

“The Struggle to Believe”

Psalm 77:1-20

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The Psalms are rich with the diversity of the life experiences of God’s people. Last week we considered the joy they find in the wonderful world God has made for them. But today we have before us a more typical psalm, a prayer to the Lord in time of trouble. The particular trouble is not identified, as is not uncommonly the case in the psalms of this type, of which there are a great many in the Psalter. In that way the psalm remains relevant to all believers, no matter what the particulars of their circumstances. If, for example, the hymn “It is Well with My Soul” could only be meaningfully sung by parents who had lost their children in a maritime disaster – the particular circumstances out of which that hymn was born – how many fewer could sing it or take comfort from it.

Text Comment

v.6 He is remembering happier days. But those recollections only make more painful his present situation. As we do so often, this man is tormenting himself as he rolls over in his mind the situation he faces and the confusion he feels.

Faith, someone has observed, is likened in the Bible to the hand by which we take hold of Christ, the eye by which we look to him, the mouth by which we feed on him; and the foot by which we come to him and walk with him. Faith is the confidence we have that what God has told us is true; that the promises he has made to us will come to pass; and that God’s character is such that we can always rely on him to be true to himself and so to his Word. But the Bible also teaches us that our faith will be tested. It teaches us that not least in the many psalms that provide a record of faith on trial, of the struggle that it is for even experienced believers to remain steadfast in their confidence in God in the teeth of the difficult and confusing circumstances of life.

Indeed, taking the Bible as a whole, we may fairly conclude that such a struggle of heart and soul as this man describes will be an experience shared by every believer at one time or another. Through many tribulations we must inherit the kingdom of God and for Christians some of those tribulations will be, must be, the many tests or trials of our faith in God. There are some people we imagine who must be immune to this struggle. Take a C.S. Lewis, for example, a man who came to the Christian faith from the standpoint of confident skepticism; so a man who had to be convinced, virtually against his will, of the truth of the Christian faith; a man who then wrote books recommending the faith and defending the faith that have brought multitudes of others to faith in Christ; a man whose arguments for the faith seem as unassailable today as they did when he first published them nearly a century ago. *But Lewis was a Christian and like any other Christian, like any other substantial believer, as the author of Psalm 77 would have been, he had his doubts.* In a letter to his childhood friend Arthur Graves he confessed this about himself.

“I have no *rational* ground for going back on the arguments that convinced me of God’s existence: but the irrational deadweight of my old skeptical habits and the spirit of this

age, and the cares of the day, steal away all my lively feeling of the truth, and often when I pray I wonder if I am not posting letters to a non-existent address.” [398-399]

Eminent Christians, other people we might well have imagined to be beyond struggle with doubt, wrestled through their lives with doubts about the truth of the Bible itself or, perhaps more often, about the genuineness of *their own faith* and God’s acceptance of them. One such man was Samuel Rutherford, a man famous for his intimacy with Christ. Indeed, no one more than Samuel Rutherford demonstrates the reality of genuine personal fellowship between Christ and the soul. But in speaking about doubts to a friend in one of his immortal letters, Rutherford wrote, “I speak as an expert.” John Bunyan was another such Christian. “Doubting Castle” in his *Pilgrim’s Progress* was not invented out of whole cloth. Bunyan was telling his own story in that great account of the salvation of a soul. He had found himself, no matter the power of his conversion or the reality of his walk with God, in Doubting Castle. That was how he knew to put such a place in his account of Christian experience!

The experience of these men and vast multitudes of other Christians remind us of what we are too often tempted to forget, viz. that *it is a great thing to believe in God!* All the time, every day, in so many different ways, both obvious and subtle, our faith is under assault. A tendency or natural inclination is constantly asserting itself to live by sight instead; to treat the visible world as the only true world and to forget or ignore all that God has told us about himself, about what is really happening in this world and in our own lives, and how essential it is to remember who we are, what we are, where we’re going, and how we’re getting there; to remember that we trust and believe in him. It is so easy for us, so natural – it requires no thought, no recollection, no evaluation of the evidence – to think of our breakfast as nothing more than the food we have prepared, the food we purchased at the grocery store. It requires attention and effort, on the other hand, to look until we can see the invisible hand that is setting our table and providing our daily bread. And, in the same way, it is so easy to be happy or sad according to the visible circumstances of our lives, but much harder to evaluate our lives at that moment in keeping with the promises of God, the future world, or the sacrifice of our Savior on the cross. It is so easy to see another human being; so much harder to remember the angels and demons who are also present in our world.

