

Call to Worship: Psalm 100

A Maskil of Asaph.

Over the next few weeks we are doing a miniseries on Book III of the Psalter.

Books I and II are dominated by the Psalms of David.

In fact, Psalm 72:20 states, “The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended.”

That doesn't mean that all of Books I and II are *by* David

(many of the 40s are of the Sons of Korah – and Psalm 50 is “of Asaph”)

When it says “*ledavid*” or “*le'asaph*” that does not mean “*by* David” or “*by* Asaph.”

It could mean “*to* David” or “*for* David” or “*of* David.” (or Asaph)

It seems likely that David wrote some of them –

but others may well have been written “*for*” him –

and others “*about*” him.

Book III has ascriptions in front of every Psalm:

Psalms 73-83 are all Psalms of Asaph

84-85 and 87 are Psalms of the sons of Korah

86 is a Prayer of David

88 is a Psalm of the Sons of Korah – a maskil of Heman the Ezrahite,

and 89 is a maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite.

Psalm 50, and Psalms 73-83 are all said to be “of Asaph.”

1 Chronicles 6 tells us of a Levite named Asaph  
who served as a singer in David's days.

1 Chronicles 15 speaks of Heman, Asaph, and Ethan as singers of David,  
and 2 Chronicles and Ezra/Nehemiah tell us that the sons of Asaph  
continued to be involved in giving praise throughout the days of the kings.

Ezra 2 tells us about the “sons of Asaph” who were singers  
at the dedication of the new foundation of the temple.

Nehemiah 11 tells us about an Asaphite  
who led the praise of the congregation.

While Psalm 50 could plausibly be from the original Asaph,  
it seems clear that the Psalms of Asaph in Book III (73-83)  
are a later collection – perhaps from the sons of Asaph.

The exile is a prominent theme in Book III –

and it is likely that these Psalms were written in the days of Josiah or later.

These ascriptions are somewhat useful for understanding the context of the Psalms –  
but perhaps more on how the Psalms are to be sung *by us*,  
more than as an interpretive guide to the author’s point of view.

The more I study and preach the Word of God,  
the more convinced I am that understanding the “original situation”  
of the author/audience  
is frequently beyond our grasp.

Sometimes we can know “what was going on” behind the text.  
(e.g., we were able to use 1-2 Corinthians to help elucidate Philippians 4).  
But if your interpretation of the text  
relies too heavily on a reconstruction of the events behind the text,  
then you can sometimes make a mess of the text!

The key is to let your interpretation be driven by the text itself.

Psalm 74 is dominated by the theme of remembering –  
which you can see in the outline in the bulletin.

### **1. O God, Why Do You Cast Us Off Forever? (v1)**

*74:1 O God, why do you cast us off forever?*

*Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?*

Psalm 74 begins with the problem of the exile.

Why do you cast us off forever?

Plainly the Psalmist does not mean *literally* forever!

The force of this takes on the sense of the unrelenting character of God’s judgment.

Why are you unrelenting in your anger against us?

We are the sheep of your pasture (Psalm 100) –

why are you still angry with us?

Notice that the Psalmist does not protest his innocence!

There is no complaint about the justice of God’s judgment.

The only question is “how long?”

Are you not content with our destruction?

When will you show mercy?

This is a question that we often face as well.

There are times when we do not experience God’s presence and favor.

We experience the common wrath of God as much as anyone else –

indeed, Peter speaks of this in 1 Peter 4 as

“judgment” beginning with the household of God.

Verse 2 then ground the prayer for deliverance upon God’s election:

**2. Will You Remember? (v2-3)**

*2 Remember your congregation, which you have purchased of old,  
which you have redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage!  
Remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt.*

Asaph does not appeal to Israel’s righteousness or faithfulness.

Rather, he appeals to God’s actions.

*You purchased us.*

*You redeemed us – “to be the tribe of your heritage.”*

Remember Zion, where *you* have dwelt.

The salvation of Israel does not depend on Israel’s faithfulness  
(by now the Psalmists have figured out that if *our* faithfulness  
is the ground of our salvation, we are in deep doo-doo)!  
Rather, Israel’s hope for salvation depends on God’s promise.

And verse 3 then asks God to come and inspect the situation:

*3 Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins;  
the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary!*

The NIV is probably closer to the first line of verse 3:

“pick your way through these everlasting ruins” –  
in other words, “watch your step”!

As God walks through Jerusalem, he must beware of the debris in the sanctuary!

Now the Psalmist changes tone,

and in verses 4-8, *we* remember the horror of the destruction of the temple:

**3. Because We Remember Your Foes Destroying Your Sanctuary (v4-8)**

*4 Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place; they set up their own signs for signs.*

The idea here is that they have set up their own insignia –  
the signs of their own deities –

in the temple (see verse 9, “we do not see our signs” –  
we see the symbols of your enemies in your temple).

