

Questioning Psalms

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"The Train Crossed the Red Sea from Exodus, 1966" by Marc Chagall

Prayer of Illumination

Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the universe, who gave us your Word and the truth and set everlasting life in our midst. Blessed are you, Lord, giver of your Word.

Amen.

Background

The Psalms are vital because they tap us into our roots that bring spiritual renewal: our Hebrew heritage. Paul in Romans speaks of Jewish and Christian relationships with a plant metaphor: you (meaning the gentiles) a wild olive shoot, were grafted into the rich roots of the olive tree of the Jewish people. In other words, our Jewish roots support us and keep us nourished and branching out. Without them, we wither.

The church's poor record of anti-Semitism throughout history is a sorrowful reminder of the loss that happens when we're cut off from these roots. So the Psalms bring us back to our roots we've been grafted into. Those experienced in gardening can appreciate this concept of grafting. What you do is combine a shoot system of one species, called a scion, with the root system of a different plant, called a rootstock. The scion is the new plant and the new branches, connected to the established root system. The two species brought together have an exchange, where they enter into a symbiotic union. Both are changed, and something entirely new is created in their union. Judaism is our root system, the rootstock. Christianity is the shoot system, the scion. Without our roots in Judaism, our faith withers and fades.

In our morning's Psalm we find expressed a vital and counter-intuitive truth from the Jewish tradition: Questioning God is crucial for a healthy and robust faith and life. The prayers and songs found in Psalms are unfiltered and passionate—prayed by people who are "at the desperate edge of their lives." And we often see a surprising, even shocking role reversal take place—God's people take the lead and put God on the witness stand to be grilled. This is only temporary, but it's real. Now Jesus says that we're the salt of the earth. But here, God allows himself to be peppered by his people. God doesn't just "allow" us to do this, God wants us to do it. Faith has the audacity to question God and summon him to action. Mortals holding the Immortal One accountable. In that questioning, conversing, and refusal to settle for easy answers, we find ourselves changed, and made better. A transformation takes place. Some things are taken off our chest. A movement from disorientation to orientation takes place.

As our morning's Psalm is read, you will hear a Hebrew word three times: "Selah." It's part of the Psalm. This mysterious word likely means—stop and reflect. Collect yourself. Cue the harp solo as a soundtrack to aid your reflection. And in that interlude ponder what was just said. Be still for a moment and listen for God's response. Mull it over.

Let's hear the Word of the Lord from:

Scripture: Psalm 77:1-20 (NRSV)

I cry aloud to God,
aloud to God, that he may hear me.
²In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;
in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying;
my soul refuses to be comforted.
³I think of God, and I moan;
I meditate, and my spirit faints. *Selah*

- ⁴You keep my eyelids from closing;
I am so troubled that I cannot speak.
- ⁵I consider the days of old,
and remember the years of long ago.
- ⁶I commune with my heart in the night;
I meditate and search my spirit:
- ⁷"Will the Lord spurn forever,
and never again be favorable?
- ⁸Has his steadfast love ceased forever?
Are his promises at an end for all time?
- ⁹Has God forgotten to be gracious?
Has he in anger shut up his compassion?" *Selah*
- ¹⁰And I say, "It is my grief
that the right hand of the Most High has changed."
- ¹¹I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;
I will remember your wonders of old.
- ¹²I will meditate on all your work,
and muse on your mighty deeds.
- ¹³Your way, O God, is holy.
What god is so great as our God?
- ¹⁴You are the God who works wonders;
you have displayed your might among the peoples.
- ¹⁵With your strong arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. *Selah*
- ¹⁶When the waters saw you, O God,
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;
the very deep trembled.
- ¹⁷The clouds poured out water;
the skies thundered;
your arrows flashed on every side.
- ¹⁸The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;
your lightnings lit up the world;
the earth trembled and shook.
- ¹⁹Your way was through the sea,
your path, through the mighty waters;
yet your footprints were unseen.
- ²⁰You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – *Questioning Psalms*

Think back to the book of Genesis. Do you remember the story of Jacob, where Jacob wrestled with the angel of God at the river? “I will not let you go until you bless me.” The angel renamed Jacob “Israel” because he struggled with God and mortals and overcame. Then the angel blessed him, even though Jacob sustained a chronic hip injury in the process. There’s not only enrichment, but sacrifice that takes place when we really engage our God. Jacob named the place of the divine wrestling meet “Peniel” saying that it was here that he saw God “face to face.”

