

Brought Very Low

Psalm 79:1-13

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Amen. Please be seated. We're in Psalm 79 as we continue to work our way through the Third Book of the Psalms. We read and worked through all too briefly a long Psalm last week. This is a short Psalm this week; a very poignant Psalm. Let me remind you of the circumstances in the context of this Psalm.

Jerusalem has been destroyed. The Babylonians have visited destruction and desecration on the house of the Lord. Many of the children of Israel have been taken off into captivity. Hundreds - thousands — have been left dead, literally...their bodies in the streets. And these words are from the account of an eyewitness or eyewitnesses; perhaps Jews who were not carried off into captivity. Psalm 137 gives us the perspective on this event from the standpoint of Jews who were taken into Babylon as exiles, but this Psalm comes from the perspective of one who has been left behind. It's a Psalm of Asaph, like so many of the other Psalms in the Third Book of the Psalms, and as such it is meant for public worship. That's a striking thing, that even the destruction of the City of David, Zion, the destruction of the temple, would be a matter for the public praise of the people of God. It's absolutely astonishing. There's a lesson just in that for us as we study this passage tonight.

I want to look at this passage in four parts. You can debate about how this Psalm should be outlined. Clearly, the first four verses constitute a lament over fallen Jerusalem. This is the eyewitness giving the account of what has happened to the City of David and to the people of God. That's clear enough.

But then it gets a little harder to outline. Is it 5-7 and 8-11, and 12 and 13; or, is it 5-8, and then 9-11, and 12 and 13; or some other way? Well, I want to draw your attention to four specific things, so here's how we're going to outline it. It's not the only way that you could legitimately outline the Psalm.

We're going to look at verses 5-8 as a prayer of confession acknowledging that the judgment that has come upon Jerusalem is deserved. This isn't some sling and arrow of outrageous fortune that can't be explained in the order of the moral universe ruled over by God. No, it's perfectly understandable why this judgment has come. The people of God have strayed. For hundreds of years He has been

warning them through the prophets, and now the chickens have come home to roost. The Psalmist recognizes that. The Psalmist addresses that, and the Psalmist contritely confesses that...and so the Psalmist contritely confesses sin.

But the Psalmist also in this passage, while confessing sin in verses 5-8, also pleads for God's compassion. He comes armed with arguments for God to show compassion. That's the second thing I want you to see.

And then I want us to look especially at the whole of verse 9 and the first part of verse 10 as the third section of this Psalm. There we see a prayer, a petition that is based on God's character.

And then, finally, in [the remainder of] verse 10, through 13, we see a prayer for judgment and justice that ends in a very surprising way. Those are the four parts of this Psalm I'd like to direct your attention to tonight. Before we read it and hear it proclaimed, let's look to God in prayer and ask His help and blessing.

Our Lord and our God, in times of trouble You are our refuge and strength, our ever-present help; and so we ought to learn to run to You. So this night as we hear read aloud Your word...Your word given by Your Spirit as the description of the experience of the saints in time of trouble...teach us how we ought to respond in trials. Bless us with an understanding of this Your holy word. We know that You mean to show us how to live, as well as to show us the One who is the way and the truth and the life. Grant us then, by Your Spirit, eyes to see and ears to hear, and hearts to believe and understand and embrace the word of the living God. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear God's word.

A Psalm of Asaph.

O God, the nations have invaded Thine inheritance;
They have defiled Thy holy temple;
They have laid Jerusalem in ruins.
They have given the dead bodies of Thy servants for food to the birds of the heavens,
The flesh of Thy godly ones to the beasts of the earth.
They have poured out their blood like water round about Jerusalem;
And there was no one to bury them.
We have become a reproach to our neighbors,
A scoffing and derision to those around us.
How long, O Lord? Wilt Thou be angry forever?
Will Thy jealousy burn like firs?
Pour out Thy wrath upon the nations which do not know Thee,
And upon the kingdoms which do not call upon Thy name.
For they have devoured Jacob, and laid waste his habitation.

