

# When God's people are scorned

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[ 0 : 00 ] The latest news section of Open Doors' website goes like this.! These are just some of the stories posted since the start of this year.

Last year, the independent newspaper reported that Christians are the world's most persecuted people, used as evidence from the International Society of Human Rights.

And this isn't just thousands of miles away. Last year, in Dublin, a Christian bakery was taken to court because they refused to bake a cake which featured the logo of our homosexual advocacy group.

In 2011, a Christian doctor in Kent faced losing his job because he spoke to a patient about how faith in Jesus could help his situation. God's people are being persecuted and always have been. God's people are being persecuted and always have been. God's people are being persecuted and always have been possible ways to respond when we face situations like these, based on how Asaph, the psalmist, could have and did respond to the situation he was in.

[ 1 : 54 ] I want to do this by working through a model which I've come across recently in the training group I'm part of at Christ Church. We're working through the How People Change course by Timothy Lane and Paul Tripp.

They suggest that in any situation we face in life, there are two possible ways to respond. One is without consideration of the cross, and one is having considered who God is and what he's done and what he continues to do for us.

The situation, I've got the picture behind me, is the heat. The crossless response is the thorns. Who God is and what he says and does is the cross.

And our response, having considered this, is the fruit. I want us to see that if our response to persecution is the right one, glory will be given to God and that this should be our aim.

If our response to persecution is the right one, glory will be given to God. Firstly, though, who wrote this psalm and what was going on at the time it was written?

[ 3 : 09 ] Psalm 79 is attributed to Asaph, along with around 10 other psalms. Asaph, or the sons of Asaph, also pop up in 1 and 2 Chronicles and Ezra.

Asaph himself was a Levite priest who lived during the reigns of Solomon, David, and Rehoboam in Jerusalem. He was made the director of music at the tent of meeting by David himself and continued this position when the temple was completed.

It was probably Asaph who set David's psalms to music. The sons of Asaph are likely to be the musicians and poets Asaph was in charge of as director of music.

And this name was used to describe people with these responsibilities from then on. Asaph was probably alive during the time when Shashik, the king of Egypt, attacked Jerusalem, when Rehoboam was king in 927 BC, recorded in 2 Chronicles 12.

Some suggest that Psalm 79 was written in response to this. But the words of the psalm seem to refer more to the complete fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, described in 2 Kings 25, where the Israelites were killed and left to be eaten by wild animals, whilst others were taken into captivity.

[ 4 : 35 ] It's therefore probable that this psalm was written by one of these sons of Asaph instead of Asaph himself. But I'll use the name Asaph when referring to the psalmist today.

So, back to this model. What was the heat for Asaph? And what is the heat for us today? At the time of writing, the temple had been defiled and Jerusalem...

Oh, sorry. The time the temple had been defiled and Jerusalem had been ruined, in verse 1, the servants of God had been killed.

And those that were still alive were being taunted, mocked, and derided by their enemy. Where is your God?

The enemy asked in verse 10. For God's people now, us, this persecution can be anything, from being laughed at and called bigoted, perhaps, to losing your home or your church building, to becoming a martyr.

[ 5 : 45 ] In 2,500 years, little has changed. So, what might Asaph and we want or believe as a result of the present situation, without thinking about who God is, what he's done, and what he continues to do for us?

What behavior could result from this? And what are the consequences of this behavior? These are the thorns in the model. It's the response we might make without God.

Firstly, the possible desires and beliefs. In his situation, Asaph could have found himself wanting what the other nations had.

Military success, riches, and security. And we can find ourselves wanting all the nice things that other people have. Wanting the easy life, where you don't have to defend yourself, and you just fit in society a little bit better.

Asaph could have thought that God is not in control. He's not powerful. Maybe God isn't loving, and he doesn't care about his people. Maybe God isn't there at all.

[ 6 : 58 ] If he was, surely he wouldn't allow his own name to be derided. And as soon as we forget something about who God is, we can have all these same thoughts.

God's not in control. He doesn't love us. He's not even there. And what behavior could result from Asaph and us thinking in this way?

