

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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"Thoughts and Prayers," and Action

Psalm 77

You've heard about our upcoming backpack project, aimed at assisting children and families who struggle to meet their need for school supplies. This event is always an uplifting and satisfying opportunity for our congregation to reach out beyond itself and practice generosity toward people in our community, as well as contribute to a positive, fruitful educational experience for many boys and girls.

Sadly, we live in a time when a productive educational experience also requires extraordinary measures that promote safety and security. Earlier this week, I saw a news report about the rising demand for bulletproof backpacks, designed to protect children who are returning to school. With the back-to-school season approaching, more and more parents are doing things that previous generations might never even have imagined or considered, in order to protect their children from gunmen.

Of course, schools aren't the only places where mass shootings have shattered assumptions about safety in public areas. Stores, restaurants, movie theaters, and even houses of worship, have become targets for these kinds of attacks. Last weekend, at least 31 people were killed in mass shootings in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio. Since then, we've witnessed an all-too-familiar set of emotions and responses to these kinds of attacks. Shock, fear, anger, and grief. Updates from law enforcement officials. Helicopters in the air and reporters on the ground. Calls for action, such as gun legislation, crackdowns on hate speech, or more resources devoted to monitoring and promoting mental health. Tragically, these things have become almost a regular part of life in America.

Soon after these kinds of attacks, people will often gather for memorial services or vigils. These gatherings give individuals and communities an opportunity to experience mutual support, comfort, and hope. Some of these assemblies take place in churches, where mourners draw upon the resources of prayer, music, and Scripture. When it comes to the Bible, its writers certainly aren't strangers to devastating events and experiences that cause them to bring themselves, including their whole range of emotions, into the presence of God.

This is particularly true of the psalms. The great Christian reformer John Calvin once called the psalms a mirror of the soul. He said, "I have been wont to call this book, not inappropriately, an anatomy of all parts of the soul; for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror." When we listen to the psalms, we often see and hear ourselves, including our own suffering, devastation, and despair. We recognize the struggles, the questions, and the cries for help.

In today's text, the psalmist says, "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" (vv. 1-2). We don't know the exact nature of the trouble or distress that the psalmist is experiencing. He or someone he knows could be ill. He and his community could be threatened or under attack. There's a good chance that he's referring to circumstances related to the exile of God's people. But whatever the specifics

of the suffering, this particular psalm, like so many others, is composed in such a way that it could be used by later generations for similar, though not identical, situations.

One of the things that stands out about this text is the psalmist's level of despair. It's as if he has become so discouraged that prayer has become virtually impossible. "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" (vv. 3-4). Constantly seeking God, praying night and day, has only led the psalmist to the conclusion that no comfort is possible. He has reached a point where he feels like his only option is to remember and ruminate. All he can do is moan and meditate.

But the good news is that he does so in the presence of God, and with a heart still open to God. Eventually, God uses the psalmist's thinking and meditating as an avenue for reawakening him to the reality of divine compassion and unfailing love. Thoughts of despair get transformed into thoughts of deliverance.

In the midst of devastation, what we do with our thoughts becomes critical. One thing we can do with our thoughts is include others in them. This is part of what we mean when we say, "You're in my thoughts and prayers." We mean, "I'll be remembering you and your circumstances. I won't forget who you are and what you're going through. And I'll be interceding in prayer for you. I'll remember you before God, looking to his mercy and asking for his help."

"You're in our thoughts and prayers." This is one of our first and most instinctive responses to individual and collective suffering. It's a familiar refrain in all sorts of tragic circumstances, including mass shootings. News reporters not only update us on the most recent developments, but also note that their "thoughts and prayers" are with the victims. Law enforcement officials, while briefing the public on the ongoing investigation, reassure listeners that the community is in their "thoughts and prayers." Politicians, all the way from the local mayor to the President of the United States, hold press conferences in which they articulate their empathy by promising their "thoughts and prayers" to grieving towns and cities.

