Memories - Bad and Good

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[0:00] I wonder how many of you have heard the saying, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, hoping for a different result.

That's an expression which is often said by people who are very frustrated. You may have heard that in various church meetings and committee meetings. Perhaps you've heard that at work.
It's an expression that's usually said by people who are frustrated. They feel that things are not going well. And to cope with that, to address that, they would like to change things.
But for whatever reason, in their desire to change things, they're frustrated. And so in their exasperation, they say this is the definition of insanity, doing the same thing over and over again, hoping for a different result.
I wonder, when we read Psalm 77, if you saw any way that the author of that psalm might be accused of insanity, at least by that definition.
[1:05] Do you see any way in which that psalm might be accused of doing the same thing over and over again, hoping for a different outcome? The psalm has two different parts.

They're quite different in tone. There's verses 1 to 9, and then verses 10 to 20. In the first part, something has gone terribly wrong.
That's clear from the very beginning, isn't it? Notice the poignancy of this psalm as it opens. Indeed, verse 1, you feel that the psalmist's grief is so overwhelming that he's almost inarticulate.
That's smoothed over a little bit in the translation that we were reading, but he expresses himself in cries that are almost not even sentences.
That first verse could be translated, My voice to God, and I cry out. My voice to God, that he will hear me. And then he carries on in verse 2.
[2:12] When I was in distress, I sought the Lord. At night I stretched out untiring hands, and my soul refused to be comforted. It carries on in verses 7 to 9.

He begins to question God. 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?
Perhaps the worst part is in verse 4. You kept my eyes from closing. If at least we can sleep, whatever the difficulties that we're going through, if at least we're able to sleep, that gives us a little bit of hope, because it means that we can forget our troubles for a bit.
Perhaps the worst thing, if you're going through a time of difficulty, is not being able to sleep. And the expression that the psalmist uses there, literally, it's like God has seized his eyelids and is keeping him from sleeping.
So the first part of the psalm, the psalmist is going through terrible difficulty. And then in the second part, everything is suddenly very different.
[3:32] Notice verses 13 to 15. The tone is completely changed.

The mournful lament has passed, and there's a joyful exuberance in worship. What is it that's happened? What has so changed the attitude of the psalmist?
Well, look at verses 10 to 11. Then I thought, to this I will appear, 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. That's what he says in verses 10 and 11.
But go back to verses 5 and 6. In fact, even a little bit further in verse 3. I remembered you, O God, and I groaned. I mused, and my spirit grew faint.
[4:40] You kept my eyes from closing. I was too troubled to speak. That was the whole problem. Remembering was the problem. It was his reminiscing about the past that might not have created the problem that he was in, but it didn't help.

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He'd been spending sleepless, anguished nights remembering the past. So how, in verses 10 and 11, is remembering suddenly the solution?
So I want us to think this morning about two different kinds of remembering. Two different kinds of memories. I want us to look first of all and consider when memories don't work.
That's another way of saying that we're going to look at the problem that the psalm identifies. And we can see that in verses 3 to 6.
So in response to the difficulties that he's in, we read, So this first set of memories, what is it that he was remembering?
[6:08] In fact, there are two questions I want us to look at as we look at this first part. What was he remembering? And what effect did that have?

So first of all, as we ask, what is it that he was remembering? We see that he was remembering his own experience. There's a pointer to that in verse 6.
I remembered my songs in the night. Okay, so he was reflecting on his own experience. He was thinking about how he had once experienced God.
And he was comparing that to his present experience. And that's something that we can all identify with, isn't it? We may be very different.
I can't even see who's linked in today, but I'm sure we represent very different kinds of people. Maybe some of you have been connected with the church all your life. Maybe others of you are new to church.
[7:06] Maybe you're linking in to see what it is that Christians believe. We may be very different, very different kinds of backgrounds. But all of us can sympathize with this phenomenon.

All of us can sympathize with thinking back to a time when we felt that things were better. At the beginning, Mike was mentioning that the last time I was here, unfortunately for you, I was the last person who took a live service there in the building in Bunda Court.
If you think back to that time, a year ago, life was so different, wasn't it? Shops were open. You could go to work. Children were in school.
You could go to restaurants and cafes and pubs. You could go to friends' houses. You could invite people to your homes. Specifically with regards to church, we could actually physically gather together to sing praises to God.
We could hear preaching. We could sit at the Lord's table for the sacraments. We could engage in normal outreach. Now, everything is on Zoom.
[8:17] And we're grateful for the technology that allows us still to have some sort of worship service. But with the best will in the world, it's not the same, is it? All of us can sympathize with that idea of thinking to the past, thinking that things used to be better.

