

God's Great Ballad | The Flow of the Psalms

The Desecrated Sanctuary

Psalm 74 (Devastation)

7.12.20

Psalm 74 A Maskil of Asaph. O God, why have You rejected us forever? Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture? ² Remember Your congregation, which You have purchased of old, Which You have redeemed to be the tribe of Your inheritance; And this Mount Zion, where You have dwelt. ³ Turn Your footsteps toward the perpetual ruins; The enemy has damaged everything within the sanctuary. ⁴ Your adversaries have roared in the midst of Your meeting place; They have set up their own standards for signs. ⁵ It seems as if one had lifted up His axe in a forest of trees. ⁶ And now all its carved work They smash with hatchet and hammers. ⁷ They have burned Your sanctuary to the ground; They have defiled the dwelling place of Your name. ⁸ They said in their heart, "Let us completely subdue them." They have burned all the meeting places of God in the land. ⁹ We do not see our signs; There is no longer any prophet, Nor is there any among us who knows how long. ¹⁰ How long, O God, will the adversary revile, And the enemy spurn Your name forever? ¹¹ Why do You withdraw Your hand, even Your right hand? From within Your bosom, destroy them!

¹² Yet God is my king from of old, Who works deeds of deliverance in the midst of the earth. ¹³ You divided the sea by Your strength; You broke the heads of the sea monsters in the waters. ¹⁴ You crushed the heads of Leviathan; You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. ¹⁵ You broke open springs and torrents; You dried up ever-flowing streams. ¹⁶ Yours is the day, Yours also is the night; You have prepared the light and the sun. ¹⁷ You have established all the boundaries of the earth; You have made summer and winter.

¹⁸ Remember this, O LORD, that the enemy has reviled, And a foolish people has spurned Your name. ¹⁹ Do not deliver the soul of Your turtledove to the wild beast; Do not forget the life of Your afflicted forever. ²⁰ Consider the covenant; For the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence. ²¹ Let not the oppressed return dishonored; Let the afflicted and needy praise Your name.

²² Arise, O God, and plead Your own cause; Remember how the foolish man reproaches You all day long. ²³ Do not forget the voice of Your adversaries, The uproar of those who rise against You which ascends continually.

We're looking at the Book of Psalms...and paying special attention to how the book is organized, the themes of the FIVE BOOKS in the whole collection.

The Book of Psalms was curated centuries AFTER the life of David probably after the Babylonian Exile (586 BC) and the editors/curators divided the whole psalter into five sections or books according to themes they discovered. The theme of this central book is devastation. Last week Phil showed us the crisis of one individual's faith, this week the collective crisis facing the whole church – the church in devastation.

This Psalm is an artistic meditation on an event so utterly painful and overwhelming that the average Israelite NEVER even imagined it actually happening. It would be like how you've been waking up lately... Shortly after your eyes open you remember this pandemic and you then think to yourself, "WOW! I can't believe this is happening!" – just imagine THAT feeling but about 1000 times stronger.

THAT'S what the average Israelite felt when they saw the Temple in Jerusalem desecrated by Babylon and eventually destroyed! They simply KNEW it could never happen...and then it DID! God's Dwelling fell...

I wonder... how YOU feel the Church is doing today in the modern world... in the U.S. ...in South Florida. What's the Church's influence/effectiveness today? How are we doing?... Do we have a voice? Is there a Christian consensus in our nation? Is the church at all instrumental in forming the opinions of this nation?

How should we read these times and how should the church (THIS church!) how should the church respond to these times... how might this Psalm instruct us?

Let's look at: **1) The Dwelling Design**
2) The Dwelling Destroyed
3) The Dwelling Re-Deployed

We can safely say that from "the beginning", it was God's loving intention to DWELL WITH the one creature made in His image – He walked with the man and the woman in the cool of the day (Gen 3.8).

And later, even after our rebellion, God continues to stress His kind purposes to dwell with us. So, Leviticus 26, v.12 "I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people."

The whole Exodus event points to God's desire to dwell with the people He ransomed from slavery. He marries Himself to them by a covenant and then He takes them on a honeymoon into the wilderness. He has them construct a bridal-suite, the Tabernacle, modeled on the Garden of Eden. God dwelling with His people... appointing a tent of meeting.

And finally designating a permanent structure, a magnificent Temple, also modeled on the Garden of Eden where God, at first dwelled with the ones He had made IN His image for communion, i.e. for meeting and for dwelling, eating and drinking with Him. AND all THIS is the background of the first paragraph of today's Psalm 74.

