



Psalm 74 - Plea for Help in Time of National Humiliation

A Maskil of Asaph.

Introduction

This psalm is a cry of anguish over a disaster that has befallen God's people; the temple has been laid to ruin and quite possibly prophesies the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. Thus this is a community lament resembling Psalm 79 in tone. In distinction from Psalm 79, however, the guilt of the covenant people does not come into view in this psalm. Of course, that does not deny that the disaster is a judgement on their unfaithfulness. Some community laments deal with situations for which the guilt of the people is not the explanation, e.g. Psalm 44 and possibly Psalm 77. Psalm 74, like Psalm 77, recounts God's mighty deeds in the past, especially the exodus; here that recounting serves as a ground for the prayer: do not let the Gentiles scorn the God who has done such things.

The majority of commentators believe this psalm followed the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians. Some argue that it is even later, following the desecration of the temple in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes. If these later dates be true, this Asaph is not the great singer and musician of David and Solomon's era, unless Asaph composed this psalm prophetically, which was possible according to: <<David and the officers of the army also set apart for the service the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who were to prophesy with lyres, harps, and cymbals>> (1 Chronicles 25:1a), and: <<King Hezekiah and the officials commanded the Levites to sing praises to the Lord with the words of David and of the seer Asaph. They sang praises with gladness, and they bowed down and worshipped>> (2 Chronicles 29:30).

Psalm 74:1-3 - O God, Why Do You Cast Us Off?

God has cast off his people, i.e. the sheep of his pasture. For God's people as a whole as his sheep refer also to Psalms 77:20, 79:13, 95:7 and 100:3. The terms acquired and redeemed are taken from Exodus 15:13-16; Israel is God's chosen people, for whom he has done great deeds in the past, marking them out as his own. This makes the current disaster – where the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary, laying it to perpetual ruins – all the more painful.

- 1 O God, why do you cast us off for ever?
Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?
- 2 Remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago,
which you redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage.
Remember Mount Zion, where you came to dwell.
- 3 Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins;
the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary.

Psalm 74:1-3

O God, why do you cast us off for ever? Asaph lived and served during the reigns of David and Solomon, which were generally times of security and blessing for Israel. Yet even within those generally good times there were occasions of difficulty in the face of Israel's enemies. Asaph wrote during such a season, or possibly with such a difficult time in mind. He wrote of the terrible sense that God has cast his people off forever and is no longer for them: <<***For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you cast me off?***>> (Psalm 43:2a), and: <<***Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off for ever!***>> (Psalm 44:23).

Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? It was not just as if Asaph felt that God had stopped caring for Israel, i.e. cast us off. Added to that was the sense that God anger was kindled against them and, in some sense, that he was working against them.

Remember your congregation. From such despair Asaph asked God to change his apparent attitude toward Israel. It seems clear that Asaph understood that God's indifference and anger was more in appearance than in fact otherwise the following appeals would be of no use:

- Asaph asked God to remember that Israel belonged to him and was his congregation.
- Asaph asked God to remember that Israel was his purchased people, bought out of the slave market of the nations.

- Asaph asked God to remember that Israel was his inheritance, his valued treasure.
- Asaph asked God to remember that he had purchased and redeemed Israel and had done so a long time ago.
- Asaph asked God to remember that he had dwelt among his people in Jerusalem, i.e. Mount Zion, in a special way.

Perhaps Asaph thought, “If God would only remember his special care and connection with Israel, then he will rescue us.” He therefore brought many reasons and appeals to God in prayer. Charles Spurgeon comments, “Pleading is wrestling: arguments are the grips, the feints, the throes, the struggles with which we hold and vanquish the covenant angel. The humble statement of our wants is not without its value, but to be able to give reasons and arguments why God should hear us is to offer potent, prevalent prayer.”

Direct your steps. Asaph asked God to run to their aid, because the sanctuary - the tabernacle or temple - had been invaded and ransacked. He hoped this would give God reason to move quickly for Israel’s good.

There is no indication of the tabernacle or the temple being so abused by Israel’s enemies in the days of David or Solomon. Not long before David’s time the tabernacle was overrun and ransacked at Shiloh when Eli was high priest; refer to 1 Samuel Chapter 4. There are a few different ways to explain Asaph’s description of these perpetual ruins:

- Asaph wrote of the catastrophe at Shiloh described in 1 Samuel Chapter 4, either being alive at that time or writing in the memory of it.
- Asaph wrote prophetically of a catastrophe that was still in the future.
- The Asaph who wrote this Psalm was not the same Asaph associated with the reigns of David and Solomon, or this Psalm came from his ‘school’ and was written many years later.

Among the far less likely possibilities are the suggestions that Asaph had only a symbolic sanctuary in mind, or that there was a devastating attack on the tabernacle or temple in the days of David and Solomon that was not recorded.

