

Psalm 74 • Arise O Lord to defend Your cause!

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Psalm 74 is where we're going to get started. So, open your Bibles there, please. Psalm chapter 74. This is...it's about 23 verses, but this is a Psalm of Asaph. It's a plea, essentially. A plea for God to restore His presence among His covenant people.

We know from our study of some other books of the Bible, like Judges, Kings, so forth, we know that Israel from time to time would enter into a time of disobedience. And, therefore, the Lord, as a response to that disobedience, would withdraw His presence so much from Israel that he would allow and open the doors for one of their enemies. One of those neighboring nations to come in to invade the land, frankly, to make life miserable for the Israelites toward the end of encouraging them to recognize their error and then return to Him in an attitude of national repentance.

And many times, the Jews would do that. In fact, the Book of Judges is just this repetition of over and over and prosperity, disobedience, invasion, misery, repentance. And then they'd go through the cycle again.

We read those stories in books like Judges, but we often don't think about the people in Israel who remain true to the Lord because God always has a remnant. We know that from the Scripture. A remnant is a biblical term used to describe, usually, a small group of people who remain true, whose hearts remain devoted to the Lord. And God always has a remnant, okay?

Well, how did the remnant feel when the nation was being invaded by the enemy? Because just because there was a dope head of a king on the throne at the time who was leading the nation astray or leading them into idolatry or, or something like that, how did they feel? You got to know they must have been just grieved to see the beauty of worship being destroyed and blasphemed and mocked. Extremely difficult.

This song is the heart of one of those members of the remnant who, during a time of national disobedience and now a time of national discipline and

judgment, is crying out to the Lord. And I want you to see something in this song as we read this.

Because there's a lot of the same poetry that we're accustomed to reading in the psalms, but I want you to look past that, a little bit at least, to be able to see in this Psalm that the psalmist is not so much crying out for himself. Because life has to be difficult when you're being invaded by an enemy, right? And you're true to the Lord. Your heart hasn't changed. Nothing changed in your life.

And yet, you're seeing all these things taken away, your freedoms are taken away, your ability to worship, you can't go to the temple because the temple is in ruins. They've just waltzed in, and they've just wrecked it, the enemy.

So, your ability to worship, your ability to exercise your love for God in a public setting it's gone. And yet, you played no part in bringing this thing on. I want you to see here that the psalmist does not say, woe is me. What the psalmist is going to say throughout this psalm, and I want you to see it. I want to tell you to look for it ahead of time. The psalmist is saying, Lord, what about You? What about Your name? What about the respect people have for You?"

That was the concern of the psalmist through this, and we're going to see this. Lord, the enemy is ravaging our country, but I'm not going to sit here and talk about the fact that prices for food have skyrocketed or that we can't even find things in the stores anymore. I'm not going to talk about the fact that people are pulled out of their homes and sometimes put to death. I'm not going to talk about the fact that we've lost our national freedom. The biggest concern of the psalmist was, Lord, look what they've done to Your name. Look what they've done to You. Look how they're mocking You. Look how they're, using Your name as if it means nothing.

Pay attention here as we go, as we go through that here and read about this cry of the faithful in a time of national disobedience. Verse 1, "*O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?*" (ESV)

Notice that the psalmist begins by asking a couple of questions. And, when you read these on the surface, it almost sounds like the psalmist is saying, I don't know why this is happening. Why is this happening? Why are You doing this? Why is Your disfavor met us here? But I don't think that's what's happening at all.

I think the psalmist knows full well exactly what's going on. The reason for the question is more to express an appeal, if you will, to the Father, heart of God. In other words, what the psalmist is saying is God, these are Your people. These are the people who You brought up. These are the people that You raised up.

These are the people that you called Your own. How long are you going to do this against Your people? How long are You going to let them suffer? Again, it's not like, I don't know what's going on here, God. And I think You're a jerk. It's not it at all. He's appealing to the heart of the Father.

Do you ever do that? And, when we do that to one another, sometimes it can be manipulative, can't it? If I'm talking to somebody, if I'm talking to a father about reuniting with his son or his daughter who he's been estranged from, I suppose I could say something semi-manipulative to say almost, how long are you going to treat your daughter this way? How long are you going to keep her at arm's length?

