

The narrative back story for Psalm 74 is most likely the Babylonian invasion of Israel in 587/6 B.C. when the army of Nebuchadnezzar burned the city of Jerusalem, razed the temple to the ground, and carried anyone or anything of material value back to Babylon. Thousands of Israel's leaders, soldiers, artisans and skilled craftsmen, were taken to Babylon in the first wave of exiles (Jer 52:28; 2 Kings 24:8-17). The devastation was so extreme that recovery was hardly imaginable (Lam 2:1-22; Jer 52:1-30). This powerful communal lament is attributed to the musical tradition of Asaph whose distinctive poetic style is bold, emotionally raw, and penetrating. It is the spiritual equivalent to being caught in a freezing rain storm, soaked to the bone and pelted by hail. This kind of worship is not for the faint-hearted nominal believer, but it is essential for all who follow the Lord Jesus.

The psalmist gives us the words to describe “the extremities of human experience” that we are bound to face.¹ We might like to purge these sorrows from our version of the Christian life, but that is impossible. True faith always suffers. Spurgeon wrote, “This history of the suffering church is always edifying; when we see how the faithful trusted and wrestled with their God in times of dire distress, we are thereby taught how to behave ourselves under similar circumstances; we learn moreover, that when fiery trial befalls us, no strange thing happened unto us, we are following the trail of the host of God.”²

The rage against worship invoked by Babylon is not limited to the sixth century B.C. It is consistent with the violence and terror experienced by believers around the world and by believers in the west who run counter to the prevailing world view. The many forms of violence go beyond the physical to psychological, emotional, and spiritual trauma.

The structure of Psalm 74 is straightforward. The first half describes the utter devastation of everything to do with worship wrought by an enemy zealous to obliterate everything associated with God's Name (Ps 74:1-11). The second half of the psalm appeals to the Lord of the universe whose sovereign power overrules the chaos of nature and who has established his covenant with his people. The psalmist makes a case for the defense of God's defenseless people and for the vindication of God's cause over the fools, foes, adversaries, and enemies that mock and revile his Name (Ps 74:12-23). Against the backdrop of human devastation, the psalmist focuses on what the crisis means for worship. Every aspect of the psalm is intensely God-centered. Everything from destruction to deliverance is under the sovereign will of God. Nothing happens apart from God, and God is the one to address, but God is not to blame for the ruins. Israel's enemies are responsible for waging war against worship and they will be held accountable.

Lining up Psalm 74 with the persecuted global church is frightfully easy. The burning and desecration of Christian places of worship is a real threat from Syria to Selma. Churches are soft targets for racists, Communists, and Islamic terrorist. Christians living in 70 AD when Rome

¹ Brueggemann, *The Psalms: The Life of Faith*. Edited by Patrick Miller. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995, 27.

² Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, Psalm 74.

conquered Jerusalem had a psalm to pray as Christians do today living in North Korea, Iraq, Syria and China. Even if we are inclined to turn away from the stark reality of evil confronted in this psalm we must determine to embrace its sober message and turn to God our King. Psalm 74 is a spiritual formation tool, equipping us with the mental models necessary to focus our attention when all hell breaks loose.

Rage against Worship

*O God, why have you rejected us forever?
Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture?
Remember the nation you purchased long ago,
the people of your inheritance, whom you redeemed –
Mount Zion, where you dwelt.
Turn your steps toward these everlasting ruins,
all this destruction the enemy has brought on this sanctuary.*

*Your foes roared in the place where you met with us;
they set up their standards as signs.
They behaved like men wielding axes
to cut through a thicket of trees.
They smashed all the carved paneling
with their axes and hatchets.
They burned your sanctuary to the ground;
they defiled the dwelling place of your Name.
They said in their hearts, “We will crush them completely!”
They burned every place where God was worshiped in the land.*

*We were given no signs from God; no prophets are left,
and none of us knows how long this will be.
How long will the enemy mock you, God?
Will the foe revile your name forever?
Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand?
Take it from the folds of your garment and destroy them!*