Psalm 74:4-8 - They Have Destroyed the Sanctuary

The next section details how the Gentiles devastated the sanctuary: they chopped up the wood and set fire to the building. The song calls it ‘your holy place,’ the place that God appointed to meet with his people, and ‘your sanctuary,’ the holy place, the dwelling-place of God’s name. Given the importance that God himself had placed on the temple, and the promises he had made to be present with his people, it is horrific that these Gentiles have profaned it, i.e. had destroyed or profaned something so holy.

- 4 Your foes have roared within your holy place;
they set up their emblems there.
- 5 At the upper entrance they hacked
the wooden trellis with axes.
- 6 And then, with hatchets and hammers,
they smashed all its carved work.
- 7 They set your sanctuary on fire;
they desecrated the dwelling-place of your name,
bringing it to the ground.
- 8 They said to themselves, ‘We will utterly subdue them’;
they burned all the meeting-places of God in the land.

Psalm 74:4-8

Your foes have roared within your holy place. Asaph asked God to defend his sanctuary, his tent of meeting or the temple. Those who oppose God had come with hatchets and hammers to destroy and have set your sanctuary on fire - and they destroy it with furious energy.

When the Babylonians destroyed the temple Jeremiah indicated that it was the Lord’s will that it be destroyed because of the nation’s continued apostasy: <<*The Lord has scorned his altar, disowned his sanctuary; he has delivered into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces; a clamour was raised in the house of the Lord as on a day of festival*>> (Lamentations 2:7).

We will utterly subdue them. Having successfully attacked the sanctuary of God, the enemies of the Lord wanted to destroy the people of God altogether: <<*They crush your people, O Lord, and afflict your heritage*>> (Psalm 94:5). They hoped to do this when they burned all the meeting-places of God in the land.

The synagogue did not exist as an established institution until after the time of Babylonian captivity. Yet it does not seem unlikely that there were meeting places of God throughout the land of Israel. When Israel was obedient these were not places of sacrifice, but places of prayer and hearing of the Scriptures. The Levites were commanded to teach Israel the Scriptures; refer to Leviticus 10:8-11, and Deuteronomy 17:9-12 and 33:10. It makes sense that there might be meeting places of God in many communities even before the synagogue became an established institution, perhaps the ‘high places’ so frequently referenced in the Books of Kings and Chronicles.

Psalm 74:9-11 - And You Seem Silent!

It is therefore puzzling that God gives no signs, that he has raised up no prophet to guide his people in such dire distress or to tell them how long it will last. It is even more puzzling why God allows the enemy to continue to scoff and to revile God's name: how can he not strike them down?

- ⁹ We do not see our emblems;
there is no longer any prophet,
and there is no one among us who knows how long.
- ¹⁰ How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?
Is the enemy to revile your name for ever?
- ¹¹ Why do you hold back your hand;
why do you keep your hand in your bosom?

Psalm 74:9-11

We do not see our emblems; there is no longer any prophet. The enemies of God and his people succeeded in gravely damaging the spiritual life of Israel. Although Israel had the benefit of God's word through many prophets there were times when he remained silent, such as: <<*Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread*>> (1 Samuel 3:1).

How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Asaph saw the destruction of the spiritual institutions and life of Israel and with heart and logic asked how long this low and afflicted state would last.

Why do you keep your hand in your bosom? Asaph did not lose confidence in the power or ability of God. He knew that if God put forth his hand of power against these enemies he would destroy them: <<*Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power – your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy*>> (Exodus 15:6).

Psalm 74:12-17 - But You Have Done Wonders in the Past

The next section recalls God's mighty deeds from the past, in which he has worked salvation, including the exodus from Egypt and the journey through the wilderness (vv.12-15), and God's creation and governance of the whole world (vv.16-17). The OT is constantly reminding its readers that the God who chose Israel to be his people is in fact the very same God who made everything there is. This is the wonder of being Israel; the point of mentioning it here is to show how wrong it is for the Gentiles to disdain this God.

- 12 Yet God my King is from of old,
working salvation in the earth.
- 13 You divided the sea by your might;
you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.
- 14 You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.
- 15 You cut openings for springs and torrents;
you dried up ever-flowing streams.
- 16 Yours is the day, yours also the night;
you established the luminaries and the sun.
- 17 You have fixed all the bounds of the earth;
you made summer and winter.

Psalm 74:12-17

Yet God my King is from of old. Asaph meditated first on the royal authority of God: <<*Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in*>> (Psalm 24:7), then upon his great power. The same God who divided the sea by his might could rescue his people in the present crisis.

You broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. In several places the Bible mentions sea serpents and Leviathan and does so often in the context of creation. Often Leviathan is considered to be a mythical sea-monster or dragon that terrorised sailors and fishermen.

