

“For Thy Name’s Sake”

A Prayer When We Are Brought Very Low

Psalm 79

When we studied Psalm 74, we noted that although many scholars connect it to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., the psalm itself contains no historical markers that require a post-exilic date. Instead, we saw that Asaph, who was not only a musician but a prophet and called a “seer,” could speak prophetically from within a future national catastrophe. Psalm 74 functioned not as a historical record, but as a Maschil — an instructional psalm — teaching God’s people how to pray when worship is devastated and when God’s purposes appear delayed.

Psalm 79 brings us into that same setting, but with even greater intensity.

Again, many view this as a historical account of the Babylonian destruction. Yet the psalm still names no invading nation, mentions no king, and gives no chronological markers. What it does emphasize is covenant language: *“thine inheritance,” “thy holy temple,” “thy servants,” “thy name.”* The focus is theological, not national.

If Psalm 74 prepares us for the destruction of worship, Psalm 79 brings us inside the experience of it.

Asaph speaks in the first-person plural — *“we are become a reproach,” “help us,” “we thy people.”* This does not require that he personally endured the event. Prophetic Scripture frequently moves from prediction to participation. The prophet identifies himself with the covenant people across generations. He speaks as a covenant representative, not simply as an observer.

So, Psalm 79 is best understood as a prophetic lament, not

as a post-event lament. It is instruction given in advance for a day when judgment would come, teaching the faithful remnant how to plead for mercy on the basis of God's covenant name.

And like Psalm 74, while its primary reference is to Israel, its principles reach us today. It teaches us how to pray when our sin brings consequences, when God allows chastening, and when we must appeal to His name.

With that understood, notice how abruptly the psalm begins. There is no introduction — just an outcry: "*O God, the heathen are come into thine inheritance...*" The devastation is already happening: the temple is defiled and Jerusalem is in heaps. The psalm begins in a very shocking way.

I. THE SHOCK OF DEVASTATION (VS. 1-4)

A. The devastation of divine discipline:

1. The heathen have seized the Israelite's inheritance (the land and the temple).
2. The temple is defiled — anyone unclean that entered the temple would defile, or pollute it.
3. They laid Jerusalem in a heap of ruin.

Nehemiah 2:17

¹⁷ Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we *are* in, how Jerusalem *lieth* waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.

4. Dead bodies of the people were being torn by beasts and fowls (vs. 2).

5. No one left to bury the dead (vs. 3).
 6. The few survivors were an object of reproach and derision (vs. 4).
- Although this devastation belonged to Israel under covenant discipline, the principles behind it still instruct God's people today.

B. The lessons for God's people.

1. The heathen in the land (vs. 1a) — Scripture shows that when God's people neglect holiness, He may allow circumstances that humble and expose weakness.
2. The temple defiled (vs. 1b) — the loss of worship is one of the most painful consequences of spiritual decline.
3. Jerusalem in ruins (vs. 1c) — when God's people neglect holiness, their testimony and influence can be weakened.
4. Bodies exposed (vs. 2) — the devastation is overwhelming and widespread. Sin rarely stays contained — it spreads.
 - a) Compromise does not stay isolated.
 - b) Neglect affects more than one generation, as we saw last week.
 - c) Spiritual carelessness costs more than anticipated.
5. The reproach and derision of God's people — when God's people falter, the world questions God's name.

- Sometimes the hardest part of hardship is not the hardship itself — it is the silence of heaven. After describing the ruins and the reproach, the psalmist lifts his eyes and asks the question many of us have asked: *"How long, Lord?"*

II. THE STRAIN OF DIVINE ANGER (VS. 5)

A. The honest question — *"How long, LORD?"*

1. Only the child of God will ask that question.
2. This is not, "Why are you unfair?", or "Why did you abandon us?" It is "How long?"
 - a) That implies hope.
 - b) It assumes that God is listening and that there will be an end.

B. The recognition of God's hand — *"Wilt thou be angry for ever?"*

1. The psalmist understands that the devastation Israel would face was not random, but that God permitted it.
2. This shows, as do other Scriptures, that God sometimes allows hardship not as rejection, but as correction (Heb. 12:5-11).