The Israelites are, v. 1, the sheep of His pasture; v.2 His congregation; v. 2 His tribe and inheritance; "and THIS Mount Zion where You have DWELT" – that word in Hebrew is very significant, the word "shakken" as in Shekinah glory (Ex 24.16), the glory that rests or dwells or

remains. God's design is to remain or dwell with human beings. Our Psalm sees that design and celebrates it...and the design appears in one form or another no less than ten times in the first paragraph.

But the whole point of this first paragraph and the whole horrified complaint is, "WE thought You really meant it – we thought You were serious about Your dwelling with us; WE THOUGHT WE COULD COUNT ON THIS FOREVER... but evidently we were wrong!"

Thus the questions, v. 1 WHY have You rejected us? Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture?... How long will the adversary revile and spurn Your name forever?"

The writer is voicing this complaint for the whole Church – "God... there are certain things we count on but ONE ABOVE ALL and that is that the Temple is YOUR DWELLING PLACE among us! If the Temple is raided and desecrated all is lost!"

Some scholars see this as a poetic lamentation (like the Book of Lamentations) over the first raid by the Babylonians in 2nd Kings 24. The Babylonian armies showed up at Jerusalem and the Israelites surrendered immediately. So the Babylonians went easy on them: they pillaged the Temple and took all the gold... they ransacked it and hacked it apart with axes and hammers... and then ten years later they returned. This time Israel resisted and Babylon totally destroyed the Temple, the walls and the entire city. Psalm 79 tells the fuller story.

And this Psalm reflects on this most unexpected and completely counterintuitive twist of history that the Dwelling of God among His people is fallen. The prophets warned that it would happen if the Church continued refusing to trust in God... that He would withdraw and the glory that dwells (*shakken, shekinah*) would depart but they simply could not believe that God would abandon His own cause and that this magnificent model of Eden, this solid Temple would be allowed to be desecrated with the flags of the enemy and the banners of false gods.

Maybe the shock and incredulity ... the refusal to believe that YES! God will give up His own cause and give His dwelling place to be destroyed... maybe the closest parallel is the disciples of Jesus Christ when He predicted, and warned them, announced and told them repeatedly, "I am going to die!"

And the disciples just couldn't see it or even imagine that He was stating a plain fact. How could the Man of God's own choosing, the Anointed Prophet, Priest and King promised from the dawn of time – how could the Messiah, the very dwelling of God on earth – how could the Living Temple of God...suffer and die?

And yes! Jesus Christ was the substance to which the Temple pointed. The Temple was the symbol but He was the real Presence of God, dwelling with His people. John 1.14: "the Word became flesh and 'tabernacled' among us..." Jesus is God in the tent of our flesh. He is the

intimate dwelling of the Bride-Groom with the Bride. He is the true SHAKKEN, the glory that doesn't dissipate (as it did from the face of Moses (2 Cor 3.7) and yet just as the holy building was invaded by the roaring enemy (v4) and they lifted up their axe and smashed it with hammers, so Jesus Christ hammered to a tree – the God who made the trees was nailed to His own creation.

And didn't Jesus Himself claim to BE the true Temple (Mat 12.6; John 2.19), "tear this temple down and I will rebuild it in three days". And in the smoldering ruins of that True Temple, the Perfect Man, the God-Man... as the wrecked vehicle, the Body that housed God Himself, as He is laid in the ground, all His people pray a prayer they can't even believe, in the words of v. 22, "Arise, O God, and plead Your own cause..."

And arise He does! He comes out of the tomb, the True Temple now risen, rebuilt and glorious, "God With Us" (Isa. 7.14, Mat 1.23). Remember the covenant, O Lord. And He does! He fulfills the human side and the divine. God with Man is dwelling who by death has broken the head of the sea monsters, has defeated all our enemies and crushed the head of Leviathan (Gen 3.15). You have established all the boundaries of the earth.

By death He killed death and in rising, He pleads His own cause – satisfies His own justice and comes to be the True Dwelling of God with His people forever.

What's more, He is now on the move, pillaging the house of the strongman, our enemy and taking from every tribe, nation and people *LIVING STONES, being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood* (1Pet 2.5)...

And by His apostle He asks us, "Don't you know that YOU are the temple?" (1 Cor 3.16, Eph 2.21) that He is the Cornerstone and His people are indwelt by the Person of God...we dwell in Christ and God's Spirit dwells in us.

