

Disaster!

Psalm 74:1-23

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If you have your Bibles, I'd like you to turn with me to II Kings 25, because II Kings 25 describes the circumstance that the Psalmist is praying to God about, is crying out to God about.

The circumstance is the Babylonian destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, one of the most cataclysmic events in the history of Israel. If every Christian remembers the date of the death of Christ, surely two realities control the mind of the believing Hebrew. First of all, the Exodus was emblazoned upon the heart of every Hebrew believer. It was the great event of deliverance in the Old Testament. Over and over, the Psalms look at the present experience of the Hebrew in light of the Exodus, and we're going to find that happening in Psalm 74 tonight.

The second grand reality that was controlling for the Hebrew believer was the reality of the presence of God with His people in Zion, especially manifested first in God's being present or near or in the midst of His people in the tabernacle, and then later God's being present or near or in the midst of His people in the temple. And so the destruction of the temple is a cataclysmic event for the people of God because on the one hand it seems to call into question the promises of faithfulness by God to His people made as far back not only as the Exodus, but all the way back to Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, and 17. And so this destruction of the temple was an event not simply of national proportion, but of biblical proportion. It impacted every aspect of the life of the believing Hebrew, and this event is described for us in II Kings 25. Let me ask you to look at verses 8-15, just so that you'll know what the Psalmist is so grieved about as he describes it in Psalm 74.

The author of II Kings tells us that (25:8ff):

On the seventh day of the fifth month, which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. And he burned the house of the Lord, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; even every great house he burned with fire. So all the army of

the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Then the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon and the rest of the people, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried away into exile. The captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen.

Now the bronze pillars which were in the house of the Lord, and the stands and bronze sea which were in the house of the Lord, the Chaldeans broke in pieces and carried the bronze into Babylon. They took away the pots, the shovels, the snuffers, the spoons, and all the bronze vessels which were used in temple service. The captain of the guard also took away the firepans and the basins, what was fine gold and what was fine silver.

Now that event described there was burned into the hearts of the people of Israel. The thought of the place where God manifests His presence, His nearness, His favor to the people of God being destroyed by the enemies of God and His people, that event was emblazoned on their hearts, and that is the event that sets the stage for Psalm 74. It is a Psalm about disaster. I'm struck again about how God in His own wisdom and providence has planned for us to be in this Psalm in this time of our experience as a people. Let's look to God in prayer and ask His help and blessing as we read and hear His word.

Lord God, this is Your word. We acknowledge that Your ways are not our ways, and Your thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and so as we enter in tonight into the Psalmist's longing question, 'Why?', we ask, O God, that we would do so in the right spirit; that we would not seek to peer into the secret things of God which You have not revealed, but that we would dwell on that which You have revealed to us in Your word by Your prophets and apostles, set forth there for our edification, and that this would be the rule of our life; and that what it teaches us would be the index by which we measure Your mysterious providence, even and especially when things occur that are far beyond our knowing. Teach us from Your word. Help us. Bless us. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear God's word from Psalm 74.

A Maskil of Asaph.

O God, why hast Thou rejected us forever? Why does Thine anger smoke against the sheep of Thy pasture? Remember Thy congregation, which Thou hast purchased of old, which Thou hast redeemed to be the tribe of Thine inheritance; and this Mount Zion, where Thou hast dwelt. Turn Thy footsteps toward the perpetual ruins; the enemy has damaged everything within the sanctuary. Thine adversaries have roared in the midst of Thy meeting place; They have set up their own standards for signs. It seems

as if one had lifted up his axe in a forest of trees. And now all its carved work they smash with hatchet and hammers. They have burned Thy sanctuary to the ground; They have defiled the dwelling place of Thy name. They said in their heart, 'Let us completely subdue them.' They have burned all the meeting places of God in the land. We do not see our signs, there is no longer any prophet, nor is there any among us who knows how long. How long, O God, will the adversary revile, and the enemy spurn Thy name forever? Why dost Thou withdraw Thy hand, even Thy right hand? From within Thy bosom, destroy them!

