

Psalm 77—the “Turn” from Self to God

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Psalm 77 offers a stunning embodiment of the reorientation of life most hoped for by evangelical faith. In the exposition that follows, I take the Psalm not simply as a devotional or liturgical residue of faith, but as an actual “speech pilgrimage” of one whose self spoke through to new faith. Specifically, the Psalm shows the route by which this life was moved from a *preoccupation with self* to a *submission to and reliance upon God*.

I

The first part of the Psalm is a fairly standard lament statement. We can enter its claim by noticing the quite different rhetorical moves made by the speaker.

1. The speaker is turned in on self in pity and self-preoccupation, and can speak of nothing but self (vss. 1-6):

I cry aloud to God . . .
I seek the Lord
 my hand is stretched out,
 my soul refuses to be comforted.
I think of God,
I moan
I meditate,
 my spirit faints,
 my eyelids are kept by God from closing
I am so troubled that *I* cannot speak
I consider the days of old,
I remember the years of long ago,
I commune with *my heart*¹
I meditate and search *my spirit*.

The speaker does a complete inventory of his/her own person and sees how it is all, in every part, mobilized for self-concern.²

2. Then in verses 7-9, there is a series of rhetorical questions. But even here there is no yielding of the agenda of self:

Will the Lord spurn forever
 and never again be favorable?
Has steadfast love for ever ceased?
 Are his promises at an end for all time?
Has God forgotten to be gracious?
 Has he in anger shut up his compassion?

There is obviously a reference to Yahweh, more than appeared in verses 1-6. But the rhetorical effort is to draw Yahweh completely into the orbit of self-concern. In these verses there occur three of Israel's most precious covenantal words, *hesed*, *hanan*, *raham*—loyalty, graciousness, compassion. The questions pose the most urgent faith issues. They ask about the very character of God. But they are questions that emerge out of an overriding self-concern. They appear to ask about God's faithfulness. But they really ask, what about me? Even the most primal qualities of Yahweh are consumed in this self-preoccupation. Thus far we are at the pool of Narcissis.³ The speaker sounds as one who understands how it all works. He knows what mobilizes God's *hesed* and *raham*. She knows how to get to it. The crisis of the poem may be one of two things. Either the speaker knows how to make it all work, which means everything has been emptied of mystery, or, more likely, even though the speaker knows how to make it work, it does not work! It is then a religion that has failed.

Janzen has suggested that some rhetorical questions in the speech of the Old Testament are not mere rhetoric, but are serious questions.⁴ Such questions ask the unaskable. In the form of a question the speaker moves into dangerous and unexplored territory in the space between us and the throne. In our Psalm the speaker is a person of conventional obedience. He has some ground to stand on and some legitimate expectations of Yahweh. He is not a renegade who has forfeited his expectations from God. But the voice of obedience is on the move, driven there by the failure of convention. Her imagination is beginning to move, beginning to guess that God's *hesed* is not unilaterally unconditional, and automatically linked to this particular believer. The poem begins to suspect that God's *hesed* (if indeed God is faithful!) has other worlds to work and cannot be summoned on demand. God is not on call. There is a probe here that the space between the two partners is dangerous and unknown space. All of that space has not yet been reduced and routinized so that it can be presumed upon. Some of the space between here and God's throne is untamed, and therefore unpredictable. And if the space is beyond control, it makes one more frantically press for the old, innocent faith which had God encapsulated.

This speaker had grown comfortable with the great affirmations of Yahweh, because the great affirmations readily translated into self-serving assurance. But now that is all being blown out of the water. A God who has been reduced to the safe proposals of "a torah so righteous" (cf. Deut. 4:8) now is known to be a God whose "form is not seen" (cf. Deut. 4:12), even if that form is thought to consist in *hesed*, *hanan*, *raham*. The desperate rhetorical questions appear in verses 7-9 after this self-inventory of verses 1-6. The speaker begins to guess that the old sure religion is collapsing.

