

# Lament

*You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me;  
my companions have become darkness. (Psalm 88:18 ESV)*

*O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses;  
you have been angry; oh, restore us. (Psalm 60:1 ESV)*

## **O God, Why?**

**March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

**Psalm 74**

**Scott Hogeveen**

Good morning, everyone it is good to be with you all this morning. Please open your Bibles with me to Psalm 74. We are going to be continuing looking at some of the Psalms of Lament and I just want to take a moment to say how excited I am that you are working through these Psalms, and I am thrilled to be able to dig into Psalm 74 with you all this morning. I think that the Lament Psalms are criminally neglected in most Christian's lives.

We do not like to experience negative emotions; we don't like to talk with people who are negative and going through pain. There is a reason our default response when someone asks who we are is "Good you? We do not want to make other people uncomfortable by talking about our trials and our sadness.

But the Bible tells us in Romans 12:15 to weep with those who are weeping, and the Psalms of Lament are uniquely able to help equip us to do this. John Calvin reminds us of the power the Psalms have to articulate the human experience. He says:

"I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, 'an anatomy of the soul;' for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin as quoted by W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 8.

These Psalms help us properly understand, experience, and relate the human experience.

With that in mind, let us turn our attention to Psalm 74. This is a longer Psalm so we will divide it in two. The first 11 verses will show us the questions the Psalmist Asks and verses 12 through 23 will show us the resolution of the Psalmist in the face of these questions and his request before the Lord.

So please look with me at Psalm 74 verse 1. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

O God, why do you cast us off forever?

Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?  
Remember your congregation, which you have purchased of old,  
which you have redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage!  
Remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt.

Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins;  
the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary!

Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place;  
they set up their own signs for signs.

They were like those who swing axes  
in a forest of trees.

And all its carved wood  
they broke down with hatchets and hammers.

They set your sanctuary on fire;  
they profaned the dwelling place of your name,  
bringing it down to the ground.

They said to themselves, "We will utterly subdue them";  
they burned all the meeting places of God in the land.

We do not see our signs;  
there is no longer any prophet,  
and there is none among us who knows how long.

How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?

Is the enemy to revile your name forever?

Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand?

Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them!

Psalm 74:1-11 ESV

This is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

As I mentioned, this first number of verses offers us three important questions that the Psalmist puts forward to God.

### Important Questions

#### 1. Why have you rejected us?

The First Question the Psalmist asks God is “why have you rejected us?” We see this right in verse 1, don’t we? “O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?”

Before we begin considering this question it is incredibly helpful to consider the context of this Psalm. Most Scholars agree that the Psalmist here is likely referring to the state of Judah after the Babylonian invasion.

In verses 3 to 8 we see this clear language of destruction and annihilation. There are also clear references to the destruction of the temple which occurred when the Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem in 587-586 B.C.

Remember that last week you saw a Psalm that was written in a time when the Assyrian nation had just wiped out the Northern tribes of Israel off of the map. Well, this Psalm is written a generation or so after that as the remaining southern tribes are destroyed by another evil nation. This is why the Psalmist asks, “why do you cast us off forever?” This destruction would seem pretty final to the Jewish people. They have seen their Northern counterparts completely annihilated by the Assyrians and now they are witnessing the burning of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple. Seeing the Babylonian standards being flown where the temple used to stand would surely give the impression that God has rejected his people forever.

This context is incredibly helpful because it helps us to understand the context of the Psalmist’s questions, but it also helps us understand the heart behind his questions. This Psalm could have easily been an expression of anger and righteous judgement against the wicked Babylonians.

Yet the Psalmist holds God responsible. He doesn’t even bother mentioning the Babylonians by Name!

He sees the current state of Jerusalem. He envisions the smoke of burning buildings, the tears of men, women, and children being carried off to slavery in Babylon, the

stench of death, and the horror of the temple, the house of the Lord, being torn down.

He sees the travesty of war and death brought upon the Jewish people, upon God's chosen people by the Babylonians and he says, "O God, Why have you done this to us?"

Why have you God brought such ruin upon us? Why have you rejected us?

The Psalmist understands that ultimate authority behind his suffering is God. And that is an important correction for us. We are loathe to say that God is in control over the bad things that happen to us. We like to think that he only gives nice, pleasant circumstances and the devil is the one who brings evil. Yet the devil is only a dog on a chain, HE CAN ONLY GO WHERE GOD ALLOWS HIM.