Yet God is my king from of old, Who works deeds of deliverance in the midst of the earth. Thou didst divide the sea by Thy strength; Thou didst break the heads of the sea-monsters in the waters. Thou didst crush the heads of Leviathan; Thou didst give him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. Thou didst break open springs and torrents; Thou didst dry up ever-flowing streams. Thine is the day, Thine also is the night; Thou hast prepared the light and the sun, Thou hast established all the boundaries of the earth; Thou hast made summer and winter.

Remember this, O Lord, that the enemy has reviled; and a foolish people has spurned Thy name. Do not deliver the soul of Thy turtledove to the wild beast; do not forget the life of Thine afflicted forever. Consider the covenant; for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence. Let not the oppressed return dishonored; let the afflicted and needy praise Thy name.

Do arise, O God, and plead Thine own cause; Remember how the foolish man reproaches Thee all day long. Do not forget the voice of Thine adversaries, The uproar of those who rise against Thee which ascends continually.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to it.

So here they are. The people of God, after hearing warning after warning from prophet after prophet, have finally seen the destruction of Jerusalem. It's an awful depiction, isn't it? The temple is torn down, ruined. The king's palace is torn down, ruined. The great houses of Jerusalem are torn down and ruined. We've seen this in our own history; those of us from the South have been reared from our earliest days with stories of what occurred in Vicksburg, Jackson, Atlanta, Columbia - whole cities swallowed up in destruction. And of course, more recently some of us have seen with our own eyes the destruction wrought upon our Coast — beautiful houses of worship destroyed, great family homes obliterated. And the Psalmist in the midst of this great disaster is crying out to God, and he is asking God a question: 'Why? What are You doing? What does it mean? How are we to understand this? How are we to respond to this? How long

are we going to be under this kind of affliction? O Lord, hear us and answer.'

And I want you to see five things in particular in this Psalm as this cry of the heart is lifted up in this time of national disaster.

First of all, I want you to notice that the Psalmist, speaking on behalf of the afflicted Israel, speaks as if he has been rejected and so calls God to remember His covenant promises. Look at verses 1 and 2: "O God, why have You rejected us forever? Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture?" This national disaster of the destruction of Jerusalem and the king's house and the temple has led the people of God to feel rejected by God; and not only to feel rejected by God, to subjectively respond to these events as if they were a rejection, but to rightly sense God's judicial rejection of them, and so they cry out to God. They appeal to God.

And that reminds us of a number of things. One of the things it reminds us is that it is not always wrong to ask "Why?" You know, sometimes when we ask "why?" we are greeted with the response, "I don't know." Sometimes we ask one another, "Why do you think such-and-such happened?" and the answer is, "I don't know." And sometimes well-meaning Christians will say to us, "You shouldn't ask why." But have you ever noticed how the Bible is filled with the question, "Why?" And in fact, in this passage the very fact that the people of God ask the question why is not an index of their unbelief, but it is an index of their faith, because they know that God in His word has told them that they are His people, His inheritance. And they know that God has told them in His word that He will establish a king on David's throne and there will never be a day when He does not have His man on David's throne, and that he will not leave them nor forsake them — and then suddenly they are handed over into the hands of their enemies. And so their asking the question "Why?" is a very important practical and theological question for them to ask.

Well, it is true, my friends, that we are not the nation of Israel and we are not a theocracy, and we cannot read into all the events of history the same dynamics that are laid forth here in the word, and there are indeed many times when we have to respond in asking what God is doing in some of the great disasters of our time, "I don't know." But it is interesting in this passage that the people of God certainly do know the answer to this question, because the prophets had been telling them the answer to this question before they ever asked it, and the prophets will give them the answer to this question again, even if they don't want to hear it! And so let's remember that there are times when it's appropriate to ask, "Why?"