*5 They were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees.*

*6 And all its carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammers.*

*7 They set your sanctuary on fire;*

*they profaned the dwelling place of your name, bringing it down to the ground.*

The enemies of God have smashed the temple and all its carved wood.  
They have burned the sanctuary and profaned the holy place,  
bringing it down to ruins.

I don't know when this Psalm was written.  
Some people think it was in the 6<sup>th</sup> century after the destruction of the temple.  
Others think it was much later – during the Maccabean era –  
citing the lack of prophets (v9), and other Maccabean connections.

But the destruction of the temple referred to here  
is far more thorough than the days of the Maccabees.  
So, whenever the Psalm was written,  
it is referring to the destruction of the temple in the days of Ezekiel.

(When the temple was rebuilt, the glory of the LORD did *not* fill the temple –  
the presence of God did *not* return to Israel.  
The memory of the destruction of the temple in 587 BC  
lingered for centuries after that).

And certainly, this Psalm was *sung* long after the rebuilding of the temple in 515 BC.  
Even after the exile was technically over, the problem of Psalm 74 remained.  
The second temple remained under the power of the enemies of God.

But verse 8 is perhaps the most perplexing verse in the Psalm:

*8 They said to themselves, "We will utterly subdue them";  
they burned all the meeting places of God in the land.*

This has created all sorts of problems for commentators  
because "every meeting place" definitely indicates that there was more than one!

But God had said in Deuteronomy that Israel was only supposed to worship  
in the *one* place that God chose.

So how can Psalm 74 speak of the destruction of "all the meeting places of God in the land"?  
Do you remember the "high places"?  
The high places were not evil in the beginning.  
In 1 Kings 3, we are told that Solomon – and all the people – sacrificed at the high places  
*because* the temple had not yet been built.

Over the next 400 years, there was a constant back and forth.  
The best kings (Hezekiah and Josiah, for instance)

sought to suppress the high places,  
but their efforts were never entirely successful.  
The high places remained as “meeting places” of God throughout the land.

Rather than think about it from the standpoint of the prophets,  
let's think about it from the standpoint of the *average Israelite*.  
Faithful Israelites had been worshiping at the high places for generations.  
And while God's command was to worship at the temple only,  
Israel seems to have been slow to obey.

One could point to any number of similar failures on the part of the Christian church!  
For a thousand years, the church of Rome  
insisted on conducting the liturgy in a language that few could understand,  
contrary to Paul's teaching that worship should be in a known language;  
perhaps closer to home, there are those today who worship on Saturday,  
thus practically returning to Moses,  
and denying the resurrection of Christ.

In all of these cases, the common thread is that  
they engaged in a practice that was once acceptable,  
but was now contrary to God's word!

This may help us grapple with Psalm 74.

Notice that verse 8 is dealing with the attitude of the attackers:  
*8 They said to themselves, “We will utterly subdue them”;*  
*they burned all the meeting places of God in the land.*

In 2 Kings 18:22 the Rabshakeh of Assyria says to Jerusalem,  
“But if you say to me, “We trust in the Lord our God,”  
is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed,  
saying to Judah and to Jerusalem,  
“You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem”?”

The Rabshakeh understood his audience.  
Hezekiah had removed the high places –  
and the people of Jerusalem were troubled about this.  
They were used to worshiping Yahweh at the high places,  
and so it would be easy to believe that Hezekiah's purge of the high places  
had angered Yahweh!

Psalm 74:8 remembers the agenda of the wicked without comment  
(although the attention to the temple in verses 5-7 suggests its priority).

Verses 9-11 are the crux of the Psalm.  
How long will this continue?

#### **4. But We Don't Know How Long! (v9-11)**

*9 We do not see our signs;  
there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long.*

The whole situation is inexplicable!

The reference to the lack of prophets *may* indicate a later date –  
but quite frankly, it is not clear that *any* of the post-exilic prophets  
would have been able to answer the Psalmist's questions.  
Jeremiah had said it would be 70 years until the rebuilding of the temple –  
but that isn't the question!

The question is not, "how long will we be without a temple?"  
The question of Psalm 74 expresses the fundamental problem that continues  
from 515 BC until the coming of Christ:

*10 How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever?*

Even after the restoration of Israel and the rebuilding of the temple,  
the foes continued to scoff and revile  
(just read Ezra-Nehemiah!).

Destruction and death have won.  
Restoring the temple does not solve the problem!  
After all, what is going to prevent Israel from following the same cycle again?

The solution will only come when God brings judgment against our enemies:

*11 Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand?  
Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them!*

When are you going to *do something* about our enemies?

The language of Psalm 74 would remind the Israelites of the gods of the nations around them,  
particularly the stories of Baal.

