

PSALM 74

This psalm does so particularly describe the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, by Nebuchadnezzar and the army of the Chaldeans, and can so ill be applied to any other event we meet with in the Jewish history, that interpreters incline to think that either it was penned by David, or Asaph in David's time, with a prophetic reference to that sad event (which yet is not so probable), or that it was penned by another Asaph, who lived at the time of the captivity, or by Jeremiah (for it is of a piece with his Lamentations,) or some other prophet, and, after the return out of captivity, was delivered to the sons of Asaph, who were called by his name, for the public service of the church. That was the most eminent family of the singers in Ezra's time. See ^{<B2B>}Ezra 2:41; 3:10; ^{<B17>}Nehemiah 11:17, 22; 12:35, 46. The deplorable case of the people of God at that time is here spread before the Lord, and left with him. The prophet, in the name of the church

- I.** Puts in complaining pleas of the miseries they suffered, for the quickening of their desires in prayer (v. 1-11).
- II.** He puts in comfortable pleas for the encouraging of their faith in prayer (v. 12-17).
- III.** He concludes with divers petitions to God for deliverances (v. 18-23). In singing it we must be affected with the former desolations of the church, for we are members of the same body, and may apply it to any present distresses or desolations of any part of the Christian church.

^{<B4>}PSALM 74:1-11

MOURNFUL COMPLAINTS

Maschil of Asaph.

This psalm is entitled *Maschil* — a psalm to give instruction, for it was penned in a day of affliction, which is intended for instruction; and this instruction in general it gives us, That when we are, upon any account, in distress, it is our wisdom and duty to apply to God by faithful and fervent

prayer, and we shall not find it in vain to do so. Three things the people of God here complain of: —

I. The displeasure of God against them, as that which was the cause and bitterness of all their calamities. They look above the instruments of their trouble, who, they knew, could have no power against them unless it were given them from above, and keep their eye upon God, by whose determined counsel they were delivered up into the hands of wicked and unreasonable men. Observe the liberty they take to expostulate with God (v. 1), we hope not too great a liberty, for Christ himself, upon the cross, cried out, *My God my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* So the church here, *O God! why hast thou forsaken us for ever?* Here they speak according to their present dark and melancholy apprehensions; for otherwise, *Has God cast away his people? God forbid,* ⁽⁵¹¹⁾Romans 11:1. The people of God must not think that because they are cast down they are therefore cast off, that because men cast them off therefore God does, and that because he seems to cast them off for a time therefore they are really cast off for ever: yet this expostulation intimates that they dreaded God's casting them off more than any thing, that they desired to be owned of him, whatever they suffered from men, and were desirous to know wherefore he thus contended with them: *Why does thy anger smoke?* that is, why does it rise up to such a degree that all about us take notice of it, and ask, *What means the heat of this great anger?* ⁽⁵²⁴⁾Deuteronomy 29:24. Compare v. 20, where the anger of the Lord and his jealousy are said to smoke against sinners. Observe what they plead with God, now that they lay under the tokens and apprehensions of his wrath.

1. They plead their relation to him: “We are *the sheep of thy pasture*, the sheep wherewith thou hast been pleased to stock the pasture, thy peculiar people whom thou art pleased to set apart for thyself and design for thy own glory. That the wolves worry the sheep is not strange; but was ever any shepherd thus displeased at his own sheep? *Remember, we are thy congregation* (v. 2), incorporated by thee and for thee, and devoted to thy praise; we are *the rod*, or tribe, *of thy inheritance*, whom thou hast been pleased to claim a special property in above other people (⁽⁵³³⁾Deuteronomy 32:9), and from whom thou hast received the rents and issues of praise and worship more than from the neighbouring nations. Nay, a man's inheritance may lie at a great distance, but we are pleading for *Mount Zion, wherein thou hast dwelt*, which has been the place of thy peculiar delight and residence, thy demesne and mansion.”

