

Faith Amid Devastation

Psalm 79

A Psalm of Asaph.

*1 O God, the nations have come into your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple;
they have laid Jerusalem in ruins.*

*2 They have given the bodies of your servants
to the birds of the heavens for food,
the flesh of your faithful to the beasts of the earth.*

*3 They have poured out their blood like water
all around Jerusalem,
and there was no one to bury them.*

*4 We have become a taunt to our neighbors,
mocked and derided by those around us.*

*5 How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever?
Will your jealousy burn like fire?*

*6 Pour out your anger on the nations
that do not know you,
and on the kingdoms
that do not call upon your name!*

*7 For they have devoured Jacob
and laid waste his habitation.*

*8 Do not remember against us our former iniquities;
let your compassion come speedily to meet us,
for we are brought very low.*

*9 Help us, O God of our salvation,
for the glory of your name;
deliver us, and atone for our sins,
for your name's sake!*

*10 Why should the nations say,
"Where is their God?"*

*Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants
be known among the nations before our eyes!*

*11 Let the groans of the prisoners come before you;
according to your great power, preserve those doomed to die!*

*12 Return sevenfold into the lap of our neighbors
the taunts with which they have taunted you, O Lord!*

*13 But we your people, the sheep of your pasture,
will give thanks to you forever;
from generation to generation we will recount your praise.*

Do You Remember When?

Unlike most of Europe and much of Asia and Africa, America has been spared real severe devastation from wars. We cannot imagine what Europe and Japan experienced during World War 2, or what Korea and China and the Philippines experienced when Japan invaded them. The most devastating war to be fought on American soil was the Civil War, which saw over 650,000 men killed, and great Southern cities like Atlanta and Richmond were complexly devastated, but that was a long time ago.

The most devastating attack on American soil since the Civil War took place on September 11, 2001. And all of us who are old enough to remember will never forget that day, will we? The site of the Twin Towers in New York burning and then falling to the ground. The site of the Pentagon in DC in flames. The massive loss of life and the utter destruction at Ground Zero in New York has left a deep and strong impression in our memories, now almost 19 years later. We will never forget that day.

9/11 is the closest memory any of us have that would allow us to connect with what Asaph is experiencing in Psalm 79. Jerusalem has been surrounded, conquered and laid waste. The Asaph who wrote Psalm 79 was probably the last Asaph of the line, maybe the same one who saw the death of King Josiah, which we considered as the possible background for Psalm 77. 25 years after the death of King Josiah, Jerusalem was devastated and the Temple of God was burned to the ground by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. Jeremiah wrote the book of Lamentations as his outpouring of grief at the devastation of the land and the holy city in 586. And Asaph wrote Psalm 79.

Lamentations opens:

*How lonely sits the city
that was full of people!
How like a widow has she become,
she who was great among the nations!
She who was a princess among the provinces
has become a slave.
She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has none to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her;
they have become her enemies.
Judah has gone into exile because of affliction^[a]
and hard servitude;
she dwells now among the nations,
but finds no resting place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress* - Lamentations 1:1-3, ESV

I. Utter Devastation, vv. 1-4

And Psalm 79 opens:

¹ *O God, the nations have come into your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple;
they have laid Jerusalem in ruins.*
² *They have given the bodies of your servants*

*to the birds of the heavens for food,
the flesh of your faithful to the beasts of the earth.*

³ *They have poured out their blood like water
all around Jerusalem,
and there was no one to bury them.*

⁴ *We have become a taunt to our neighbors,
mocked and derided by those around us.*

Asaph cries out to God that the nations have come into His inheritance. The people of God are the inheritance of the Lord. Ephesians 1:18 refers to the people of God, the saints, as the glorious inheritance of God in Christ. It is true that we, the people of God, have been given a glorious inheritance in Christ, kept in heaven, but it is also true that we are God's inheritance in Christ. And so, Asaph cries out to God that the nations have come into and devastated His inheritance.

Overall, five things move Asaph to lament and cry out in these opening verses:

1. The nations have come into and spoiled God's inheritance.
2. They have defiled God's holy Temple.
3. They have laid God's holy city in ruins.
4. The people of God have been slain and their bodies have been left out, unburied, exposed to the elements and eaten by the birds and beasts.
5. The people of God are being openly ridiculed, mocked by their surrounding neighbors.

This is truly deep and profound devastation.

I do want to note one quick theological point of relevance for us today: Notice that proper respect for the dead in the Lord includes burial. God's people have always believed that the right way to honor and show respect for the dead is with proper burial. As cultures have come under the influence the Gospel, they have buried their dead, and as the West have moved into being a post-Christian culture, we have stopped setting aside land for graveyards and cemeteries and we have stopped burying the dead. The rise in cremation as a cheaper and more convenient alternative to burial is a poor testimony to the respect for the body and to the real hope of resurrection.