The Bible clearly teaches that God is the one on the throne with power and authority over all things. He is sovereign over your suffering and hardship. That is the underlying fact of this question.

And within this question is another important reminder for us as well. That is that there is a reason behind our suffering. The question of "why?" implies that there is a reason.

Your suffering is not random, your sorrow is not meaningless, every circumstance in your life is being used by God for his good purposes. EVERY. SINGLE. ONE.

We must remember these things in those seasons of difficulty and hardship. We must remember that God is the one behind it all and he is using it for his purposes. That doesn't necessarily mean that it will be easy or pleasant. But these notions must shape our mindset and our prayers in the face of hardship.

Now, the second question the Psalmist asks is:

## 2. Why do you allow the wicked to prosper?

We see this implicitly in verse 4

Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place;  
they set up their own signs for signs.  
Psalm 74:4 ESV

And we see it more explicitly in verse 11 which reads

“Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand?  
Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them!”  
Psalm 74:11 ESV

Here the Psalmist is wondering why God would let an obviously wicked and evil nation like Babylon to triumph over them? Tremper Longman III is really helpful here at setting the scene. He comments on verse 4 and the language of setting up signs saying that

“The enemy desecrated this holy place by setting up their standards, presumably a reference to Babylonian battle standards that would have contained idolatrous symbols representing their gods.”<sup>2</sup>

There is vivid imagery here of Babylonian military standards flying over the ruins of the Temple bearing images of their false gods in the place designated for God’s presence with his people.

Imagine that with me if you will for a second. Imagine the Psalmist standing where the entrance to the temple would have been. A place that would have been the gateway to God’s presence. A place that would have been the focal point of the all of the hope, confidence, and peace of the Israelite people. The Psalmist stands in the ruins of the temple. He looks out and surveys the smoke rising from burning Jerusalem. He listens to cries of thousands mourning the loss of their loved one. He smells the stench of death and destruction, and he looks up to where the temple would be and he sees the Babylonian flags instead.

Where God should have been, abomination had taken his place.

So the Psalmist asks God why he would allow such wickedness to prosper while his very people are overrun.

And this is a question we all wrestle with one level or another. If you have talked to an atheist for any length of time about Christianity it is likely that you have heard the argument that if God is good and in control, then how can evil exist?

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<sup>2</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 15–16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 280.

And that is a very real question. It can be hard to think that God is both good and in control when we look at the world around us. When we consider what is happening in Ukraine right now, the global pandemic, the evil we see in our daily lives it is tempting to think that either God is not good, or he is not in control.

But that is not the case! In fact, it is the idea that God is good and in control that is at the heart of the Psalmist's question here. He asks God why he is allowing these wicked people to prosper?

He is asking "Why are you, the sovereign holy God, allowing these wicked men to prosper?"

And that is a question we want to be asking too. We want to know why wicked men continue to prosper in the world today. We want to know why so much evil seems to go unpunished.

These are big, important questions and they are appropriate questions to ask.

So what this Psalm does, is it help us ask these questions without doubting the fact that God is good and that he is in Control.

We can say along with the Psalmist, "God I know you are in control of all things and I know you are perfect and good, so why are you letting this evil go unpunished?"

Remember that Christians are called to mourn. We should see the prospering of wicked and evil people in the world, and we should mourn? Our hearts ought to be broken by the travesty that we see around us. But the question is, will you let the prospering of wicked and evilness make you question and doubt God? Or will you allow it to draw you closer to God in prayer and faith?

The Third and final question that we see in this section is:

### 3. Why will you not defend your name?

We see this right in verse 10

"How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?  
Is the enemy to revile your name forever?"  
Psalm 74:10 ESV

Here the Psalmist appeals to God in a very powerful way. This question demonstrates a thorough understanding of God's Character. Throughout the Bible we see that God

is in fact a jealous God. He is jealous for his people, and he is jealous for the praise of his people. He wants them to recognize who he is and what he has done for them.

God is meant to be worshipped by his people. He is more worthy of worship than anyone can truly put into words. And yet the exact opposite is happening all around the Psalmist. He is seeing the Babylonians make a mockery of God. They are decimating his people and his temple. They are declaring that their false gods are triumphant over the only true God.