2. They plead the great things God had done for them and the vast expense he had been at upon them: “It is *thy congregation*, which thou hast not only made with a word's speaking, but *purchased of old* by many miracles of mercy when they were first formed into a people; it is *thy inheritance*, which thou hast redeemed when they were sold into servitude.” God gave Egypt to ruin for their ransom, gave men for them, and people for their life, ^{288B} Isaiah 43:3, 4. “Now, Lord, wilt thou now abandon a people that cost thee so dear, and has been so dear to thee?” And, if the redemption of Israel out of Egypt was an encouragement to hope that he would not cast them off, much more reason have we to hope that God will not cast off any whom Christ has redeemed with his own blood; but the people of his purchase shall be for ever the people of his praise.

3. They plead the calamitous state that they were in (v. 3): “*Lift up thy feet*; that is, come with speed to repair the desolations that are made in thy sanctuary, which otherwise will be perpetual an irreparable.” It has been sometimes said that the divine vengeance strikes with iron hands, yet it comes with leaden feet; and then those who wait for the day of the Lord, cry, *Lord, lift up thy feet; exalt thy steps*; magnify thyself in the outgoing of thy providence. When the desolations of the sanctuary have continued long we are tempted to think they will be perpetual; but it is a temptation; for God will avenge his own elect, will avenge them speedily, though he bear long with their oppressors and persecutors.

II. They complain of the outrage and cruelty of their enemies, not so much, no, not at all, of what they had done to the prejudice of their secular interests; here are no complaints of the burning of their cities and ravaging of their country, but only what they had done against the sanctuary and the synagogue. The concerns of religion should lie nearer our hearts and affect us more than any worldly concern whatsoever. The desolation of God's house should grieve us more than the desolation of our own houses; for the matter is not great what becomes of us and our families in this world provided God's name may be sanctified, his kingdom may come, and his will be done.

1. The psalmist complains of the desolations of the sanctuary, as Daniel, ²⁹⁷ Daniel 9:17. The temple at Jerusalem was the *dwelling-place of God's name*, and therefore the *sanctuary*, or *holy place*, v. 7. In this the enemies did wickedly (v. 3), for they destroyed it in downright contempt of God and affront to him.

(1.) They roared in the midst of God's congregations, v. 4. There where God's faithful people attended on him with a humble reverent silence, or softly speaking, they roared in a riotous revelling manner, being elated with having made themselves masters of that sanctuary of which they had sometimes heard formidable things.

(2.) They set up their ensigns for signs. The banners of their army they set up in the temple (Israel's strongest castle, as long as they kept closely to God) as trophies of their victory. There, where the signs of God's presence used to be, now the enemy had set up their ensigns. This daring defiance of God and his power touched his people in a tender part.

(3.) They took a pride in destroying the carved work of the temple. As much as formerly men thought it an honour to lend a hand to the building of the temple, and he was thought famous that helped to fell timber for that work, so much now they valued themselves upon their agency in destroying it, v. 5, 6. Thus, as formerly those were celebrated for wise men that did service to religion, so now those are applauded as wits that help to run it down. Some read it thus: *They show themselves, as one that lifts up axes on high in a thicket of trees*, for so do they break down the carved work of the temple they make no more scruple of breaking down the rich wainscot of the temple than woodcutters do of hewing trees in the forest; such indignation have they at the sanctuary that the most curious carving that ever was seen is beaten down by the common soldiers without any regard had to it, either as a dedicated thing or as a piece of exquisite art.

(4.) They set fire to it, and so violated or destroyed it to the ground, v. 7. The Chaldeans burnt the house of God, that stately costly fabric, ⁴⁸⁹2 Chronicles 36:19. And the Romans left not there one stone upon another (⁴⁸⁴Matthew 24:2), rasing it, rasing it, even to the foundations, till Zion, the holy mountain, was, by Titus Vespasian, ploughed as a field.