"Thoughts and prayers." It's something we need to say, and something that others need to hear. We need to give words to our compassion, and they need to hear words of compassion. These words don't have to be fresh and original words, creatively crafted under the strain and stress of unexpected tragedy. Many of our best and most needed words are familiar, frequently spoken words. When you're in the receiving line at the funeral home, and you say to the grieving family members, "I'm so sorry for your loss," those are good and appropriate words. Even if they've heard them hundreds of times before, those words from your mouth confirm what is being said most of all by your presence, namely that the mourners aren't alone, and that the Lord's compassion is unfailing.

"Thoughts and prayers." Often, these prayers will take the form of intercession for those who have been harmed, who bear the wounds of gun violence. In the face of such terrible news, we take the individuals, families, and communities devastated by such an attack, and hold them before the mercy of God. But intercession, while necessary and important, isn't the only form of prayer available to us. We can also pray in the form of lament. Lament calls out in anguish to God. Lament cries out to God with great distress. Lament doesn't act as if faithfulness is about putting on a false smile and showing up at the house of worship, pretending that everything is alright. No, lament means pouring your soul out to God, with no illusions about the brokenness, unrighteousness, and suffering that seem to prevail. Lament means coming to God with your doubts about his presence and your

questions about his apparent inaction. Lament is what we hear from the psalmist in part of today's text: "Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again? 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?" (vv. 7-9).

Praying in the form of lament doesn't mean that you're being unfaithful or unchristian. On the contrary, lament can actually be a powerful expression of faith. Faith that's serious enough to be honest with God, and to hold God to his promises. In fact, the journey toward deeper hope can often require such honesty with yourself and with God. Notice that Psalm 77 doesn't end after verse 9. After confronting God about his seeming distance and inaction, the psalmist shifts to remembering what the Lord has already done in the life of his people, especially in the exodus from Egypt. If God could take the enslaved Israelites, who looked like they had no means of escape, and bring them out of bondage, then there was still a future for the psalmist and for the people of God. So by recalling and reflecting on the saving deeds of the Lord, the psalmist moves from despair to hope. He's reawakened to a fresh sense of God's faithfulness, mercy, and compassion.

The Lord's compassion is more than just a thought or a word. The Lord's compassion takes the form of action. Most of all, he has acted through the death and resurrection of Christ for our deliverance. That good news always shapes the way we react and respond to whatever terrible news shows up on our television screens. And these days, that terrible news is often the latest incident of gun violence, mass casualties, and another community in shock and mourning.

How, then, are we to respond? Certainly with "thoughts and prayers." By prayerfully holding others before the mercy of God, we show that God is personal, and that he has identified himself with us through Christ, for purposes of redemption and healing. By praying, we show that God's promises are reliable and that his love for the world stands forever. By praying, we reaffirm the reality of God's sovereign love in the midst of circumstances where it looks like God doesn't reign. So when gun violence erupts, we pray.

But a fully faithful response requires more than just prayer. It also requires action. Not action without prayer. There are some who would contend for that approach. "We don't need any more statements promising thoughts and prayers," they would argue. "What we need is action." But from a Christian perspective, faithful action is preceded by faithful prayer. Faithful action has to be grounded in God's grace and power, since he's the only one who can ultimately save us from our own violence and self-destruction. So action, yes. But action rooted in prayerfulness.

That action might take a variety of forms. It might take the form of countering hate speech with gospel speech, the word of peace through Christ. It might take the form of combating ideologies of white supremacy by proclaiming instead the supremacy of Christ, before whom we all stand as equals, made in the image of God. It might take the form of advocating for gun legislation. It might take the form of supporting your local police in their efforts to combat domestic terrorism. It might take the form of making resources more available for mental health, or becoming more familiar with red flags that point to the possibility of violent behavior among people you know. It might take the form of giving financially to organizations that provide support for victims of gun violence and mass shootings.

Whatever your background, your political views, or your ideas about how to proclaim and practice the gospel in our day and time, we're certainly united in our conviction that we're called to "thoughts and prayers," and to action.