Psalm 74:1-11

Faith, not doubt, prompts two heart wrenching questions to open the psalm and three at the end to close the first half of the psalm. Faith, not doubt, addresses God personally, and identifies the worshipers as “the sheep of your pasture.” Skeptics and cynics do not address God this way, but believers do. They may be discouraged, even despairing; disoriented, even disgusted; but their devotion to God is real and resilient. When faith is tested and all reason seems to fail, it is faith, not doubt, that asks why. Even in the throes of despair, faith, not doubt, will not let go of the divine reality. The psalmist turns to God in an act of faith. He foreshadows Peter’s conviction when he spoke on behalf of the disciples, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (John

6:68).

Despite the “forever” impact of God’s rejection, Psalm 74’s communal lament is cried in good faith. The psalmist feels like God has walked off and is never coming back. The scene before his eyes must have been post-apocalyptic. The utter devastation goes on forever as far as the eye can see. The psalmist pleads with the Lord to turn around and come back to “the endless ruins.”

Faith, not doubt, focuses on the destruction of the sanctuary and the dishonor of God. Surely whole villages and towns, along with farms and crops, and herds of cattle were destroyed. The Babylonian conquest meant that men, women, and children were brutally raped, killed, imprisoned, and enslaved. Nevertheless, the psalmist remains focused exclusively on the temple. His passion is centered on the house of God and is consistent with David’s plea, “One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling” (Ps 27:4-5). The disaster is wholly understood in the light of its impact on worship and the honor of God, and not on the personal suffering of the people of God.

In the first year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign over Babylon, Jeremiah reminded the people of Judah that for twenty-three years he had spoken the word of the Lord “again and again,” but they had not listened (Jer 25:3). His warning was as clear as it could be: “Turn now, each of you, from your evil ways and your evil practices, and you can stay in the land the Lord gave to you and your ancestors for ever and ever. Do not follow other gods to serve and worship them; do not arouse my anger with what your hands have made. Then I will not harm you. But you did not listen to me” (Jer 25:5-7). Jeremiah continued,

“Therefore the Lord Almighty says this: ‘Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of the bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and light of the lamp. The whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

“‘But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will make it desolate forever. I will bring on that land all the things I have spoken against it, all that are written in this book and prophesied by Jeremiah against all the nations’” (Jer 25:8-13).

Reading Psalm 74 against the backdrop of Jeremiah's prophecy is to wonder why the psalmist did not allude to the sins of Israel nor stress the need for repentance. Surely it is their rejection of God and his ways that precipitated God's rejection of them. But the psalmist says nothing about their culpability and guilt. Instead of discussing sin and repentance, the psalmist equates Nebuchadnezzar's conquest with God's judgment. It is God who is ultimately responsible for the terrible devastation and the Babylonian army is his instrument of judgment. God has weaponized the enemy.

The time for national confession and repentance is past. The sinful nation of Israel has been sentenced and judged. This is why the focus is neither on Israel's sins nor Babylon's conquest. What matters now is how long God's rejection will last. The key word is "forever." "O God, why have you rejected us *forever*?" The poignancy of the psalm lies in what feels like a never-ending separation – a permanent estrangement. It is into this state of suffering and anguish that the psalmist pleads for God to end his smoldering anger, to acknowledge the sheep of his pasture, to remember his inheritance, to embrace his redeemed and chosen people, and to dwell again on Mount Zion. The psalmist weaves into his communal lament a rich theology of grace that we must not miss in the midst of the suffering. It is right there from the beginning of the psalm.

In the Asaph tradition, the psalmist pictures evil, not in the abstract, but in the vivid detail of an on-the-scene observer who witnesses a mob roaring into the temple, desecrating the sanctuary with pagan graffiti and hacking away with axes and hatchets the beautiful cedar paneling with carved open flowers as if it were firewood (1 Kings 6:16-19). They smashed the cherubim, stripped the gold, and then lit the Holy of Holies on fire to burn Solomon's temple to the ground. "We will crush them completely was their cry!"