There are three parts to the Baal cycle:

- 1) Baal was the storm-god who battled against Yamm  
(whose name means "sea" – v13),  
thereby establishing order over the chaos of the sea.
- 2) Having become king of the earth, Baal builds his palace,

with the approval of El – the high god.  
3) Mot – the god of death – challenges Baal,  
and slays him.  
With the death of the storm god, the earth wilts and fades.  
His sister, the warrior goddess, Anat, then descends into the underworld  
and slays Mot (death), thereby freeing Baal from death,  
and the earth flourishes again.

There is a lot of language from the Baal cycle in Psalm 74.  
The themes of kingship, temple building and divine conflict  
are woven together in ancient thought.  
Since the Baal cycle comes from before the time of David,  
there can be no question as to which came first.  
And given how prominent Baal-worship was in Israel,  
we can be sure that the Psalmist was familiar with it.

And if you think about it,  
it would be irresponsible of the Psalmists to ignore the idols of their day.

Just like it would be irresponsible of me to ignore the idols of our day,  
the gods of our culture that seek to draw you away from the Triune God.

I seek to warn you of the gods of death –  
the perils of trusting in wealth, politics, or anything else.

Even so, Psalm 74 reminds Israel why they should trust in Yahweh –  
and *not* in Baal.

And we see this in verses 12-17,  
as the Psalmist claims that Yahweh is greater than Baal.

### **5. So We Remember Your Deeds of Creation and Redemption (v12-17)**

There are three themes in verses 12-17  
the central theme is the kingship of God –  
with two subthemes  
as 1) God conquers the Sea and its monsters, especially Leviathan,  
and 2) establishes the seasons and the orderliness of creation.

These are exactly the themes of the Baal cycle.

Baal was the Canaanite God of storms and fertility.  
He was the one who fixed the seasons, and established the patterns of life.

In the Baal cycle, the death of Baal disrupted the seasonal patterns –  
all the earth was thrown into disarray;  
and thus, in the Baal cycle the Sea (Yamm) and Death (Mot) –  
the sources of destruction and death in the universe –  
threaten to triumph over life and order (symbolized in Baal).

As one scholar puts it:

“like it or not, Death is the ultimate ruler of all that lives.  
However, Mot has a very serious problem, to wit,  
guaranteeing his source of supply.  
Stated differently: Mot’s enormous strength,  
symbolized by his unlimited ability to take away life,  
is circumscribed by his inability to grant or restore it.  
In order to ensure his supply of food, Mot needs Baal –  
the agency of life-giving precipitation, especially of the winter rains.”

There is probably a lot more going on in the Baal cycle as well:  
the people of Ugarit had fought off a challenge from the sea-peoples,  
and it appears that the battle between Baal and Yamm  
may well reflect the more terrestrial battle between Ugarit and the Sea-peoples.

And all of this centers around the kingship of Baal:

“Baal is a monarch precisely because he is the deity  
who can mediate the blessings of the natural cosmos  
both to human society and to the company of the pantheon.”  
Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle* p. 96.

In light of this, listen to verses 12-17:

*12 Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth.  
13 You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters.  
14 You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.  
15 You split open springs and brooks; you dried up ever-flowing streams.  
16 Yours is the day, yours also the night; you have established the heavenly lights and the sun.  
17 You have fixed all the boundaries of the earth; you have made summer and winter.*

I want you to hear two things here.

First, you should hear the parallels!  
God (Elohim) is my King (not Baal).  
God divided the sea, broke the heads of the sea monsters –  
and (using the same name as the Ugaritic Baal cycle)  
crushed the heads of Leviathan.  
God fixed the seasons and the orderliness of creation.

But second, you should hear the differences.

Where is the conflict?

In the Baal cycle, Baal is afraid of Yamm (the Sea) and Mot (death).

Baal is not strong enough in himself to defeat them.

He needs Anat, the warrior goddess, to destroy death.

Certainly the Sea (Hebrew Yam) is presented as hostile here,

but there is no hint that God had any difficulty subduing the sea!

The point of Psalm 74 is that our God (Elohim) is far greater than Baal.

Our God subdues Yam and overthrows Leviathan without any difficulty whatsoever!

Now, in light of this, let's look at *what* this means:

*12 Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth.*

This phrase “midst of the earth” comes from Exodus 8:22

as Yahweh warns Pharaoh of the plagues that will come,

“that you may know that I am Yahweh from the midst of the earth.”

Certainly there are lots of Exodus themes that run through these verses:

*13 You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters.*

The obvious language of “dividing the sea” points to God’s work in dividing the Red Sea,

but the “sea monsters” (the *tanninim*) reminds us of Exodus 7,

when Moses cast down his staff, and it became a sea monster,

and it swallowed up the sea monsters of Pharaoh’s servants

(I know, your translation probably says “serpent” –

but the connection here is important: God rules the *tanninim*!)