II

There is a striking move from the "I, I, I," in verses 1-6 which is still safely rooted and conventional and with no failure of nerve, to the probe of the questions of verses 7-9, which ask new questions. And then there is verse 10. This verse is the crucial turn in the Psalm, exceedingly difficult to translate. This

verse clearly looks both ways, back to the "I" statements of verses 1-6, forward to the rest of the Psalm (vss. 11-20). It consists in two elements. The first element is a statement about *grief or trouble*.⁵ The second element is a statement of *change*, presumably that God has changed. The translation is difficult, and there is some variation of nuance. RSV renders:

It is my grief
that the right hand of the Most High has changed.

The Jerusalem Bible renders:

"This" I said then "Is what distresses me;
that the power of the Most High is no longer what it was."

More poignantly, the New English Bible renders:

Has his right hand, I said, lost its grasp?
Does it hang powerless, the arm of the most high?

Kraus comments:⁶

God's works and God's way are for humankind inaccessible (Is. 55:8ff.). They stand in an impenetrable, burning splendor. He himself, Yahweh, is the Holy One (Ps. 71:22, 89:19) who is "ganz Andere." His saving deeds evidence his incomparability (Ex. 15:11).

The speaker has discovered that Yahweh has freedom, will not be on call, not presumed upon. God is not locked into a *quid pro quo*. And it causes grief, illness, despondency to discern that the partner has changed. Observance of the freedom God has to change causes a terrible unsettling among the faithful. The sure comfort of an utterly obedient relationship is shattered by the awareness that this hidden, free God will not be fully discerned or completely predictable. And the response must be to break out of obedience of a simple kind for the practice of an imagination that seeks to find other ways of relating to this free God. To relate to such a free God requires freedom on the part of the believer, a freedom likely censored by the conventional religion of verses 1-6.

The grief here expressed is not unlike the pouting of Jonah over God's graciousness (Jonah 4:1, 9). Only here the depression is more intense. And the substance moves in the opposite direction from that of Jonah. Jonah is disconcerted that God is gracious when he does not want God to be gracious. Here the Psalmist is dismayed that God is not gracious when he had fully counted on that predictable graciousness.

The discernment of verse 10, anguished as it is, admits of more than one reading. If one is linked to a flat one-dimensional faith, then this verse is a *bitter loss of faith*. But if we think in terms of obedience on its way to risky imagination, then this verse is an *opening for new faith* beyond the conventions and routines which secure but do not reckon with God's awefulness. This verse stands at a very risky and dangerous place where evangelical faith often stands. And indeed must stand. And as we stand there, we never know in advance if we face *loss of faith* or *opening for new faith*. The dramatic substance of verse 10 leaves the issue quite unresolved. And we must not rush past that

dramatic moment in this speech-pilgrimage.

III

So the Psalm makes its desperate way beyond verse 10. We have now the speech of a wounded partner well beyond the old innocence. We do not know how this speaker moves from verse 10 to verse 11. But we can surmise it was not an easy move. We do not know how any faith-speaker makes the leap from the preoccupation with self to an imaginative acknowledgement of the primacy of the other. But that is what happens in this Psalm and in all serious biblical faith. It involves leaving the safety of "the torah so righteous" for "the God so near" who is yet so free (Deut. 4:7-8). The dramatic move concerns the abandonment of self as the primal agenda for the Thou who is out beyond us in freedom. And we make no mistake to observe that that transfer of the agenda, that ceding of concern for self to the other is the crucial move of biblical faith, the *sine qua non* for covenanting. And we observe what an urgent, difficult task Christian nurture and preaching now is. For the narcissism of our culture (on which see vss. 1-6) is precisely aimed at *not* ceding self, not relinquishing. This Psalm models the very move of faith which our cultural ideology wants to prevent. The whole consumer perspective concerns retention of self and satiation of self. That is what is given in verses 1-6, and what is relinquished in what follows.

