

The Embattled Church

Book of Psalms

By Ken Wimer

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Bible Text: Psalm 79

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Shreveport Grace Church

2970 Baird Road

Shreveport, LA 71118

Website: <http://www.shrevegrace.org/>

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/shreveportgracech

Let's take our Bibles and the time that we have here to look together at Psalm 79. This is a very interesting chapter because it speaks of the demise of Jerusalem at a time when Jerusalem seemed to be prospering and so, perhaps somewhat prophetic of what would take place when God would raise up an evil enemy, the Babylonians, the Chaldeans and bring them against Jerusalem to destroy the city and to destroy the Temple as took place somewhere around 700 years before Christ. But as we read this together, I want us to consider the same question that puzzled Habakkuk. There is a lot in here that parallels with what we find in the book of Habakkuk and that is, how can God, being a just God, look upon that which is evil and use even evil nations to chasten his people. So, even as Habakkuk waited on the Lord for that answer, so we wait on the Lord. We're not to question God's judgments; we're not to question what he does. And, again, here's a clear example of what I have said before and repeated often, is that everything God does is right and is right because God does it, that's the simple answer. But are there not times when, as you look back through the history of the church and even perhaps today, when God for purposes of his choosing, causes the church to be overrun with tares, if you will, different ways of looking at this, or compromise, or leaven. These are all different terms that we find in Scripture. Here, it would be in causing the church to be overrun with persecutors and how it is that he sustains his church even in the face of the most atrocious opposition or corruption, different ways of looking at this.

Let's read this together here in Psalm 79,

“1 O God, the heathen are come into thine inheritance; thy holy temple have they defiled; they have laid Jerusalem on heaps. 2 The dead bodies of thy servants have they given to be meat unto the fowls of the heaven, the flesh of thy saints unto the beasts of the earth. 3 Their blood have they shed like water round about Jerusalem; and there was none to bury them. 4 We are become a reproach to our neighbours, a scorn and derision to them that are round about us. 5 How long, LORD? wilt thou be angry for ever? shall thy jealousy burn like fire? 6 Pour out thy wrath upon the heathen,”

and there we can understand the word “heathen” even as in verse 1 as the nations,

“Pour out thy wrath upon the heathen that have not known thee, and upon the kingdoms that have not called upon thy name. 7 For they have devoured Jacob, and laid waste his dwelling place. 8 O remember not against us former iniquities: let thy tender mercies speedily prevent us: for we are brought very low. 9 Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of thy name: and deliver us, and purge away our sins, for thy name's sake. 10 Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is their God? let him be known among the heathen in our sight by the revenging of the blood of thy servants which is shed. 11 Let the sighing of the prisoner come before thee; according to the greatness of thy power preserve thou those that are appointed to die; 12 And render unto our neighbours sevenfold into their bosom their reproach, wherewith they have reproached thee, O Lord. 13 So we thy people and sheep of thy pasture will give thee thanks for ever: we will shew forth thy praise to all generations.”

Let's have a word of prayer.

Most gracious and heavenly Father, as we come together in these few moments, I pray that you would be directing our own hearts and cause us to look unto you even during this time, to consider your great works and consider how it is that you are a just God, the Savior, that you exercise your will where you will, when you will, how you will. And I pray, dear Lord, that you would grant us submissive spirits as we contemplate your works and never to question what you are doing but to be brought to bow low at Christ's feet and to acknowledge that all that you do is for your honor and glory even when we don't understand it. But above all, that you should preserve a remnant such as we are that you would save by your grace for Christ's sake, us not being any better than any others and that you should be merciful to sinners such as we are. I pray, dear Lord, that you would bless our meeting together today and throughout these hours of worship to your honor and glory and we give you the praise in our dear Savior's name. Amen.

