

The psalmist is outraged. Dead bodies lie in the street and there is no one left to bury the dead. Blood runs in the street like water. Jerusalem is reduced to rubble and neighboring nations heap scorn on God's inheritance. It is hard to imagine a more devastating picture of human loss and destruction. The raw emotion of Psalm 79 fits the Asaph tradition and the reality of extreme suffering. It fulfills its canonical purpose by causing worshipers to put words to unspeakable anguish. The human soul and the collective spirit of God's people are pushed past fear and hate to prayer. Our Christian brothers and sisters in Syria and North Korea can identify with this psalm. Although their situation of persecution and suffering is not brought on by their disobedience and idolatry, they like the psalmist, suffer from brutal political violence and indescribable atrocities. As discouraging as this psalm may be and as much as we might like to skip over it in the Psalms, it is an essential resource for the suffering people of God. Only such a prayer, in the Spirit of God, can overcome the intense anger and hatred generated by such evil.

Psalm 79's focus on extreme suffering and loss of life is a fitting companion to Psalm 74's description of the utter destruction and desecration of the Jerusalem temple. Since both Psalms appear to be responding to the Babylonian conquest of Israel, why were these two psalms not placed together? What is the purpose of the intervening psalms? Is the sequence important (75-78)? Following the destruction of the sanctuary (Ps 74), Psalm 75 reassures the worshiper of the nearness of God and his set time for righteous judgment. Psalm 76 moves from the just vindication of Israel to God's ultimate eschatological fulfillment. Like Psalm 73, Psalm 77 wrestles with the tragedy of Jerusalem's fall from the perspective of the person who remains faithful. He struggles for the long-range view of God's mighty salvation and takes comfort in the fact that the Lord led his flock "by the hand of Moses and Aaron" (Ps 77:20). Even though Psalm 78 ends on a positive note by stressing the integrity of David's heart, the thrust of the psalm records the long and tragic history of hard-hearted rebellion, idolatry and apostasy. This brings us back to the reality of the Babylonian captivity and the fall of Jerusalem, only this time it is not the temple that is in view (Ps 74) as much as the people as a whole (Ps 79).

### *How Long?*

*O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance;  
they have defiled your holy temple,  
they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.  
They have left the dead bodies of your servants  
as food for the birds of the sky,  
the flesh of your own people for the animals of the wild.  
They have poured out blood like water all around Jerusalem,  
and there is no one to bury the dead.  
We are objects of contempt to our neighbors,  
of scorn and derision to those around us.  
How long, Lord? Will you be angry forever?  
How long will your jealousy burn like fire?*

Psalm 79:1-5

Believers pray this psalm today holding the persecuted church in their hearts. We are mindful of the heavy cost many pay for following Jesus Christ. The Babylonian captivity prompted psalms and prophecies that serve the church today. Israel suffered because of their hard-hearted rebellion and apostasy (Ps 73, 78), but the persecuted church suffers for their witness and obedience. The believer who prays today is like the psalmist or the prophet who remains faithful in spite of the idolatry and unbelief that surrounds them. These Asaph style prayers resonate with the perspective of the prophets. They represent the faithful remnant who suffer the consequences of national apostasy and the judgment of God even though they have made the Sovereign Lord their refuge (Ps 73:28). They are like innocent civilians who become collateral damage in a war they didn't ask for or deserve. Calvin wrote, "The most eminent of the servants of God may be put to a cruel and ignominious death – a punishment which we know is often executed upon murderers, and other despisers of God; but still the death of the saints does not cease to be precious in his sight: and when he has suffered them to be unrighteously persecuted in the flesh, he shows, by taken vengeance on their enemies, how dear they are to him."<sup>1</sup>

Even when the early church was not suffering severe state-sponsored persecution, they saw themselves in the psalmist's description of cultural alienation. What was true for the people of God, "We are objects of contempt to our neighbors, of scorn and derision to those around us" (Ps 79:4), could have easily been written by the apostles. Peter encouraged faithfulness in spite of false accusations and unjust suffering (1 Peter 2:12, 19). He wrote, "Even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened" (1 Pet 3:14). He called Christ's followers to keep a clear conscience, "so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Pet 3:16).

The psalmist's question, "How long, Lord?" must have resonated with the apostle John, because it is the pivotal question of the heavenly martyrs' prayer meeting. When the fifth seal is broken we hear the cry of martyrs, whose "untimely deaths on earth are from God's perspective a sacrifice on the altar of heaven."<sup>2</sup> The fifth seal reveals an extraordinary prayer meeting. The saints who have gone before, have been "slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained." In line with Psalm 79 they humbly confess their need for God's grace and zealously pray for the salvation and judgment of God.<sup>3</sup>

The faithful saints cry out to the "Sovereign Lord, holy and true," asking how long the wild horses of judgment and persecution will be allowed to run wild? The answer comes back, "until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed." We are sobered by the fact that time is measured, not in conversions, but in martyrdoms. "God's patience is costly not simply for God, but for the innocent."<sup>4</sup> These are the saints who suffered Taliban atrocities in Afghanistan and the crackdown against Christians in Iraq. Some of these martyrs are from Nigeria, slain by the ruthless Boko Haram. Many are victims from North Korea's brutal persecution. Under the altar there are new converts from Sri Lanka, who were targeted and killed by radical Buddhists. Some of the praying saints are from

<sup>1</sup> Calvin, Psalms, 284.

<sup>2</sup> Mounce, *Revelation*, 157.