Today, we can lament many different ways in which the nations have come into and devastated the inheritance of the Lord. In many parts of the world, Christians suffer severe persecution. In North Korea and in Somalia, the church has been completely devastated, killed and imprisoned systematically. In other places, like Nigeria, Colombia, and Pakistan, they face severe and violent persecution by different violent factions.

But in safer places in the world, the nations have come into the Lord's inheritance in other ways, with false ideologies and unbelieving theologies that have undermined confidence in the Word of God and robbed God of His glory among His people. A low view of Scripture and the pursuit of worldliness have spiritually devastated parts of God's people as much as they are physically devastated by violent persecution in other parts of the world.

We need to be aware of how worldliness and compromise have robbed us of our spiritual vitality in the Lord, and we need to lament and cry out to God for revival and reformation for His church, as well as for protection and courage for those suffering intense persecution. So often, the worldliness and compromise of the church makes us a laughingstock, ridiculed by our unbelieving neighbors, as it is obvious that we do not value the Gospel and the Word of God as much

as we value politics and power.

II. Imprecatory Prayer, vv. 5-7

But Asaph does not just lament. He also prays an imprecatory prayer against the invading nations. Babylon has laid waste Jerusalem and Judah, but then Edom and Moab and the Philistines and others have come into ransack and ridicule. So, Asaph cries out –

⁵ How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever?

Will your jealousy burn like fire?

⁶ Pour out your anger on the nations

that do not know you,

and on the kingdoms

that do not call upon your name!

⁷ For they have devoured Jacob

and laid waste his habitation.

We have noted before with other Psalms that the cry “How long?” is a faithful cry. Asaph doesn’t ask, “Why, O Lord?” here, although he does ask that question in Psalm 74, which was probably written at the same time. But here, in Psalm 79, he seems to know why. He cries for mercy later in verse 8 for previous sins, “our former iniquities.” The prophets, including Jeremiah, have warned the people of God for years and years that devastation was coming because of their sin. But now Asaph wants to know “How long?” How long will God be angry? Surely, it will not be forever, will it? Notice that God’s wrath against His people for their sin is regarded as His jealousy. God is jealous for His people; He wants our hearts to be wholly His, and He burns with passion for the hearts of His people.

After asking “How long?”, Asaph calls on God to pour out His anger on the nations who do not know Him. This is imprecatory prayer, a prayer against the wicked in the world. Imprecatory prayer is prayer that calls down curses on people. It is not something Christians are to engage in lightly, flippantly, or regularly – although we are to pray for the downfall of wickedness in the world. If we remember that we do not fight against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of evil, we can direct the main thrust of our imprecatory prayers against Satan’s kingdom of darkness and deception.

And yet, we can also pray for an end to evil in the world. When we pray “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” we are praying for Satan’s kingdom of darkness and deception to be pushed back and for the wickedness that reigns in our world to be pushed back and toppled. So, we can pray for an end to abortion, for it is an evil attack on the defenseless image of God in the womb. We can pray for an end to racial division and distrust within the Body of Christ, as this evil division of God’s people mars our witness in the world. We can pray for the downfall of evil regimes in the world that violently suppress the Gospel, like in North Korea or in Somalia or, as has recently happened, in the Sudan. Now, we need to be careful to be biblically minded and focused on the kingdom of God, not on our personal political priorities.

If we are praying in a biblically minded and kingdom-focused way, then imprecatory prayers are part of the spiritual warfare and the important work of God’s people in the kingdom of God for His glory.

III. Plea for Mercy & Deliverance, vv. 8-10

Ans yet, Asaph is not only praying an imprecatory prayer. He is also praying for mercy and deliverance for God's people:

⁸ *Do not remember against us our former iniquities;
let your compassion come speedily to meet us,
for we are brought very low.*
⁹ *Help us, O God of our salvation,
for the glory of your name;
deliver us, and atone for our sins,
for your name's sake!*
¹⁰ *Why should the nations say,
"Where is their God?"*
*Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants
be known among the nations before our eyes!*

Asaph prays that God will not remember against them their former iniquities. These are not necessarily sins that Asaph himself or that his contemporary peers have committed; they would also include the former sins of God's people that have been responsible for God's anger burning against His people and disciplining them. We can see patterns of generational sin and generational consequences in the Bible, and we see patterns of prayer for mercy for all of these sins. So Daniel prayed in Daniel 9:4-9 –

"O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁵ we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules. ⁶ We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land. ⁷ To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame, as at this day, to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you. ⁸ To us, O LORD, belongs open shame, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against you. ⁹ To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him

Now, Daniel himself was not stubbornly rebellious against the words of the prophets, but he was part of a people that had been stubborn and that had been stubborn for generations.

