

The Song of the Persecuted

(Psalm 74)

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Introduction

We live in a culture growing more and more hostile to God..

Now, every culture has been hostile to God because men refuse to live under authority...

This is the story of world history..

Yet, the hatred of God continues to grow even in our own nation.

Just last month, a prominent politician suggested a law to prevent people who believe that Jesus is the only way to salvation from holding public office..

That is just the tip of the iceberg though...

There are stories everyday of legal and social attacks on believers..

And all of this is the result of a concerted effort to rid the world of Christianity..

The motivation behind that effort is clearly satanic and it continues to grow daily not only in this nation but against the church in any nation of the world..

Now, this hatred of God spills down and becomes hatred of God's people in the world as well..

Therefore, the church is persecuted regularly...

We don't see physical violence against the church much here, but it certainly occurs in other areas of the world...

However, there is a growing persecution of the church here in other ways as the Christian world-view and way of life is under attack...

Personally, I have grown numb to such attacks on Christianity...

There are so widespread and numerous that it overwhelms my ability to consider them all..

So, I simply see them and pray for God's help to endure them...

Now, Israel had a similar problem in the OT...

You see, their way of life was attacked as well...

The Assyrians and the Babylonians came in and conquered them as a nation in 722 BC and 586 BC...

Not only were they conquered, they were carried off our of their nation to live in the area of the conquering nations...

And not only were they carried off, their way of life was destroyed....

The temple where they worshipped their God was burned down and their cities that God had give them were destroyed...

It was a radical takeover of their faith....

Now, we can't fully relate to the suffering of Israel as we still live in the land and we can still worship freely..

But we can relate to their misery as they watched their way of life be persecuted...

And there may be no better place to see their suffering than listening to their prayers as a people while they were suffering...

And so take your Bibles and turn to Psalm 74 with me....

Psalm 74 is a psalm of lament or grief or suffering...

Most likely, this psalm was composed in response to the fall of Jerusalem and the land of Israel at the hands of the enemy...

It was a psalm that was sung by Israel as an act of worship, but also as a prayer to God to help Israel in her time of need...

I think it fits perfectly with the state of the church in the world today....

Though we aren't captives, we are persecuted by the world..

We are called foolish by the world...

Our beliefs and views of the world are ridiculed as old fashioned and out of date...

Though we may still have buildings to hold church, the foundations of our faith are being attacked everyday by our enemies....

So what is the thought process of the people of God while under attack?

I think we will find 3 ways to respond to persecution as a people under attack...

The first response to persecution is this...

I. We Plead God's Promises (1-11)

Look at verses 1-2 of Psalm 74...

*1 O God, why have You rejected us forever?
Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of
Your [b]pasture?
2 Remember Your congregation, which You have
purchased of old,
Which You have redeemed to be the tribe of Your
inheritance;
And this Mount Zion, where You have dwelt.*

Though we know better as believers, it seems as if God has abandoned us as His people..

We see that apparent hopelessness in verse 1...

God, why have you rejected us as your people?

Though the Scriptures are clear that God will never abandon his people, our minds are pushed to that point when we see the evil persecution of the world..

This was the difficulty of Israel being conquered and deported to a foreign country...

Had God abandon them?

Had they lost their Promised Land for good?

So the psalmist calls on God to remember them in verse 2...

Remember us, Lord!

Now clearly, God never forgets his people, but there is nothing wrong with calling on God to remember you in your trials...

The Lord is not insulted for you to call on Him to remember you...

There is nothing arrogant there or unbiblical to call on God to remember you...

When Peter was sinking in the sea, he didn't think to himself, "well, I better not insult Jesus by asking him to save me."

No, Peter called out, "Save me, Lord."

To call God to keep his word is fine for the believer...

In the midst of temptation, remind the Lord of his word to not tempt you beyond what you can bear...

Tell him to show you the way out of temptation that he has promised in His Word..

And that is the cry of Israel here...

Lord, it feels like you have left us here to die, so remember us now!

Then verse 3...

3 [c]Turn Your footsteps toward the perpetual ruins;

The enemy has damaged everything within the sanctuary.

4 Your adversaries have roared in the midst of Your meeting place;

They have set up their own [d]standards for signs.

5 It seems as if one had lifted up

His [e]axe in a [f]forest of trees.

6 And now [g]all its carved work

They smash with hatchet and [h]hammers.

7 They have [i]burned Your sanctuary [j]to the ground;

They have defiled the dwelling place of Your name.

8 They said in their heart, "Let us [k]completely [l]subdue them."

They have burned all the meeting places of God in the land.

In verse 3, the psalmist representing the people of Israel simply remind God of the damage done by their attackers...

Lord, they have destroyed the place we meet to worship you...

Verse 4 says that the enemy has set up their own standards for signs...

The idea is that the enemies of Israel and their God had come into the temple and the places of Jewish worship and hung their banners in there...

Imagine if you will someone coming into a church building and replacing the cross with their symbols of Anti-Christian logos....

