

“When God is Absent”
Psalm 74
(Preached at Trinity, August 7, 2011)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. We find of **Psalm 74** that it is a Psalm of Asaph and that it is a Maschil, a psalm of instruction; a psalm with the design of teaching. It is similar to **Psalm 79**.
2. What is the teaching of this psalm?
 - A. It finds its context most likely during the Israel’s exile. Babylon invaded Judah in 586 B.C and the nation suffered a terrible defeat; Jerusalem was devastated, the temple was burned, and the people were taken into captivity. **Psalm 74** finds the agony of a defeated people suffering under the darkness of God’s absence.
 - B. We learn how God’s people wrestled with God during this terrible time of distress and we are taught how we are to respond under similar circumstances.
3. As we unfold the psalm I’ll break it down into five sections:
 - I. A Puzzling Question – “Why hast thou cast us off” (1) – **Verses 1-3**
 - II. A Perplexing Destruction – “They have cast fire into thy sanctuary” (7) – **4-8**
 - III. A Painful Silence – “There is no more any prophet” (9) – **Verses 9-11**
 - IV. A Past Remembrance – “For God is my King of old” (12) – **Verses 12-17**
 - V. A Promise Pleaded – “Have respect unto the covenant” (22) – **Verses 18-23**
- I. A Puzzling Question – “Why hast thou cast us off forever” (1) – **Verses 1-3**
 - A. Asaph’s opening prayer is the most fearful for any believer to pray – and the most puzzling – “Why hast thou cast us off?”
 1. What does this mean? Had God cast off His people? Paul answers this question loud and clear in **Romans 11**
Romans 11:1 – “I say then, Hath God cast away his people? God forbid.” - μή γένοιτο – Literally, “May it never be!”
ESV – “By no means”
 2. But God had certainly withdrawn the power of His presence
 3. One glance at the devastation of Jerusalem reminded them of God’s displeasure.
Psalm 74:1 – “*why* doth thine anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture?”
 4. Was it necessary for Asaph to ask this question? God’s actions had not been arbitrary. He blessed them with prophets to warn them but they would not hear. Years before the destruction God spoke through Isaiah the prophet:
Isaiah 3:8 – “For Jerusalem is ruined, and Judah is fallen: because their tongue and their doings *are* against the LORD, to provoke the eyes of his glory.”

5. Asaph's question was not so much why did God judge Judah but why was the judgment so enduring? It lasted for 70 years – an entire generation would have perished in Babylon
 "Why hast thou cast us off forever"
Psalm 79:5 – "How long, LORD? wilt thou be angry for ever?"
 6. Asaph calls upon God to remember that they are His people
- B. God's people can still suffer the sorrow of God's absence
1. It is almost always the result of sin. We cannot pretend that our sin goes unnoticed or that it goes without consequence.
 - a. In **Verse 1** Asaph speaks clearly that they were under the judgment of God, which he describes as God's anger.
 - b. We have to understand this anger properly
 - c. John Calvin – "Properly speaking, God is not angry with his elect, whose diseases he cures by afflictions as it were by medicines; but as the chastisements which we experience powerfully tend to produce in our minds apprehensions of his wrath, the Holy Spirit, by the word *anger*, admonishes the faithful to acknowledge their guilt in the presence of infinite purity."
 2. He will never forsake His people but sin wounds our conscience, disquiets our peace, and hinders our fellowship. There are two familiar patterns that follow sin.
 - a. A professing believer falls into sin, his conscience condemns him, he suffers loss of communion with God, yet he flees from God, often continuing in the sin. At the same time he flees from God's people.
 He may prove to be an apostate or God may chasten him to bring him back.
 - b. A professing believer falls into sin, suffers under a wounded conscience and flees to God in repentance. At the same time he is fleeing to God in repentance he also embraces the people of God – the church. He continues in pursuit of God seeking peace no matter how long it takes.
John Owen – "Unmortified sin is a thick cloud that spreads itself over the face of the soul, and intercepts all the beams of God's love and favor. It takes away all sense of the privilege of our adoption; an if the soul begins to gather up thoughts of consolation, sin quickly scatters them."
 But we must not too quickly grant ourselves peace until we've dealt sufficiently with the sin.
Owen - "When the heart is disquieted by sin, speak no peace to it until God speak it."
 3. We must follow the pattern of Asaph – confession and pleading with God.
- II. A Perplexing Destruction – "They have cast fire into thy sanctuary" (7) – **Verses 4-8**
- A. Why would God allow His holy temple to be destroyed?