In fact, there are times when it's important to ask why, because there are messages of biblical growth that we need to hear and which are necessary for us to grow in grace in asking and hearing God's answer to that question "Why?" in His word. But let us also remember that sometimes when we ask the question

why, God answers that question not by explaining the specifics of His purposes in some event or circumstance in our lives, but by pointing us to another question, which is “Who?” So that our question “Why?” leads us to the question “Who?” which is answered by reference to our loving and sovereign heavenly Father, so that all we may know in some circumstances is what we learn about our God in those circumstances, and we may have to wait. We may have to wait until the end to see the purposes that God has in answer to that question “Why?”

But there's another thing I want you to see even as we contemplate this rejection and the cry that it evokes in verses 1 and 2, and that is, isn't it interesting how the circumstances of God's people are so similar that this Maskil that could be written by Asaph 2,500 years or more ago works for us today? We can enter into the experience of the people of God in the cataclysmic events of our lives. “O God, why did You take my child from me? Lord God, why did you take my husband from me? My wife from me? Lord God, why has this trial befallen my family, my community, my congregation? Lord God, why?”

We can take up the words of this Psalm written in another time and another place, in another circumstance, and its words are perfect for us, because every word of Scripture is given by inspiration and every word of Scripture is profitable. And the circumstances of the people of God are so similar in all ages that this Psalm written by Asaph still suits us 2,500 years later.

But the thing I want you to see especially is that God's people are asking why here because of promises that He has made in His word. I want you to see two words in particular in these first few verses.

First of all, notice in verse 2 what Israel is called. They are called a purchased congregation. And then notice again in verse 2 that they are called a redeemed tribe — purchased and redeemed. Where does that language come from? It comes from the Exodus, where God did — what? He purchased them. He redeemed them out of Egypt. How do The Ten Commandments start? “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, who redeemed you out of the house of bondage.” And that purchase, that redemption, defined who the people of God were, and it is because they are the purchased and redeemed people of God that they ask this question: ‘Why? Lord, if we are the purchased and redeemed people of God, why are we being sent into exile?’

And not only that, as the purchased and redeemed people of God asking why, notice what they ask God to do. Look at verse 2: “Remember....” They ask God to remember. That's very important, and we're going to come back to that and you'll see that word repeated again in verse 18, so just hold that thought. Why is it so significant that they would ask God to remember? It's tied into the Exodus and to God's redemption of them out of Egypt. Hold that in the back of your minds. So the first thing we see is God's people rejected, and they're calling to God to remember them.

The second thing we see (and we see this in verses 3-8) is the ruined temple. People are rejected (verses 1-2), temple is ruined (verses 3-8). And here God's people — isn't it beautiful language? — they ask God to run to the site of the ruined temple and to look at it, to see what is going on. Listen to how they put it:

“Turn Your footsteps toward the perpetual ruins; the enemy has damaged everything within the sanctuary. Your adversaries have roared in the midst of Your meeting place; they have set up their own standards for signs. It seems as if one had lifted up his axe in a forest of trees. And now all its carved work they smash with hatchet and hammers. They burned Your sanctuary to the ground; they defiled the dwelling place of Your name. They said in their heart, ‘Let us completely subdue them.’ They have burned all the meeting places of God in the land.”

You understand now why this is such an urgent question to ask ‘Why are You letting this happen, Lord?’ Because this is not just a natural disaster that has befallen the people of God; this is a spiritual disaster that has befallen the people of God, because the focal point of God's presence in their midst as their God, the temple, has been destroyed. And the people who had been planted in Canaan, God's promised land to the children of Israel, have now been exiled from Israel and taken into a strange land again, when God had said in taking them out of a strange land, the land of Egypt before, that He was going to plant them in Israel forever. It is this crisis of the exile which will define the theological question all the later prophets ask: ‘Lord, You said You were going to set up a king in the line of David and he was going to reign forever. Our last king has had his eyes put out, and he saw his children slaughtered before his eyes were put out. Your leaders have been carried off into Babylon. How are we to understand that, God? How can we understand that You've been faithful to Your covenant promises when this has befallen? Lord, Your house, the place where You meet with Your people, You manifest Your presence, has been burned to the ground. How are we to understand that? Lord, the land that You gave to us is now occupied by pagans who rule over us, and only the poor are left scattered behind to tend the vines and the fields. Lord, how are we to understand that You are still in control? How are we to understand that You are still faithful to Your promises? How are we to understand this?’

