

Despair: Hopelessness

How Life Feels - part 10

Book of Psalms

June 28, 2020

The **anatomy of despair** includes these pieces, and occurs in this **downward spiral**:

→ Complacency #1: I know what I need.

→ I can't get it.

→ Complacency #2: God won't give it.

→ It may never come.

DAY 1: Complacency #1 and Complacency #2.

1. Ingrained in our fallen nature is the foolish belief, "I *know* what I need." It **seems** so obvious to us. It **feels** like it *should* work. As long as we believe we can get what we need we will have no compelling or felt need for God. The result? What I'm calling Complacency #1.

2. Eventually (1) the reality of our fallen human nature, (2) the reality of the fallen nature of those all around us, and (3) the reality of the fallen world all seem to conspire against us toward this conclusion: We cannot get what we think we need.

3. It's at this point that Complacency #1 toward God begins to thaw. We become aware of the reality of life – we were made for God, to know God and to depend on Him.

4. But what happens when God won't give me what I most want? We pound the doors of heaven! Sometimes God responds as we like, but other times He doesn't. It's at this point that we pick up the psalmist in Psalm 77.

*Psalm 77:1 I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. ² When I was in **distress**, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands and **my soul refused to be comforted**.*

5. What strikes you at the beginning of this psalm? Have you felt this way?

6. Why do you think he *refuses* to be comforted?

DAY 2: I can't get what I think I need

Psalm 77:3 I remembered you, O God, and I groaned; I mused, and my spirit grew faint. Selah

1. In his distress the psalmist struggles (1) within himself, (2) with himself and (3) with God. Jot down what you hear going on in the psalmist with each of these key words and phrases:

a. "I groaned"—

b. "I mused"—

c. "My spirit grew faint"—

God's not giving what I need:

Psalm 77:4 You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak.

⁵ *I thought about the former days, the years of long ago;*

⁶ *I remembered my songs in the night. My heart mused and my spirit inquired:*

⁷ *"Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again?"*

⁸ *Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time?*

⁹ *Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?" Selah*

2. As the psalmist wrestles within himself, his wrestling deepens into wrestling with God.

3. What differences do you notice between v. 6 and verse 3?

4. What made the difference between verse 3 and verse 6? Look at the beginning of v. 6. What did he remember? How do you think that helped him?

5. Notice the psalmist's questions in vv. 7-9?

a. Are they getting more general or more specific?

b. What do you hear behind these questions?

c. How does the psalmist feel?

6. How closely do these "theological" doubts and questions relate to the psalmist not getting what he thinks he needs?

Halfway through Psalm 77, God's redemptive work is seen in the psalmist. Three significant shifts are made for the psalmist. We'll look at each of these shifts in the next three days.

DAY 3: Shift #1: from outcomes I want to WHAT God wants to *do!*

Psalm 77:10 Then I thought, "To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High."

1. God leads the psalmist to make some dramatic changes in his pondering and musing!

2. Instead of focusing on what God is not doing, or wondering if God will ever "show His favor again," what grabs the psalmist's focus now?
 - a. What name of God does He recall?

 - b. What aspect of God's nature does the psalmist "appeal?"

*Psalm 77:11 I will **remember** the **deeds** of the LORD; yes, I will remember your **miracles** of long ago.*

3. How does this verse compare to verse 10? What strikes you about where the psalmist is going?

*Psalm 77:12 I will meditate on all your **works** and consider all your **mighty deeds**.*

4. The psalmist put two big concepts together.
 - a. God deeds are mighty, AND
 - b. God is working!

5. Here's the psalmists' realization. Just because God is not bringing about the outcomes he wants does not mean:
 - a. God is not working!
 - b. God is not powerful enough to work.

6. As we'll see in tomorrow's devotional, this realization begins to comfort the psalmist who formerly *refused* to be comforted!

7. What strikes you about Shift #1?

DAY 4: Shift #2: from outcomes to WHO God is: holy!

*Psalm 77:13 Your **ways**, O God, are **holy**. What god is so **great** as our God?*

¹⁴ You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.

1. When people question God on the issue of why does evil exist, people usually point to this “explanation”: Either God is not powerful enough to stop evil, or God is not good enough to stop evil.
2. What fallen human nature cannot conceive or understand is this: God does allow evil and suffering while still being powerful and good. This is the conclusion that helps the psalmist.
3. What does the psalmist remember about God’s character in v. 13?

4. What does the psalmist remember about God’s strength in v. 14?

*Isaiah 55:8 “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are **your ways my ways**,” declares the LORD.*

*⁹ “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are **my ways higher than your ways** and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

5. How do these verses in Isaiah compare with Psalm 77:13-14?

Isaiah 55:10 As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

¹² You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.

¹³ Instead of the thornbush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD's renown, for an everlasting sign, which will not be destroyed.”

6. What God tells Isaiah is a similar message he tells the psalmist.

- God is working (though it may not be visible)
- God is powerful (though it may not be in the way we hope to see)
- God will accomplish His purposes!