Well, secondly, as we look at this psalm, and this is perhaps the really important thing, what effect did that have?
As we think about this, it's very important to say that it would be wrong to say that society is getting better and better. Many people try to convince themselves of that.
They want to believe that the human race is continually improving and making itself better. And obviously, in some ways, it's true that society does improve.
But in other ways, it takes steps backward. The idea that humanity was continually improving used to be very popular in the last century. But then World War I happened.
[9:26] And then World War II happened. And it became increasingly difficult to believe that the human race morally was getting better and better. Okay?

So it's not that we're saying that the human race is improving. But from a Christian point of view, we believe that God has made certain promises. The psalm even mentions that, doesn't it?
He asked God, has his promises failed for all times? Okay? Most basically, as Christians, we believe that Jesus said, I will build my church.
Okay? But sometimes, you may feel that the church is shrinking. In Scotland, for example, we can easily look to the past, to a time when the church was much larger and much more influential in society.
And we look at our present circumstances, and we think, things are getting worse, not better. Even more personally, God has promised that his people would grow increasingly close to him.
[10:34] He has promised that we would grow in maturity, that we would grow in likeness to Jesus. But sometimes, in your own personal life, you may feel, if you're honest, that you're growing further

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from God, not closer.

You may feel like you're becoming less like Jesus rather than more like Jesus. This is the important thing.
If we think about our own experience, at times, that may lead us to question God. We may look to our past experience of God, and it appears to us that things used to be better, that things are getting worse.
And we come to question God. We wonder, has God forgotten his promises? Okay? So, sometimes, I'm not saying that we don't have experiences of God, and I'm not saying it's wrong to reflect upon those experiences, but sometimes, reflecting on our own experience can lead us to question God.
So, sometimes, memories don't work. Sometimes, they don't make things better. They don't help us to cope with the situation that we're in. Okay, I want us to look secondly, then, at when memories do work.
[11:59] So, when we read the second half of this psalm, we see that it's profoundly different. The whole tone has changed. In verses 11 and 12, sorry, in verses 10 to 11, that is, we see why.

To this I will appear, 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.
This is very important now. What is it that the psalmist remembers? As we move into the second half of the psalm, he's not thinking about his own personal experience of God, as important as that is.
He's looking past that, and he's remembering what God has done in the past. And we could summarize that in one word. The psalmist is reminding himself that God is shepherd.
Okay, that comes out explicitly in verse 20, doesn't it? You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. He's thinking back to the Exodus, when God led his people out of Egypt, and he's remembering that God was their shepherd.
[13:22] That comes out explicitly in verse 20. But the thing is, the kind of language that he uses in verse 20, in fact, echoes verse 15.

If you have your Bibles there with you, if you look back at verse 15, we see there that the author says, With your mighty arm, you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.
Okay, those two verses, in both of them, the psalmist speaks about your people. In verse 15, he speaks about God's mighty arm.
In verse 20, he speaks about the hand of Moses. And the thing is that in both of those verses, he's echoing the language of Exodus 15.
In Exodus 15, in verse 13, there God is described as the shepherd who had redeemed his people and had led them out of Egypt. One fundamental truth of God's people is that they know God as shepherd.
[14:30] That was true of ancient Israel, and it's true of us today. Jesus famously announced, I'm the good shepherd. So Jesus is calling each of you to know him as your shepherd.

And everything in between those two verses, verse 15 and verse 20 of Psalm 77, everything in between that is telling us what it means for God to be shepherd.
What it means for Jesus to be shepherd. And as we look at that, and as we unpack that this morning, we see that there are two things.
First of all, if Jesus is shepherd, then he has unimaginable power, and he will use that power to defeat his enemies.
Now, that may seem surprising. Some of you, if you're connected with agriculture in Scotland, some of you may even know shepherds. Shepherds have a good connotation.
[15:33] You may think of shepherds as being honorable. But we perhaps don't think about shepherds as being exalted and powerful. But in the ancient world, shepherd was regularly a title chosen by kings and emperors.