Note that this was not the only move possible after verse 10. It is one among some options. After the wonderment of the questions of verses 7-9 and the startling discovery of verse 10, another move could have been made. The speaker could have moved to Psalm 14 and concluded, "There is no God." The move beyond verse 10 is a hazardous one, for any of us. And the outcome is never sure ahead of time. But the move has been made here, a move which now reckons the free "Thou" as the starting point for life.⁷

That move, one of several possibilities, concerns us directly as we seek to be faithful and as we seek to live in our culture. On the one hand that move made in verse 11 is a move from a religion of law to a religion of grace. It articulates the awareness that we live by gift and not by grasp. On the other hand, observe that in our society of consumer narcissism, a *religion of petty moralistic obedience* goes with an *economics of satiation*. That is, in our secularized version of it, we do not hope for God to satisfy all our desires (Ps. 145:16). But we do expect to have all our desires satisfied, even if by another source. So we are part of a culture which holds together *consumer satiation* and *petty obedience*. That tight alliance serves to keep *us* as the agenda, an excuse for not ceding life beyond self, an inability to transfer attention beyond our needs and appetites.

The religious temptation among us is to walk close to the dangerous rhetorical questions of verses 7-9 and to become aware of the hurt and anguish of verse 10. But then not to move on to verse 11, not to move to the "Thou," but to circle back again to verses 1-6, which permits a preoccupation with self (and self's program) and requires a numbing.⁸ Because being numb will do, if there is no deliverance.

IV

By the mercy of God, the Psalm does not circle back. And if it did, it would then be only a mirror for our fearful self-preoccupation. It would then not be a model of faith, but only an exercise in self-serving. But it moves on. It says something new and surprising and unpredictable. And that is why we attend to it. It moves on in remarkable fashion, so that verse 11 follows closely after verse 10. We may be glad for that modeling of the move. But we recognize at the same time that we do not know how it is possible. We presume that this move, here or anywhere, is not made easily or quickly. Likely there is a long pause in the Psalm, a desperate resistance, a counting the cost, like standing at the edge of the cold swimming pool, testing it with a toe, putting it off and then the quantum leap into the new icy world of imaginative faith. It is indeed a turning loose of the old self.

The move from verses 1-10 to verse 11 is like the move envisioned by Jesus:

For whoever would save his life will lose it;
and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's
will save it. (Mark 8:35)

The first part, with the series of "I" is about *keeping life*. And the move to the second part with the series of "Thou" is a readiness to *lose life in order to gain it*. I do not suggest that prayer and liturgy are the full scope of self-surrender. But I am very sure that unless there are liturgic ways for that move in our lives, we will not make them elsewhere, either with reference to personal maturation or to social change. The very rhetoric of Israel here makes such a move thinkable, i.e., capable of being imagined.

There is a waiting, a hoping, a resisting, a yielding, a dying, a being surprised. By verse 11 the speaker has abandoned the preoccupation with self and is able to focus on this one who "has changed," the same change that caused resentment and loss in verse 10.

1. By verse 11, the speaker is on the way into a new world of imagination. In verses 1-6, the speaker had focused narrowly on "my present" which is all consuming. Now there is a reentry into "our past" which had been bracketed out in self-preoccupation. And in the pondering of that past, the speaker comes to the fresh awareness that it is precisely God's freedom to change and come and go that is the hope of Israel and the deliverance of folks like the speaker, in this present, or in any present.

In the second part of the Psalm, a very different vocabulary is now at work:

verse 11 deed	(ma'alelê)	←
wonders	(pil'ekā)	←
verse 12 work	(pa'alekā)	←
deeds ('alilothikā)		←

These four terms are stated in a concise chiasmus. The key point is made in verse 13:

Thy way, O God, is holy (*qadôsh*).

God's way is *ganz Anders*, not to be reduced, not to be accommodated or conformed either to my needs or my expectations. And then, following naturally, there is an assertion of incomparability:

What god is great like our God?

The question sounds like that of Deut. 4:8 to which we have made reference. No god like ours, no god so near, no god so free, no god so surprising or exasperating. Here is the end to all analogy. And the bold, liberated speaker of verses 11ff., discovers that the self-preoccupied speaker of verses 1-6 was complaining about an idol, for this free God of *hesed*, *hanan*, *raham* will not be treated like a fortune cookie.

