

**UNSELFING  
Psalm 77**

**Dr. Howard Batson  
First Baptist Church  
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Max Lucado says

**It is the heroin of the emotions, the angel dust of the spirit, the cocaine of the soul.  
Injected into our system with the intentions of recovery, it has the capacity to kill.  
It's available and alluring and its dealers and users are often Christians.**

**The name of the drug is pity.**

**No one dependent upon pity ever intended to get that way.**

**The first experiment with the drug is usually a legitimate problem; a sickness maybe,  
cancer, a cold, a broken leg.**

**Perhaps it was taken to weather a crisis, death, bankruptcy, a divorce.**

**Whatever the cause, the treatment is the same, well-meaning friends treat us with pity,  
kind words, sympathetic gestures, empathetic tears.**

**Most of the time the treatment has its intended results.**

**Healing occurs and we pick ourselves up and we continue with our lives.**

**There are times, however, when a habit is formed.**

**The attention and compassion feel good.**

**The sudden flood of love and warmth gives us a type of high.**

**Well-intentioned friends inject our veins with kindness, fill our room with the smoke of  
understanding.**

**My, it feels nice.**

**In fact, it's been a while since we felt such warmth and sympathy.**

**So, instead of fighting to get back on our feet, we allow ourselves to ease into this addiction.**

**Motivation wanes.**

**Creativity disappears.**

**Initiative exits.**

**Paralysis enters.**

**We love the process of healing so much that we don't want to get healed.**

**Instead of getting better, we convince ourselves that we're worse.**

**In time, we become pity junkies.**

**We thrive on the compassion of others.**

**We become masters of reciting our woes and will gladly retell the tale to anyone who  
will listen.**

**We bare our wounds to all who pass, begging for a sympathetic touch.**

**As is true with drugs, each dose of pity is less effective.**

**Soon the pity from others is not stout enough, so we manufacture our own.**

**We convince ourselves that we are a victim of everything.**

**Our parents didn't raise us correctly.**

**My boss doesn't respect me.**

**I was potty trained too early.  
Society expects too much of me.  
Nobody loves me, everybody hates me.  
I think I'll eat some worms.  
For those who follow this cycle to its end there's a predictable final step – anger.  
We've become so efficient at convincing ourselves that we are victimized by the world that  
the only logical reaction is anger.  
Anger at the world, anger at family, anger at the church, anger at society.  
Self pity has paralyzed us to the point that we become useless to the family, to the church,  
and to the community.**

Of course, the problem with this drug, this opium of the soul, is that we're all susceptible to it, aren't we? We all have potential for self pity at some time in our life. We all have problems. We all have situations that are unfair. We all have reasons to feel sorry for ourselves at some time or another. Tragedy strikes. Often times loving, caring friends, the church, come to support us. As well they should. We all need that kind of comfort and help in times of need.

And yet there are those times when we don't get over our problem and move on. We begin to enjoy this comfort, this pity. We begin to enjoy those listening ears. We search out only those friends who will pity us. It becomes an ugly scene – people needing people to further their victim mentality. We become pity junkies. We become focused on ourselves.

When we come to the 77th Psalm, we find a pity junkie. I want to notice some things about pity from this psalm – this self-pity, this narcotic that leaves its addicts wasted and derelict. And there is just enough injustice, disappointment, unfairness, and hurt in all of our lives to provide ample raw material for our injured imaginations to work up into lush melodramas of self-pity.

#### **I. The first thing I want us to notice is that self-pity often deals with accurate facts.**

He really does have a better car than I do. That woman does have a more understanding husband. Her metabolism really is faster, making it easy for her to stay thin. He really isn't nearly the worker I am, yet he got the promotion. Yes, the facts are not in dispute. The wife that I really did love for 52 years has died. Yes, I really was a victim when my husband left me when we entered our 40s because he wanted to have a fling with his younger secretary.

There is no doubt about it – self-pity, I would say not only often but almost always, deals with accurate facts. There really is a death. There really is a divorce. There really is a physical ailment, a malady – these real facts that cause us to pick up the germ of self-pity. As Eugene Peterson has noted, the antidote to this self-pity virus, this over-drugging ourselves with ourselves, is in Psalm 77. It is the antidote of prayer.

This psalm falls into two almost equal but highly contrasting sections, verses 1-10 and verses 11-20.

## **II. A second thing I want us to notice about self-pity is that it allows no balm to heal (vs. 1-2).**

Notice the opening of this psalm.

My voice rises to God, and I will cry aloud;  
My voice rises to God, and He will hear me.  
In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord;  
In the night my hand was stretched out without weariness;  
My soul refused to be comforted.