2. He complains of the desolations of the synagogues, or schools of the prophets, which, before the captivity, were in use, though much more afterwards. There God's word was read and expounded, and his name praised and called upon, without altars or sacrifices. These also they had a spite to (v. 8): *Let us destroy them together*; not only the temple, but all the places of religious worship and the worshippers with them. *Let us destroy them together*; let them be consumed in the same flame. Pursuant to this impious resolve they burnt up all the synagogues of God in the land and laid them all waste. So great was their rage against religion that the

religious houses, because religious, were all levelled with the ground, that God's worshippers might not glorify God, and edify one another, by meeting in solemn assemblies.

III. The great aggravation of all these calamities was that they had no prospect at all of relief, nor could they foresee an end of them (v. 9): “We see our enemy's sign set up in the sanctuary, but *we see not our signs*, none of the tokens of God's presence, no hopeful indications of approaching deliverance. *There is no more any prophet* to tell us how long the trouble will last and when things concerning us shall have an end, that the hope of an issue at last may support us under our troubles.” In the captivity in Babylon they had prophets, and had been told how long the captivity should continue, but the day was cloudy and dark (^{<3542>}Ezekiel 34:12), and they had not as yet the comfort of these gracious discoveries. God spoke once, yea, twice, good words and comfortable words, but they perceived them not. Observe, They do not complain, “We see not our armies; there are no men of war to command our forces, nor any to go forth with our hosts;” but, “no prophets, none to tell us how long.” This puts them upon expostulating with God, as delaying,

1. To assert his honour (v. 10): *How long shall the adversary reproach and blaspheme thy name?* In the desolations of the sanctuary our chief concern should be for the glory of God, that it may not be injured by the blasphemies of those who persecute his people for his sake, because they are his; and therefore our enquiry should be, not “How long shall we be troubled?” but “How long shall God be blasphemed?”

2. To exert his power (v. 11): “*Why withdrawest thou thy hand, and dost not stretch it out, to deliver thy people and destroy thy enemies? Pluck it out of thy bosom, and be not as a man astonished, as a mighty man that cannot save, or will not,*” ^{<2449>}Jeremiah 14:9. When the power of enemies is most threatening it is comfortable to fly to the power of God.

^{<1742>}PSALM 74:12-17

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS OF DIVINE POWER

The lamenting church fastens upon something here which she calls to mind, and *therefore hath she hope* (as ^{<2111>}Lamentations 3:21), with which

she encourages herself and silences her own complaints. Two things quiet the minds of those that are here sorrowing for the solemn assembly: —

I. That God is the God of Israel, a God in covenant with his people (v. 12): *God is my King of old*. This comes in both as a plea in prayer to God (^{<310>}Psalm 44:4, *thou art my King, O God!*) and as a prop to their own faith and hope, to encourage themselves to expect deliverance, considering the *days of old*, ^{<371>}Psalm 77:5. The church speaks as a complex body, the same in every age, and therefore calls God, “My King, my King of old,” or, “from antiquity;” he of old put himself into that relation to them and appeared and acted for them in that relation. As Israel's King, he wrought salvation in the midst of the nations of the earth; for what he did, in the government of the world, tended towards the salvation of his church. Several things are here mentioned which God had done for his people as their King of old, which encouraged them to commit themselves to him and depend upon him.

1. He had divided the sea before them when they came out of Egypt, not by the strength of Moses or his rod, but by his own strength; and he that could do that could do any thing.

2. He had destroyed Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Pharaoh was the *leviathan*; the Egyptians were *the dragons*, fierce and cruel. Observe,

(1.) The victory obtained over these enemies. God broke their heads, baffled their politics, as when Israel, the more they were afflicted by them, multiplied the more. God crushed their powers, though complicated, ruined their country by ten plagues, and at last drowned them all in the Red Sea. *This is Pharaoh and all his multitude*, ^{<371>}Ezekiel 31:18. It was the Lord's doing; none besides could do it, and he did it with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. This was typical of Christ's victory over Satan and his kingdom, pursuant to the first promise, that the seed of the woman should break the serpent's head.

