



## Psalm 79 - Plea for Mercy for Jerusalem

A Psalm of Asaph.

### Introduction

This is a community lament, which was occasioned by a great disaster that fell upon Jerusalem, possibly the Babylonian destruction, and has many similarities to Psalm 74. It recounts the violence and impiety of the Gentile conquerors and asks God how long he intends to put up with such things. Running through the psalm is a recognition that, just as by reason of the covenant, Israel expects God to treat them differently than he treats the other nations, so too Israel should live faithfully to that covenant. The disaster came because Israel did not embrace the covenant in true faith; the psalm confesses that, asks for forgiveness and pledges renewed faithfulness.

The majority of commentators believe this psalm followed the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians. If this date is 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 79:1-4 - The Nations Have Defiled Your Holy Temple and Slain Your People.

The first section chillingly describes the destruction that the nations, probably Babylon and its allies, have wrought on God's inheritance, i.e. the remaining land of Judah where his own people dwell. They have defiled the holy temple, treating something holy as unclean, which is an atrocity against God and invites a severe

penalty from God: *<<I myself will set my face against them, and will cut them off from the people, because they have given of their offspring to Molech, defiling my sanctuary and profaning my holy name>>* (Leviticus 20:3); they have laid Jerusalem in ruins, God's favoured city and the home of David's dynasty: *<<but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves>>* (Psalm 78:68); and they have wantonly slaughtered God's own people, leaving their bodies unburied for wild animals to eat.

- 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 air for food,  
the flesh of your faithful to the wild animals 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 neighbours,  
mocked and derided by those around us.

#### Psalm 79:1-4

O God, the nations have come into your inheritance. The army that conquered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem was under the command of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Yet, like the armies of many ancient empires, it was made up of soldiers of many nations conquered by the Babylonians.

The land is called God's inheritance or 'heritage' because Israel is his inheritance and he gave the land to them as their inheritance: *<<But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron-smelter, out of Egypt, to become a people of his very own possession, as you are now. The Lord was angry with me because of you, and he vowed that I should not cross the Jordan and that I should not enter the good land that the Lord your God is giving for your possession>>* (Deuteronomy 4:20-21), *<<O save your people, and bless your heritage; be their shepherd, and carry them for ever>>* (Psalm 28:9), and: *<<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>>* (Psalm 74:2). The conquering Babylonians came against the people of Judah but into the land of Israel. That particular land was important to God and therefore

Asaph noted the crisis of that land being invaded by the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar and his armies.

They have defiled your holy temple. The temple was holy but now was defiled. Jerusalem once prospered but now was laid in ruins. The servants of God were dead and their corpses disgraced, i.e. given to the birds of the air for food with no one to bury them.

We have become a taunt to our neighbours. The shocking and brutal fall of Jerusalem and Judah made them a disgrace and contemptible to the surrounding nations. This would hurt anyway, but the people singing these are God's people, and the neighbours are Gentiles; God's people were supposed to be an advertisement to the Gentiles of how great and good a God Yahweh is.

The Jews were mocked and derided by those around them. In this, they suffered similar treatment to that which Jesus would face as he suffered and died on the Cross: <<*Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!' In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself'*>> (Mark 15:29-31).

#### Psalm 79:5-7 - How Long, O Lord, Will You Let This Go On?

This section guides God's people in what they should feel at such a time. The right question is not, "How long will you let us suffer like this?" After all, they suffer because God is angry with their unfaithfulness. Rather, the question is, "How long will you allow the nations, who do not know you, to get away with what they have done?" Even though Jacob, i.e. Israel, has been unfaithful, the Israelites still belong to the Lord.

- <sup>5</sup> How long, O Lord? Will you be angry for ever?  
Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?
- <sup>6</sup> Pour out your anger on the nations  
that do not know you,  
and on the kingdoms  
that do not call on your name.
- <sup>7</sup> For they have devoured Jacob  
and laid waste his habitation.

## Psalm 79:5-7

**How long, O Lord?** In the midst of the catastrophe of the conquest of Judah and Jerusalem, Asaph asked the question that many sufferers among God's people ask. **How long** does not question the why of suffering, but in faith asks when, and if it will last forever. A similar cry will be heard from those who are martyred during the great tribulation: *<<When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, 'Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?''>>* (Revelation 6:9-10).