The psalmist's focus is not on Israel's suffering, but on God's honor. "They defiled the dwelling place of your Name" (Ps 74:7). His cry is not for the nation but for the Name, "How long will the enemy mock you, God? Will they revile your name forever?" (Ps 74:10). The psalmist knows that the destiny of the nation lies in the devotion to the Name. There is no salvation apart from the name of God and this truth remains unchanged, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Only in God is there any hope for salvation, causing the psalmist to cry out, "Why don't you do something? How long are you going to sit there with your hands folded in your lap?" (Ps 74:11, The Message).

Our praying imagination links Psalm 74 to the apostle John's apocalyptic picture of the suffering saints. When the fifth seal is broken an extraordinary prayer meeting is revealed (Rev 6:9-11). The saints who have gone before, who have been "slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained" (Rev 6:9), are praying for salvation. We are sobered by the fact that time is measured, not in conversions, but in martyrdoms. "We are uncomfortable with the response which calls the saints to rest a little longer," writes Miroslav Volf. ". . . God's patience is costly not simply for God, but for the innocent."³ The "white robe" these martyrs are given is a

³ Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 299-300.

symbol of purity.⁴ They are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. The saints who best understand Psalm 74 are the disciples who suffer the defilement of the name of God. The saints who suffer Taliban atrocities in Afghanistan and the crackdown against Christians in Iraq. They are Christians who face martyrdom in Nigeria from the ruthless Boko Haram and are victims of North Korea's brutal persecution. They are new converts from Sri Lanka, who were targeted and killed by radical Buddhists. They are praying saints from Saudi Arabia and Iran. There are Egyptian and Syrian believers who praying, "How long?"

Prayer is the link that ties us to the Lord of history. Prayer expresses our shared anticipation of Christ's salvation and judgment and our shared community with those who have gone before. Their longing becomes our longing. Their hope is our hope. When the peace and power of Christ are available, why settle for the survival tactics of the world? Christians believe that there is real hope in a world that is constantly trying to adapt to hopelessness.⁵

Rise Up, O God, my King

But God is my King from long ago;
he brings salvation on the earth.
It was you who split open the sea by your power;
you broke the heads of the monsters in the waters.
It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan
and gave it as food to the creatures of the desert.
It was you who opened the springs and streams;
you dried up the ever-flowing rivers.
The day is yours, and yours also the night;
you established the sun and moon.
It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth;
you made both summer and winter.

Remember how the enemy has mocked you, Lord,
how foolish people have reviled your name.
Do not hand over the life of your dove to wild beasts;
do not forget the lives of your afflicted people forever.
Have regard for your covenant,
because haunts of violence fill the dark places of the land.
Do not let the oppressed retreat in disgrace;
may the poor and needy praise your name.
Rise up, O God, and defend your cause;
remember how fools mock you all day long.
Do not ignore the clamor of your adversaries,
the uproar of your enemies, which rises continually.

Psalm 74:12-23

⁴ Revelation 1:14; 3:5, 18; 4:4; 7:9, 13; 19:8, 14.

⁵ Webster, Follow the Lamb, 138.

Psalm 74, like Psalm 73, makes a decisive shift from lament to confession and from despair to hope. The tale of destruction in the first half of the psalm is matched by a history of God's deliverances. Calvin explains "the simple and natural meaning" of this strategic pivot, "God has wrought on behalf of the chosen people many deliverances, which were as open and manifest as if they had been exhibited in a conspicuous theatre."⁶ Who is King Nebuchadnezzar compared to God the King and how does the power of the Babylonian army compare to God's power over the universe. The psalmist reviews "the overwhelming power of God" to tame the chaos of nature and to form the nation of Israel, freeing it from Egyptian bondage. The psalmist appears to have deliberately merged creation and election in language reminiscent of both in order to refute ancient Babylonian and Canaanite myths. He declares in unmistakable ways that the Lord is sovereign over creation and history.⁷