The name Leviathan appears five times in the OT; in Canaanite myths it is the name of a dangerous, dragon-like monster: <<*Let those curse it who curse the Sea, those who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan*>> (Job 3:8). The biblical authors are confident that the Lord triumphs over all powers, including the most feared: <<*On that day the Lord with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea*>> (Isaiah 27:1); here, this monster is used as a figure for Egypt. Elsewhere the name is used for fearsome creatures, over which God has control.

The name Leviathan means ‘twisting one’ and is also used in other interesting places in Scripture:

- Job 26:12-13 also refers to God’s piercing defeat of a fleeing serpent associated with the sea.
- Job 41:1 as a great sea creature that men cannot tame or catch.
- Psalm 74:12-14 refers to Leviathan as a sea serpent, and that God broke the head of the Leviathan long ago, perhaps at creation.
- Psalm 104:26 also refers to Leviathan as a sea creature, probably a whale.
- Isaiah 27:1 speaks of the future defeat of Leviathan, also associating it with a twisted serpent that lives in the sea.
- Isaiah 51:9 and Psalm 89:8-10 also speak of a serpent associated with the sea that God defeated as a demonstration of his great strength, and identifies this serpent with the name Rahab, meaning ‘proud one.’

Satan is often represented as a dragon or a serpent, e.g. in Genesis Chapter 3, and Revelation Chapters 12 and 13, and the sea is thought of as a dangerous or threatening place in the Jewish mind; refer to Isaiah 57:20, Mark 4:39 and Revelation 21:1. It is possible that Leviathan is another serpent-like manifestation of Satan whose resistance to creation was overcome.

In the ancient times Middle East there were many popular legends about the gods who combated different hostile deities in order to create the earth. Biblical authors took some of these stories and made Yahweh the hero of them. Therefore, it is Yahweh who divided the sea, when ancient legends said that Tiamat (the Deep) was the chaotic goddess defeated by the hero god Marduk (Bel), or Yam (the Sea) who was defeated by Baal. It is Yahweh who broke the heads of Leviathan in pieces, not Marduk or Baal.

You cut openings for springs and torrents; you dried up ever-flowing streams.

Asaph recounted examples of God’s power and authority over nature. God has power over the waters, over day and night, and over all the seasons. Verses 16-17 summarise the work of creation as detailed in Genesis Chapter 1.

Psalm 74:18-23 - Have Regard for the Covenant and Deliver Us!

The psalm goes on to plead with God to ‘remember this,’ as if God could forget (even though it feels as if he has done so at times). It is unthinkable for God to deliver the soul of his dove, a clean bird, (i.e. Israel) to the wild animals (i.e. foreign powers), to be torn and devoured. There is no appeal to the people’s merit; rather, the appeal is have regard for the covenant (God’s promises to the patriarchs) and plead his cause (God chose the people of Israel for his purposes, to bring light to the Gentiles; how will the Gentiles receive the light if they are so busy mocking?).

- 18 Remember this, O Lord, how the enemy scoffs,
and an impious people reviles your name.
- 19 Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals;
do not forget the life of your poor for ever.
- 20 Have regard for your covenant,
for the dark places of the land are full of the haunts of violence.
- 21 Do not let the downtrodden be put to shame;
let the poor and needy praise your name.
- 22 Rise up, O God, plead your cause;
remember how the impious scoff at you all day long.
- 23 Do not forget the clamour of your foes,
the uproar of your adversaries that goes up continually.

Psalm 74:18-23

Remember this, O Lord, how the enemy scoffs. After declaring the unmatched power of God, Asaph then called upon God to take vengeance upon his enemies and to protect his people, i.e. do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals.

Have regard for your covenant. Asaph wisely and persuasively called upon God to act in view of his covenant with his people. In a dangerous world, full of the haunts of violence, God's people could rely on God's covenant promise: <<*I am making this covenant, sworn by an oath, not only with you who stand here with us today before the Lord our God, but also with those who are not here with us today*>> (Deuteronomy 29:14-15), <<*Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David*>> (Isaiah 55:3), <<*I will make an everlasting covenant with them, never to draw back from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, so that they may not turn from me*>> (Jeremiah 32:40), <<*yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant*>> (Ezekiel 16:60), and: <<*Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear*>> (Haggai 2:4-5).

Rise up, O God, plead your cause. Asaph approached God with concern for his own cause. He asked God to act not only out of compassion for his people but also out of concern for his glory, to rebuke the foolish man who reproaches God daily. Asaph's cry is reminiscent to that of David: <<***Rise up, O Lord, confront them, overthrow them! By your sword deliver my life from the wicked, from mortals – by your hand, O Lord – from mortals whose portion in life is in this world***>> (Psalm 17:13-14a).

The uproar of your adversaries that goes up continually. Asaph pressed the urgency of the plea, as did other psalmists: <<***The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts***>> (Psalm 46:6). With wickedness on the increase, there was more reason for God to act sooner rather than later.