

'Thy Way Was in the Sea' (Psalm 77)

by T. Austin-Sparks

God's way is always in the sea, and He will make a way for us through even the darkest waters.

Scripture: Psalm 77:10

Topics: "God's Deliverance", "Hope in Despair"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks reflects on Psalm 77, where Asaph, a once joyful choir master, finds himself in despair due to the absence of God's evident presence and power in his life. Asaph's turning point comes when he recalls God's past deliverance of Israel through the Red Sea, realizing that the same God who made a way for His people can also make a way for him in his current troubles. This remembrance transforms his lament into hope, as he understands that God's paths may be hidden but are always present, even in the darkest times. Sparks emphasizes that, like Asaph, believers can trust in God's faithfulness to provide a way through their own challenges, no matter how insurmountable they may seem. Ultimately, he reassures that God is always capable of leading His people through the depths of despair.

Transcript

Reading: Psalm 77

The heading of this psalm shows that it was contributed by Asaph, who was David's choir master - the leader of the singers. Quite a number of psalms are attributed to him, and in this one he was in real trouble; he was a man of music who had lost his music, a song leader whose only song was a lament. We do not know the actual cause of his difficulty, but it seems quite clear that it was due to the lack of evidence of God's presence or power. The signs which should have manifested God's glory were not forthcoming; Asaph could see nothing to indicate that the Lord had any interest or concern in his situation; and so, cast down and depressed, he brooded over the circumstances; and the more he did so the more he found himself in the mire of despair.

The words are alarming, but right in the full flow of his outpoured complaint there came a turning-point, when he pulled himself up short and decided that he would not allow his weakness or infirmity to govern any longer, adding, "But I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High" (verse 10). This became the turning point. From then on the dark night began to give place to the rising sun of a new outlook. Once again life had a meaning.

In the course of his recollection there had come to mind one of his own experiences, "I will call to remembrance my song in the night" (verse 6). This does not mean that he proposed to recall that there had been a time when he was more cheerful and sang even in the dark, but implies that he called back to mind the subject matter of that nocturnal song. There had apparently been a night when he could not sleep and so occupied his waking hours by composing a song for the choir. Its subject matter was that ever-recurring theme of Israelite psalmody, the exodus from Egypt. Asaph remembered how he had indulged his poetic gift in describing the way in which the Lord got His people out of Egypt and through the Red Sea, celebrating the mighty work of God which was expressed in this deliverance. As the words came back to him, he suddenly realised that he himself was now in the same predicament, needing to find a way through, and that the song which had applied to the nation was now valid for him - he needed to take a dose of his own medicine. He remembered what he had said and sung to encourage others in their times of difficulty and was able to appropriate the same comforting truths for himself. It was at that moment that streaks of dawn came into his dark sky, heralding a coming day, so that his psalm finished in a blaze of light.

The operative phrase, which seems to be the focal point of his awakened memory, was "Thy way..." Asaph's own trouble was that he could see no way. His situation was such as to be like a siege around his soul; the dark forces had compassed him about and he could see neither a way out nor a way through. This is so often the perplexity of God's children: they can see no way through.

In his song that night, Asaph had made much of the fact that the Lord's way was in the sea and His paths in great waters. Israel could first of all find no way out - they were held fast in Egypt's bondage. Then God solved that problem, only for them to be faced by another and a greater, for they had been given a way out but there was no way through. The Red Sea lay in front of them, Pharaoh's pursuing army was coming up behind; and the desert and the mountains were on either side. So it was that they were confronted by that impassable, threatening sea which straddled their path ahead and only suggested death and the grave. They had come out, but now it seemed that shame, reproach and calamity were imminent. It looked very much like the end of the road.

On that occasion the problem was no problem to God. He was not in a panic, not even in a quandary, nor did He propose to lead them around by detours and by-passes. No He went straight through. We may be without a way, but God never is. He led them right through the deep. For others, great waters present an impasse, but the Lord has His own path through them. The words, "Thy footsteps were not known" suggest that everybody was wondering where the Lord could tread, for there was no visible foothold. When it was all over they were still wondering how He had done it, but the thing that mattered was that they were out on the other side. The Lord was not daunted by the waters - He just made His way through them and led His people with Him. Sea or mountains do not present obstructions to Him, for He proceeds unhindered on His way. He took His people with Him; He led them through the impassable.

How vividly Asaph remembered that night when he composed his encouraging song to celebrate that great historical movement through the sea, but now he suddenly realised that he was being challenged by his own words, as every speaker for God, and singer for God, always is. His sea was not the same as theirs, but it was just as threatening; the hostile pressure from behind was different from Egypt's armies, but just as cruel and just as unavoidable. What should he say? That God had forgotten? That God had allowed him to be hemmed in without a way of escape? That the waters were too deep for God, or that He who had brought him out was now unable to bring him through? No, that could not be true. He would think again of that song in the night, the song of God's deliverance and of the way through which He Himself

made for His harassed people. "Thy way was in the sea." Then he would tell himself that this same God who brought His people through then, would make a way for him - even though it had to be through deep waters.

Again and again in the Old Testament this experience was repeated in the history of God's people. Men found themselves encircled by difficulties and confronted by the impossible, but in every case the Lord led them through. His footsteps were unknown, but they were always sure; as untraceable by man as any footprints on water, but direct and purposeful as befits our almighty God.

In Luke 21 the New Testament records a preview of the end, as given by the Lord Jesus to His disciples. The descriptions are such that they were certainly not exhausted by the happenings when Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70. Among the many predictions concerning features at the end-time is the prophecy that there will be "distress of nations with perplexity". The force of this last word is to describe an impasse - no way out. That, said the Lord, is what the nations will have to face, and face it without God. Was there ever a more accurate description of the world situation? Distress - with no way through, no prospect but despair? It is a dreadful experience to be gripped by complete despair, but this need never happen to Christ's disciples. He has promised that His faithfulness will always provide a way of escape. This time it will be upwards, so they must lift up their heads to see redemption - a way out - personified, as He Himself comes swiftly to greet them with footsteps which are not known.

So we see that what can be true for any Asaph in his own personal circumstances, will one day be equally valid for the whole Church. In the darkness of the world situation, the human prospects for God's people grow gloomier and gloomier. It may seem, as it did for the psalmist, that God's very mercy has clean gone for ever and that His promises have failed. God, however, has guaranteed to give a way out and up by the return of Christ. Men without Christ have every reason to feel their hearts failing them for fear, but the redeemed can quietly and confidently rely on a way through with God. No seas like these seas! No deeps so daunting as these! But God is not at all at the end of His resources. His way was in the seas as He led Israel through the depths; He made a way for Asaph in his time of distress; so we can be certain that He has a pathway for us too, even though it be through the darkest waters. "Who is so great a God as our God?"

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