I want to pause here for a second and draw your attention to the fact that this is exactly what we see with Jesus on the cross as well. Jesus was constantly mocked and slandered in his trials and as he hung on the cross as Luke 23 reminds us

“And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” <sup>36</sup> The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine <sup>37</sup> and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”  
Luke 23:35:38 ESV

So, the Psalmist is confused. He knows that the Israelites were far from perfect, he understands that God is using this to discipline them and correct their sin, but he doesn't see how God can use such a vile and wicked nation like Babylon. He doesn't understand how God can allow an even more wicked and perverse nation overcome his own people.

He is saying, “God I know who you are! I know that you are faithful to your people! I know that you will defend your name! I Don't understand what is happening. I don't know why you are letting this happen!”

Again, these are good and healthy questions. We should expect God to act consistently with his character. In fact, we can be confident that he always will be consistent. However, as Psalm 74 reminds us, we won't always understand what God is doing or why.

And that is okay.

That is okay.

That is one of the most important take-aways from the Psalms of lament. IT is okay to not understand why God is doing what he is. It is okay to not understand why God has allowed through the experiences you have. These are healthy questions to ask. And they are good questions.

Often Christians are too quick to brush by these questions. Often, we don't allow ourselves to sit and mourn and wonder why God is doing this, we try to pull ourselves out of it. We rush ourselves, or worse, we rush other people out of sadness into hope and comfort without allowing them to truly understand and deal with their despair.

One of the things that this pandemic has revealed to me is that most human beings are quite incapable of dealing with negative emotions. We don't know how to experience them properly so we escape into the internet or we numb ourselves with distracting entertainment or substances. People are afraid of negative emotions and so they do everything in their power to avoid them.

But the Psalms of lament help us push through into these emotions. To experience them in a healthy way with a proper understanding of who God is and how he relates to our suffering. And it is by truly experiencing these negative emotions that we are better able to know God and know his love for us.

The answer then to this question of why God is not defending his name is that he has greater things in store. God works in unexpected ways. He uses weakness and defeat to achieve victory and Glory.

This is the story of the exodus out of Egypt.

That is the story of the cross. Just when the devil thought he had defeated Christ on the cross. Jesus defeated sin and bought the forgiveness of sins for all those who put their faith in him and rose from the dead Conquering death.

And this is the story of the return from exile, as the Jewish people, according to God's promises and plan, will return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

God is faithful to his people, and he will accomplish his purposes. That is what the Psalmist is appealing to here. We see that in verse 2" Remember your congregation, which you have purchased of old, which you have redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage!"

And this leads us to the second section of this Psalm: The Psalmist's Resolve.

### **The Psalmist's Resolve and Request**

We will read this section in a minute, but I just want to highlight the fact that verse 12 begins with one of the most important words in this Psalm, and arguably the Bible.

YET



The word Yet is a hinge word. It signals a pivot, a change in direction of thought. The Psalmist was presenting God with his confusion and his lack of understanding of the situation the Jewish people had found themselves in. He asks God those three important questions as he seeks to understand. And in the middle of his confusion, for it does not end here, he says this: Look with me to verse 12 to the end of Psalm 74.

In the middle of his confusion the Psalmist says:

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<sup>[d]</sup> on the waters.  
**14** You crushed the heads of Leviathan;  
 you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.  
**15** You split open springs and brooks;  
 you dried up ever-flowing streams.  
**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.  
**18** Remember this, O Lord, how the enemy scoffs,  
 and a foolish people reviles your name.  
**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!

Psalm 74:12-23 ESV

This section begins with the word “yet” which tells us that there is a change in thought and approach here. I am sure that Levi has mentioned the fact that the typical pattern

for Psalms of lament is to end with a note of hope and trust. Psalm 74 is kind of unique in this regard as it not so much an expression of hope as it more an expression of steadfast resolve in the face of Truth. There are two main things to highlight in this last section. The Psalmist's Resolve and his Request.

### 1. The Psalmist's resolve

I want to emphasize that resolve as we work through this last section.

You see, the Psalmist has been asking these important questions. He has been crying out to God saying that he doesn't understand why or how God is allowing this to happen.

Yet he says, yet "God my King is from old, working salvation in the midst of the Earth."

Surely, he is looking back upon the Exodus here remembering the fact that God has delivered his people in miraculous ways from the most dire of situations. He is remembering the fact that when all hope was lost the Israelites through the Red Sea on dry ground by God's powerful hand.

The Psalmist continues by highlighting God's power over the seas. The Seas in that time were regarded as a source of chaos, death, and ruin. To be completely honest with you I am not entirely sure what the Leviathan is, and I am wary of anyone who thinks they know for sure. The Bible doesn't give us an exact answer because the leviathan is primarily a symbolic creature.