And this Living Temple, the Church, abiding in Jesus Christ, found wherever the Church is in every nation – this Temple does sometimes STILL... suffer...and faces an enemy who still roars and seeks to destroy and devour (1 Pet 5.8)

And there are times... when the living stones, God's own sheep whom He has purchased of old and redeemed as the tribe of His inheritance... there are times when they suffer... and the Temple is again smashed with hatchet and hammers and broken.

We have brothers and sisters in many nations, living stones connected to our Cornerstone who are deployed in the world...and who live (20) in "dark places of lands full of ...violence". Nigeria is becoming one of those places: Islamic terrorists killing our brothers and sisters – damaging the Temple of God (1 Cor 3.17).

And in our own day...and in our own place there are indeed signs, “they have set up their own standards for signs” There are indicators that the Temple made of living stones is losing its place in this society.

We see pointers that the influence of the Church is less than it used to be. There are signs that we are living in a post-Christian society... truths we thought were self-evident are rejected and falsehoods we thought would NEVER take root...have gained traction and become widely accepted.

What then...WHAT IS THE CHURCH TO DO? I am very much helped by the Sociology Professor from University of Virginia, James Davison Hunter. In his book titled *To Change the World*, he writes, “The goal for Christians, then, is not and never has been to “take back the culture” or to “take over the culture” or to “win the culture wars” or to “save Western civilization.” Ours is now, emphatically, a post-Christian culture, and the community of Christian believers are now, more than ever -- spiritually speaking -- exiles in a land of exile. Christians, as with the Israelites in Jeremiah’s account, must come to terms with this exile.” (James Davidson Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy & Possibility of Christianity In the Late Modern World*, Oxford University Press, 2008; p. 280)

See, the Church for all our flaws and hypocrisy and needs, STILL, we are the re-deployed DWELLING OF GOD of earth (“know ye not, ye ARE the Temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” [1Cor 3.16]). And we must see that we live in this world as exiles. The Psalmist perhaps lived to see the Church taken to Babylon to live as exiles.

And maybe you know that there were some believers in the God of Covenant... they believed that they should rebel against Babylon and rise up and that God would give them victory and “the evil king Nebuchadnezzar would die...and we can return to our city (Jerusalem) and get on with our lives!”

And Jeremiah, himself an exile IN Babylon, and God’s true prophet was to tell the Israelites, “DO NOT REBEL against Babylon and its king or you will die... instead... show yourself to be gracious guests...and seek the well-being (shalom) of the city where God has planted you... pray for Babylon... love one another and let the Babylonians see that love. And love the Babylonians; serve them... model integrity.”

“No way, Jeremiah! These are our enemies and they don’t believe the truth! They’re the ones who destroyed the Temple!”

But you see, God used that period of Church history to teach the Church how to live as exiles. And the New Testament picks up the theme and reminds us repeatedly that we TOO are exiles (1Pet 1.1, 2.11). We, like Abraham the believer, we have another Country, another City, which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Heb 11.10-16).

And in our re-deployment... as the dwelling of God...and yet living in (what appears to be) an increasingly hostile environment to truth and to the Good News we take our cues from God Himself.

He incarnated and sought the welfare of the City – He wept over the city. He served in the city (John 13).

And He, Jesus Christ, the Dwelling of God, was torn down and died for the city. “Yet God is my King from of old, who works deeds of salvation (the Heb = *yeshua*) in the midst of the earth.”

How we doing? What are we gonna do to this society and culture that’s become resistant to God and to the Truth? What is our strategy?

I think we serve. We hold out grace and truth. We raise our families with care and godliness and grace. We pray (isn’t what we’re reading today? A PRAYER) especially for our family in Nigeria and China who face real danger and persecution.

We serve the city by carrying out our callings (as single people, as students, as electricians, as artists and accountants and spouses and neighbors and citizens) we demonstrate a humble but holy (not sanctimonious but true holiness that comes only by a repeated trust in Jesus Christ and true repentance).

We serve our community TOGETHER at Oceanside Adult Living Facility and teaching English to immigrants (one of the best things we’ve ever done!)

And we live in hope... even if, in God’s plan, we really do face real persecution... we still live in hope that soon and very soon we will hear these words:

"Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will dwell among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away ...and I saw no temple in that City, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb ARE its temple." (Rev 21.3-5, 22)