**Will you be angry for ever?** Asaph expressed the heart of the devastated people of Judah after the fall of Jerusalem. In the years of Jeremiah's ministry many false prophets had told them that deliverance would come. Because they ignored God's true messenger Jeremiah, judgement came upon his people and they were completely unprepared for it. The good news was that God's anger and jealousy would not burn against his people forever. Jeremiah foretold the judgement to come, but he also told of restoration that would follow.

**Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?** God's jealousy is an analogy, based on the 'marriage' relationship between God and his people ('clings' in Genesis 2:24 and 'hold fast' in Deuteronomy 10:20). Unlike human jealousy, which can be irrational (Numbers 5:14), God's is a passionate commitment to receiving exclusive loyalty from his people – a commitment for their good. This is confirmed by: *<<for you shall worship no other god, because the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God>>* (Exodus 34:14), and: *<<For they provoked him to anger with their high places; they moved him to jealousy with their idols>>* (Psalm 78:58), where false worship provokes it. When this psalm acknowledges that God is jealous, it is admitting that the people have been unfaithful (vv.8-9).

**Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you.** God would answer Asaph's prayer in time, when judgement came upon the Babylonian Empire and they were conquered by the Medes and Persians: *<<So from his presence the hand was sent and this writing was inscribed. And this is the writing that was inscribed: mene, mene, tekel, and parsin. This is the interpretation of the matter: mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; tekel, you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians>>* (Daniel 5:24-28). Babylon devoured Jacob and was in turn devoured.

**Verses 6-7 are remarkably similar to:** *<<Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not know you, and on the peoples that do not call on your name; for they have devoured Jacob; they have devoured him and consumed him, and have laid waste his habitation>>* (Jeremiah 10:25). If this was written after

the Babylonian invasion then it is possible that Jeremiah influenced the author of this psalm. If it was written prophetically by Asaph in the time of Solomon then Jeremiah may have been influenced by the psalm.

For they have devoured Jacob and laid waste his habitation. Some take this as a reference to the temple, which was certainly destroyed in the conquest of Jerusalem. Yet it is more likely that it refers to the land of Israel itself, previously referred to as God's inheritance (v.1).

### Psalm 79:8-10 - Forgive Us, Help Us, and Let the Nations Know about It!

This section now faces the basic problem: God's people have been untrue to him and must seek his forgiveness. The psalm weaves two themes together: the first is the understandable desire for relief <<***we are brought very low. Help us***>>, and the second is the desire, born of true faith, for God's honour in the world: <<***for the glory of your name***>>, <<***for your name's sake***>>, and <<***why should the nations say?***>>. This psalm takes these two as connected: God's reputation is tied to his people's well-being, and their well-being cannot be separated from their faithfulness. Like the Assyrians before them, the Babylonians were but the rod of God's anger, sent to discipline his people; but they went about their work too eagerly and boastfully – and thus made themselves liable to God's judgement; refer to Isaiah 10:5-19. Therefore the psalm prays for this to be known among the nations before their eyes: if everyone sees it, then everyone can learn its lessons, just as this disgrace has taught a lesson to God's people. The forgiveness and help requested are for the people as a whole, that they be allowed to continue under God's special care. For more on this kind of forgiveness, refer to the comments made on Numbers 14:13-19 and 14:36-38.

<sup>8</sup> Do not remember against us the iniquities of our ancestors;  
let your compassion come speedily to meet us,  
for we are brought very low.

<sup>9</sup> Help us, O God of our salvation,  
for the glory of your name;  
deliver us, and forgive our sins,  
for your name's sake.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

## Psalm 79:8-10

Do not remember against us the iniquities of our ancestors. Speaking on behalf of the exiled survivors, Asaph humbled himself before God and admitted their sin against him. They could no longer deny their sin; instead they could plead for forgiveness and for God's tender mercies to come speedily.

The concept of former iniquities suggests a principle. Charles Spurgeon wrote, "Sins accumulate against nations. Generations lay up stores of transgressions to be visited upon their successors; hence this urgent prayer."

For we are brought very low. Before they were brought very low they would not humbly repent. Now they were in the place to do it: <<*The Lord protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me*>> (Psalm 116:6).

