

PSALM 79

This psalm, if penned with any particular event in view, is with most probability made to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the woeful havoc made of the Jewish nation by the Chaldeans under Nebuchadnezzar. It is set to the same tune, as I may say, with the Lamentations of Jeremiah, and that weeping prophet borrows two verses out of it (v. 6, 7) and makes use of them in his prayer, ~~2415~~ Jeremiah 10:25. Some think it was penned long before by the spirit of prophecy, prepared for the use of the church in that cloudy and dark day. Others think that it was penned then by the spirit of prayer, either by a prophet named Asaph or by some other prophet for the sons of Asaph. Whatever the particular occasion was, we have here,

I. A representation of the very deplorable condition that the people of God were in at this time (v. 1-5).

II. A petition to God for succour and relief, that their enemies might be reckoned with (v. 6, 7, 10, 12), that their sins might be pardoned (v. 8, 9), and that they might be delivered (v. 11).

III. A plea taken from the readiness of his people to praise him (v. 13). In times of the church's peace and prosperity this psalm may, in the singing of it, give us occasion to bless God that we are not thus trampled on and insulted. But it is especially seasonable in a day of treading down and perplexity, for the exciting of our desires towards God and the encouragement of our faith in him as the church's patron.

~~3911~~ PSALM 79:1-5

MOURNFUL COMPLAINTS

A psalm of Asaph.

We have here a sad complaint exhibited in the court of heaven. The world is full of complaints, and so is the church too, for it suffers, not only with it, but from it, as *a lily among thorns*. God is complained to; whither should children go with their grievances, but to their father, to such a

father as is able and willing to help? The heathen are complained of, who, being themselves aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, were sworn enemies to it. Though they knew not God, nor owned him, yet, God having them in chain, the church very fitly appeals to him against them; for he is King of nations, to overrule them, to judge among the heathen, and King of saints, to favour and protect them.

I. They complain here of the anger of their enemies and the outrageous fury of the oppressor, exerted,

1. Against places, v. 1. They did all the mischief they could,

(1.) To the holy land; they invaded that, and made inroads into it: "*The heathen have come into thy inheritance, to plunder that, and lay it waste.*" Canaan was dearer to the pious Israelites as it was God's inheritance than as it was their own, as it was the land in which God was known and his name was great rather than as it was the land in which they were bred and born and which they and their ancestors had been long in possession of. note, Injuries done to religion should grieve us more than even those done to common right, nay, to our own right. We should better bear to see our own inheritance wasted than God's inheritance. This psalmist had mentioned it in the foregoing psalm as an instance of God's great favour to Israel that he had *cast out the heathen before them*, ~~Ps~~ Psalm 78:55. But see what a change sin made; now the heathen are suffered to pour in upon them.

(2.) To the holy city: *They have laid Jerusalem on heaps*, heaps of rubbish, such heaps as are raised over graves, so some. The inhabitants were buried in the ruins of their own houses, and their dwelling places became their sepulchres, their long homes.

(3.) To the holy house. That sanctuary which God had built like high palaces, and which was thought to be established as the earth, was now laid level with the ground: *They holy temple have they defiled*, by entering into it and laying it waste. God's own people had defiled it by their sins, and therefore God suffered their enemies to defile it by their insolence.

2. Against persons, against the bodies of God's people; and further their malice could not reach.

(1.) They were prodigal of their blood, and killed them without mercy; their eye did not spare, nor did they give any quarter (v. 3): *Their blood*

have they shed like water, wherever they met with them, round about Jerusalem, in all the avenues to the city; whoever went out or came in was waited for of the sword. Abundance of human blood was shed, so that the channels of water ran with blood. And they shed it with no more reluctance or regret than if they had spilt so much water, little thinking that every drop of it will be reckoned for in the day when *God shall make inquisition for blood.*

(2.) They were abusive to their dead bodies. When they had killed them they would let none bury them. Nay, those that were buried, even the *dead bodies of God's servants, the flesh of his saints*, whose names and memories they had a particular spite at, they dug up again, and *gave them to be meat to the fowls of the heaven and to the beasts of the earth*; or, at least, they left those so exposed whom they slew; they hung them in chains, which was in a particular manner grievous to the Jews to see, because God had given them an express law against this, as a barbarous thing, ⁽⁶²³⁾Deuteronomy 21:23. This inhuman usage of Christ's witnesses is foretold (⁽⁶¹⁹⁾Revelation 11:9), and thus even the dead bodies were witnesses against their persecutors. This is mentioned (says Austin, *De Civitate Dei, lib. 1 cap. 12*) not as an instance of the misery of the persecuted (for the bodies of the saints shall rise in glory, however they became meat to the birds and the fowls), but of the malice of the persecutors.