As we look at this particular chapter, Psalm 79, again, I've entitled this simply "The Embattled Church" and, certainly, that is the picture of the church here in this world. We have to always be reminded that we live in a sin-cursed world and it's to be expected then that there are going to be enemies. I had an opportunity, even yesterday, of speaking with someone about Canaan and how we have been falsely told that Canaan is a picture of heaven. Well, here would be a good example of why Canaan is not a picture of heaven because the Lord brought the children of Israel into this land and I believe the proper term is "the Promised Land." Some of the old writers like to refer to it as "the Holy Land," but you would agree with me there's nothing holy about it. It's the Promised Land and we saw in our studies in Joshua that God fulfilled every promise to Israel concerning that land and bringing them in and settling them in there. But if it was a picture of heaven, I hate to think of spending eternity in a situation much like we're reading here where there are enemies who would be directed in and would overrun and overtake and persecute and kill and lay siege to the Lord's people. You say, "Well, why would God purpose these sorts of times when his church would be overrun?" Those are the answers that we're going to see together as we study this particular portion of Scripture. Why is it

that God causes heaven to enter into an assembly? Why is it that he brings persecution against churches and against his servants even to the point of them having to lay down their lives?

Here in verse 2, it says, “The dead bodies of thy servants have they given to be meat unto the fowls of the heaven.” Not even a proper burial, just laid out there and exposed to where the carnivorous birds come and peck away at them and eat them up, even to the point where the heathen mock as we read in verse 10, “Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is their God?” Now, I have to confess, we live in relative comfort right now. When I compare what I’m reading here with what down through history and perhaps even some of the Lord’s people throughout the world, may be facing even at this point, we don’t have right now, as far as I know, a threat of death for meeting here or someone barging through that door and taking us out because we’re meeting together to exalt and worship the Lord Jesus Christ, but nothing says that that day won’t come. As we look at the change in our political scene even here in the United States, this is becoming more and more a reality, I believe, in our minds as we have a government that continues to gather information. It all just depends on how that government is pleased to use that information. Or, I should say, how God would ordain that that government use it because until the Lord gives that authority, there is no government or authority in heaven or hell that can even touch one of the Lord’s anointed unless he’d be pleased to ordain it. Such is the God we worship.

So, these are some questions I believe that are very practical for us as we consider this Psalm and, obviously, we’re not going to be able to see it all in this one setting and, Lord willing, we’ll come back to this. But, if I were to try to outline this particular Psalm: verses 1-3 we consider what it is that the Lord has ordained that the heathen should do. I know in some of the old writers, you hear about God’s decorative will, what he decrees and then you hear about his permissive will and they almost present this in a way that, “Well, God would not really ordain that these nations come in and do this to the church, but for reasons known only to him, he permits it.” Well, those are distinctions that men come up with and I believe for many reasons to try to get God off the hook but there is nothing that lives or breathes or moves or has its being, is what Paul declared in Acts 17, but what God ordains it.

So, here in Psalm 79:1, when it says, “O God, the heathen are come into thine inheritance,” it’s not as if the Psalmist is informing God of something he didn’t know about, but rather the Lord has put the church, his servants, Asaph being one of them, in such a position in contemplating these things where it evokes the heart cry unto God. And I would hope that that would be the same result even in our own hearts if the Lord has truly opened our hearts to consider the evil that could come and does come when God takes his hand and restraint off of men and turns them loose. We tend to look on them as nice people, good people. You hear all these terms about people until the Lord pulls back the curtain a little bit and they do something that seems very evil in men’s eyes and men are shocked. “How could so-and-so? I know him. He was the neighbor. How could he have done that?” when in reality, it’s an evil that God perceived all along and declared all

along. It's just that he took his hand off so that he revealed unto us what is the nature of men.

The amazing thing is, it's the very people we sit together with even under the hearing of the gospel. We never presume that even everyone who comes and sits and listens to the gospel then is a good person, that we're all sinners before a holy God and unless Christ has paid our debt and once that ransom has been answered, to a holy God, we're just as evil as the next person. And to expose what men are, the Lord ordains that even some that are closest to us become our greatest persecutors and antagonists and there is no greater example than the Lord Jesus Christ himself of whom the Psalm said that "my particular friend lifted up his heel against me." That's what he called Judas, "an acquaintance," not a brother. But there he was, walking with our Lord all these years and in the appointed time, Satan entered into Judas and he went and did what he was ordained to do. The Lord knew it all along but it was exposed what he was.