And here in Psalm 77, we see that God is telling us something of what it means for him to be shepherd. And what happened when God came as Israel's shepherd? Well, the very fabric of the universe was undone.
The waters saw you, O God. The waters saw you and writhed. The very depths were convulsed. The clouds poured down water.

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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.
Now, this is poetry. And no doubt, to an extent, the author is using figurative language here. But he's describing a real thing. God came and he delivered his people from the most powerful nation on earth.
[16:45] And he completely destroyed their armies when they rose up against him. Now, if Jesus is claiming that he is the good shepherd, then that means that he is this kind of shepherd.

It means that he has unimaginable power. We won't look at it this morning, but after the service, I would encourage you to go to the New Testament. And you can look, for example, at John's writings.
So look at the end of John's gospel. Or look at the beginning of the book of Revelation. John wrote both of those books. And at the end of John's gospel, when Jesus is arrested, he's in the garden with his disciples.
Judas leads Jesus' enemies to arrest Jesus. And they find him there with his disciples. And Jesus says to them, who are you looking for? And they say, Jesus of Nazareth.
And then all Jesus says is, I am he. And when he said that, what did his enemies do? They fell to the ground like dead men.
[17:52] They were so overwhelmed in the presence of Jesus that they dropped down to the ground. And then later on in John's gospel, sorry, in the book of Revelation, the apostle John had an encounter with Jesus after Jesus' resurrection.

This was much later on in John's life. Now, bear in mind that the apostle John was someone who knew Jesus intimately. He had spent at least three years with Jesus.
He was Jesus' close friend. And also, by this point, the apostle John knew who Jesus was. He knew that he was the son of God.
And nevertheless, he has a vision in which he encounters Jesus, not as he was on earth, but now with all of his glory revealed. And what does John do when he sees Jesus in all of his glory?
He fell to the ground like a dead man. Jesus is that kind of shepherd. Jesus is a shepherd of unimaginable power.
[19:02] Now, that's both encouraging and also challenging, isn't it? It's encouraging because the Israelites, the author of this psalm, whatever the difficulties, whatever the problems that he was going through, when he remembered that his God was this kind of shepherd, he was reminded of the fact that his God was a God of unimaginable power, far greater than whatever the difficulties were that he was going through.

And if you know that Jesus is your shepherd, then it means that he is far more powerful than whatever it is you're going through. And he will one day defeat all of those difficulties, and Jesus will defeat all of his enemies.
He will win. So that's encouraging, but it's also challenging, isn't it? Because if we're honest, sometimes Jesus might not seem that interesting to us.
Sometimes our hearts grow cold, and sometimes we really ignore Jesus. But if this is who Jesus is, if Jesus is really that person that Apostle John encountered and he fell to the ground as a dead man, if Jesus is that person whom those soldiers encountered and they dropped to the ground, then Jesus is not someone to be ignored.
Jesus is not someone to whom we should be indifferent. So that's both encouraging and also challenging. Now, you may be thinking, that seems like quite a grand claim to say that Jesus is that kind of shepherd.
[20:46] You might be asking, really? How can we know that it's true, that Jesus is a person of unimaginable power that will one day defeat his enemies?

You may be asking, if Jesus is so powerful, maybe you want to believe that, but you're wondering, if that's true, then why are things going so badly for me?
Why do things seem to be getting worse rather than better? In some ways, I think that's a fair question. Why is it that we should believe these things about Jesus?
Remember, when the solvist said this, this wasn't an aspiration. He wasn't hoping that his God might be this kind of shepherd.
He was remembering that he was that kind of shepherd and that he had acted in this way in history. This was an act of remembering what God had done.

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[21:47] And we can do the same thing. When we say that Jesus is this kind of shepherd, we're not hoping that he is. We're remembering what he has done.

There's a passage in the Bible in the New Testament. It's in Ephesians in chapter 1. The Apostle Paul says, well, he speaks about the strength that God exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age, but also in the one to come.
And God placed all things under Jesus's feet and appointed him to be the head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.
You see, Paul there is reflecting on Jesus's resurrection. And he's saying that Jesus's resurrection from the dead is proof of his power.
So Jesus's resurrection, it's an astonishing thing, isn't it? That's the point, really. People don't come back from the dead. But in this case, Jesus did.
[23:09] God acted in history. And Jesus's resurrection is something that you can investigate from a historical point of view. And you can know, as a fact, the New Testament speaks about the fact of Jesus's resurrection.