7. That God is holy makes a huge difference in how we evaluate our circumstances when they aren’t what we wish they were AND when it *appears* to us that God isn’t working.

8. What strikes you from today’s devotional?

DAY 5: Shift #3: from outcomes to HOW God acts: redemptively!

*Psalm 77:15 With your mighty arm you **redeemed** your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. Selah*

1. Here is the central point: God is redemptive! He redeems His people.

2. To redeem something can mean any of the following:
 - a. To buy something back, or to win something back that was once lost.
 - b. To free prisoners from captivity.
 - c. Redemption often involves paying a ransom.
 - d. Redemption can mean to free people from the penalty of their sin.
 - e. Redemption is the process of reforming our heart.

3. It is these kinds of things that God IS doing even when we wonder if He is doing anything! We wonder this because we want Him doing outcomes we think we want.

4. The psalmist finishes this psalm by remembering the parting of the Red Sea, the deliverance of the people through a dry sea bed, and being redeemed from the bondage and slavery in Egypt.

*Psalm 77:16 **The waters saw you, O God, the waters saw you and writhed; the very depths were convulsed.***

*¹⁷ The **clouds** poured down water, the **skies** resounded with **thunder**; your arrows flashed back and forth.*

*¹⁸ Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your **lightning** lit up the world; the **earth** trembled and quaked.*

*¹⁹ **Your path led through the sea, your way** through the mighty waters, though **your footprints were not seen.***

*²⁰ You **led** your people **like a flock by the hand** of Moses and Aaron.*

5. In these verses what strikes you about:
 - a. God's power? (His acts and deeds)

 - b. God's holiness? (Especially in v. 20).

6. **Week's summary: We've looked at the anatomy of despair and how God led him to deal with his despair.**

7. **What is your biggest takeaway from the week?**

Shattered! Life will never be the same. Terms you never imagined would be hung around you like a cheap necklace: loss, cut short. Carry grief's scars with you. Identify with Jesus, the "Man of Sorrows, and acquainted with grief."

WORDING:

The world less safe, less certain, less predictable...

"I sometimes feel like a child in a world that has lost its wonder, in a world that has turned scary with shadows, and I can't find my way home." Gire, North Face, p12.

It is not all despair is overt. When we started PCI for the first seven years, I wondered if this plane was ever going to get off the ground. We bumped along ever so slowly. Despair for me was like a low-grade fever—not enough to go to the doctor for, but you just felt so listless. Do you know that kind of despair?

Examples: spouse w/ no interest in spiritual things; marriage that is stagnant or slowly eroding away; teen years—dealing with issues you never in your wildest dreams ever anticipated you'd have to deal with; career that started out with so much promise and has plateaued; health difficulties that are unresolvable; some of you live with physical pain as a way of life.

Angry pride vs. humble trust.

A light on the dashboard indicates something is wrong under the hood of the car, in the engine. Same with emotions. Emotions indicate what is really going on in the heart. When I feel despair there's more to do than just pray, "Lord, forgive me for my depression." Those are good words, but inadequate words. There's more to be repented of than despair. There is sin in the heart that is producing the emotion of despair!

Despair occurs when:

- ✓ My ways have quit working.
- ✓ I cannot get God to do what I think I must have.

I give up.

"Ungodly despair:

- ✓ refuses to walk through the valley of the shadow of death;
- ✓ refuses to agonize any longer with the pangs of uncertainty, loss...
- ✓ is the collapse of self-will." Cry, p147.

"The courage of the psalmists exposes the illusion of a blissful world." Cry, p148

Psalm 77:1-2 I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted.

Situation—unknown. We don't know what the psalmist is going through, but he does label it "distress." Whatever it is, it is gut-wrenching. It's the kind of struggle that keeps him up late at night.

'Although ungodly despair demands an **answer** for the loss, it would refuse to accept an answer even if it were **hand-delivered** by God. Godly despair cries out for perspective but allows the hollowness of loss to move the heart to seek God." *Cry*, p147-8

Psalm 77:3-4 I remembered you, O God, and I groaned; I mused, and my spirit grew faint. You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak.

Instead of counting **sheep**, trying to think pleasant thoughts or count to ten, he **moves his heart toward God**. He lays out **every thought banging around** in his head and heart.

When he first cried out to God, there was **no answer**, or rather, an **answer he did not care for**. Now, he "remembers" God and notice, "I **groaned**." His real problem was not out there somewhere. The real struggle in his heart was his **distrust** of God. From the psalmist's point of view, what God was doing or not doing **made no sense** to him. Turning to God **exposes** these specific thoughts which are **distrustful**.

Psalm 77:5-7 I thought about the former days, the years of long ago; I remembered my songs in the night. My heart mused and my spirit inquired: "Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again?"

He thinks about the past, perhaps the early days of faith, and he remembers his favorite worship songs. But his heart is not stirred directly toward God, he gains **no strength, peace or joy**. Instead, what is **exposed** is closer to the heart of his distrust—"has God had it with me? Has he **given up** on me?"