(2.) The improvement of this victory for the encouragement of the church: *Thou gavest him to be meat to the people of Israel*, now going to *inhabit the wilderness*. The spoil of the Egyptians enriched them; they stripped their slain, and so got the Egyptians' arms and weapons, as before they had got their jewels. Or, rather, this providence was meat to their faith and hope, to support and encourage them in reference to the other difficulties they were likely to meet with in the wilderness. It was part of the spiritual

meat which they were all made to eat of. Note, The breaking of the heads of the church's enemies is the joy and strength of the hearts of the church's friends. Thus the companions make a banquet even of leviathan, ~~Job~~ Job 41:6.

3. God had both ways altered the course of nature, both in fetching streams out of the rock and turning streams into rock, v. 15.

(1.) He had dissolved the rock into waters: *Thou didst bring out the fountain and the flood* (so some read it); and every one knows whence it was brought, out of the rock, out of the flinty rock. Let this never be forgotten, but let it especially be remembered that the rock was Christ, and the waters out of it were spiritual drink.

(2.) He had congealed the waters into rock: *Thou driedst up mighty rapid rivers*, Jordan particularly at the time when it overflowed all its banks. He that did these things could now deliver his oppressed people, and break the yoke of the oppressors, as he had done formerly; nay, he would do it, for his justice and goodness, his wisdom and truth, are still the same, as well as his power.

II. That the God of Israel is the God of nature, v. 16, 17. It is he that orders the regular successions and revolutions,

1. Of day and night. He is the Lord of all time. The evening and the morning are of his ordaining. It is he that opens the eyelids of the morning light, and draws the curtains of the evening shadow. *He has prepared the moon and the sun* (so some read it), the two great lights, to rule by day and by night alternately. The preparing of them denotes their constant readiness and exact observance of their time, which they never miss a moment.

2. Of summer and winter: "Thou hast *appointed all the bounds of the earth*, and the different climates of its several regions, for *thou hast made summer and winter*, the frigid and the torrid zones; or, rather, the constant revolutions of the year and its several seasons." Herein we are to acknowledge God, from whom all the laws and powers of nature are derived; but how does this come in here?

(1.) He that had power at first to settle, and still to preserve, this course of nature by the diurnal and annual motions of the heavenly bodies, has

certainly all power both to save and to destroy, and with him nothing is impossible, nor are any difficulties or oppositions insuperable.

(2.) He that is faithful to his covenant with the day and with the night, and preserves the ordinances of heaven inviolable will certainly make good his promise to his people and never cast off those whom he has chosen, ~~2885~~Jeremiah 31:35, 36; 33:20, 21. His covenant with Abraham and his seed is as firm as that with Noah and his sons, ~~0081~~Genesis 8:21.

(3.) Day and night, summer and winter, being counterchanged in the course of nature, throughout all the borders of the earth, we can expect no other than that trouble and peace, prosperity and adversity, should be, in like manner, counterchanged in all the borders of the church. We have as much reason to expect affliction as to expect night and winter. But we have then no more reason to despair of the return of comfort than we have to despair of day and summer.

~~1748~~ PSALM 74:18-23

PLEADING WITH GOD

The psalmist here, in the name of the church, most earnestly begs that God would appear for them against their enemies, and put an end to their present troubles. To encourage his own faith, he interests God in this matter (v. 22): *Arise, O God! plead thy own cause.* This we may be sure he will do, for he is jealous for his own honour; whatever is his own cause he will plead it with a strong hand, will appear against those that oppose it and with and for those that cordially espouse it. He will arise and plead it, though for a time he seems to neglect it; he will stir up himself, will manifest himself, will do his own work in his own time. Note, The cause of religion is God's own cause and he will certainly plead it. Now, to make it out that the cause is God's, he pleads,

I. That the persecutors are God's sworn enemies: "Lord, they have not only abused us, but they have been, and are, abusive to thee; what is done against us, for thy sake, does, by consequence, reflect upon thee. But that is not all; they have directly and immediately reproached thee, and *blasphemed thy name,*" v. 18. This was that which they roared in the sanctuary; they triumphed as if they had now got the mastery of the God is

