

September 18

Psalm 44, 74, 79, 80, 85, 89

Psalm 74 is a song that was written after the army of Babylon had burned the Temple and broken down the walls of the beautiful city of Jerusalem. It asks a one-word question: "Why?" But really, it is two separate questions: "Why are you still angry with us?" and "Why don't you punish the wickedness of our conquerors?" *Verse 1 says, "Why have you rejected us forever, O God"* (I don't know how many years into exile this Psalm was written, but it must have seemed like forever!) and *verse 11, "Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them!"* The Almighty can handle all our tough questions but always remember our Sovereign God is under no obligation to answer them.

The words of Psalm 74 are haunting. Jerusalem is full of *"everlasting ruins."* The Temple has been destroyed by *"men wielding axes"*, who then burned it to the ground. In verse 8, the Psalmist says that the invaders burned *"every place where God was worshiped in the land."* That was a revealing statement because the Temple was the only place authorized by God for worship but the *syncretistic spirit of the age* had created a number of other unauthorized worship sites. And then Verse 9 says: *"No prophets are left."* That expression may indicate that the Psalm originated in Jerusalem after Jeremiah had been dragged down to Egypt. Ezekiel and Daniel, you will remember, were with the exiles in Babylon.

Psalm 79 is quite explicit. It begins with these words: *"O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance; they have defiled your holy Temple, they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble."* Some of the horrible aftermath of Jerusalem's destruction is noted in verses 2 and 3: *"They have given the dead bodies of your servants as food to the birds of the air, the flesh of your saints to the beasts of the earth. They have poured out blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there is no one to bury the dead."* The Psalmist paints a desolate picture of an extremely difficult situation.

Psalm 80, though some scholars place it after the Assyrian destruction of the Northern Kingdom, sounds and feels like the others: *"Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved...why have you broken down its walls so that all who pass by pick its grapes...your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish."*

All of our Psalms today are songs of the exile – mournful, wailing, desperate cries for help based on four things: The mercy of God – the Psalmists hope for deliverance because they *assume that God's anger with His faithless people will not last forever* (though to the author of Psalm 74 the length of time since the destruction of Judah seemed to be approaching forever!) *Because God is merciful*, there is hope in these Psalms that He will turn His wrath aside and restore His people. Now I need to remind you that there was plenty of ground for hope. Isaiah and Ezekiel, in particular had promised it. The Psalmists here are only claiming the promises of Scripture.

The second thing upon which these pleas for help are grounded is the belief in God's justice. Since the nations He used to bring judgment down upon Judah and Israel were themselves godless and even more evil than the victims, the *Psalmists are waiting for God to "visit" these evildoers with justice.* His holiness demands it and the "sheep" in exile are watching for it.

The third base upon which the hope for deliverance rests is an even stronger one. It is the assumption that since the defeat of Israel has left the impression that Israel's God is not as strong as the gods of Babylon and Assyria, Jehovah's honor has been questioned by many nations. He Himself has been mocked by the destruction of His Temple. The Psalmists believe that the glory of God has been compromised in the destruction of the Temple and of His city Jerusalem and in the exile of His people (His vine), Israel. Therefore, they are sure that He will move to vindicate His honor.

It is clearest in Psalm 74: *"How long will the enemy mock you, O God...rise up, O God and defend yourself; remember how fools mock you all day long!"* It is there again in 79: *"Help us, O God our Savior, for the glory of your name...why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?'"*

The fourth and final ground upon which the appeal is made is the history of God's deliverances and actions in the past. Since God has acted mightily on behalf of His people in the past to deliver them, there is faith that He will do it again in their present distress. God *"split open the sea, crushed the heads of Leviathan, and opened springs and dried up rivers"* – that is a poetic reference to Israel's deliverance from Egypt – found in Psalm 74.

In Psalm 80, there is another narration of history: *"You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations...you cleared the ground for it..."* In other words...given all that you have done for us in the past, we are bound to believe that you will once again act in our present emergency.

The kind of prayers that Israel prayed in times of trouble boiled down to the same two realities that our prayers in the troubles we encounter depend upon: A knowledge of who God is – a God of mercy who is committed to justice and to the defense of His own glory; and a remembrance of what God has done. He has delivered His people from their enemies based upon a covenant that He has established through them.

The essence of Psalm 80 is a brief prayer repeated at the end of each of the Psalm's three sections. It is another of those prayers that are worth memorizing so that we can pray them over our lives as well: *"Restore us, O Lord God Almighty, make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved."*

Let me encourage you to pray that prayer that prayer daily...over your church, your family, over our country. We live in a dark world and sometimes the darkness seems impossible to penetrate. Remember that Jesus is the "light" of the world and that His light shines in the darkness and that the darkness cannot overcome it...

*Lord, let your light, light of your face*

*Shine on us*

*That we, may be saved*

*That we, may have life*

*To find our way*

*In the darkest night*

*Let your light, Shine on us*