

24/7 PRAYER RESOURCES



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In this prayer series, Lyndall Bywater a Salvationist from the UK Territory and freelance speaker and writer on prayer, will explore ways in which different people make connection with God in prayer. For some, connection comes most easily through the outside world—they glimpse God most readily through the lens of nature, friends and everyday life. For others, the journey towards God starts by shutting out the world, and allowing stillness and solitude to open up deep places within them. The final study explores an altogether different 'way in'.

Prayer Personalities (Part 2)

Digging in

By Lyndall Bywater

Psalm 77 (NLT)

For Jeduthun, the choir director: A psalm of Asaph.

- 1 *I cry out to God; yes, I shout. Oh, that God would listen to me!*
- 2 *When I was in deep trouble, I searched for the Lord.*
All night long I prayed, with hands lifted toward heaven, but my soul was not comforted.
- 3 *I think of God, and I moan, overwhelmed with longing for his help. Interlude*
- 4 *You don't let me sleep. I am too distressed even to pray!*
- 5 *I think of the good old days, long since ended,*
- 6 *when my nights were filled with joyful songs. I search my soul and ponder the difference now.*
- 7 *Has the Lord rejected me forever? Will he never again be kind to me?*
- 8 *Is his unfailing love gone forever? Have his promises permanently failed?*
- 9 *Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he slammed the door on his compassion?*
Interlude
- 10 *And I said, "This is my fate; the Most High has turned his hand against me."*
- 11 *But then I recall all you have done, O LORD; I remember your wonderful deeds of long ago.*
- 12 *They are constantly in my thoughts. I cannot stop thinking about your mighty works.*
- 13 *O God, your ways are holy. Is there any god as mighty as you?*
- 14 *You are the God of great wonders! You demonstrate your awesome power among the nations.*
- 15 *By your strong arm, you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. Interlude*
- 16 *When the Red Sea[a] saw you, O God, its waters looked and trembled! The sea quaked to its very depths.*
- 17 *The clouds poured down rain; the thunder rumbled in the sky. Your arrows of lightning flashed.*
- 18 *Your thunder roared from the whirlwind; the lightning lit up the world! The earth trembled and shook.*
- 19 *Your road led through the sea, your pathway through the mighty waters—a pathway no one knew was there!*
- 20 *You led your people along that road like a flock of sheep, with Moses and Aaron as their shepherds.*

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I am immensely looking forward to the invention of the eternal battery, that is to say, the one which never runs out of power. I travel a lot, and battery-powered devices are all but indispensable if I am to allay the boredom of long train journeys. I even go so far as to have several different listening options in my bag, so that, if one dies, the others will be on hand to fill the yawning gap.

It is a particularly bad day when all the batteries die at the same time: the IPOD splutters its last; the CD player proves incapable of spinning CDs; the mobile phone would gladly let me listen to the radio for a while, but it will be at the expense of being able to phone anyone at my destination, should the train get delayed. The abandonment is complete. It's just me and my thoughts (and perhaps the unnecessarily loud mobile phone conversation of a fellow passenger).

Yet, if I stay awake and alert, these journeys can be by far the most enjoyable and productive times in my week. Despite the surrounding passengers and the intermittent station announcements, these can be the times when I truly understand the meaning of solitude.

'I found thee not, O Lord, without, because I erred in seeking thee without that wert within.'
(St Augustine of Hippo)

St Augustine was born in the latter part of the fourth century AD, and was one of the foremost writers and theologians of his day. One of the concepts for which he is best known is that of 'interiority': the idea that we can only truly know God by shutting off outside stimulæ, and finding him in our inner world. As we still ourselves in solitude, our spirits have a chance to interact with his Spirit, and our souls become aware of the Eternal.

'Interiority' certainly comes to the aid of the writer of Psalm 77. Here, we have a person who is in turmoil. Unlike last week's psalmist, he has not found God in the world around him; he has not stumbled across the reassuring fingerprints of the Divine in his everyday life. He has reached the end of a long day, and he is still crying out to God for an answer (verses 1,2). Unable to find peace, and unable to shut out the disquiet by falling asleep (verse 4), he begins a process of introspection.

Some claim that this religious practice of shutting oneself away from the world is tantamount to escapism, but anyone who has journeyed into the depths of their own soul will know that you don't get off that lightly. The first part of the psalmist's inward journey is truly dark. He is faced with the contrast between how his life used to be, and how it is now (verses 5,6a). It is logical to suggest that the first thing we encounter, when we turn inwards to look at our own souls, is our own frailty and inconsistency, and that alone can put us off the idea of prayer for a very long time.

If possible, the second stage of the journey is even darker. Having faced his own spiritual bankruptcy, he begins on the perilous pathway of 'what ifs' (verses 6b-9). He picks through the rubble at the very bottom of his worst experiences, and unearths some frightening imponderables. What if God doesn't rescue? What if God isn't able to do the things people say he can do? What if, when he comes to the end of himself, God isn't actually there.

And that is where the miracle of interiority occurs. At the end of the last and worst thought, a hand reaches out from beyond, and begins to pull him back up to hope.

In the outside world, hope generally begins with noticing something. In the inside world, it begins with remembering something. The psalmist starts to remember things about his God (verses 10,11). Suddenly, he is no longer staring at the wallpaper of his own despair; instead, he is looking out of the windows. He has been taken beyond himself, and has begun to remember other places, other people, other times when God's goodness and faithfulness were proved utterly true.

The last part of the journey is altogether brighter. Amazed anew by the God he has connected with, even in the depths of his own troubled soul, he sets himself a formidable task:

'I will meditate on all your works, and consider all your mighty deeds' (verse 12).

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The rest of the psalm is an exultant song of praise. Instead of being a dry, hopeless place, his inner world becomes a riot of life and colour, as he lets awe and wonder flood his soul.

We don't get to hear how life turned out the next morning, but I suspect we are safe in concluding that this worshipper made his way back into the outside world with an altogether lighter heart.

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