“Do not remember the iniquities of our forefathers against us;
Let Thy compassion come quickly to meet us;
For we are brought very low.
Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Thy name;
And deliver us, and forgive our sins, for Thy name's sake.
Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’
Let there be known among the nations in our sight,
Vengeance for the blood of Thy servants, which has been shed.
Let the groaning of the prisoner come before Thee;
According to the greatness of Thy power preserve those who are doomed
to die.
And return to our neighbors sevenfold into their bosom
The reproach with which they have reproached Thee, O Lord.
So we Thy people and the sheep of Thy pasture
Will give thanks to Thee forever;
To all generations we will tell of Thy praise.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

Those great lyricists of the 1970's, Walter Becker and his companion in *Steely Dan*, wrote:

“They've got a name for the winners of the world, and I want a name when I lose.
They call Alabama the Crimson Tide,
They call me Deacon Blues.”

The cry of their heart, I think, was something like this: They wanted a name; they wanted a song to sing in a time of loss. They wanted a song to sing when victory was not near. They wanted a song to sing when they'd failed.

Isn't it interesting how God provides His children songs to sing in time of failure, songs to sing in time of trial? He's given us a song for every season. Isn't that one of the amazing things about the Psalter, that He has given the people of God something to sing in every circumstance?

As Joe and I were walking up to the platform this morning, Joe commented to me, “You know, how many churches do you think in the Jackson area are singing *In Thy Wrath and Hot Displeasure* this morning?” Not many, my guess is! It comes right out of the Psalms; it's just a paraphrase of the Psalm, but my guess is there are not many churches in Jackson singing *In Thy Wrath and Hot Displeasure*. But, you know, they're the poorer for it, for what can miserable Christians sing? Not many songs being written for miserable Christians out there, but there are a lot of Christians in misery.

Today is the Day of Prayer for international Christians who are persecuted. Brad lifted up a prayer tonight for our brothers and sisters — and there are literally hundreds of thousands of them around the world who are suffering for Jesus Christ. What do they sing in the time of their trial? God has provided a book of things for them to sing, and it's our privilege to sing them with them.

I want us to see four things tonight from this sad lament of a saint who has seen the judgment of God on men visited on his people. He's seen the people of God brought very low, and even in that moment there are words of hope and there are words of learning.

I. The tragedy seen from God's perspective.

First of all, in verses 1-4, where you see his lament for fallen Jerusalem. And the thing I want you to see here is that this tragedy is seen from God's perspective. I don't think any of us who witnessed the video images of September 11 in New York and Washington will ever forget the horror of that, and no doubt there are many perspectives that would be helpful and legitimate to share about them...and certainly this Psalmist's eyewitness account of Jerusalem's fall is graphic.

He speaks of the blood of God's people flowing in the streets. He speaks of no mercy being shown by the invaders. He speaks of dead bodies which have been left unburied in the city rows of Jerusalem. But the thing that strikes you here in verses 1-4 is that he is describing this tragedy not just as a tragedy per se, but as a tragedy from God's perspective. It's a cry of the heart, yes; but ultimately it is a cry of faith in perplexity, not a cry of doubt, because the Psalmist is not simply horrified by a dreadful event, but horrified by a dreadful event which seems to call into question God's power and God's sovereignty and God's rule and seems to hinder the cause of His kingdom. Listen to how he says it:

“O God, the nations have invaded Your inheritance. They have defiled Your holy temple; They have laid Jerusalem in ruins. They have given the dead bodies of Your servants for food to the birds of the heavens, the flesh of Your godly ones to the beasts of the earth.”

The picture, you see, is not just of the tragedy that has unfolded in Jerusalem, though it is tragedy of the highest order. We couldn't see anything more poignant had we been on the Coast of Mississippi in the wake of the great storm. We couldn't have seen anything more poignant than the Psalmist saw had we been standing there with Salvation Army and Red Cross and firemen and policemen around the base of the World Trade Center on September 11. This is a horrific scene. But what absolutely undoes the Psalmist is the injury that seems to have been done to God and to His cause and to His kingdom, and so he lifts up this cry to God, this cry of the heart — faith in perplexity asking God what is going on.

Isn't God's word good? It always suits the situation of the church from age to age, and there is never a situation that the church faces for which there is not a word of God in time of need.

We enjoy peace. We enjoy relative security and safety and prosperity, but tens of thousands of our brothers and sisters around the world know just this kind of persecution. We could go into the Sudan and see the blood of God's children running in streets. We could see their dead bodies left unburied. Is there a song for them to sing?