So, that's what we see here in verses 1-3, just to what lengths evil men, when given the authority and the restraint is taken off, to what lengths they will use that particular power given to them against the Lord, against his people. That's really what it is, it's a battle against the Lord. A great example in the New Testament would have been the Apostle Paul. He confessed that he had been in particular a blasphemer. Well, that was after the fact but while he was breathing out hatred toward the church and going from place to place with authority to imprison and to kill, he considered that he was actually doing a service to God. It's like fanatics today that will go in and take out a whole crowd of people and believe thereby that they're actually doing God a service. Most wars, if not all of them going on today, are in some way religious wars. It's people defending their God and when it comes down to the world versus the church, it's really a spirit of antichrist that is within all unregenerate natural men, that unless, like Paul, the Lord stopped him and turned him, converted him, but up to that point, that spirit of antichrist was in him. Even though he was one of God's elect; even though he was one for whom Christ paid the debt, it just had not yet been revealed.

So, all of this we see here in verses 1-3, is to what lengths sinners will go in breathing out their hatred for Christ and the gospel. But in verse 4, we see to what lengths God will bring his people low. What's important here is not our reputation, what's important here is the glory of Christ and when it says in verse 4, "we are become a reproach to our neighbors and a scorn and derision to them that are round about us," we see there that in God's purposes, he will at times and seasons appointed, direct his people to be brought so low as to where they would become a reproach, a scorn and derision. We need to be careful not to keep up a reputation when it comes to this world. You see, that's a spirit of compromise. Trying to fit our lifestyle, trying to even fit our doctrine or our message as pertains to how we worship to what people want, we can't do that. I will tell you that it's as unpopular today how we worship God, as it was back in Christ's day. Even Paul said in his defense that that way of worship that others call a sect, he boldly declared "it is in that way that I worship God."

I will tell you that even though, right now, some may not be saying it openly to you, yet they're talking. They talk around the table. They talk out of earshot. And they already see you as a reproach, a scorn and a derision because you will not run with them, you won't meet with them. When they send you invitations to come to their church meetings and you refuse, they can get pretty haughty too because when you try to simply explain to them that the way they worship is not how the Lord has taught you to worship God, they'll throw it right back in your face. That's when the scorn comes, "Oh, so you think you're the only one that's saved." That's that rebellion that is in men's hearts against this gospel. But, you know what? These doors are open every time we come for worship and we're not shutting anybody out but there are many that shut themselves out because they've blocked their ears and they will not hear. They prefer to pass through this life in that false worship to which God has left them.

That's what we see described here in verse 4. Then in verse 5, we find questions. Do you ever have questions? Well, I'm thankful that here are expressed some questions that many times are raised in our own hearts when we see this evil against the Lord and against his people. "How long, LORD? wilt thou be angry for ever? shall thy jealousy burn like fire?" When we read the book of Revelation, it appears that at least this is put in human language when you're reading Revelation, as the church is gathered in heaven around the throne and even as we studied in Revelation, the Lord has purposed not to come back, to return, until that last number is brought in but there is also a designated number of martyrs. There are a designated number of people that will lay down their lives for the gospel's sake and there in Revelation we find even the church around the throne of God crying out to the Lamb, "How long? How long?" And that's the answer that is given there. We'll come back to this and look at it together.

As you continue on down through this Psalm, in verses 6-7, we see how it is that the Lord directed the Psalmist to respond to the heathen. You know, there are times where the Lord causes us to pray for the salvation of sinners but there are also times when he takes away that prayer and even as we see here, "Pour out thy wrath upon the heathen that have not known thee, and upon the kingdoms that have not called upon thy name." In general, when we consider Paul's worship, we cannot pray for the Lord to bless those kinds of worship like you hear some saying, "Bless everybody that's meeting today in church." Well, we can't pray that way. It's a blasphemy before the Lord. You say, "Well, how do you pray for false worship?" That the Lord destroy it. That he rid this nation of it. That he rid this the influence of it. There is no compromise with false worship so don't be surprised when you read here, "Pour out thy wrath upon the heathen that have not known thee." That's just simply stating what is the end of all who attempt to approach unto God in any other way but the way of Christ, all those who worship the day after the way of Cain. What will be their end? God will pour out his wrath upon them. Particularly in verse 7, "they have devoured Jacob, and laid waste his dwelling place." Again, there may be among that number some that God has purposed to save and for them, we truly pray, "Lord, do your work of grace." But for all others, we pray that his justice be manifest.