Psalm 77:8-9 Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"

The psalmist is "engaged in a **deep struggle with God** over his **fears and depression**. He demands an accounting from God. In his anxiety, he **throws God's promises** back in His divine **face**.... The psalmist **confronts** God here and **demand to know** whether He is a **liar**. In the midst of his pain, he looks at his situation and wonders if God has **renege**d on His promises to him." *Cry*, p149

"We are too quick to **explain away** this kind of language. Most of us would be scared to death to talk to God this way. But what do we do instead? We repress our strong emotions, and too quickly and unreflectively 'turn it over to God.' If we are honest with ourselves, however, we don't really put it in God's hands—we bottle it up within ourselves. The problem continues to exist, and our fear festers and grows inside of us...." *Cry*, p149. The consequence is a largely **passionless** relationship with God! "The irony of questioning God is that it honors Him: it turns our hearts away from **ungodly despair** toward a **passionate desire to comprehend Him**" and **more deeply trust and love** him. *Cry*, p150

The **midnight battle** takes a significant **shift** at this critical juncture in the psalm. He will move from utter despair "to the **heights of joy**. He leaves us in no doubt about the reason for his change of mind:

Psalm 77:10-12 Then I thought, “To this I will appeal: 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. I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds.”

Notice what he has done to this point. He has taken his trouble to God and **vented** to God what was inside his heart. There are dark places in his heart, **distrust** is exposed and expressed and he passionately realizes more deeply his **need** of God. He moves out of his **trouble** toward God’s past acts of **deliverance**. He remembers perhaps the greatest O.T. example, Moses and 2 million people escaping through the **Red Sea**.

It’s at this point that powerful **imagery** comes flashing into his mind. It’s as if he can see himself in the picture, and he is utterly amazed. The picture forms in his head right here. Look at v.16ff.

Read with panache! ...

Psalm 77:16-20 The waters saw you, O God, the waters saw you and writhed; the very depths were convulsed. The clouds poured down water, 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. Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Ancient history. Do you notice how descriptive the psalmist is? It’s as if he puts himself right in the middle of the story, in vivid imagery and detail. Dark, ominous **clouds**, driving rainstorm, lightning flashing across the sky, the deep roll and sharp crackle of thunder, the **waters** writhe as if in tortuous pain. It’s as if you can smell the very **danger** hanging in the air—the Egyptian **army** about to descend and swallow up a hapless nation. What is the effect on the psalmist? He “recognizes that the danger confronting the Israelites was far more frightening than his own problems. They had their backs up against an impassable sea as the Egyptian army bore down on them. Talk about helpless! They were sitting **ducks** before the anger of a shamed Pharaoh. God, however, not only delivered the Israelites but also destroyed the Egyptians through the act of splitting the sea and then closing it again. The lesson is clear to his heart. **If God could deliver** His people from such dire troubles and deep fears in the past, He can certainly handle any present problems.” Cry, p151.

The picture portrays a powerful picture of the power and love of God. “He now remembers the past, and this allows him to **stop tossing** and turning with midnight anxiety and explain: Cry, p152

Psalm 77:13-15 Your ways, O God, are holy. what god is so great as our God? You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples. With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

It’s easy to settle into life with a “**contented indifference** toward God. Yes, they believed He existed. They also believed that He would protect them whether or not they worshiped or paid any attention to Him.” Cry, p153

Lessons

Complacency #1: toward God occurs when we believe we have what it takes to take care of our own well-being without God being central in our lives.

Complacency #2: toward God occurs when we believe God won’t give us what we want.

Little spiritual passion occurs when we settle for a safe existence, a safe life that doesn't *require* us to trust God. Despair strips us of the "illusion of self-confidence." Cry, p153

Notice the pattern: ***Complacency to despair to hope.***

... hope that is more deeply imbedded in God, less in ourselves. *The same pattern can be thought of this way: **stagnant relationship** to despair to intimate fellowship with God (deeper passion).*

"Apart from heavenly hope earthly hope has only one destination: inevitable disappointment. **But heavenly hope provides the substance that allows us also to hope here on earth. God is at work in the circumstances of my life.** When there are setbacks, I do not have to give in to complete despondency, because my ultimate hope is in God, who will never let me down." Cry, p155.

"Thankfully, despair is seasonal. It is God's severe mercy for a time, not a chronic condition of every moment of life.... Heavenly hope does not preclude despair. But it assures us that although there may be crying in the night, there will be rejoicing in the morning." Cry, p156

"The surprising truth is that God uses the emptiness that induces depression to drive us to Him. This in turn gives rise to greater joy, and to heavenly hope. We live in a world created beautiful but tainted by human sin. As we see the world for what it really is, we have a choice—despair or God." Cry, p155

Despair: I know what I need. I can't get it and God won't give it! Angry pride vs. humble trust.