2. The remainder of the Psalm, verses 15-20, is like a credo which recites the great deeds of the past. Verse 15 uses Exodus language with the verb *ga'al*. Verses 16-18 talk about a storm. It could be any storm God. The language is not unlike the Canaanite imagery of Psalm 29. But the language of the storm is regularly drawn toward this people. Verse 16 has echoes of Psalm 114:3-4 which uses sea imagery for Exodus. Verses 17-18 are about a storm. But the point is for Israel in verses 19-20 which becomes completely concrete and completely Israelite at the end, with the mention of Moses and Aaron.

Most striking about this Psalm is its abrupt ending. Nothing here about a return to the agenda of verses 1-6. There is nothing about all of that being resolved. It is as though the speaker is left to draw her own conclusions about the condition of verses 1-6 in relation to the statements of verses 15-20. Nothing has been resolved, but everything has been recontextualized. The speaker in verses 1-6 is preoccupied because he is caught in a narrow range in which such personal trouble requires a conclusion that God does not care. That narrow religious agenda is however shattered. It is shattered by remembering, by awareness of God's incomparability, by reference to Israel's concrete history, but most of all it is shattered by the utterance, *Thou* ('*attah*).

Now I have dealt with this Psalm in detail because I take it to be structurally the story of God's people who are always *trapped* and/or *on the move*. This Psalm knows that all of us live in this battle. We struggle to stay home with the sure company of "I." We move between a petty religion of calculating obedience aimed at well-being, and a fully liberated imaginative religion of awe and amazement and trembling before the Holy One. In this Psalm, verses 1-6 (7-9) articulate the first; verses 11-20 speak about the alternative. The first is dominated by "I." The second is governed by "Thou."

Thou art God (v. 14)

Thou didst redeem thy people with *thine* own arm (v. 15)

the waters saw *thee*

the crash of *thy* thunder

thy lightnings

thy way was through the sea

thy path through the great waters

thy footprints unseen (vv. 18-19).

Thou didst lead thy people (v. 20).

Note that after verse 12, there is not a single "I." One can observe that there is a neat contrast between the "my" of the first half—my trouble, my hand, my spirit, my eyelids, my soul, my heart, my spirit—and the "thy" in the second half—thy thunder, thy lightening, thy way, thy path, thy footprints. The rhetorical change cannot be accidental. The contrast is total, decisive and intentional. And the turn is in verse 10. Everything is up for grabs in verse 10, waiting for fresh resolution. It is the pastoral moment that could go either way. It is the evangelical moment in which the news may break. It is a moment of deciding, to live in the world where the Most High changes, or to retreat back into a world where "least high" keeps us at the center of things. It is the pastoral task to be present to that moment of terror, a moment which requires enormous imagination.

NOTES

1. "I commune with my heart" is a statement of religion reduced to self-preoccupation, not unlike the characterization of the Pharisee (John 18:11) who "prayed with himself."

2. The self-inventory is paralleled to the lamentation of Psalm 22:17: "I count all my bones."

3. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1979) has made important linkages between the myth and the pathology of our time. One of the important ingredients in such immobilizing narcissism is the flattening of imagination so that the person is incapable of thinking of life other than it presently is, or incapable of thinking of life beyond self.

4. J. Gerald Janzen, "Metaphor and Reality in Hosea 11," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers, 1976* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1976) 413-445.

5. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms II* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979) 214-15, takes the word from *hllh*, and understands it as "kill," (pierce) and renders it, "my death." See the helpful and lucid comment of A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms II* (Greenwood, S.C.: The Attic Press, Inc., 1972) 558.

6. Hans Joachim Kraus, *Psalmen I* (Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament 15¹, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961) 532.

7. Worth noting is the argument made here in sharp distinction from that of Gordon Kaufman in his excellent book, *The Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981) 63-75. If I read Kaufman correctly, he argues that the self-conscious assertion of "I" leads to the liberating reality of "Thou." I believe this Psalm argues that the move is not from a full act of self-consciousness, but from relinquishment of self, precisely what modernity finds so difficult.

8. On "numbing" as the problem of our culture, see Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) and especially the important work of J. Robert Lifton, whose major summary is *The Broken Connection* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).