I hope you are grateful, I certainly am, that the Bible is such an honest book, as candid about life’s difficulties, even for the children of God, as it is. *You will never learn to think of faith as an easy thing in the Bible.* It is the Bible that teaches us about the life-long struggle with sin, about the peaks and valleys of Christian experience, and about the reality of doubt. Here is a man who, like Rutherford or Bunyan, we might have thought to be beyond a struggle with doubt. He had walked with God a long time. He was apparently a significant figure in the life of Israel and at the temple in Jerusalem. Yet here is this psalm, like so many other psalms, coming white-hot out of the troubling experiences of his life. The song is a recollection of a time when his faith wavered, was weak, and how the Lord graciously made his faith strong again.

We don’t know the circumstances, as I said, but we know from the psalm their effects. He felt far away from God, that God was not near to him. His faith lacked vitality, even a sense of reality. He prayed to God, but it seemed to him that he had received nothing but cold silence in return. Where was the Lord? Why could he not find him? Or, better, why had the Lord not found him?

The fact that he could remember times when he basked in a sense of the Lord's nearness and love only made his present situation the more painful. How far away those days seemed now! More than this, whatever the particular problem was that he was facing, the Lord hadn't resolved it. It was still there, a stone in his shoe, a thorn in his flesh. He couldn't wake up in the morning or go to bed at night thinking about anything else. *He was beginning to waver, to wonder: perhaps God is not there after all!* Perhaps he isn't my God after all. Perhaps he is not the God I have believed him to be; or, perhaps he had begun to doubt that God *cared for him*. He gives powerful expression to his doubts in vv. 7-9. Has God's love ceased? Has he forgotten to be merciful? Has God reneged on his promises? Have I been duped? His doubts were becoming stronger than his faith.

Surely all of you who have been Christians for any length of years have found yourselves in this man's shoes at least once or twice, if not many times. But the psalm not only teaches us that real believers can pass through challenging times and can struggle with doubts; the psalm shows us how to practice our faith in such times.

We must not miss the obvious. The psalm was written both to describe the agony of doubt through which this man had passed *and* to celebrate his deliverance from his doubts and the restoration of his faith. However deep his doubts at the beginning of the psalm, by the end of it they have been overcome; wonderfully overcome. True enough, every Christian's experience will not be the same. The trial of faith can last for a short time or a long time; it can consist of doubts about God or about one's own faith. Doubt can be overcome in a moment of stunning realization, as it was in the case of the author of Psalm 73, or only slowly over time. That is not the point. The point is that doubts are real and painful and unsettling, and that God knows how to rescue his children in their trials! But however God may bring deliverance, it is ours to seek it and that is what we learn from this good man.

First, and obviously, this man worked the problem. He confessed his doubts. He explained in prayer to God precisely what he had come to think or, at least, to worry about. He didn't think it sinful or unmanly or self-centered to make a great deal of the trial through which he was passing. He made a breast of his doubts to God – probably to others as well – and he was rewarded. The psalm is the story of an honest man being rewarded for his honesty. Here is a man who did not make the mistake so many have made: simply to accept, to come to terms with the weakness of his faith and lose himself in the day to day business of life. He didn't simply drift away from confidence in God and God's Word and to continue in that state for months or years on end. A weak faith allowed to remain weak will not sustain a Christian life. This man was wise enough to admit that if faith in the living God is *anything* it is *everything!* Therefore, job 1 is to see to the nurture, the preservation, and the practice of that faith!

Nor did he allow himself to indulge the illusion that his doubts were too shameful to mention since they are a form of unbelief in God. He didn't make the mistake of thinking that to admit his doubts was to speak ill of himself or of God. He opened his mouth, he confessed his doubts, and he agonized over them before the Lord. It was only when he dealt with this crisis of faith that the objective impossibility of his doubts began to appear to him. It was precisely by acknowledging what he was thinking that the way forward occurred to him.