<sup>3</sup> Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 137-139.

<sup>4</sup> Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 299-300.

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.<sup>5</sup> Prayer expresses our shared anticipation of Christ’s second coming and our shared community with those who have gone before. Their longing becomes our longing. Their hope our hope. They are not dead and buried, but alive and waiting! We may place a premium on personal security and entertainment, but the fifth seal offers the perspective of the martyrs. Their voice cries out, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” In the company of the saints who have gone before we confront real life and feel the weight of glory. John’s Spirit-inspired vision calls for courage, endurance and perseverance. 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.

*Plea for God’s Response*

*Pour out your wrath on the nations  
that do not acknowledge you,  
on the kingdoms  
that do not call on your name;  
for they have devoured Jacob  
and devastated his homeland.*

*Do not hold against us the sins of past generations;  
may your mercy come quickly to meet us,  
for we are in desperate need.  
Help us, God our Savior,  
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?”*

*Before our eyes, make known among the nations  
that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.  
May the groans of the prisoners come before you;  
with your strong arm preserve those condemned to die.  
Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times  
the contempt they have hurled at you, Lord.*

*Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture,  
will praise you forever;  
from generation to generation  
we will proclaim your praise.*

Psalm 79:6-13

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<sup>5</sup> Webster, Follow the Lamb, 138-139.

The question, “How long, Lord? Will you be angry forever?” bridges the two halves of the psalm. The psalmist shifts the focus of the psalm from catastrophe – the tragic fall of Jerusalem due to Israel’s apostasy – to God’s just judgment of the nations responsible for oppressing Israel. Like a father God has disciplined Israel, but now the psalmist calls on God as Israel’s Savior and Defender, “Pour out your wrath on the nations” (Ps 79:6). The psalmist identifies these nations to the Lord as kingdoms “that do not call on your name.” They have “devoured Jacob,” “devastated” the land of Israel, shed the blood of “your servants,” and have “hurled” contempt at the Lord.

In the midst of all this the psalmist pleads for forgiveness, but he does so in such a way as to corroborate the perspective that these Asaph psalms are composed by a faithful remnant. He prays the way Asaph did in Psalm 73 and the way the prophet Jeremiah prayed (Jer 10:23-25). No sincere believer would ever claim not to need forgiveness. All of us, and especially the most faithful and mature believers among us embrace the need to pray: “Help us, God our Savior, for the glory of your name; deliver us and forgive our sins for your name’s sake” (Ps 79:9) This is the reason every Christian worship service includes a prayer of confession, not because someone may have sinned, but because we all need to confess our sins and pray for forgiveness. But we can safely assume that the psalmist distances himself, along with all those who share his conviction and practice, from the disobedience, idolatry, and apostasy that brought down God’s judgment on Jerusalem through the agency of Nebuchadnezzar and his army (2 Kings 25). He boldly prays, “Do not hold against us the sins of past generations; may your mercy come quickly to meet us, for we are in desperate need” (Ps 79:8). The prayer itself indicates that the reason no longer exists for God to distance himself from his people. It is this truth that prompts the psalmist to ask rhetorically, “Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’” (Ps 79:10).

Asaph and the worship pastors who followed in his tradition, may not have comprehended Christ’s radical love for our enemies. The ultimate Son of David called his followers to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors (Matthew 5:44) and the apostles called all disciples to follow in Christ’s footsteps to the cross (1 Peter 2:21). Even so, we continue to embrace the message of God’s just judgment and we affirm with the psalmist the reality of God’s final judgment. We join the psalmist in praying, “Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times the contempt they have hurled at you, Lord” (Ps 79:12). Even as we acknowledge with the apostle that the Lord is patient, “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

The apostle John’s fifth apocalyptic seal is a call to honor the eighth beatitude: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for there is the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>6</sup> The saints who have gone before are praying the psalms just like we are. Their prayers are reminiscent of Asaph’s prayer, “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!” (Ps 79:10). They cry out, “When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?” The saints respond, “The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord is in his heavenly throne. He observes humanity; his eyes examine them. The Lord examines the righteous, but the

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:10.

wicked and those who love violence his soul hates. On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot. For the Lord is righteous, he loves justice; upright people will see his face” (Ps 11:3-7).

The psalm ends on a note of praise, an easily overlooked characteristic of the Asaph tradition, given the psalmist’s raw emotion and blunt descriptions of disaster, but perfectly consistent with the big picture vision of God’s salvation and judgment. Each of the psalms in this sequence praise God for his guidance and look forward to God’s eschatological fulfillment. For Asaph the arc of devotion ends with praise to God for the guidance that reaches into eternity: “You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you take me into glory” (Ps 73:24).

Psalms 74 and 75 are brought to a similar conclusion with Asaph stating his conviction: “But as for me, I will declare this forever; I will sing praise to the God of Jacob. . .” (Ps 75:9). Psalms 76 emphasizes God’s righteous judgment: “He breaks the spirit of rulers; he is feared by the kings of the earth” (Ps 76:12) and Psalm 77 concludes, “You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (Ps 77:20).

Psalm 78 continues the theme of shepherding. God calls David “to be the shepherd of his people Jacob” and the psalmist concludes, “And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them” (Ps 78:70-72). So, it is significant that Psalm 79 ends on this theme of God’s everlasting shepherding: “Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will praise you forever; from generation to generation we will proclaim your praise” (Ps 79:13). This brings us to a climax and a fulfillment that points forward to Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep and who has sheep that are not of this pen (John 10:11, 16).