The Leviathan was the epitome of the destructive power of the seas. It represents chaos and death and by proclaiming God's power, his victory over the seas and the Leviathan, the Psalmist is declaring God's sovereign rule over all creation, even those things that appear chaotic and unruly.

There is no triumphant declaration of confidence and hope in this Psalm. We see that after stating God's power and authority over all the Earth and all Seasons, the Psalmist returns to appealing to God in light of this to act. The Psalm ends not with a triumphant declaration that God will act, but an urgent plea for God to remember his people and remember to act justly against those who are opposing him.

And I LOVE THIS!

I Love that this Psalm doesn't end triumphantly or with an answer from God. It ends with resolve and the expectation of an answer to his request.

Which leads to the second thing in the section.

## 2. The Psalmist's request

I find it fascinating that this Psalm does not end at this declaration of God's power and authority. It ends in an unexpected way. Rather than end with a proclamation of hope and confidence it ends with uncertainty and a request made to God.

But that is often how our prayers feel, is it not? So often we pray for the salvation of loved ones, we pray for healing from cancer or Alzheimer's or any manner of sickness, so often we pray, and we do not feel or experience triumph over our situations and difficulties.

Often, we are required to move ahead with the quiet resolve, knowing that God is on the throne and that he is working in all things, even when we don't see how.

And this Psalm meets us in this place. It teaches us to remember the power of God, to remember that he has it all in his hand. As Matthew Henry reminds us

"When the power of enemies is most threatening, it is comfortable to flee to the power of God by earnest prayer."<sup>3</sup>

We see this exact thinking all throughout Scripture as well. Jesus himself reminds us of this in Matthew 10, saying

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. <sup>30</sup> But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. <sup>31</sup> Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.  
Matthew 10:29-31 ESV

And the Apostle Paul in Romans 8, one of the most comforting chapters in all the Bible reminds us

that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. Romans 8:18 ESV

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Henry and Thomas Scott, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Ps 74:1.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good,  
Romans 8:28 ESV

Christian you are not called to be filled with happiness in every season of life. You are not expected to have a smile on your face 24/7. There will be seasons of sorrow and Sadness. There will be seasons of doubt and despair.

There will be seasons when all you can do is put one foot in front of the other, trudging forward with the resolve that God is working through the storms and chaos of life.

And as Matthew Henry helpfully reminds us again

“We have as much reason to expect affliction, as to expect night and winter. But we have no more reason to despair of the return of comfort, than to despair of day and summer. And in the world above we shall have no more changes.”<sup>4</sup>

And so, the encouragement from Psalm 74 for us this morning is that it is good and proper to bring our requests to God. It is good to feel sorrow and despair, it is good for us to bring these things to God.

If we don't let ourselves feel these things. If we try to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, put on a brave face, force ourselves past these emotions we will not develop as healthy mature people. And we will not be able to adequately come alongside other Christians in their times of difficulty and despair.

We must also balance out these feelings of sorrow and despair with the quiet resolution that comes from knowing who God is. That's what we see in this Psalm. We see the Psalmist's resolve and we see his request together.

And we have the perfect basis on which to make our requests to God. We have the cross of Jesus Christ. The perfect display of God's character, his love and his faithfulness that we could ever imagine. And as we look backward to the cross, we likewise can then look forward to a future that is guaranteed because of the cross.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Henry and Thomas Scott, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Ps 74:12.

As Matthew Henry reminded us, we have no reason to despair the return of comfort. As the Bible repeatedly reminds us. Whatever happens in this life is a momentary thing compared to the greatness and complete pleasure of eternity.

Psalm 74 encourages us to not brush off or avoid our negative emotions. IT encourages us to experience them deeply and to work through them with the quiet steadfast resolve that comes from knowing the nature and character of God and knowing that he is the absolute authority of every situation we find ourselves in. We should allow ourselves to feel the sadness and grief that comes through suffering, but we cannot let it overcome us.

These Psalms are a powerful tool for us as we seek to grow more and more like Christ. He demonstrated the proper place of sadness and grief as he wept over Lazarus, knowing full well that he would raise him.

So, this morning I want to close with a powerful reminder from Hebrews 4:16

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Hebrews 4:16 ESV

Let us, brothers and sisters, use Psalm 74 as a guide and a tool to help us draw near to Jesus with confidence in our times of need.

Let us pray together.