“Has the Lord’s steadfast love forever ceased?” Just to put that question to himself set him to thinking about that possibility. Has the God whose steadfast love had been Israel’s salvation time and time again, has that God become someone else? “Has God forgotten to be gracious?” Is it possible that the God whose mercies are new every morning has now run out of mercy? To ask the question is to answer it. It is no easy thing to stop believing in everything you have known to be true of God; his reasons for his faith had always been entirely sufficient in years past. Putting his doubts on the table, as it were, defining them explicitly, facing what they mean and what they imply led this good man from the first step to the second.

That second step was to make the case against his doubts. After all, he didn’t want them to be true. The thought of this universe bereft of a God of love and mercy and faithfulness, the thought that God’s Word would no longer be a light to his path or a lamp to his feet; these were not happy thoughts! So, he took his doubts on as a man of intellectual and spiritual integrity will do. He didn’t plan to live in a fog. He wanted the air to clear even if, God forbid, he was at last forced to give up his faith. So, what did he do? He began recollecting why for so long he had a sturdy faith; why he had not doubted the reality of God or the truth of his Word. He “filled his mouth with arguments” as Job did before him.

Many of you children and most of you adults will remember that scene in *The Silver Chair*, one of Lewis’ Narnia stories. This was when the witch-queen of the Underworld tried to make the children believe that her dismal kingdom was the only world there was and that what they remembered of their own far better world was really only a dream. As she talked to them her words acted on them almost like a drug and in the background was the sound of the mandolin that she was playing, a sound that drowned out the sound of their own thoughts. This is Lewis’ picture of the spiritual reality that Bunyan was describing when he had his pilgrim locked up in Doubting Castle! The children knew there was something they should remember, something very important. Aslan, if you remember, had sent them on a mission, but their minds were full of the queen’s words and her music lulled them to sleep. “The sun? There is no sun. You have seen my lamps and imagined that there was a sun.” That is what the queen told the children.

If you remember the story you will also remember that Aslan had warned them and prepared them for this. He had given the children four signs to remember and repeat. Before they left on their mission he had warned them: “...the signs which you have learned here will not look as you expect them to look...that is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearances.” But they had forgotten the signs and Aslan as well. Appearances had become everything to them. After all, the queen was so beautiful!

That is what had happened to this man and that is what so often happens to us. We forget what we know, what we have learned, what we have ourselves experienced, what we had been convinced was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We forgot all the reasons we had believed in the first place; all the conviction, all the assurance that had been ours before for the best of reasons. The world around us, the words we hear from every direction every day, the lulling music makes us forget that the Lord had told us to expect such trials and what to do when we found our faith being tested. Souls go to sleep; appearances become everything.

He was a wise man. He remembered what he was supposed to do. He was supposed to remember the signs; he was to call to mind the truth he had been taught and that had been proved to his soul. We often forget that thoughts are also acts, acts that we can control, can perform. This man actively recollected what he had forgotten. Depending on the test, the time, the circumstances, there are innumerable arguments or evidences to recollect.

Blaise Pascal, the celebrated French mathematician, philosopher, and man of letters, like Lewis a great defender of the Christian faith, was also a man who knew from personal experience about the doubts Christians can struggle to overcome. For Pascal had been the discovery of the truth about his own sin that he made as he read the Word of God, a discovery that his conscience confirmed that made him a Christian. It was the Bible's description of his own heart that convinced him. As he put it:

“The Gospel to me is simply irresistible. Being the man I am, being full of lust, and pride, and envy, and malice and hatred, and falsehood, and all accumulated and exasperated misery, to me the Gospel of the grace of God, and the redemption of Christ, and the regeneration and sanctification of the Holy Spirit, that Gospel to me is simply irresistible.”

And so that is what he remembered when his faith grew weak: why he had become a Christian in the first place, what had convinced him of the truth that he found in God's Word. Or a believer might recollect, as any believer can, the Lord's faithfulness to him or her in the past, the particular ways in which the Lord provided or instructed or corrected or encouraged or showed himself to him or to her. There are such memories from my past life that have often helped me to banish my doubts. The fact that he is not or has not recently seemed to help you in just those ways hardly means that he has not helped you in many ways before. And since he told you to expect such tests or trials, times of spiritual dryness or weariness or distraction, should we not expect to find both in our lives: proofs of his love and care on the one hand, and times without obvious demonstrations of that love and care on the other.