Jeremiah prays similarly in Jeremiah 14:20: *"We acknowledge our wickedness, O LORD, and the iniquity of our fathers, for we have sinned against you."*

The Bible says that God cannot be mocked and that we reap what we sow. Sometimes, one generations reaps what has been sown for many generations. We can see this pattern in our own history as well as in the Bible. A disregard for God's word, a neglect of His worship, forms of political idolatry, divisiveness over personal petty issues – these can be patterns of sin which endure for generations and which bring judgment, and for which we need to cry out for mercy.

Notice, then, the basis for which Asaph asks for help and deliverance: It is a concern for the honor and glory of the name of God:

*Help us, O God of our salvation,
for the glory of your name;*

*deliver us, and atone for our sins,
for your name's sake!*

The testimony of God's people before a watching world is for the honor of God's name, for His glory among the nations. This is how Jesus prayed for the unity of the church in John 17:20-23 –

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. - ESV

“That the world may know” – This should be the motivation for our prayers on behalf of Christ's church – not that we might be comfortable or safe or have it easy or be respected, but that the world might know the glory of God in Christ Jesus His Son.

IV. The Promise of Future Praise, vv. 11-13

Then, as Asaph draws his prayer to a close, he looks ahead to a time when God's devastated people will be able to praise Him:

*¹¹ Let the groans of the prisoners come before you;
according to your great power, preserve those doomed to die!
¹² Return sevenfold into the lap of our neighbors
the taunts with which they have taunted you, O Lord!
¹³ But we your people, the sheep of your pasture,
will give thanks to you forever;
from generation to generation we will recount your praise.*

What an amazing thing for Asaph to pray at such a time! It's easy to understand the imprecatory prayers and the prayers for mercy and deliverance. But here is Asaph, looking around at tacks of dead bodies being eaten by wild animals and birds, and he is looking forward by faith to the day when “we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever; for generation to generations we will recount your praise.”

No matter how dark the night may seem. No matter how long the year may feel. No matter how surreal the hardships of God's people may seem, God will be faithful to deliver and restore His people. We will give thanks. We can give thanks by faith even now for the coming day.

Ultimately, the day of final justice, recompense, and deliverance Asaph was looking forward to by faith is the same day we can look forward to by faith. And we have even more confidence as we look forward, because we know the Lord Jesus has conquered sin and death and is alive and victorious forevermore.

What is our hope that God will have mercy on us and not treat us as our sins and our fathers' sins deserve? It is because all of our sins were poured out on the Lord Jesus on the cross, and the debt we owe for our sin has been cancelled, and we have already been forgiven. The finished work of atonement by the Lord Jesus on the cross gives us absolute confidence as we pray for mercy.

What is our hope that all will be made right in the end? It is anchored in the victorious resurrection of Jesus to eternal and glorious life, as the firstborn from the dead. He has swallowed sin and death and He is alive forevermore, and He has the keys of death and Hades.

The same Lord Jesus who died for our sins and rose again to conquer death has promised us that He will come again for us, to take us to be with Himself forever, to make all things new, and to finally rid His people and His creation from all sin and evil and oppressive enemies forever. That day is coming!

So, do you know Him? Do you belong to Him by faith, so that this hope and confidence are yours in Him?

Your . . . Your . . . Your . . . Your . . . Your

Asaph had seen utter devastation. He had seen with his own eyes such bloodshed and destruction as very few of us, if any of us, will ever witness in our lives. And yet, he kept his faith in God, even in the face of such devastation. And if we understand how, then we can keep our faith in the face of whatever devastation we may face. We can see that he kept faith by crying out to God, by pouring out his despair and his need before God. And he did so in faith because he knew that he and his people belonged to God, that they were God's own. Notice how Psalm 79 is dominated by the pronoun "Your" –

*1 O God, the nations have come into **your** inheritance;
they have defiled **your** holy temple;*

*2 They have given the bodies of **your** servants
to the birds of the heavens for food,
the flesh of **your** faithful to the beasts of the earth.*

*5 How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever?
Will **your** jealousy burn like fire?*

*6 Pour out **your** anger on the nations
that do not know you,
and on the kingdoms
that do not call upon **your** name!*

*7 For they have devoured Jacob
and laid waste his habitation.*

*9 Help us, O God of our salvation,
for the glory of **your** name;
deliver us, and atone for our sins,
for **your** name's sake!*

*Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of **your** servants
be known among the nations before our eyes!*

*11 Let the groans of the prisoners come before you;
according to **your** great power, preserve those doomed to die!*

*12 Return sevenfold into the lap of our neighbors
the taunts with which they have taunted you, O Lord!*

*¹³ But we **your** people, the sheep of **your** pasture,
will give thanks to you forever;
from generation to generation we will recount **your** praise.*

Asaph will not anchor his hope in anything less than God Himself, and he finds security and faith amid devastation by remembering that they are God's very own people, and that God will act for the sake of His own. Christian, what is your only comfort in life and in death? It is that we are not our own, but we belong body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. Because I am HIS and He is mine, I cannot be shaken or lost forever, and I can always trust in Him!