As to appeal to his emotions, but God can't be appealed to that way. He's not going to let anybody manipulate Him anytime, anyway. What the psalmist is doing here is he's reminding the Lord, You are a God of mercy. Your heart is merciful at its essence. So, I'm going to speak to Your mercy. I'm going to speak to Your compassion. You have a heart for Your children that goes way beyond my love for them.

Have you ever thought about that related to your own kids when you're praying for your own children? Have you ever gone to the Lord and just said, Lord, You love my kids more than I do. Have you ever appealed to His heart, His love, His compassion? I don't think God considers that manipulative at all. In fact, I think He likes it because, you know what?

What we're doing is we are calling attention to and exalting, in fact, the heart of God, the mercy of God. When I call those things to His attention, I'm basically honoring Him as a loving, merciful, compassionate God, you see. And I think that's what the psalmist is doing here.

Verse 2, he says, *“Remember your congregation (which is another way of referring to the nation) which you have purchased of old, which you have redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage! Remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt.”*

And again, now here in verse 2, he's calling upon the Lord to remember. Notice how he says it repeatedly, *“Remember”, “Remember.”* It's not like God has

forgotten again. He's not manipulating God. Hey God, what's the deal here? Did You forget that You made a covenant with these people? Did you forget that You called them the apple of Your eye? Did You forget?" No! He's...what he's doing is he's calling the Lord to respond again in keeping with His past promises and commitments.

Now, once again, if you're talking to me about my past promises, you might be manipulating me because, you see, I'm not capable of keeping all my promises. I'm just not capable of it because I'm a human being. I can make all kinds of promises to you but, whether I'm able to keep them or not, is usually another matter.

And I'm usually not, not perfectly by any means, because I'm not in control, right? I'm not in control of my circumstances. I'm not in control of my life. So, from that standpoint, things happen. Well, God's in total control. He's the sovereign, eternal God. When God makes a promise, there's nobody to keep Him from making or keeping that promise, you with me?

To remind the Lord of the promises He has made is to honor the One who made it, see? To go back to the Lord and say, You said that You would work all things together for the good of those who love You and are called according to His purpose, is not to manipulate or to twist God's arm and kind of provoke Him into doing something good for you.

It is to remind Him that you believe in His promises and you're trusting in those promises. And by calling those to remembrance, again, it's not like He's forgotten it, you are basically expressing your faith in the One who made those promises. Now, as we look at verses 3 through 8, this is basically...here's where the psalmist starts to talk to the Lord about the extent of the devastation.

Now, remember, this is a godly man who is sorrowful over what has happened to his nation, even though he himself has not, he has remained true to the Lord. But he's talking to the Lord about all the devastation. Look what he says beginning in verse 3.

He says, *“Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins; (perpetual meaning ongoing) the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary! ⁴ Your foes (your enemies) have roared in the midst of your meeting place; they set up their own signs for signs. ⁵ They were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees. (In other words, someone who just walks in and just decimates the area.) ⁶ And all its carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammers. ⁷ They set your sanctuary on fire; they profaned the dwelling place of your name, bringing it down to the*

ground. ⁸ *They said to themselves, 'We will utterly subdue them': they burned all the meeting places of God in the land.*"

What's kind of interesting about this is that we're living in a time when people are starting to deface and ruin churches. And it's happening. I mean, it's happening.

Imagine if somebody came in here, broke in here, in this building, and started lighting things on fire. Took hatchets and hammers and just started chopping up chairs, furniture, things, wall, breaking the light, spray painting their own insignia, the name of their group or nation or something like that. Would you be grieved?

Would you be grieved to walk in here and find the place just decimated, burned, ruined? You know what's interesting about that? This is just a building. The temple was much more than that. In the Old Testament, that's where God's presence truly was. Today, the temple of the Holy Spirit is you. You are the temple of the Holy Spirit. That is where He takes up residence.

Kind of interesting, isn't it? So, here we would get all grieved about a building, and we would feel the implications of what it means to have our freedoms, and our rights, and our nice area taken away from us. But imagine how the Jews felt. Imagine how this man felt. There was only one temple. There was only one place for them to go. So, the psalmist calls attention to all this destruction that's been caused by the enemy.

And look what he says in verse 9, "*We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long.*" And what he's saying is, You're not speaking to people. You're not telling us what's going on. We haven't had any prophetic messages saying, this is going to go on for this long...