This is why it is so valuable to read church history and Christian biography. This is what you will find in every case. You will see men and women convinced and you will see their conviction weakening only to be restored again. I have read a great many biographies, autobiographies, and diaries or journals of the saints and, as the Word of God before them, they too teach me both how faith is convinced and how it is tried. The more you see your own experience in those of other believers, the more you realize how similar your trials are to theirs, the more confidently you will remember the truth you forget when your faith is made weak for some reason. In the church newsletter of Westminster Chapel in London, Martyn Lloyd-Jones made just this point to his congregation.

“When you feel that the fight is too much for you, and all is against you, and when you are complaining of all that is happening to you read chapter 11 of the Epistle to the Hebrews. If you do not feel ashamed of yourself at the end, well... And if you do not get up and say, ‘Yes, they did it in the strength of God and I am going to! If God enabled them, he will enable me,’ I do not understand you.”

But by far the best thing to remember is not so much your own experience, your own past encounters with the mercy and faithfulness of God – important as those recollections are – but the great facts of God’s redemption. This is what this man remembered. In his time he thought naturally of the exodus from Egypt, the great redemptive event of the ancient epoch, the OT’s great picture of divine redemption leading to eternal life.

Living as we do in this day and age, we think not so much of the exodus – though it is worth our remembering that – but of those great events of which the exodus was an enacted prophecy: the birth, the life and ministry, the death on the cross, and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. What love, what power, what genius, what perfect answer to the problem of our sin, our guilt, our separation from God. Who would have; who could have ever invented such a story? No one in first century Israel or Rome! The utter unexpectedness of it, the historical demonstration of its historicity, its power to transform human life and the life of the world against the grain of every human prejudice and all human pride: it is simply breathtaking! Remember and contemplate *that history*, call it to mind, roll it over in your thoughts and see if your doubts don’t perish before these great facts of history.

That’s what this man did and that is what happened to him. His doubts began to dissolve in the recollection of what God has done. Did you notice the striking difference between the first half of the psalm and the last? The first verses of Psalm 77 are dominated by the first person singular pronouns: “I,” “me,” and “my.” Everything as the psalm begins is “I this” and “my that.” Count up the times those pronouns appear. More than twenty times through verse 12. And then no more. Once he began recollecting the mighty works of God, once he began setting the Lord before him, God, not himself, not his own situation, not his own spiritual pain filled his thoughts.

What? God forgetting to be merciful; the God who did such things for the salvation of his people? Impossible! There is a mystery here, to be sure; the mystery of God’s dealing with the soul. The very things that make other men unbelievers – the struggles and confusions of life – cure real Christians of any possibility of unbelief! These doubts that appear from time to time in a believing heart are the very things that cause us to cry out to God and prompt us to remember those things that cannot help but put our doubts to rest.

The crosses we must bear in our lives, the shipwreck which is made of some of our hopes and dreams for this world, the transgressions and sins and self-inflicted wounds, the dark providences and unanswered prayers, the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous, I say these things that make unbelievers of so many make us who are the Lord’s only the more sure that our faith is nothing less than the conviction of the truth.

And now we can see some of the Lord’s wisdom in permitting our faith to be tried and even for a time to become weak. Nothing becomes so certain as that which is found to be certain even through and in defiance of doubts. No wonder then that there are so many things in life and so many things in the teaching of the Bible that are calculated to awaken doubt and test our faith. Only a tested faith, a faith that grows stronger in trial is a faith to carry us to the end of our journey. No wonder then that all the saints, and the best among them, have struggled with doubts.

So, when your faith is weak, do what this man did. Confess your doubts and fill your mouth with arguments. Call to mind the solid foundation upon which the Christian faith is built. It may take time; it may require some perseverance, but soon enough all of this thought about me, about myself and my troubles will be changed into a happy preoccupation with the majesty, the faithfulness, the mighty works, and the love and mercy of God!