The psalmist is crying out – crying out aloud to God. But notice in verse 2, the psalmist refuses to be comforted. It's a hidden agenda of self-pity. I've become so comfortable in the state that I am, feeling sorry for myself, that I refuse to let anything heal me, to push me forward, to make me make progress. If so, things will change and I am enjoying the attention, I am enjoying the sorrow – the wallowing in worries like the pig in mud.

## **III. The third thing I want us to see about self-pity is that it is accusing (vs. 3-4).**

Notice how distant God is from this pitier.

When I remember God, then I am disturbed;  
When I sigh, then my spirit grows faint.  
(v. 4) Thou hast held my eyelids open;  
I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

Even the sleepiness of this psalmist is blamed on God. “God, you're holding my eyelids open. That's why I can't sleep at night.”

This all-absorbing trouble leaves no time even for sleep. Verse 4 – God has pried open the eyes of the one to be pitied. My insomnia, in other words, is God's fault. This is a reoccurring characteristic of self-pity. Someone else, often God, is responsible for my trouble.

When we begin to enjoy wallowing in self-pity, however real the initial cause of the hurt, we begin to blame others. Someone else is responsible for our unhappiness. Someone else has robbed our joy. Someone has literally rained on our parade of life. If no one else is handy, then God is always there, ready to be blamed.

## **IV. The next thing I want us to see is that self-pity grovels in nostalgia.**

Verse 5

I have considered the days of old, the years of long ago.

The grass was greener fifty years ago. The previous generation was more energetic, more noble, more just. Almost everybody agrees that things were better in the old days – but no two people agree on when the old days were. **Russell Baker calls our bluff. “Despite the universal**

yearning for the old days – it is also true that 99 percent of people who prefer the old days wouldn't dream of going back unless they could take their ear [iPhone] with them." As Eugene Peterson says, "Self-pity is a shabby historian. It constantly remembers the past only to feed the injustice of the moment and to avoid doing anything about it." (Eugene Peterson, *Where Your Treasure Is*, p. 102)

If only I were still married – when we were married, things were wonderful.

If only she were still alive – when she was alive, life was a joy.

If only I had my old job back – if there weren't the cutbacks and layoffs.

If only... If only... If only... If only... Self-pity is a shabby historian that gets stuck in history – in the way things used to be.

One way to know whether you are caught in self-pity is if you are always longing for the ways things were before. You're so fixated in the past you can't live in the present, much less future.

**V. The next thing I want us to notice about self-pity is that it is exactly that – focused on the self. It's morbidly introspective.**

Have you noticed how many times "I" and "my" are in the first verses of this psalm? Back in verse 1 – "my" voice rises to God, and "I" will cry aloud; "my" voice (again)... he will hear "me."

Verse 2 – ... "my" trouble "I" sought... "my" hand... "my" soul...

Verse 3 – ...when "I" remembered...then "I"... when "I" sigh... "my" spirit grows faint

Verse 4 – ... "I" am so troubled that "I" cannot speak... "I" have considered... "I" will remember "my" song... "I" will meditate with "my" heart, and "my" spirit ponders.

In verses 1-6 there is nothing but a self-preoccupation. Nothing can be spoken of but me, myself, and I.

Look at verse 6.

I will remember my song in the night; I will meditate with my heart; and my spirit ponders.

There is nothing wrong with a healthy self-awareness. That's a hard thing always to achieve – a healthy self-study. But this psalmist has crossed the line. **As Eugene Peterson says, "The self meditating on the self is in a room without air, without oxygen. Left there long enough, breathing its own gases, it sickens."** (Eugene Peterson, *Where Your Treasure Is*, p. 103)

## **VI. Notice something else about self-pity. It is not a good theologian.**

Look at verses 7 and following.

Will the Lord reject forever?

And will He never be favorable again?

Has His lovingkindness ceased forever?

Has His promise come to an end forever?

Has God forgotten to be gracious?

Or has He in anger withdrawn His compassion?

We can hear what becomes the climax, clearly, of the psalm. It's a dangerous area – a gray area – the area of questioning God.

Look at the questions.

1. The Lord will spurn forever and never again be favorable?
2. His steadfast love has ceased forever?
3. His promises are at an end for all time?
4. God has forgotten to be gracious?
5. In anger He has shut up His compassion?

What kind of God do we have? When we are people of self-pity, we have a rejecting God, a tired God, a stingy God, a forgetful God, an angry God.

Does self-pity make for good theology? Even those of us with a first grade knowledge of the God revealed in scripture and experienced in the centuries of salvation history know that such statements are foolish. Such statements are not based on the revelation of God's word or the observation of how God has dealt with His people. Rather, they are fabricated out of focus on self. You see, when we become people of the "pity party," our God becomes tired and stingy and forgetful and angry.