Asaph could have stopped trusting God, and therefore stopped worrying about the derision God was facing. He could have taken the defeatist view that his situation would never improve, and live the remainder of his life bitterly.

He could even have adopted the lifestyle of those around him in exile, forgetting about the true God, and picking himself a new one from the catalog of Babylonian gods.

And as soon as we start believing that God isn't in control, we do start wandering away from him, making gods of other things, replacing God.

[ 8 : 02 ] There's also the danger of Christians taking this persecution into their own hands. A quick Google search reveals a lot of support for this idea. But this does not seem to be the pattern as the early church emerged and the persecution began.

John was exiled. Peter was put in prison. Paul was beaten. And Stephen was stoned. None of them fought back. So what could be the consequences of this possible behavior?

Ultimately, it drives us away from God. And as we get further away from God, more of this behavior happens, and it becomes a cycle.

Eventually, we're so far away from God, we've forgotten the problem we had in the first place. Or we've changed our Christianity so much that we're now in a position to deal with the problem ourselves.

Our lives will be guided by something other than God. We have a new God. It could be the God of possessions and seeming comfort that our oppressors have. It could be the God of sorting out all our own problems.

[ 9 : 15 ] It could be the God of self-pity. But these consequences are all as a result of one of God's people trying to deal with a situation without considering who God is and what he does right.

Sorry, what he does. Remember, if our response to persecution isn't the right one, is the right one, glory will be given to God, and this should be our aim. If our aim is not to bring glory to God, our response to this persecution cannot be the right one.

So we've identified the issue that God's people are facing in Asaph's day and how Christians can suffer similarly now.

But as a man of God, Asaph knew, and we should know, who God is and how particularly he's working to help in times of trial. This is the cross part of our model.

So who is God? What has he done? And what is he doing? We see from the psalm that Asaph knows that the God he prays to is compassionate.

[ 10 : 25 ] Verse 8. He knows he is the one who can truly bring salvation. Verse 9. He knows God has the power to preserve his people.

Verse 11. At this point for Asaph, though, it seems as though God hasn't provided much for his people recently. But there are two things that he is providing.

The fact that Asaph can write this psalm and pray this prayer with confidence that God will act is a provision in itself. Isaiah 65, verse 24, points out that God answers prayers as they're being said and sometimes before they're even spoken.

It says, Before they call, I will answer. While they are still speaking, I will hear. If God hadn't promised to listen to his people, there would be no hope of the promise in Ezekiel 18, verse 21. But if a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live. He shall not die.

[ 11 : 39 ] Secondly, God is providing the people with the awakening they need to actually turn away from their sin. We're all familiar with the regular pattern of the Israelites throughout the Old Testament.

They turn away from God and serve other gods. God judges them by allowing their enemies to defeat them. The people then cry out to the Lord. A judge or king is raised up to defeat their enemies and peace is restored.

The people had been led into sin as Solomon had turned away from God to idolatry. After 300 years of this, they had finally been taken away into exile as judgment for this.

And we've seen some of the details of what this entailed already. But this is what it took to keep the cycle moving. The next step was for the people to cry out to God.

And this is what Asaph is doing. Without Jerusalem and the temple's destruction, without many of the people being killed and left unburied, without the scorn and derision they now faced, they would have carried on in their lack of faith and not received the salvation promised.

[ 12 : 54 ] God is providing his people with exactly what they need. And God still provides exactly what his people need now.

The situations of persecution God's people find themselves in today are not because God is judging or rejecting them. Romans 8 verse 1 tells us that there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

But these situations are used to refine us, to strengthen us, and deepen our faith and trust in God. Have a look at James 1 verses 2 to 18 later.

As we think about judgment and the apparent rejection from God, it's worth reminding ourselves exactly what Christ went through at the cross.

As well as the worst physical death that humans could think of at the time, unlike us, he was judged and rejected by God there. Nearing his death, Jesus cried those famous words, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[ 14 : 06 ] As we've seen, God's apparent rejection of Israel was serving to bring them back to him. Joshua 1 verse 5 records God promising to Joshua that he will never leave or forsake him.

And Hebrews 13 verse 5 quotes these verses, showing their applicability to new testament believers to us.