Yes, there is. It's right here. God has provided a song for His children to sing in every occasion. May it be long before we have to sing this song ourselves, for ourselves, in these circumstances: but if we should find ourselves in these circumstances, God has already written the song that we will sing. And when we lift up these words not having experienced these same experiences, let us remember that we do have brothers and sisters around the world who are under these circumstances today and let us sing these words for them, with them. God's word is excellent, and He supplies the words to say, the prayers to pray, the songs to sing in every situation of the church from age to age.

Now I want you to look especially at the depiction which we have in verses 2-4:

They have given the dead bodies of Thy servants for food to the birds of the heavens, the flesh of Thy godly ones to the beasts of the earth. They have poured out their blood like water round about Jerusalem. There was no one to bury them. We have become a reproach to our neighbors..."

You understand what that scene is describing. It is describing to you what happens when the judgment of God comes against those who have been unfaithful to His covenant. Let me just remind you. Turn back with me to Genesis 15. Remember when God came to confirm His commitments to Abraham and you have this scene - Genesis 15:9:

"Bring Me a three year old heifer and a three year old female goat, and a female three year old lamb, and a turtledove and a young pigeon." Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two and laid each half opposite the other, but he did not cut the birds. And the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abraham drove them away.

Now, you understand what that is. That is a picture of the curse of the covenant against those who have violated it. The birds picking at dead carcasses is a picture of someone who has been so cut off from God's blessing and God's people that there's no one even there to bury him or her at the end of their days. It's the ultimate picture of judgment. It's a picture that Jeremiah paints in his book of the result of the unfaithfulness of the people of God in his own day. That's what's so burdensome to the Psalmist as he looks at this scene, because as he

looks at Jerusalem he realizes that what he is seeing is a graphic picture of God's judgment against His people, and this scene of unburied bodies and flowing blood is the ultimate example of the curse of the covenant, the final humiliation.

And I want to say, my friends, this is not just an Old Testament scene. The Book of Revelation tells us that we must expect this to be a scene that is played out in the life of the church. Let me just give you one example. Turn forward with me to the Book of Revelation and look at chapter 11. This is the picture of the two witnesses, these faithful ministers in the church declaring the truth in the face of an opposing world, and we read this in Revelation 11:

And there was given me a measuring rod like a staff; and someone said, 'Rise and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and those who worship in it. And leave out the court which is outside the temple, and do not measure it, for it has been given to the nations; and they will tread under foot the holy city for forty-two months. And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for twelve hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lamp stands that stand before the Lord of the earth. And if any one desires to harm them, fire proceeds out of their mouth and devours their enemies; and if any one would desire to harm them, in this manner he must be killed. These have the power to shut up the sky, in order that rain may not fall during the days of their prophesying; and they have the power over the waters to turn them into blood, and to smite the earth with every plague, as often as they desire. And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war with them, and overcome them and kill them. And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which mystically is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. And those from the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations will look at their dead bodies for three and a half days, and will not permit their dead bodies to be laid in a tomb. And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry; and they will send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth.

Now that's not the end of the story (and you can see the end of the story later in that chapter), but the point is this: The Lord is telling His people to expect His faithful messengers to receive this kind of response and treatment from the world in the new covenant era. This sad picture of the judgment of Babylon is not something that is past. There is a new covenant manifestation, and the church itself must be prepared to endure this kind of scene.

You know, the people that love the Lord are most deeply moved by those disasters that seem to hinder the cause of Christ, and it is this Psalmist's great love for the Lord and his great love for the Lord's people that most deeply pains

him as he looks on this scene of desolation.

So, first we've seen the tragedy from God's perspective.

II. The consequences of sin and a plea for compassion.

Now in verses 5-8 we come to a prayer of confession and a petition for compassion, and what we see here are the consequences of sin and also a plea for compassion. There's more than just a little astonishment here. "How long, O Lord? Will You be angry forever? Will Your jealousy burn like fire?" And then the astonishment really comes through in verses 6ff: "Pour out Your wrath upon the nations which do not know You!" 'Lord, instead of judging us, the one people in the world that holds up Your name and worships the true God, try judging the pagans for a change!'