Then there was Abraham, intervening and negotiating with God over Sodom and Gomorrah, basically taking God to the mat saying you can’t do this injustice of punishing innocent people if you call yourself a just God. God listened. Moses questioned God’s calling of him at the burning bush. God prevailed and Moses relented. But Moses could work out his doubts with God and God answered Moses’ objections. There is something rewarding in that give and take.

- Job questioned why God would bring such evil upon him.
- Jeremiah challenged the way God appeared to be running the universe.
- The prophets Malachi and Habbakuk cross-examined God, asking some tough questions about the evil going on in the world.
- And then Jesus, who is Jewish, quoted Psalm 22 on the cross saying, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

This honest questioning is not just for the Doubting Thomas’s out there. This is for all of us. Faith calls us all to dig deep and get a closer look at our feelings of bewilderment or anger and to seek understanding, to look ourselves in the mirror and ask some tough questions:

- What am I feeling?
- Why am I feeling this way?

We commune with our heart. Our spirit makes diligent search. To get strong emotions off our chest and out of our system, you have to take a closer look and stay with them before letting them go.

As therapist and Auschwitz survivor Edith Eger says, the opposite of depression is expression. What isn’t expressed stays inside and it’s unexpressed emotions that can make us sick. It feels good to voice and vent our emotions. Why? We feel heard. God can handle our fears and frustrations. We named them and God is still here. No punishment. No cut off. And then we keep talking, keep listening, keep engaging the Scriptures and God. God doesn’t walk away and we don’t either. We do this in community too—not just alone. This is how our painful memories can be healed by God—in partnership and participation with us.

Through this courageous conversation, our moping becomes meditation, our complaining shifts to communing, our ruminations transform into recollections. We can see a little better God at work in us, God at work in the church, and God at work in the world. We see our part a little clearer, the role others play too. We are able to better discern God’s presence. We can say about history that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon or that George Washington crossed the Delaware River. But grafted in with Israel, we say: “God brought us out of slavery in the land of Egypt.” Sure God used Moses to do it, but it was God who set us free. God parted “my” Red Sea. Our faith becomes personal and

particular. God brought “me” through a tough divorce, a health scare. God helped “me” pick up the pieces after I lost my job. God got “us” through the pandemic.

From our Jewish heritage, we learn about a hands-on faith that’s engaged, interactive—an encounter, an event, where we wrestle with God and plunge ourselves into faith and life in all its rawness and contradictions. Here is the paradox:

- We need to first conquer, to be able to yield ourselves.
- We have to first triumph, in order to surrender.
- We have to first acquire, before we lose it all.

God doesn’t want us to passively receive our faith and leave it untouched, to settle for memorized answers, head nodding, and checked boxes. To find meaningful answers, you’ve got to contend with God, with yourself, and with the world, to speak up and speak out. Give words and wrestle with your doubt, disgust, or disappointment. God invites us to roll up our sleeves and have a good argument. Duke it out. Not fight, but argue. Ask personal questions. Get a little uncomfortable, even heated. Come to an understanding. It’s a sign that you care, that God cares, that important things are at stake. You’re on a quest for truth.

It’s good, healthy exercise for the soul to grapple with God. In fact, the rabbis often critique Abraham’s son Isaac because he didn’t challenge God enough like his father Abraham and son Jacob did. I like how Rabbi Abraham Heschel puts it, that the greatness of a person is measured by how many deep problems that person is concerned with in the world and in themselves. He then goes on to say that even God has problems. Just look at the Bible. God is always wrestling with the problem of human beings. God understands our problems, because he has problems, too! Look at the individual in Psalm 77: I cry unto the Lord with my voice. Not another’s voice, but “my” voice.