In the midst of political, philosophical, and spiritual wreckage the psalmist extols the truth of who God is and what God has done. In worship, he reverses the dishonor shown to God and remembers who dried up the Red Sea and split the rock in the wilderness bringing forth water.⁸ The psalmist credits God with the foundational realities that shape life and history: "You own the day, you own the night; you put stars and sun in place. You laid out the four corners of earth, shaped the seasons of summer and winter" (Ps 74:16-17, *The Message*). The psalmist is our worship leader fighting for perspective in the midst of the ruins. He goes back to these fundamental truths and the basic story of God's power to create and redeem. He gives us words to articulate the positive realities hidden in the darkness of evil. He is not reminding God of who he is and what he has done as if God has forgotten. No, his direct address is not for God's benefit but for ours: "You split the sea. . . You broke the heads of the monster. . . You crushed the heads of Leviathan. . . You opened up springs and streams. . . You dried up the ever-flowing rivers. . . Day is yours. . . Night is yours. . . You set the boundaries of the earth. . . You made summer and winter." He is telling the truth about God and in the act of worship we the people of God are reminded of the fundamental truths that shape our existence and give us hope even when it seems that all is lost.

By continuing to address God directly, "Remember how the enemy has mocked you, Lord" (Ps 74:18) and "Remember how fools mock you all day long" (Ps 74:22), the psalmist makes his appeal on the basis of God's honor. He pleads with God, "Have regard for your covenant" (Ps 74:20). "Rise up, O God, and defend your cause" (Ps 74:22). The psalmist's primary appeal for God to act rests in his sovereignty rather than in his people's suffering. Nevertheless he prays on behalf of "the sheep of your pasture" (Ps 74:1), "the nation you purchased long ago" (Ps 74:2), and pleads with the Lord, "Do not hand over the life of your dove to wild beasts; do not forget the lives of your afflicted people forever." The striking image of the dove endangered by wild beasts underscores the vulnerability, fragility, and weakness of the people of God. We cannot save ourselves. We were never meant to. The Church made up of beatitude-based believers will never impress the world as anything other than poor and needy. Christians do not belong to the elite. They don't leverage institutional power and shape society. This is not because "they don't

⁶ Calvin, Psalm 74, 173.

⁷ Ross, Psalms, 586-587.

⁸ Ross, Psalms, 588.

believe enough, or try hard enough, or care enough, or think Christianly enough, or have the right worldview.”⁹ Faithfulness to Christ runs contrary to the dominant culture and the benefit of understanding this truth encourages humility, cultivates realism, reduces anxiety, removes false guilt, builds resilience, and encourages prayerful dependence. Futility and cynicism are countered by a realistic appraisal of the power of evil and our dependence upon the Lord.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) despised the biblical description of the believer as a lamb or a dove. He argued that hope in anything other than the will to power is an illusion. If Nietzsche read Psalm 74 he would extol the philosophy of the wild beast and the power of the oppressor. For him there is only the strong man and his will to power. Nietzsche argued that Christianity used the myth of love to foster an illusion. Humanity was falsely educated to believe in something other than the hard fact of exploitation and self-mastery. Nietzsche despised, “. . . The innocuous Christian-moral interpretation of our most intimate personal experiences ‘for the glory of God’ and ‘for the salvation of the soul’ — this tyranny, this caprice, this rigorous and grandiose stupidity has *educated* the spirit.”¹⁰ Nietzsche contended, “In real life it is only a matter of *strong* and *weak* wills.”¹¹ Christianity was created out of fear of “an incurable pessimism;” the avoidance of a deep down unteachable, unyielding spiritual fate that “life itself is the will to power.”¹²