3. Against their names (v. 4): “*We that survive have become a reproach to our neighbours*; they all study to abuse us and load us with contempt, and represent us as ridiculous, or odious, or both, upbraiding us with our sins and with our sufferings, or giving the lie to our relation to God and expectations from him; so that we have become *a scorn and derision to those that are round about us.*” If God's professing people degenerate from what themselves and their fathers were, they must expect to be told of it; and it is well if a just reproach will help to bring us to a true repentance. But it has been the lot of the gospel-Israel to be made unjustly a reproach and derision; the apostles themselves were *counted as the offscouring of all things.*

II. They wonder more at God's anger, v. 5. This they discern in the anger of their neighbours, and this they complain most of: *How long, Lord, wilt thou be angry? Shall it be for ever?* This intimates that they desired no more than that God would be reconciled to them, that his anger might be

turned away, and then the remainder of men's wrath would be restrained. Note, Those who desire God's favour as better than life cannot but dread and deprecate his wrath as worse than death.

PSALM 79:6-13

PETITIONS FOR SUCCOUR AND RELIEF

The petitions here put up to God are very suitable to the present distresses of the church, and they have pleas to enforce them, interwoven with them, taken mostly from God's honour.

I. They pray that God would so turn away his anger from them as to turn it upon those that persecuted and abused them (v. 6): “*Pour out thy wrath, the full vials of it, upon the heathen; let them wring out the dregs of it, and drink them.*” This prayer is in effect a prophecy, in which the *wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.* Observe here,

1. The character of those he prays against; they are such as have not known God, nor called upon his name. The reason why men do not call upon God is because they do not know him, how able and willing he is to help them. Those that persist in ignorance of God, and neglect of prayer, are the ungodly, who live *without God in the world.* There are kingdoms that know not God and obey not the gospel, but neither their multitude nor their force united will secure them from his just judgments.

2. Their crime: *They have devoured Jacob,* v. 7. That is crime enough in the account of him who reckons that those who touch his people touch the apple of his eye. They have not only disturbed, but devoured, Jacob, not only encroached upon his dwelling place, the land of Canaan, but laid it waste by plundering and depopulating it.

(3.) Their condemnation: “*Pour out thy wrath upon them; do not only restrain them from doing further mischief, but reckon with them for the mischief they have done.*”

II. They pray for the pardon of sin, which they own to be the procuring cause of all their calamities. How unrighteous soever men were, God was righteous in permitting them to do what they did. They pray,

1. That God would not *remember against them their former iniquities* (v. 8), either their own former iniquities, that now, when they were old, they might not be made to possess the iniquities of their youth, or the former iniquities of their people, the sins of their ancestors. In the captivity of Babylon former iniquities were brought to account; but God promises not again to do so (²⁶¹⁹Jeremiah 31:29, 30), and so they pray, “Remember not against us our first sins,” which some make to look as far back as the golden calf, because God said, *In the day when I visit I will visit for this sin of theirs upon them*, ²⁷³¹Exodus 32:34. If the children by repentance and reformation cut off the entail of the parents' sin, they may in faith pray that God will not *remember them against them*. When God pardons sin he blots it out and remembers it no more.

2. That he would purge away the sins they had been lately guilty of, by the guilt of which their minds and consciences had been defiled: *Deliver us, and purge away our sins*, v. 9. Then deliverances from trouble are granted in love, and are mercies indeed, when they are grounded upon the pardon of sin and flow from that; we should therefore be more earnest with God in prayer for the removal of our sins than for the removal of our afflictions, and the pardon of them is the foundation and sweetness of our deliverances.

III. They pray that God would work deliverance for them, and bring their troubles to a good end and that speedily: *Let thy tender mercies speedily prevent us*, v. 8. They had no hopes but from God's mercies, his tender mercies; their case was so deplorable that they looked upon themselves as the proper objects of divine compassion, and so near to desperate that, unless divine mercy did speedily interpose to prevent their ruin, they were undone. This whets their importunity: “*Lord, help us; Lord, deliver us; help us under our troubles, that we may bear them well; help us out of our troubles, that the spirit may not fail. Deliver us from sin, from sinking.*” Three things they plead: —

1. The great distress they were reduced to: “*We are brought very low*, and, being low, shall be lost if thou help us not.” The lower we are brought the more need we have of help from heaven and the more will divine power be magnified in raising us up.

2. Their dependence upon him: “*Thou art the God of our salvation, who alone canst help. Salvation belongs to the Lord, from whom we expect*

help; for *in the Lord alone is the salvation of his people.*” Those who make God the God of their salvation shall find him so.