It's a spiritual crisis that they are facing. But as I said, my friends, they already had the answer to this question. I'll ask you to turn in your Bibles to II Chronicles. Second Chronicles 36 also describes this scene. You see it in verse 11 and following:

“Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. He did evil in the sight of the Lord his God; he did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet who spoke for the Lord. He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar who had made him swear allegiance by

God. But he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the Lord God of Israel. Furthermore, all the officials of the priests and the people were very unfaithful following all the abominations the nations; and they defiled the house of the Lord which He had sanctified in Jerusalem. The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, until there was no remedy. Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand. And all the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he brought them all to Babylon. Then they burned the house of God, and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its fortified buildings with fire, and destroyed all its valuable articles.”

Isaiah even tells us in Isaiah 47:6 that it was God Himself who had taken up this wrath against Israel. There is an answer in God's word to this Why? Because the children of Israel had not listened to the messengers of grace that God had been sending to them over and over and over. They had rejected those messengers, and God had visited them in this destruction through the Babylonians, through the Chaldeans, through Nebuchadnezzar.

And so this ruined temple is there, evidence that God was deadly serious when He had warned them through the prophets. And yet the people of God can still turn to Him and say, ‘Lord, run to the temple and look what's happened, and remember.’

There's a third thing I want you to see. Look at verses 9-11. Here we see these adversaries, even though they're the instruments of God to bring just punishment against His wayward people, they revile Him; and these reviling adversaries are not only troubling to the people of God as they lift up this Psalm to God, but it is also troubling that they're not revealing prophets. Listen to the words of verses 9-11:

“We do not see our signs, there is no longer any prophet, nor is there any among us who knows how long. How long, O God, will the adversary revile, and the enemy spurn Your name forever? Why do You withdraw Your hand, even Your right hand? From within Your bosom, destroy them!”

You see, the people of God are troubled that the adversaries of God and His people are exulting over Him. They have moved into Jerusalem and wiped it out, and wiped out the temple just like they would have moved into a thousand other cities and wiped out the temples of a false god. And it grieves the people of God to think that the one true God has been dishonored such by these pagans, and

so they cry out to God 'Lord, they're exulting over You. Bring Your judgment against them.' Now, God will. He tells us that He will in Isaiah, and He does so. This is one of the messages of the Book of Daniel, isn't it, that God does bring judgment against those enemies? But right now they're exulting over the people of God.

And notice that the worst judgment of all here is the loss of His word through the prophets. Jeremiah talks about this in Lamentations 2:9. The voice of the prophet is not heard. God had sent prophet after prophet to Israel and Israel had not listened, and now the voice of the prophet is not heard. The people of God say 'We want to hear a word from the Lord. We want to see a sign from the Lord.' The Lord had given the prophets a word and a sign, and now the only sign they see are the banners of the Chaldeans hanging in the destroyed temple in Jerusalem. These reviling adversaries vex the people of God, but nothing vexes the people of God more than the loss of His revealing prophets. This is the meaning of that great statement, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." That's not talking about some sort of a strategic plan put together by a very trendy up-to-date group of thinkers and forecasts and presented ably, and that you need that in order to be successful. That's talking about revelation, revelation from God. Where there is no revelation from God the people perish. We live by the word of God, every word that proceeds from His mouth, and there's no greater curse than the withdrawal of that word.