*14 You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.*

*15 You split open springs and brooks; you dried up ever-flowing streams.*

*16 Yours is the day, yours also the night; you have established the heavenly lights and the sun.*

*17 You have fixed all the boundaries of the earth; you have made summer and winter.*

The blending together of Exodus and creation themes should not surprise us.

After all, the Exodus was an act of creation (or, new creation).

As Derek Kidner says:

“The parting of the Red Sea and the crushing blow to Egypt, the dragon of the deep . . .

invite comparison with the Canaanite boast of Baal’s victories

over the personified Sea and River,

over the Dragon (tnn; cf. the plural tannînîm, dragons here)  
and over the seven-headed serpent Lothan (the equivalent to Leviathan).  
The point here is that what Baal had claimed in the realm of myth,  
God had done in the realm of history –  
and done for His people, working salvation.  
Scripture will also use this language for the battle  
with ‘the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places’  
(cf. Is. 27:1; Rev. 12:7ff.; 13:1ff.);  
but here verse 12-15 survey the earthly scene,  
clothing the exodus events in its lively imagery,  
from the Red Sea (13a) to the Jordan(15b),  
and from the realm of judgment on the enemy (13, 14a)  
to that of God’s turning the wilderness into a scene of plenty (14b, 15a).  
It was highly relevant to the current crisis of verses 1-11,  
as indeed it is to the vicissitudes of the Christian Church.” (Kidner, 268)

This way of using the myths of the surrounding nations  
would be the same as if I said to you,  
that our God is the one who spoke the Big Bang.  
I’m not saying that the modern mythology behind the Big Bang is literally correct.  
(any more than Psalm 74 is saying that Leviathan was a literal creature),  
but rather, that when modern science  
speaks of all things coming into existence through some random event,  
God is not merely some “God of the gaps” who fits into modern scientific theories –  
but rather that he is the one who orders and governs all things.

Psalm 74 takes on the myths of its day,  
and shows how our God is the one who does all that they myths claim for other gods.

While Death (Mot) is not named in Psalm 74,  
he is behind the plea to “remember your covenant” in verses 18-21:

**6. Please Remember Your Poor against the Enemy (v18-21)**

*18 Remember this, O Lord, how the enemy scoffs,  
and a foolish people reviles your name.*

*19 Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild beasts;  
do not forget the life of your poor forever.*

*20 Have regard for the covenant,  
for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence.*

*21 Let not the downtrodden turn back in shame;  
let the poor and needy praise your name.*

Lurking in the background behind these verses is Mot (the Hebrew word for death).

Death lurks in the dark places of the land (v20).  
Death awaits in the jaws of wild beasts (v19).  
If God does not remember his covenant, then death will devour us.

There is a sense in which Psalm 74 is precisely the sort of covenant-song  
that Ezekiel attacks.

This refrain of “O Lord, please remember your covenant”  
was one that Jerusalem in Exile was really good at!

But there are two ways to sing Psalm 74:

“Hey, God, when are you going to do what you promised?!

We’re suffering over here – and you’d better do something about it!”

But the Psalmist is not primarily concerned for himself.  
Why does the Psalmist want God to remember?  
Why does the Psalmist want God to act?

### **7. Arise, O God, and Remember! (v22-23)**

*22 Arise, O God, defend your cause;  
remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day!*  
*23 Do not forget the clamor of your foes,  
the uproar of those who rise against you, which goes up continually!*

O God, defend *your* cause!  
Sure, I don’t like being in exile.  
I don’t like it that everything is wrong – and that the temple is destroyed –  
and that the wicked are in power.  
But what grieves my heart most is that your enemies are mocking you!

And in a day when the foolish continually scoff at God,  
when they say things like  
“spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing”  
(Hawking & Mlodinow),  
we should ask God to defend his own name.

I know –  
this is not a very satisfying ending.  
You would really like for me to say,  
“therefore you need to go out and defend God’s name”  
we need to do evangelistic apologetics!  
we need to ...

Wait!

Stop!

There will be time for all those things.

But now is not that time.

Psalm 74 is the song that we sing in the midst of Exile.

Psalm 74 would very much fit with the end of Ezekiel 17.

There is *nothing* that you can do to defend God's name.

Are you going to march out against the Babylonians?

Can you really out-argue Stephen Hawking?

Or, to put it another way,

are you bigger than Jesus?

Our Lord Jesus Christ took down the powers of sin, death, and the devil.

He has overthrown Satan himself.

And you think a few puny mortals are going to defeat him?

We sing Psalm 74 as we remember God's mighty deeds –

how our God is the one who created all things,

how our God is the one who redeemed his people and delivered them from death,

bringing about a new creation.