Israel, of whom they had heard such great things. As nothing grieves the saints more than to hear God's name blasphemed, so nothing encourages them more to hope that God will appear against their enemies than when they have arrived at such a pitch of wickedness as to reproach God himself; this fills the measure of their sins apace and hastens their ruin. The psalmist insists much upon this: "We dare not answer their reproaches; Lord, do thou answer them. Remember that the *foolish people have blasphemed thy name* (v. 18) and that still *the foolish man reproaches thee daily.*" Observe the character of those that reproach God; they are foolish. As atheism is folly (³⁹⁴Psalm 14:1), profaneness and blasphemy are no less so. Perhaps those are cried up as the wits of the age that ridicule religion and sacred things; but really they are the greatest fools, and will shortly be made to appear so before all the world. And yet see their malice — They reproach God daily, as constantly as his faithful worshippers pray to him and praise him; see their impudence — They do not hide their blasphemous thoughts in their own bosoms, but proclaim them with a loud voice (*forget not the voice of thy enemies*, v. 23), and this with a daring defiance of divine justice; they *rise up against thee*, and by their blasphemies even wage war with heaven and take up arms against the Almighty. Their noise and *tumult ascend continually* (so some), as the cry of Sodom came up before God, calling for vengeance, ⁴¹²Genesis 18:21. *It increases continually* (so we read it); they grow worse and worse, and are hardened in their impieties by their successes. Now, Lord, *remember this; do not forget it.* God needs not to be put in remembrance by us of what he has to do, but thus we must show our concern for his honour and believe that he will vindicate us.

II. That the persecuted are his covenant-people.

1. See what distress they are in. They have fallen into the hands of *the multitude of the wicked*, v. 19. *How are those increased that trouble them!* There is no standing before an enraged multitude, especially like these, armed with power; and, as they are numerous, so they are barbarous: *The dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty.* The land of the Chaldeans, where there was none of the light of the knowledge of the true God (though otherwise it was famed for learning and arts), was indeed a dark place; the inhabitants of it were *alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that was in them*, and therefore they were cruel: where there was no true divinity there was scarcely to be found common humanity. They were especially cruel to the people of God; certainly those

have no knowledge who *eat them up*, ^{<BIB>}Psalm 14:4. They are oppressed (v. 21) because they are poor and unable to help themselves; they are oppressed, and so impoverished and made poor.

2. See what reason they had to hope that God would appear for their relief and not suffer them to be always thus trampled upon. Observe how the psalmist pleads with God for them.

(1.) “It is *thy turtle-dove* that is ready to be swallowed up by the multitude of the wicked,” v. 19. The church is a dove for harmlessness and mildness, innocency and inoffensiveness, purity and fruitfulness, a dove for mournfulness in a day of distress, a turtle-dove for fidelity and the constancy of love: turtle-doves and pigeons were the only fowls that were offered in sacrifice to God. “Shall thy turtle-dove, that is true to thee and devoted to thy honour, be delivered, its life and soul and all, into the *hand of the multitude of the wicked*, to whom it will soon become an easy and acceptable prey? Lord, it will be thy honour to help the weak, especially to help thy own.”

(2.) “It is *the congregation of thy poor*, and they are not the less thine for their being poor (for God has *chosen the poor of this world*, ^{<BIB>}James 2:5), but they have the more reason to expect thou wilt appear for them because they are many: it is *the congregation of thy poor*; let them not be abandoned and forgotten for ever.”

(3.) “They are in covenant with thee; and wilt thou not *have respect unto the covenant*? v. 20. Wilt thou not perform the promises thou hast, in thy covenant, made to them? Wilt thou not own those whom thou hast brought into the bond of the covenant?” When God delivers his people it is *in remembrance of his covenant*, ^{<BIB>}Leviticus 26:42. “Lord, though we are unworthy to be respected, yet have respect to the covenant.”

(4.) “They trust in thee, and boast of their relation to thee and expectations from thee. O let not them return ashamed of their hope (v. 21), as they will be if they be disappointed.”

(5.) “If thou deliver them, they will praise thy name and give thee the glory of their deliverance. Appear, Lord, for those that will praise thy name, against those that blaspheme it.”