And then in the middle of all this lament and all this crying, we see verses 12-17 and we see the fourth thing, and that is the Psalmist rehearsing the power of our sovereign God, God the sovereign king:

"Yet God is my king from of old, who works deeds of deliverance in the midst of the earth. You divided the sea by Your strength; You broke the heads of sea-monsters in the waters. You crush the heads of Leviathan; You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness."

You see the point there. The Psalmist is making it very clear: this did not happen because God was not powerful enough to keep it from happening, because this is the God who created the world. This is the God who divided the seas from the land. This is the God who hung the stars. This is the God who created sun and moon. This is the God who controls the mightiest of the sea creatures and the mightiest of the land creatures. This is the sovereign God of heaven and earth, so if this has happened it has not happened because He is not too powerful.

Yet around us today, everywhere, every crisis that occurs, we are told time and again by somebody that God couldn't help it, that God had nothing to do with this. A child dies tragically and we're told God has nothing to do with it. A city is destroyed: God had nothing to do with it; God couldn't do anything about it; He didn't know it was coming; He couldn't stop it from happening. And the Psalmist is just telling you in Technicolor™ that is not the answer.

God is sovereign; God is all-powerful; there's nothing out from under His control, so that's not the answer to the question 'why'. The answer to the question 'why' from heaven is not, 'Oh, gee, my people, I really would have liked to have helped you, but I just didn't have the power to do it.' That is never the answer, because God is sovereign.

And then again the lament continues. We see it in verses 18-23, but notice here now we have a prayer of petition in the midst of this lament, and here is the prayer:

"Remember this, O Lord, this enemy has reviled; a foolish people has spurned Your name. Do not deliver the soul of Your turtledove to the wild beast; do not forget the life of Your afflicted forever. Consider the covenant...."

Here the petition is 'Lord God, remember Your covenant promise to Your people. Remember the promise and oath that You swore to Your people. Remember Your adversaries here; bring Your judgment against them, but remember the promises You have made to Your people.'

Now we're back to that word *remember*. Why is that word so important? Well, turn with me in your Bibles as we close back to Exodus 2. In Exodus 2:23, Moses describes the people of God burdened under the oppression of their taskmasters in Egypt:

"It came about in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died. And the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God." [Now look at the next verse, verse 24] "So God heard their groaning; and God *remembered* His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them."

What is the Psalmist saying? 'Lord God,' this Psalmist is saying, 'I can remember from the time that I can remember, on my mother's knee hearing the story told of how Your people cried out to You in their need, and You remembered the promise You had made to Abraham.'

Why is he saying *remember* now? Because he wants the Lord to remember the promises that He has made to Abraham.

Now you'll remember, my friends, that Daniel does the exact same thing in Daniel 9. Daniel stumbles upon Jeremiah's scroll, he reads Jeremiah's explanation as to why the children of Israel have been sent into exile, and he says to the Lord, 'Lord God, heed Your word. Do what You say You will do in Your word. We don't deserve Your mercy, but, Lord, do what You said You would do in Your word: bring the children of Israel out of exile.' And at the end of Daniel

9 you remember that God dispatches His angel to speak to Daniel to tell him that his prayer has been heard, but this angel explains to Daniel that his prayer is going to be answered in a quite unexpected way. The angel tells Daniel that in answer to Daniel's prayer the Messiah is going to be sent into the world; the Messiah is going to die in Jerusalem, and then God's great purposes are going to be brought to pass.

You see the significance of that. In order for God's promise to Abraham to come to fruition, His Son must die. The Messiah must die, and we, trusting in Him alone for our salvation as He is offered in the gospel, become the recipients of all the promises that God has stored up for His believing people since the day that He made those gracious words of promise to Abraham.

And that's how this Psalm closes: with a people who deserve to be judged, yet standing before God and saying, 'Lord God, deal with us not as we deserve, but as You have promised.'

Let's pray.

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