Nietzsche applied the law of the jungle to the human beast. No one weeps when the lion tears apart its prey and no one should weep when the noble dominate the weak. There is no Incarnate One, only the human being who “will have to be an incarnate will to power, it will strive to grow, spread, seize, become predominant.”¹³ For Nietzsche there were only two kinds of people, the exalted and the exploited, the proud and the humble, the powerful and the petty, the hardened and “the doglike people who allow themselves to be maltreated.”¹⁴ Humility was unbecoming the noble soul. To exploit and dominate was a worthy goal for the man of superior rank and self-made self-worth. Nietzsche complained, “For two millennia now we have been condemned to the sight of this new type of invalid, “the sinner”. . . everywhere the sinner. . . everywhere dumb torment, extreme fear, the agony of tortured heart, the convulsions of unknown happiness, the cry for ‘redemption.’”¹⁵

The “forever” factor played into the deep discouragement of the psalmist. He feared that somehow God’s rejection would be forever, that the ruins would be everlasting, and that the Lord would forget the lives of his afflicted people forever. At the center of the psalm he laments, “We are given no signs from God; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be” (Ps 74:9). It is understandable that in the wake of the Babylonian invasion and conquest that the psalmist would feel this way. The prophets are silent and there is no sign of future vindication. Nevertheless Nebuchadnezzar’s triumph does not mark the Lord’s failure. The Lord’s sovereign

⁹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 89.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, sec. 188, 291.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, sec. 23, 221.

¹² *Ibid.*, sec. 13, 211.

¹³ *Ibid.*, sec. 259, 393.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, sec. 260, 395.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, sec. 20, 577.

plan is being worked out “in a manner far more complex, thorough, and slow” than the psalmist can imagine.¹⁶ The trajectory of salvation history leads downward to the manger. God called Abraham out of nowhere to make of him a great nation. Under the patriarchs, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, the family grew. Then, famine led the Israelites into four hundred years of Egyptian bondage. We remember the first Exodus when the Israelites escaped from Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and were led through the wilderness by Moses and Joshua into the Promised Land. The stories of Deborah, Gideon, and Ruth, led us to Kings Saul and David. Here, Israel is at its height. David’s son Solomon begins the descent.

The kingdom is divided between Jeroboam’s Israel in the north and Rehoboam’s Judah in the south. Against a litany of bad kings, Elijah and Elisha keep Israel’s history alive. From there the story-line belongs to the prophets. It is hard to keep 16 prophets straight. Their ministry, from Joel to Malachi, spans 400 long years. Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah and Jeremiah tried to turn the hearts of the people to God. Embedded in their message is the story of the coming Messiah. God judges his people and sends them into exile. The Babylonian captivity runs for 70 years. Habakkuk, Daniel, Ezekiel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, cover this period. This is where Nehemiah and Ezra come in as well.

The first Exodus was powerful. God’s ten plagues, the Passover meal, and the solidarity of the people of Israel leaving Egypt in mass, crossing the Red Sea on dry ground, feeding on manna in the wilderness, and receiving the Law on Mount Sinai, all add up to a spectacular defining moment. But the second Exodus from Babylon was nothing by comparison to the first. Israel trekked back to their homeland as refugees. Nehemiah and Ezra describe a beleaguered people, barely hanging on. When the temple was rebuilt, those who remembered the glory days under Solomon and the first temple, cried, because they were disappointed. Malachi’s cry for faithfulness is the last word in this downward trajectory, followed by 400 years of silence. The people of God, through whom God designed to bless all the nations, was taken down to rock bottom. The descent of the Messiah was preceded by the descent of the people of God.

All the work that went into post-exilic Israel was God’s way of building a cradle for his ultimate revelation. God restored the Jewish people, the Jerusalem temple, the Mosaic law, the Passover, the sacrificial system, the priesthood, and the walls of Jerusalem, in order to cradle the Incarnate One. And even though everything was on a smaller scale than the first Exodus and Solomon’s temple and even though there was more struggle and less excitement, anticipation grew. There was no room for pride of country and race among a people humbled by God and looking for his mercy and justice. The Promised Land may be less promising than in the days of Moses, but the Promised One is coming and God is at work. “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:11-12).

¹⁶ Wilcock, *The Message of the Psalms*, vol 2:15.