1. The Babylonians defiled the holy place
Psalm 74:6 – “they break down the carved work”
Psalm 74:7 – “They have cast fire into thy sanctuary, they have defiled *by casting down* the dwelling place of thy name to the ground.”
 2. The temple was the dwelling place of God among His people
 It was the place of meeting. The Ark was the throne of God—the place of God’s Shechaniah glory.
 Most important, it was the place of mercy.
 3. With the destruction of the temple all communion with God was severed
 4. The word for “synagogue” in **Verse 8** is not a good translation.
 - a. There were no synagogues until after the Babylonian captivity. The word means “meeting place.” It speaks of the place where Israel met with God. In the KJV 150 of the 223 times the word is found it is translated “congregation,” synagogue only here.
 - b. With the destruction of the Temple Israel lost communion with God.
 The Babylonians took away the daily sacrifice, the festivals, the feasts. God was far removed from Israel.
- B. Would God allow the joy and peace of His communion to be crushed?
1. We must understand the exceeding sinfulness of sin. We must understand its devastating effect upon the believer. From “Mortification”
 - a. The danger of being hardened by its deceitfulness
 - b. The danger of some great temporal correction.
 Owen – “Though God should not utterly cast thee off for this abomination that lies in thy heart, ye he will visit thee with the rod; though he pardon and forgive, he will take vengeance of thy inventions.”
 - c. Loss of peace and strength all a man’s days. “To have peace with God, to have strength to walk before God, is the sum of the great promises of the covenant of grace.”
 - d. The danger of eternal destruction. “Though God does resolve to deliver some from a continuance in sin that they may not be destroyed, yet he will deliver none from destruction that continue in sin.”
 2. We must see the loss of God’s presence and peace as a terrible curse
- III. A Painful Silence – “There is no more any prophet” (9) – **Verses 9-11**
- A. The silence in Babylon was deafening
1. The prophetic voice before the destruction was great and loud but Israel would not hear. Now there was nothing but silence. Amos sent a strong message to the northern kingdom:
Amos 8:11 – “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD:”
 2. Notice the intensity of Asaph’s prayer

Psalm 74:11 – “Why withdrawest thou thy hand, even thy right hand? pluck *it* out of thy bosom.”

- a. It is actually a prayer of desperation for God to come to their aid
NAU **Psalm 74:11** – “Why do You withdraw Your hand, even Your right hand? From within Your bosom, destroy *them!*”
- b. Spurgeon – “How bold is the suppliant! (i.e. begging, pleading) Does he err? Nay, verily, we who are so chill, and distant, and listless in prayer are the erring ones. The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and he who learns the art shall surely prevail with God by its means.”

B. As believers we too can grope about in darkness

1. We have the Word of God – the sure Word of Prophecy, the glorious counsel of God, and yet we can find ourselves shut off from its power because we refuse to take heed.

2 Peter 1:19 – “We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts:”

2. Our prayers should be just as fervent, just as intense. When God seems distant, when there is nothing but silence, plead all the more earnestly.

IV. A Past Remembrance – “For God is my King of old” (12) – **Verses 12-17**

A. Asaph recounts God’s wondrous work in the past

Psalm 74:12 – “For God *is* my King of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth.”

1. He speaks of the deliverance from Egypt – the parting of the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, referred to in **Verse 13** as dragons or sea monsters and in **Verse 14** as the leviathan
2. The word leviathan is found five times in the OT and has various meanings.
 - a. The name has been used to describe a crocodile and even a whale. It could even describe an extinct dinosaur.
 - b. Here it is being used as a figure for Egypt
3. In **Verse 15** Asaph brings to remembrance the power of God in drying up the Jordan River
Psalm 74:15 – “Thou didst cleave the fountain and the flood: thou driedst up mighty rivers.”
4. In **Verses 16-17** he calls to remembrance God’s mighty power in governing the earth. He rules the day and the darkness. He sets the boundaries of the mountains and the seas. He causes the seasons to cycle with perfect harmony.
5. In the midst of God’s absence Asaph called to remembrance the great demonstrations of God’s mighty presence and finds comfort.

B. We also can find great comfort in remembering God’s mighty power

1. We remember the evidence of God’s mighty power in His Word
2. We remember the evidence of God’s mighty power in Providence
3. Most important, we remember all of the times God has demonstrated His mighty power in our own lives.

Even at times when our prayers seem dry and the heavens seem as brass and God seems an infinite distance away the memory of God's past presence in our lives brings us great confidence.

4. Even in God's absence we are able to sing forth in praise –
Who is a sovereign God like Thee . . .

V. A Promise Pleaded – “Have respect unto the covenant” (22) – **Verses 18-23**

A. Asaph reminds God of the particular relationship He has with His people

1. In **Verse 19** Asaph refers to Israel to “thy turtledove” and
2. In **Verse 20** he reminds God of His covenant
“Have respect unto the covenant”
3. They were God's people. His promises are unchanging.
Spurgeon – “Here is the master key, -- heaven's gate must open to this. God is not a man that he should lie; his covenant he will not break, nor alter the thing that hath gone forth out of his lips.”
4. In **Verses 18, 22-23** he reminds God that their enemies were also His enemies
These wicked men were blaspheming the holy name of God
Psalms 74:18 – “Remember this, *that* the enemy hath reproached, O LORD, and *that* the foolish people have blasphemed thy name.”

B. Even when we are suffering under God's chastisements we have the comfort that we are His people

1. His chastening hand gives us the assurance that He deals with His own as a Father to His children
Hebrews 12:6-7 – “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. ⁷ If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?”
2. Even when God seems absent there are several truths that should encourage us.
 - a. Even though we may be suffering justly due to our own sin we are still God's people.
 - b. Even though we may feel rejected we must never forget that we are God's purchased possession that He will never forsake.

Conclusion:

1. We are on a journey that is wrought with danger. Sin and temptation is an ever present enemy. God is preserving us as His own people. Though sin will always crush our peace and comfort God will never forsake us outright.
2. May this cause us to pray boldly and fervently as we find Asaph doing here. May we own our sins and confess them openly and plead with God even when He seems distant and we groan under His chastening hand. May we confess our sins humbly and sincerely and plead God's grace as His covenant people.
Calvin spoke concerning the Israelite captives: “they impute to their own sins all the calamities which they endured; but at the same time they lay before God his own covenant by which he adopted the race of Abraham as his peculiar people.”
3. May we continue to press toward our high calling with great thanksgiving that God's hand is upon us.