There's more than a little astonishment here, but there is also contrition and confession and repentance, because the Psalmist recognizes that this judgment is the consequence of sin. He admits that it is God's just punishment, and he does it several times in the Psalm: "How long, O Lord? Will You be angry forever? Will Your jealousy burn like fire?" What does that language remind you of? Jealousy...wrath...anger.... Turn back with me to Exodus 20.

In the Ten Commandments the Lord promises this about worshiping other gods — Exodus 20:5: "You shall not worship them or serve them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations of those who hate me." The Psalmist, when he says "How long, O Lord? Will You be angry forever? Will Your jealousy burn like fire?" is tipping you off that he knows that the people of God deserve this judgment because of their idolatry. God is just doing what He promised that He would do if His people went after other gods, which they did! Over and over and over again!

And then he confesses their sin again in verse 8: "Do not remember the iniquities of our forefathers...." and again, that's echoing Exodus 20:5. And then again in verse 9, he'll say, "Forgive our sins...." Oh, the Psalmist knows that we need forgiveness of sins. He knows that this event is a judgment, a righteous judgment of God, and so it is only right to respond to this judgment of God with confession, and so he prays that God would forgive their sins.

But notice the arguments that he brings: "Let Your compassions come quickly to meet us, for we are brought very low." He comes to God with arguments. When your friend has done you wrong, you come to your friend with arguments. When you disagree with your husband, you come to your husband with arguments. And the Psalmist under the burden of God's judgment comes to God with arguments: 'Lord God, look at how low we are laid. We need Your compassion. We don't just need a little mercy; we need a lot of mercy! We need Your compassion, Your

tender compassion, the multitude of Your compassions!

The Psalmist knows how great his need is. It's a shame that we don't see the greatness of our own need as often as we ought.

But, my friends, I want you to think of something else from this passage as well: for it's not only a prayer of confession and of petition for compassion, it is a picture of God's certain judgment on the wicked. You know, in our day and age one of the least popular (and increasingly least believable to this world and culture) teachings of Scripture is God's final punishment of the wicked. And you see what this picture the Psalmist has drawn us does? It says 'If you don't think that God will really finally punish the wicked, take a look at what He does to His children. Take a look at Jerusalem. Look at the city streets of Jerusalem. You don't think God will judge the wicked?' The prophet said that judgment begins at the house of God, and so it does; but that judgment — and that judgment has been there from time immemorial and will be there until He comes again — that judgment says 'You don't think God will judge the wicked? Look at how He's dealt with His own people.' It's a reminder of how we need the grace of God.

III. A petition for the honor of God's glory.

But then thirdly, I want you to see this prayer for help which the Psalmist lifts up based on God's character. You see it there in verses 9 and 10: "Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Your name; deliver us, and forgive our sins, for Your name's sake. Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?'" You see the appeal — 'Lord, hear us; show compassion to us; help us, deliver us, forgive us...' Why? The appeal is rooted in God's person, in God's character, and the reasons are piled up: 'Lord, hear us because You're our salvation, so if You're our salvation, save us! Lord, hear us because Your essential glory is at stake. Hear us, help us for the glory of Your name. Hear us because Your good name is at stake. Deliver us and forgive us our sins for Your name's sake. Hear us because the knowledge among the nations of Your greatness and power is at stake. Why should the nations say 'Where is their God?'"

You see, the cause of God's help and aid and mercy is always found in God Himself and not in us, and so the Psalmist doesn't say 'Lord God, forgive us because we deserve it; Lord God, help us because we are really nice; Lord God, show mercy because we are needy...' but 'Lord God, forgive us for the glory of Your name, for Your name's sake, for the witness to Your glory amongst the nations.'

When disaster strikes the church, we ought always have a chief concern for God's glory, like the Psalmist did. But when disaster strikes us, we ought to appeal to God for help on the basis of His name. And you know, that's so pastorally wonderful of God to remind us, because one of the things that Satan

always does in time of trial is whisper in your ear 'You're not worthy. Why are you calling out to Him for help? You've been unfaithful.' And you see, if the reason why we're saying 'Lord, help us' is because we're worthy or we've been faithful, then the voice of the evil one will overwhelm our cries. But that's not why the Psalmist cries out. 'Lord God, I'm petitioning You for the honor of Your glory. I'm coming to You because of the glory of Your name. I'm asking You to forgive me because of Your name's sake. I'm asking You to hear us so that the nations will not be able to say 'Where is their God?''