3. The interest of his own honour in their case. They plead no merit of theirs; they pretend to none; but, “*Help us for the glory of thy name; pardon us for thy name's sake.*” The best encouragements in prayer are those that are taken from God only, and those things whereby he has made himself known. Two things are insinuated in this plea: —

(1.) That God's name and honour would be greatly injured if he did not deliver them; for those that derided them blasphemed God, as if he were weak and could not help them, or had withdrawn and would not; therefore they plead (v. 10), “*Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is their God? He has forsaken them, and forgotten them; and this they get by worshipping a God whom they cannot see.*” (*Nil praeter nubes et coeli numen adorant. Juv. — They adore no other divinity than the clouds and the sky.*) That which was their praise (that they served a God that is every where) was now turned to their reproach and his too, as if they served a God that is nowhere. “Lord,” say they, “Make it to appear that thou art by making it to appear that thou art with us and for us, that when we are asked, *Where is your God?* we may be able to say, He is nigh unto us in all that which we call upon him for, and you see he is so by what he does for us.”

(2.) That God's name and honour would be greatly advanced if he did deliver them; his mercy would be glorified in delivering those that were so miserable and helpless. By making bare his everlasting arm on their behalf he would make unto himself an everlasting name; and their deliverance would be a type and figure of the great salvation, which in the fulness of time Messiah the Prince would work out, to the glory of God's name.

IV. They pray that God would avenge them on their adversaries, 1. For their cruelty and barbarity (v. 10): “Let the avenging of our blood” (according to the ancient law, ¹⁰⁰⁶Genesis 9:6) “be known among the heathen; let them be made sensible that what judgments are brought upon them are punishments of the wrong they have done to us; let this be in our sight, and by this means *let God be known among the heathen as the God to whom vengeance belongs* (³⁹⁰¹Psalm 94:1) and the God that espouses his people's cause.” Those that have intoxicated themselves with the blood of the saints shall have *blood given them to drink*, for they are worthy.

2. For their insolence and scorn (v. 12): “*Render to them their reproach.* The indignities which by word and deed they have done to the people of God himself and his name let them be repaid to them with interest.” The reproach wherewith men have reproached us only we must leave it to God whether he will render to them or no, and must pray that he would forgive them; but the reproach wherewith they have blasphemed God himself we may in faith pray that God would render seven-fold into their bosoms, so as to strike at their hearts, to humble them, and bring them to repentance. This prayer is a prophecy, of the same import with that of Enoch, that God will convince sinners of all their hard speeches which they have spoken against him (⁴¹¹⁵Jude 1:15) and will return them into their own bosoms by everlasting terrors at the remembrance of them.

V. They pray that God would find out a way for the rescue of his poor prisoners, especially the condemned prisoners, v. 11. The case of their brethren who had fallen into the hands of the enemy was very sad; they were kept close prisoners, and, because they durst not be heard to bemoan themselves, they vented their griefs in deep and silent sighs. All their breathing was sighing, and so was their praying. They were appointed to die, as sheep for the slaughter, and had received the sentence of death within themselves. This deplorable case the psalmist recommends,

1. To the divine pity: “*Let their sighs come up before thee,* and be thou pleased to take cognizance of their moans.”

2. To the divine power: “*According to the greatness of thy arm,* which no creature can contest with, *preserve thou those that are appointed to die* from the death to which they are appointed.” Man's extremity is God's opportunity to appear for his people. See ⁴¹¹⁸2 Corinthians 1:8-10.

Lastly, They promise the returns of praise for the answers of prayer (v. 13): *So we will give thee thanks for ever.* Observe, 1. How they please themselves with their relation to God. “*Though we are oppressed and brought low, yet we are the sheep of thy pasture, not disowned and cast off by thee for all this: We are thine; save us.*” 2. How they promise themselves an opportunity of praising God for their deliverance, which they *therefore* desired, and would bid welcome, because it would furnish them with matter for thanksgiving and put their hearts in tune for that excellent work, the work of heaven.

3. How they oblige themselves not only to give God thanks at present, but to *show forth his praise unto all generations*, that is, to do all they could both to perpetuate the remembrance of God's favours to them and to engage their posterity to keep up the work of praise.

4. How they plead this with God: “Lord, appear for us against our enemies; for, if they get the better, they will *blaspheme thee* (v. 12); but, if we be delivered, we will praise thee. Lord, we are that people of thine which thou hast *formed for thyself, to show forth thy praise*; if we be cut off, whence shall that rent, that tribute, be raised?” Note, Those lives that are entirely devoted to God's praise are assuredly taken under his protection.