But Jesus, who was in perfect relationship with God the Father, felt the real rejection of God as he took the punishment for the sins of many.

So as we feel deserted, we need to remember that we can pray to a God who in Jesus suffered a much more real rejection than we ever will.

Remember, if our response to persecution is the right one, glory will be given to God and this should be our aim. Having reminded ourselves of the cross and who God is as we face scorn and derision, how does our thinking and behavior change?

[ 15 : 15 ] What are the consequences of these changes? What fruit can be seen from these changes? What is the right response to persecution? Firstly, how did Asaph direct his heart based on who God is and what he had done?

How should we direct our hearts? How did Asaph direct his heart? How should we direct ours? Throughout the psalm, Asaph shows that his primary concern is God's glory.

He points out that God's holy temple had been defiled in verse one. God's servants had been killed, verse two. He points out that the people doing this do not call on God's name, verse six.

As the surrounding nations carry out their destruction, they ask themselves mockingly, where is their God? In verse 10. In other words, they're saying, your God is nothing more than a figment of your imaginations.

He is nothing. And Asaph points this out to God. In verse nine, Asaph shows that the only reason he's asking for help is for the glory of God's name.

[16:29] At no point through the psalm does Asaph question why it's happening or indicate that he thought it shouldn't be happening. He is solely concerned for God's own glory. Asaph is solely concerned for God's glory.

Asaph's attitude, even amongst this persecution, is summed up in verse 13. He recognizes that God's people still have things to be thankful for and still have reasons to praise the Lord. So this must be our attitude in times of trial and persecution too. First and foremost, we need to be concerned with God's name. As soon as we start feeling sorry for ourselves, we have stopped remembering the cross and who God is and we've started to trivialize the situation.

How can our own comfort in a tiny fraction of time compare with the glory due to our all-powerful, eternal, unchanging, all-knowing, truthful, good, gracious, merciful, and righteous God?

How can our own comfort in a tiny fraction of time compare with the glory due to God? As soon as we recognize that any persecution we face is actually persecution of God, our response in these situations should change.

[17:56] How did Asaph respond to this persecution in light of what he knew about God and what God had done and what he was doing? How should we respond? We see Asaph respond in three ways to this persecution.

He prays for judgment, he prays for forgiveness, and he praises God. So firstly, judgment. Asaph prays that God would send his judgment on the opposing nations three times in verses 6, 10, and 12.

He says, pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you. Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants be known among the nations and return sevenfold into the lap of our neighbours the taunts with which they have taunted you, O Lord.

Asaph entrusts the judgment of those who don't follow God's law to God. He doesn't take matters into his own hands. At Christchurch, we're currently following the Israelites through the book of Numbers.

We see here that as soon as they took matters into their own hands involving other nations, they were defeated. At other times, we read that God gave their enemies into their hands.

[19:13] His judgment came through his people, but it was God's decision and it was God's victory. Asaph doesn't even suggest how the judgment he's asking for should come about, but he knows he can boldly ask for this because, as we've seen, his primary concern is for God's glory.

As Christians in the Western world today, praying that God will judge may seem alien to us. We live in an age of tolerance and that mindset may influence the way we think.

We might tell ourselves it's intolerant to ask for judgment on those who have differing views to ours, but this is what the psalmist calls us to do. The Bible talks repeatedly about the judgment to come and our prayer for this shows our trust in God and his plan for the world.

Again, we shouldn't take matters into our own hands. 1 Corinthians 4, verse 5, says, therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

God will judge all those whose purposes of the heart were against him and who never repented of this, and it's not wrong to pray that this will happen.

[20:39] It would be wrong if that was all we prayed, though. So secondly, Asaph prays for forgiveness for the sins God's people had committed.

He recognizes that what Israel was going through was an act of judgment from God as a result of their disobedience to him. Deuteronomy 28, 25, says, The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies.

And verse 26, says, Your dead body shall be food for all the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away. Jeremiah 24, verse 9, says, I will make them a horror to all the nations of the earth to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them.

And Ezekiel 5, verse 14, says, I will make you a desolation and an object of reproach among the nations all around you when I execute judgments on you in anger and fury and with furious rebukes. Asaph knows that what he is describing is judgment from God. The only correct step to take when sin is realized is to repent and ask for forgiveness.