C. The imagery of jealousy — *"Shall thy jealousy burn like fire?"*

1. God is jealous for His name, for His people, and for His covenant faithfulness to His people.
2. God's "jealousy" (קִנְיָה) — zeal or intense

passion) is not pettiness (as we might understand it today), nor is it insecurity, nor the fear of losing something. Divine jealousy cannot mean what sinful human jealousy often means.

God's jealousy is His holy zeal to protect what belongs to Him.

Exodus 34:14

¹⁴ For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God:

3. Just as a faithful husband would not be indifferent if his wife gave her heart to another, God is not indifferent when His people give their hearts to idols.
 4. *"Burn like fire"* — God will not ignore unfaithfulness but will act in discipline because He loves His own.
- The jealousy of God reminds us that He is not indifferent. He corrects His people, but He is also committed to His name. The psalm now goes from asking how long discipline will last, to asking that God act justly toward those who defy Him altogether.

III. THE STIRRING FOR JUSTICE (VS. 6-7)

A. Justice is not the opposite of mercy.

The same God who disciplines His people also judges open rebellion.

B. The basis of the request (vs. 6)

1. *"That have not known thee..." "That have not called upon thy name..."*

This is not just hatred by the enemies of Israel; it is spiritual defiance.

2. This prayer by the psalmist is not for vengeance; it is an appeal for God to act consistently with His revealed character (which His "name" represents).

C. The covenant contrast (vs. 7)

1. Israel is disciplined as sons while the Gentile nations that defy God and His people stand outside that covenant relationship He has with His people.
 2. God disciplines His people, but He doesn't abandon His justice and judgment of the world.
- When we see injustice, it is not wrong to desire that God set things right. What is wrong is taking justice into our own hands. The psalmist leaves it with God.

IV. THE SURRENDER TO MERCY (VS. 8-10)

A. Acknowledged guilt (vs. 8a)

"O remember not against us former iniquities..."

1. The psalmist doesn't appeal for relief while ignoring guilt. He's not saying, "Lord, this isn't fair." He recognizes their sin and pleads for God's mercy.

Daniel 9:4-5

⁴ And I prayed unto the LORD my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments; ⁵ We have sinned, and have

committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments:

2. By the use of the word “remember” (רָמַז) here, the psalmist is not asking God to forget cognitively. He is asking God not to act in judgment upon their sins.

B. Admitted weakness (vs. 8b)

“Let thy tender mercies speedily prevent us: for we are brought very low.”

1. The word “prevent” (מִנִּיחַ) means to “go before” or “come to meet.” They are saying, “If your mercy does not move first, we will not survive.”
2. *“We are brought very low”* — there’s no pride; no defense; no justification or excuse. There is just humility brought because of discipline.

Sometime the healthiest place spiritually is when we finally admit, “Lord, we are very low.”

C. Appealed basis — God’s name

“Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of thy name: and deliver us, and purge away our sins, for thy name’s sake.”

1. The argument is not their worthiness, or their suffering, or their promises or vows. It’s God’s name.
2. The strongest ground for mercy is not our need — it is God’s name.

D. Appeal for God’s honor (vs. 10)

"Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is their God?"

In other words, they are saying, "If your people remain under your chastening hand, Your name is mocked."

That's why justice (vs. 6-7) and mercy (vs. 8-9) are not opposites.

V. THE STRENGTH OF THEIR CONFIDENCE (vs. 11-13)

A. A cry of preservation (vs. 11)

1. *"Let the sighing come before thee..."* — this is deeply personal language. They ask God to hear what no one else hears.
2. The "prisoner" language may reflect captives, but it is deeper than just that. It points to their helplessness, powerlessness, and dependence.
3. *"According to the greatness of thy power"* — they entrusted survival to God, not themselves.

B. A confidence in justice (vs. 12)

1. This is not for revenge. It is an appeal for moral accounting.
2. "Sevenfold" speaks of completeness. They trust God to settle what they cannot.

C. A commitment to praise (vs. 13)

1. Notice what has not changed — they are still His people and they are still His sheep.
2. The psalm begins with the children of God in

ruins and ends in their praise for God's deliverance.

Conclusion:

The psalm began with devastation and ends with devotion. The people are still under discipline, still surrounded by reproach, but they know Who they belong to.

When we are brought very low, it is enough to know Who we belong to as well. We appeal, as they did, to His name, not our own strength — and because He is always faithful, His people will praise Him for ever.