Finally, in verse 10, the conclusion comes that God has changed. We want a God that is predictable, who works something like a magic formula. When we have tragedy in our lives and God seems to be absent, then we think perhaps God has changed. Our old religion is collapsing. Our self-serving assurance is gone.

Verse 10 is translated by the *Jerusalem Bible* to read this way: This, I said then, is what distresses me, that the power of the Most High is no longer what it was.

Or the *New English Bible*: Has His right hand, I said, lost its grasp? Does it hang powerless, the arm of the Most High?

God cannot be presumed upon and God cannot be locked into a pattern of behavior. There is grief and illness and despondency when it seems that God has changed.

Yes, self-pity leads us to a pathetic theology in which we do not know God who is good and powerful, steadfast and sure.

What a pathetic picture in verses 1-10, the picture of the pitying self. People who walk through life with a terrible limp and don't really want to be made well. They are comfortable limping, being known as a limper, having everyone cast their eyes in sympathy as they hobble along in life. A broken God and a broken self.

Some of you here this morning – that's exactly where you are in your life. You've made no progress because you don't want to make any progress. You're stuck in the past. Every time a scab forms over your wound, you pick it off and declare to the world that you are still bleeding.

I know that's a horrid picture, but it best captures who we are when we become a people of self-pity. The theology is broken. Your God is not good. You even think that God has forgotten to be gracious.

There is a division between verses 10 and 11. This prayer that started focusing on self now comes to the end of that road and sees how it leads to nothing but wasteland. The psalmist begins to change his tune.

Look at verses 11-15

I shall remember the deeds of the Lord;  
Surely I will remember Thy wonders of old.  
I will meditate on all Thy work,  
And muse on Thy deeds.  
Thy way, O God, is holy;  
What god is great like our God?  
Thou art the God who workest wonders;  
Thou hast made known Thy strength among the peoples.  
Thou hast by Thy power redeemed Thy people,  
The sons of Jacob and Joseph.

One thing seems clear in this psalm. To get well, we have to stop focusing on the "I," "me" and "my," and start focusing on the "thee" and "thou." Notice how we change from the "I's" to the "thou's."

Verse 14 – Thou...thou

Verse 15 – Thou...

Verse 16 – Thee... Thee (as it continues to the next section)

First, If we are going to get well, we have to stop focusing on ourselves and focus on God.

This is especially true in our worship, as this psalm would have been used in worship. So many times we come to church thinking about what we can get out of it, rather than thinking about how we can focus on God. Therefore, worship becomes something that is self-centered rather than God-centered. I and my needs become the focus of worship rather than God and God's greatness. The very approach to worship that demands that God is there to dole out the solution to our

problems, that He is nothing more than the great guru of self-help, causes us to cease to realize who He is.

Yes, the change in the psalm — the getting well — demands that we focus not on the “me” and “my”, but rather the “Thee” and “Thou”.

Second, to get well not only do we have to change our focus from ourselves to God, but we have to remember (vs. 11-12) what God has done for us. Know your history, says the psalmist, as he begins to get well. Has God forgotten? Has He rejected? Is He stingy and inept? No, remember His deeds. God’s way is holy. Look at verse 13. What god is great like our God?

Third (vs. 16-20), in order to be well we have to realize that God cannot be controlled. He is on His throne and He will not be made inept because of our assessments. Rather, with these images and undertones of Genesis 1, we have the watery chaos out of which God fashioned the good creation echoed in these sentences that sing salvation. We have in these final verses a cosmic thunderstorm, the lightning lighting up the world. The earth, itself, shaking.

Notice verses 19-20. Going, as the psalmist does, from trying to control God, trying to manipulate God and have God produce his wants, he goes to a God whose footprints may not be known. But look. “Thou didst lead Thy people like a flock.” It’s not that God doesn’t care. It’s not that He leaves us aimless in the midst of His mystery and power. Rather, He leaves us the prophet and the priest, the Moses and the Aaron, to lead us through the wilderness.

There is a real need for un-selfing. Some of you here this morning need to move on. You’ve been in that feeling of victimization, that spiral of downward wallowing, pity, and feeling of hopelessness. You’ve focused on the past. You’ve focused on yourself. You’ve focused on the poor theology that makes God small and inept, unable and silent. It’s time for you, like it was time for the psalmist, to move on, to think about others and God — not yourself, to dare to take the bandage off and try to run again, to move yourself from the comfortable confines of the infirmary and move out into the park once again.

It’s time. It’s time to move on. It’s time to cease the language of “poor me.” It’s time to stop blaming others. It’s time to focus on God — in our hearts and in our worship. It’s time to remember all the great things God has done for you and to dare walk again, confidently, into life, nay run.