So, we'll come back to that in verses 6 and 7, but here in verses 8 and 9, this prayer to God that you can see in 6 and 7, you can see the Psalmist's prayer against Christ's

enemies but here in verses 8 and 9, we find the prayer turning inward. To me, this is a true evidence of a work of grace in the heart where the Spirit of God causes us to know our own guiltiness and guilt-worthiness, if you will, apart from the grace of God. “O remember not against us former iniquities: let thy tender mercies speedily prevent us: for we are brought very low. Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of thy name: and deliver us, and purge away our sins, for thy name’s sake.” It’s almost as if, even as the Psalmist here was reflecting upon the evil in these nations, that the Lord by his Spirit caused him to reflect on his own evil. This is always the thought that brings us low, that all the while you’re pointing the finger at somebody else, that way you’ve got three fingers pointing back at yourself.

And as the Lord causes us to know our own sin, it causes us to cry out to him in the same way, “Why me? Why should the Lord be merciful to me?” Well, it can only be in one way as it says here in verse 9, “by purging away our sins,” but notice, not for our name’s sake so that I can get my reputation back. No, “for thy name’s sake.” If indeed I am among that number, Lord, that you in your mercy and grace have purposed to save, that remnant of grace of which Paul wrote according to the election of grace, that number of those that Christ has redeemed. You see, that’s the true ticket to glory, if I can put it that way. People talk about a ticket to heaven and we know that hymn that has become popular, it’s not even a hymn but a song, “When the saints go marching in, Lord, I want to be in that number.” It’s all about me getting in any way I can. That’s not the way it is. I’ll tell you that: every one whom God has chosen in his grace and mercy and every one that Christ has redeemed by his blood, will be entering in. But it will be because, verse 9 says, their sins have been purged away and it’ll be for his name’s sake. Do you see that in verse 9, “O God of our salvation.” That’s what distinguishes our God from all other gods that people worship. He is the God of our salvation. All the glory belongs to his name and any that he does deliver, it is because he has purged away their sins for his name’s sake.

There is a whole message right in that, in verse 9 of Psalm 79, but that’s what we see described there, this plea to God. Then verses 10-12, we see how it is that God is pleased to be known among the nations. Do you see that? “Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is their God? let him be known among the heathen in our sight,” and then it lists different ways that God is pleased to make his name known. Sometimes it is in avenging the blood of his servants. Even our Lord said that the blood of Abel would be avenged upon that whole generation in his day of self-righteous religious Pharisees. You think, “Well, wow. Abel shed his blood way back when. Thousands of years have passed and you mean God is holding the generation to account in which Christ came, lived and died? What’s the relationship?” Well, that same spirit of Cain that slew Abel was in those of Christ’s generation and they willingly declared it when they said, “His blood be upon us and on our children.”

People make foolish statements; in their unbelief they throw out these challenges to God as if he’s not going to act. Well, he doesn’t re-act, but I’ll tell you this: every bit of blood God will avenge upon the wicked, upon those that Christ did not pay their debt. There is a ransom to be paid and this is where our world is ignorant of this and you can’t cover it. You cannot hide it under religion, under the fig leaves of false worship. It appears to be a

covering for a while but just like Isaiah said, there comes a time when they realize their bed is too short, or the covering will not cover and they realize that it has been a refuge of lies all along. And God will avenge that blood upon them. You say, "Why doesn't he avenge it upon his people?" Well, Christ paid the debt. That's that wrath that Christ bore but for all others, it's why they're called reprobates. The Lord does, indeed, avenge that blood.

And then the chapter ends in verse 13. I'm just giving us an overview here and we're going to come back to the details next time, but the response of God's people in light of all this, "So we thy people and," what? "Sheep of thy pasture will give thee thanks for ever." Sheep are defenseless animals. We cannot stand up against the onslaught of the enemy in any way, nor would we want to try. But as sheep, we have a great Shepherd and Christ being that Shepherd, us being his people, it evokes from us "the giving of thanks for ever and showing forth," notice, "his praise to all generations." We don't try to overcome but we overcome in him who has overcome, that is, the Lord Jesus Christ alone.