Imagine Christian churches filled with the rainbow flags of the homosexual movement or the crescent moon of Islam or the star of David...

Remember in the tribulation period, the Antichrist will come in and destroy a rebuilt Jewish temple and put his banner in the temple and demand to be worshipped...

This is the pattern of the world....

To replace the God of the world and put up their banners instead...

And the psalmist here simply reminds God of the work of the enemy to destroy the place of worship for Israel..

The sanctuary is gone...

The beautiful wood work of the places of worship have been ripped apart by axes ..

The place has then been burned to the ground..

If you are a student of the Civil War, you may have heard of Sherman's March to the Sea at the end of the war...

The south was already defeated by the time Sherman began to go through cities and burn and loot them and kill people....

He wasn't on a military campaign; he was seeking to crush the spirit of southerners...

The enemies of God work in a similar way...

They do not desire to co-exist with the people of God...

They want them eliminated...

The Babylonians didn't conquer and simply put Israel under their rule in their own hometowns...

They conquered, they captured and they destroyed...

And Israel's spirit was crushed....

Verse 9....

***9 We do not see our signs;
There is no longer any prophet,***

It seemed to Israel that God was not only abandoning them, he also wasn't speaking to them...

There was no prophet in the land to give them hope or direction....

God had apparently gone silent at the worst possible time...

And look, that is a reason to lament and be filled with sadness..

Man doesn't live by bread alone but by the very word of God...

And Israel needed to hear from God, and the question they needed answered the most is found in the next few lines of the psalm...

Nor is there any among us who knows how long.

10

*How long, O God, will the adversary revile,
And the enemy spurn Your name forever?*

11

*Why do You withdraw Your hand, even Your right
hand?*

From within Your bosom, destroy them!

The question of how long will this persecution last is the question that assaulted them the most as a nation...

That is the question that plagues us as well in our trials...

Lord, how long will this go on?

It is the answer that we often need, right?

So Israel is suffering and you can see it in their prayer here...

They need answers, so they plead for God to answer them and act on behalf of them...

This is not the act of naming and claiming God's promises of health, wealth, and prosperity...

This is calling on God to remember and not abandon...

To speak and not be silent...

And this is the kind of pleading to the Lord that those in trials should do...

This is the kind of pleading that doesn't demand of God but appeals to Him and his word...

Remember us Lord...

Help us Lord...

Protect us Lord...

And that is a great first response to persecution...

A second response is found in verses 12-17...

II. We Praise God's Power (12-17)

Verse 12...

12

***Yet God is my king from of old,
Who works deeds of deliverance in the midst of the
earth.***

As the psalmist speaks of the demise of his people..

As his hope is growing dim...

As his faith is being shaken...

Two words come into his mind....

Yet God...

These are the two words that mark the testimony of
the people of God....

The enemy was attacking...

The world around us was falling...

But God...

When your faith is fading, these two words can give
you hope..

But God...

You see, Satan tempts us to believe that God has abandoned us...

Isn't speaking to us...

Satan tempts us to think that God is gone and incapable of helping us...

Yet God is always there....

And as the psalmist is in the midst of an uncertain future, he turns to remember the God of the past...

God is my king of old....

He works deliverance in the earth....

And then he goes on to list some of God's acts of deliverance in verses 13-17....

13

***[m]You divided the sea by Your strength;
[n]You broke the heads of the sea monsters [o]in
the waters.***

14

***[p]You crushed the heads of [q]Leviathan;
[r]You gave him as food for the [s]creatures of the
wilderness.***

15

[t]You broke open springs and torrents;

[u]You dried up ever-flowing streams.

16

Yours is the day, Yours also is the night;

[v]You have prepared the [w]light and the sun.

17

[x]You have established all the boundaries of the earth;

[y]You have [z]made summer and winter.

Look at the words of this section...

You divided...

You broke...

You crushed...

You gave...

You broke...

You dried up...

You prepared....

You established....

You made...

And if you look closely at your Bible, you may have notes by each of these verses...

And the reason for that is that the Hebrew stresses the fact that God did these things all by Himself...

The literal translation would be...

You Yourself divided....

You yourself crushed...

Your yourself established...

The psalmist wrote this in such a way to stress that God acted alone when he did these acts of deliverance in the past....

He didn't need the help of the people or of someone else....

God can deliver and he has delivered all by Himself...

This is the power of God...

Now, this doesn't mean we don't to the doctor when we are sick....

God may use the doctors to help and heal us...

But God never needs a doctor if he has decided to deliver someone from a sickness...

This doesn't mean we live recklessly and foolishly and take for granted God's protection of us...

But God can protect us even in our foolishness and recklessness...

All the psalmist has to do to calm his anxious heart is list the works of God from history past and he is calmed....

The God who divided the sea can protect me from my enemies...

The God who made the sun and moon can surely make me a way out of a trial...

The God who established the boundaries of the world can certainly establish a boundary of protection around me...

Our enormous trials are but small problems for the power of God...

So many people are so dramatic today...

