads Psalm 77, Jeri's eyes open. Like the psalmist, she realizes she cannot fully know God's ways, nor can she always trace His steps. Yet all around is evidence of His presence and His character. Jeri resolves to trust Him when the seas rage as well as when they are calm, for she realizes she knows the One who made the storm.

Jeri's spirit revives as she considers God's grace toward her. Reminders of His eternal presence and fellowship, His salvation and song, His guidance and assurance, His protection and provision help Jeri recognize and turn away from the empty threats of her depression. She studies Ephesians chapters 1-3 and writes about the grace of God in her life. She has been trying to gain God's favor and even to obligate Him by her good works. Now she repents, asking God to purify her motives to love Him completely and

her neighbor as herself. She logs her progress at catching herself when she is serving herself under the guise of serving God.

9. Biblical Hope.

You led Your people like a flock by the hand
of Moses and Aaron. Ps. 77:16-20

Asaph remembered that God does not forget to lead His people. Through the ages when believers have walked through the valley of the shadow of death, He has walked alongside (Ps. 23:4). His plan is neither arbitrary nor threatened by hardship. To the contrary, with struggle comes opportunity for spiritual growth. God has prepared His children for victory in the difficult journeys of the past and the present. He continues to prepare His children for the future as well, providing for every need by His steady, timely and faithful Hand.

Though difficult circumstances persist, Jeri now finds peace and hope in her journey with Christ. She learns to recognize that all we really *have* is Christ, and even then it is He who has *us*. The pleasures of her earthly blessings are counted but loss in comparison to her riches in Christ (Phil. 3:7-8). Whatever may befall her in this world, Jeri knows that she is enjoined and enabled to glorify God in her responses, so that she lays up treasures in heaven that can never pass away. Though she still loses things that are temporal, she knows she cannot lose that which is eternal (2 Cor. 4:17-18). And it is enough.