That happened at other times of disobedience. You'll remember when the nation of Israel was hauled off into exile in the Babylonian Empire. Remember God told Jeremiah that it would be 70 years. It would last for a period of 70 years. (Jeremiah 25:9-13)

Daniel read that prophecy and began to compute the dates and started to figure out they were very close to getting to the end of that 70 years. And there was at least the hope of knowing this thing is coming to an end. But look at what the psalmist is saying. We got...we have no prophet. There's no prophetic message and nobody knows how long.

This is...isn't it disheartening when you're in a very difficult circumstance and you can't see any light at the end of the tunnel? You don't know how long this is going to last. Nobody told you. It's one thing when you've had surgery and they say, well, you're going to be down for 4 to 6 weeks. And so, you start counting the days. Or somebody says, "This is going to go on for so long, and then it'll lift..."

Sometimes we even look at the calendar during the winter months, during those months of inversions and cold temperatures, and we're just kind of (Pastor Paul uses a sad tone:) April and May are coming, we can see it on the calendar. At least we know this isn't going to go on forever. Even when we had our snowpocalypse a couple of years ago, we knew that it was eventually going to melt, although, I have to say I had my doubts.

I thought the snow would be here forever and we were going to be in a new ice age. I seriously wondered sometimes. I thought, this will be here till the middle of the summer. But it wasn't and it was great because it all came to an end and we ended up having summer right on schedule. God's amazing like that.

But can you imagine no end? No end. No end in sight. And that's what the psalmist is saying here. Nobody knows. And that's why he asks in verse 10, look with me there. He says, "*How long, (O Lord, or) O God, is the foe (the enemy) to scoff? (To keep scoffing the way he does? How long) Is the enemy (going) to revile your name forever? ¹¹ Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them!*"

It's one thing for their enemies to make their lives miserable. But, again, notice what the psalmist is saying here, how long will the enemy revile Your name? And, by the way, the word, revile means to abuse and insult.

He's saying, how long are you going to let these people abuse Your name? How long are You going to let this go on? I can't imagine You're going to let it go on forever. So, how long, Lord? He's calling upon the Lord to act.

Verse 12, "*Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. ¹³ You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. ¹⁴ You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him his food for the creatures of the wilderness. ¹⁵ You split open springs and brooks; you dried up ever-flowing streams. (Notice he's referring to things just related to creation.) ¹⁶ Yours is the day, yours also the night; you have established the heavenly lights and the sun. ¹⁷ You have fixed all the boundaries of the earth; you have made summer and winter.*"

What is he doing? What is the psalmist doing? He's just gotten done saying, how long, how long, how long...how long You'll let this go on? And it's almost...one would get the impression like God's sitting back and maybe He's even unable to respond. No! And that's what he's saying here.

He goes through these verses, verse 12 through 17. And he's basically saying, but You're the Lord. Look what You did...You created...You set the seasons in order. You made the sun and the lights of the night. And You did, and You did, and You did... And he's just saying, no...

This is the psalmist's way of building up his faith. And I've said to you before in our study of Psalms, this is a really great thing for you to adopt in your own prayer time. Especially when you're under it, especially when you're feeling the weight of some situation, or circumstance, or whatever, to say, but, Lord, I know who You are. I know what You're capable of. I know what You can do.

You're the Creator for heaven's sakes. You're the One who set this all in motion. You're the One who spoke and things existed that didn't exist before. From Your very Word You spoke things into existence. Of course You have the ability. Of course You have the power.

You see what's going on here? We're reminding ourselves God is able, right? He says in verse 18, *“Remember this, O LORD, how the enemy scoffs, (He's saying, “Don't forget that scoffing.”) and a foolish people reviles your name. (Again, abuses or insults. He says,) ¹⁹ Do not deliver the soul of your dove...”* And now he's referring to his people, the people of Israel.

“¹⁹ Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild beasts; do not forget the life of your poor forever. ²⁰ Have regard for the covenant, for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence. ²¹ Let not the downtrodden turn back in shame; let the poor and needy praise your name. ²² Arise, O God, defend your cause; remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day! ²³ Do not forget the clamor of your foes, the uproar of those who rise against you, which goes up continually!”

In other words, it goes on and on day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. So, this is the cry, the cry of the heart of the devoted of the Lord who sees the devastation all around him and yet cries out for God because he is concerned most about the Lord's name being disrespected.