You can know that that happened. It's not a vague hope. It's not an aspiration. It's something that happened. Okay? So, in the first place, we can remember, because of Jesus's resurrection, that he is this kind of shepherd.
That he has unimaginable power. Okay? But the second implication of this is that if Jesus is your shepherd, it means that he will lead you with gentleness and skill.
Notice verse 20 again. You led your people like a flock. In fact, this idea of shepherd is present in all of these psalms around Psalm 77.
In Psalm 78, in verses 51 and 52. But he brought his people out like a flock. This is speaking again of the Exodus.
[24:21] He led them like sheep through the desert. He guided them safely so that they were unafraid. But the sea engulfed their enemies. The image of God as shepherd doesn't only convey the idea of his power.

This image is also one, as we would expect, as it's an image of tenderness and compassion. God's enemies may have experienced him as an implacable, invincible foe.
But his people knew him as the one who gently guided them. And similarly, when Jesus presents himself as the good shepherd, it means that he is gentle and compassionate and kind with you.
It means that he'll deal with you gently and mercifully. And that's so important, isn't it? If we were only aware of Jesus' unimaginable power, we'd be scared of him, wouldn't we?
We would never turn to Jesus. But Jesus has revealed himself not merely as one of unimaginable power, but also as one of unimaginable mercy.
[25:37] And again, this isn't something that we say as a vague hope. It's not merely that we're desperately hoping that Jesus will be merciful.

He has demonstrated his mercy and his compassion. Again, we can think of the writings of the Apostle John. In John's Gospel, in John chapter 10, he records Jesus' words when Jesus said, I am the good shepherd.
I know my sheep, and my sheep know me. Now, do you want proof that Jesus loves you? Do you want proof that Jesus is compassionate and kind?
Jesus says, I lay down my life for my sheep. I have other sheep. They are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also.
They too will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd. What is the proof that Jesus is the good shepherd?
[26:45] As you go through, at this moment in your life, as you go through very difficult times, and as you don't understand the circumstances around you, you're not sure what the future holds for you, you question all of those things, you may have an awareness of your own sinfulness and your own unworthiness, and you wonder, how can I know that God loves me?

How can I know that he accepts me? What is the proof that Jesus is the good shepherd? The proof is that he loves his sheep.
He loves you so much that he was willing to die for you. This is a fact of history. Again, we can know, from a historical point of view, we can know that Jesus died.

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We can know that he was crucified when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. And in Romans chapter 5, verse 8, Paul says, Now, when the psalmist reminded himself of these things, when he reminded himself of the power of his shepherd, when he reminded himself of the goodness and the kindness and the gentleness of his shepherd, it didn't make all of his problems go away, but he could know that these things were true.
So when we go back to our definition of insanity, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and hoping for a different outcome.
[28:37] Whatever you may think of that definition and its usefulness, we see that that's not what the psalmist is doing here. He is not doing exactly the same thing twice.

He was responding to difficulty in two very different ways. And you're going to have a choice as to how you respond. Because your life won't always be getting better.
Difficult times will come. We trust that this pandemic will pass. But nevertheless, there will be other difficulties that you will face in your life. And if you only reflect on your own personal experience of God, that is, if you only remember those times in your own experience when things seemed to be better, it may lead you to question God.
Verses eight to nine of this psalm, we read, has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful?
You see the irony of that statement. The psalmist is remembering things, and he's wondering if God has forgotten. Okay. But if you look beyond your own circumstances, you can see proof that God hasn't forgotten.
[30:01] If you remember God's mighty acts in Jesus Christ, then you can know that Jesus is your shepherd. And that won't make your difficulties disappear.

But it does mean two very important things. It means that you can be sure that Jesus is more powerful than your difficulties, and that he will overcome those difficulties.
And you can know that he will lead you through them. So may God bless us through his word. And may all of us know Jesus as our shepherd.
Okay. In just a moment, we're going to conclude our worship by singing a hymn, and then we'll have a benediction. But before we do that, if I could just take a moment very briefly again to thank you for your invitation.
It's been a pleasure to join with you. And thank you to all of you in the various different places where you are for linking in to our service and joining with us as we worship God.
[31:01] Thank you.

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