IV. Avenge Your servants, preserve the prisoners, return the reproach.

And one last thing we see here in verses 10-13: this prayer of judgment and justice. There are three parts in this prayer. He asks God to avenge His servants. 'Avenge Your servants, O Lord.' Secondly, he asks God to preserve the prisoners: 'Preserve those who are doomed to die; preserve those who have been taken captive.' And thirdly, he prays that God will return the reproach of the nations against Him on them. "Avenge Your servants...preserve the prisoners...return the reproach...let there be known among the nations in our sight vengeance for the blood of Your servants which has been shed." He's asking that the blood of the innocents which had been shed in Jerusalem would be returned upon those who dealt with them wrongly — and again, that's not an Old Testament prayer, that's a New Testament prayer. As we think upon those who have been persecuted in our own time, that's a prayer we should remember for them.

Let me prove it to you. Turn again to the Book of Revelation. It so often supplies us with our attitude in a situation of persecution and opposition from the world. Look at Revelation 16. This is right after the third bowl of wrath has been poured out — the picture of God pouring His wrath and judgment out on the world — and look at what is said in Revelation 16:5, 6.

"And I heard the angel of the waters saying, 'Righteous art Thou, who are and who wast, O Holy One, because Thou didst judge these things; for they poured out the blood of saints and prophets, and Thou hast given them blood to drink. They deserve it.'"

And if we were to look at Revelation 18 and Revelation 19 and Revelation 20, we would see this principle of God visiting judgment on those who have wronged His people. And this prayer is a prayer, a petition, that God would repay the blood of the innocents shed.

But it's also a prayer of preservation for those imprisoned and awaiting death. So many had been carried off into exile, and the heart of the Psalmist is for them. He asks that God would protect them and would spare them and uphold them in their trials.

William Plummer, the great Southern Presbyterian commentator on this, makes a very interesting application of this and he actually points in two distinct directions. One is he says that all of us ought to have a heart to pray for those who are in prison awaiting their sentence. It's an interesting application of this truth. But he also says that Richard Baxter, having looked at this Psalm, said that it moved him to pray with a greater force and fervency for the heathen, and especially the Muslims who would certainly stand under the judgment of God in the last day. Isn't that an interesting response?

But finally he asks again a third petition: Return the reproach.

"...Return to our neighbors sevenfold into their bosom the reproach with which they have reproached You."

Notice again that this is not just a cry for vengeance in the sense of getting even: this is a concern for the besmirched honor of God, and the Psalmist cries out these specific petitions.

But then he closes in a quite extraordinary way. Look at verse 13:

"So we Your people and the sheep of Your pasture will give thanks to You forever; to all generations we will tell of Your praise."

Now, what is truly amazing is where this song ends up. When you consider where this Psalm starts, in verses 1-4, it leads you to wonder with amazement at the faith which enabled such a Psalm from such distress to end with thanksgiving and praise. It is perhaps more like Habakkuk 3 and Job 1 than any other passage of Scripture that I know. This Psalmist is looking at the destruction of the city of God, he is looking at the destruction of the temple of God, and he is concluding this Psalm with thanksgiving and praise to God, just as Job after the report of the loss of his goods and his children could tear his clothes and say, "The Lord has given; the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Just as Habakkuk says, 'Though the fields do not give us a harvest, though the vines fail us, yet we will trust in the Lord,' so this Psalmist looking on the destruction of the city of God, of the people of God, determines to give thanks to God and to praise Him to the next generation.

Well, my friends, when we are in trouble, it is always best to bring our woes straightway to God, but we are never so deeply in trouble that we ought not to thank and praise God, too. And this Psalmist reminds us of that. May the Lord bless His word. Let's pray.

Lord God, give us the grace to sing to You in our deepest distress, and above this, the grace to thank and praise You in our deepest distress. And when we are enjoying times of plenty and blessing, grant that we would not forget our friends,

our brothers and sisters, who are in distress; so that when we come to this Psalm, we will sing it with them. Hear our prayer, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Would you stand for God's blessing.

Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith through Jesus Christ our Lord, until the day break and the shadows flee away. Amen.

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