One of the unique things about the Psalms is that it’s one of the first times in any ancient poetry anywhere that the individual is mentioned and speaks of themselves as “I”. God empowers us to speak out and to speak up. We’re given a voice. God cares not only for his people, but cares for you individually. So don’t let your frustrations stay bottled up in you. In the appropriate place and way, get them out. Articulate them. Pray them out loud. God wants you to speak up, not just here in the Sanctuary, but at home or wherever you are. Come as you are, be as you are. Don’t be somebody else with God. Cry out with your voice and seek the Lord.

“My soul refuses to be comforted.” (77:2)

Settle for no easy answers or platitudes. Give God an earful, and he’ll give you his ear. All the questions you’ve been afraid to ask—ask. Don’t let God off the hook. Jesus did this too. As the book of Hebrews tells us: *“Jesus prayed with loud cries and tears... and he was heard for his godly fear.”* (Heb. 5:7)

And so we ask tough questions:

- Have you changed God?
- God, you’re supposed to be faithful and merciful, but I’m not experiencing you that way right now, I’m not feeling it.
- How long will you ignore us? Isn’t the gospel good news? But everything seems lousy right now. It’s getting old.

When we do wrestling like this, it can impact our sleep—thinking about loved ones, about work, or church, or a relationship. “You kept my eyelids open God—I couldn’t get a wink of sleep.” Or as novelist Don DeLillo puts it: “In the dark, the mind runs on like a devouring machine, the only thing awake in the universe.” But then a turnaround happens. The psalmist says these simple words: “I call God to mind.” Four times he says it. He remembers the past. He makes the past present. He recreates and relives a past event: the Exodus. He puts himself in the scene in real time: Pharaoh’s breathing down his back. He tastes the grit of the desert dust in his mouth. Moses slams his staff into the cold waters. The Red Sea is splitting. God starts peeling back the waters. They are descending deep into the sea on dry ground. The wall of water tumbles down. Waves crash over the enemy. Horse and rider are thrown into the sea. The unseen God is there. He’s acting, delivering. Look closely. His unseen footprints are everywhere.

In therapy, clients are often told to share past events in the present tense. It helps you experience them deeper. You can reframe them better. You understand them better when you relive it. Our Hebrew heritage teaches us to remember well.

- Bad remembering remains stuck, brooding and stewing on the past.
- Good remembering transports God’s good actions in the past into the present.
- Bad remembering fills you with regrets, what ifs, and resentment.
- Good remembering recollects God’s faithfulness and the good memories with others we’re thankful for. It heals what went wrong. You can change your response.

As Christians, we remember when God was in Christ on earth. We get into the boat with the disciples and launch onto the lake. We see Christ sleeping in the boat on his little pillow. In panic we shake him awake as the storm rages. He slowly gets up and speaks to us. “Why are you afraid? Did you leave your faith on the shore?” Jesus turns and has a heart to heart talk with the elements, just like God did when he separated the waters and the land, just like at the Red Sea. Jesus orders the wind and the waves to halt. They stop and listen. They too are still before the Creator of all.

Jesus’ unseen footprints are all over the surface of the Sea of Galilee. We know Jesus is with us in our storms today, literally and figuratively. We’ll get through leaky roofs, musty carpets, and emergency warnings on our phone. And if God doesn’t part the waters, he’ll give us an Ark Building 101 class. As Christians, we continue to look to the acts of God in Christ. The past is always present with the Prince of Peace. Looking back on his crucifixion and his resurrection, we find the hope and meaning to keep moving forward, to keep our sanity now, fresh and alive.

God seems different, but really, we’re the ones who have changed. Instead of being a source of sorrow, God is now a worker of wonders, a miracle maker. Our cry of pain has become a cry of praise. But the pain had to come first, before the praise. Pain first, praise second. Our litany of lament transforms into a hymn of praise. God has done amazing things, and he will do them again.

Amen.

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