For the glory of your name. Asaph wisely appealed to the glory of God in his prayer for help. The glory of Judah and Jerusalem had been shattered, yet God might move for his people in the interest of his own glory: <<*For your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great*>> (Psalm 25:11), and: <<*Although our iniquities testify against us, act, O Lord, for your name's sake; our apostasies indeed are many, and we have sinned against you*>> (Jeremiah 14:7).

Forgive our sins. Usually it takes a sacrifice to effect 'atonement'; but here, the temple is no more (v.1), so this is likely a metaphorical use of the word, meaning 'forgiveness.' This helps to show that the OT does not suppose that somehow God's hands are tied and he can only effect forgiveness through the sacrifices; the companion idea, that the sacrifices do not work 'automatically,' without respect to the worshipper's faith, is also crucial to the OT.

Where is their God? Asaph made a slightly different appeal, still with an eye to God's glory. Asaph considered the custom of the avenging of the blood in his ancient culture, where the murder of a family member would be answered by the work of the *goel*, the avenger of blood. He asked God to put the nations to silence and display his active presence by acting as the avenger of blood on behalf of his people.

## Psalm 79:11-13 - Preserve Us, Return Their Taunts, and We Will Praise You.

Verses 8-10 prayed for forgiveness; here, the effect of that forgiveness will be that God will preserve those of his people who are doomed to die. Perhaps the reference to prisoners means that they are literally to be executed, but it is more likely that the people praying this see themselves under a sentence of 'death,' i.e. abandoned by God. The taunts of the neighbours against God's people (v.4) are taken to be against God himself; v.12 asks that God would give the destroyers what they deserve for daring to taunt God. Verse 13 looks forward to the granting

of forgiveness, and pledges that God's will give thanks to him forever – this is what he made them for, and to sing this psalm sincerely is to accept this as a call to a genuine embrace of the covenant.

- 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 bosom of our neighbours  
the taunts with which they taunted you, O Lord!

### Psalm 79:11-12

Let the groans of the prisoners come before you. Asaph considered the misery of his many countrymen who were prisoners in Babylon, asking God to hear their groaning and to act on their behalf.

According to your great power preserve those doomed to die. Asaph then considered those among the exiles in Babylon who were condemned to death, and asked that God preserve them. Adam Clarke says those who are doomed to die is literally “‘Sons of death.’ Either those who were condemned to death because of their crimes, or condemned to be destroyed by their oppressors. Both these senses apply to the Israelites: they were sons of death, i.e. worthy of death because of their sins against God; they were condemned to death or utter destruction, by their Babylonish enemies.”

Return sevenfold into the bosom of our neighbours the taunts with which they taunted you, O Lord! Sevenfold seems to be an idiom for ‘completely,’ as seen in: <<*Then the Lord said to him, ‘Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.’ And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him*>> (Genesis 4:15), <<*The promises of the Lord are promises that are pure, silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times*>> (Psalm 12:6), and: <<*Yet if they are caught, they will pay sevenfold; they will forfeit all the goods of their house*>> (Proverbs 6:31).

Sometimes sevenfold is simply a way of saying abundantly or in great measure: <<*See, it is written before me: I will not keep silent, but I will repay; I will indeed repay into their laps their iniquities and their ancestors’ iniquities together, says the Lord; because they offered incense on the mountains and reviled me on the hills, I will measure into their laps full payment for their actions*>> (Isaiah 65:6-7), <<*You show steadfast love to the thousandth generation, but repay the guilt of parents into the laps of their children after them, O great and mighty God whose name is the Lord of hosts*>> (Jeremiah 32:18), and: <<*Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven*

*times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times>> (Matthew 18:21-22).*

<sup>13</sup> Then we your people, the flock of your pasture,  
will give thanks to you for ever;  
from generation to generation we will recount your praise.

### Psalm 79:13

Your people, the flock of your pasture. After praying for rescue, protection, and vengeance, Asaph ended this psalm with grateful dependence upon God, a far cry from the way he started an earlier psalm: <<*O God, why do you cast us off for ever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?*>> (Psalm 74:1). He properly recognised God’s place as Shepherd over his people and sheep.

Will give thanks to you for ever. As grateful sheep, they would declare their thanks and praise both now and in the future: <<*In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name for ever*>> (Psalm 44:8).