Their issues is the most pressing issue in the world..

Their problems are problems that no one has ever faced...

Their situation is worse than anything anyone else has ever experienced...

Yet the truth of the matter is this..

God has seen worse and delivered more fully in other matters....

For the people of God, we may be in trouble at times, but God's power runs much deeper than the problems of our life....

Israel may have been overwhelmed by her enemies, but God was never overwhelmed by her problems...

His power is made perfect in our weakness, and when we are weak, we simply need to be reminded that He is strong...

And the evidence of His strength is all around us...

When you are down, look up at the sky and be reminded that the God who put all of creation together is certainly able to put your life back together...

So, when persecution comes, we plead God's promises and we praise God's power....

One final way to respond to persecution and it is found in verses 18-23...

III. We Pray for God's Protection (18-23)

Verse 18....

18

Remember this, [aa]O Lord, that the enemy has reviled,

And a foolish people has spurned Your name.

19

Do not deliver the soul of Your turtledove to the wild beast;

Do not forget the life of Your afflicted forever.

20

Consider the covenant;

For the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence.

21

Let not the oppressed return dishonored;

Let the afflicted and needy praise Your name.

22

Arise, O God, and plead Your own cause;

Remember [ab]how the foolish man reproaches You all day long.

23

Do not forget the voice of Your adversaries,

The uproar of those who rise against You which ascends continually.

The final part of psalm 74 is a simple plea for help...

Israel simply needed God to deliver them from this persecution of the enemy...

They wanted their enemies defeated...

And I love how the psalmist puts in in verse 19....

19

Do not deliver the soul of Your turtledove to the wild beast;

This is the picture of protection...

God's people are the harmless bird and Satan is the roaring lion seeking to devour...

God's people need protection and help to avoid the beast, so they plead for God to help them...

And then verse 20...

Consider the covenant...

What covenant is the psalmist referring to?

The Abrahamic covenant, where God promised to bless Abraham and give him a land and a name and a people forever and ever...

This is the convenient that ensures God's salvation of redemption of Israel in the future as well...

I have used this before but kids are experts at covenants...

My 4 year old understands covenants and reminds me of them all the time....

Dad, you promised to help me build a tent in the living room tonight...

Mom, you told me I could have a pack of M&Ms...

This is how a 4 year old sees the world...

A series of promises made to be kept...

Our God is a Father who keeps His covenant promises too...

And when we call on him to keep His word, we are acting as his children....

The psalmist is doing what kids learn to do from a very early age...

He is asking God to keep His promises, and again this isn't a bad thing to do....

God isn't insulted...

He is honored that you remember and call upon
Him to keep it...

Israel needed help and they are reminding God that
he has promised Abraham's descendants a land and
a blessing forever...

And if God doesn't answer, his enemies win and his
name is dragged through the mud...

So, the psalmist calls on God to remember the na-
tion and send help...

And look, that is a great way to respond to persecu-
tion...

Ask God to remember his covenant with you...

Now, let me be clear....

God's covenant with us is different than his
covenant with Israel...

We aren't promised a land and we aren't promised
to be the nation that brings a Savior into the
world...

But we promised a few things as the people of God
in this age...

One is this....

The gates of hell wont prevail against the church...

When we see the church suffering, remind God of his promise to us that the church will endure against all evil...

Another promise of God to us personally is persecution is for our good...

So ask God to teach you quickly so that the trials can end and your faith can be strengthened...

We also have the promise that God will not leave us or forsake us and that nothing can separate us from His love for us...

Conclusion

As we draw this psalm to a close, let me highlight one other interesting thing about this psalm...

And it is this...

There is never a sense of relief granted...

A lot of psalms end on a good note...

The psalmist feels better....

Help has come...

Deliverance is delivered..

But not here...

Now history lets us know that Israel was granted relief...

They were allowed to come back to their land, rebuild a smaller temple and experience some prosperity..

I want to be real honest here...

I know a lot of people want revival of the American church...

And certainly I would love to see that, but to be really transparent with you, I don't see that coming anytime soon...

Now, that leads me with a question?

Does that mean I shouldn't pray this prayer?

Absolutely not!

WE don't pray and assume relief...

We pray to bring God into our troubles and open our hearts to Him....

We pray to get endurance and hope and experience the blessing of talking to our God...

The psalmist here didn't get an answer within the psalm he wrote, and we may never get an answer to the prayers we pray...

But the comfort is this...

We are praying to a God who listens and can answer if he so desires...

Persecution may never leave the church in America, but that is okay...

Fire refines the people and purifies the church...

The church always grows best when it is attacked, and though we may prefer a society that loves the church...

WE must remember that the church is more powerful when the society hates it...

Because the persecuted church is made of people truly committed to the Lord..

Psalm 74 is a model for us today who live in a culture that attacks us as believers...

We aren't to call to fight back, but we are called to plead to God, to praise His power, and to ask for his protection....

The church doesn't respond to attack with the sword and gun, but with praise and pleading...

Let us pray tonight...