[ 22 : 02 ] And we see Asaph doing this in verse 8. Without repentance, the psalm would be a waste of breath and a waste of ink. We've seen already that God required this repentance in order for his people to be back in relationship with him.

He wouldn't carry out Asaph's position for judgment without the repentance too. And for us, as Christians facing persecution, the situation is not quite the same.

God may face us with these situations to refine and strengthen us and to deepen our trust in him, but never to judge us. We believe that Jesus has already taken the judgment that we deserved. But these situations may serve as a reminder to us that we are sinful and do need to be regularly confessing our sin to God whilst trusting in his grace and mercy.

And we may need to go further than just personal repentance in these situations. Could the reason we face persecution and God's name is derided be that Christians haven't stood up and defended the gospel in the past?

[ 23 : 23 ] Especially in a country like ours where we see this mocking and scorn of God and his people more and more. Could things have been said and actions taken to prevent God's law being rewritten by sinful humans?

We all have a part to play in preventing God's name being scorned. And I'll be the first to admit that I rarely play this part well. We need forgiveness for this and we need strength to do it better.

The third response of Asaph is to recognize his position as a sheep in God's pasture to give thanks to God and to praise him.

On a first read of this psalm verse 13 seems out of place. To the non-Christian reading this it would seem out of place. God and his people are being persecuted by the world but Asaph is thankful to God and praises him.

Why? We've seen all the way through that this situation had been engineered by God to bring his people back to him. We've seen the expectancy that Asaph prays with what he is praying for will happen.

[ 24 : 40 ] So Asaph is thankful that he was part of God's chosen people despite its current situation. He was thankful for all that God had revealed about himself which led to the confidence Asaph had in him.

We've seen the expectancy that sorry I said that bit. Yeah. So he was thankful for all that God had revealed about himself which led to the confidence Asaph had in him.

He was thankful that one day whether in his lifetime or not God would judge those in opposition to him and end the persecution he faced. And Asaph praises God for this and this should be our response this morning too.

Despite the opposition God's peoples face all over the world God is in control and we have the promise of a future judgment where all will bow their knee to God.

And we have the promise of eternal life free of pain and suffering for all God's people. Although we don't see it in the psalm there is a fourth response for God's people suffering from persecutors.

[ 25 : 57 ] In the sermon on the mount Jesus said love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. And Paul repeats this as he writes to Romans in chapter 12 verse 14.

Although we don't see Asaph doing this we are called to pray for those in opposition to God. We were in that position once but God saved us and we did nothing to contribute.

We're no better than anyone else and for this reason we should want all people to receive the free gift of grace just as we have. We must love those who persecute us.

The more and more we become like Jesus the more likely this becomes. It was Jesus who prayed for the forgiveness of those who had crucified him as he slowly died.

Whatever trials we face Jesus faced them more fully and Jesus shows us the perfect response to every situation. We need to pray for judgment pray for forgiveness praise God and pray for our persecutors in every situation that we find ourselves in.

[ 27 : 13 ] We need to do the same as we hear of our Christian brothers and sisters all over the world who are being persecuted. Lastly what are the consequences of responding to persecution in this way?

For Asaph and for Israel their repentance led to their gradual return to Israel from exile to rebuild Jerusalem and live together as God's people under God's rule again.

For us responding in the ways we've discussed will result in our relationships with God being strengthened as we trust him more for judgment and forgiveness.

It will result in us having more of an eternal perspective looking forward to the new heavens and earth God has promised as we see the brokenness of this world.

This response should result in us knowing how to deal with times of persecutions in the future and knowing what to do to possibly prevent them. Ultimately if our response to persecution is the right one glory will be given to God and this should be our aim.

[ 28 : 27 ] So how do we respond to persecution? to sum up we recognize that the glory of God is the most important thing. We remind ourselves of the thanks and praise God deserves whatever the situation.

We entrust judgment for persecution to God recognizing it is ultimately directed at him. We ensure our hearts are right before God repenting of sin personal and corporate.

We make use of the refining and strengthening God gives us and we pray for our persecutors that they would recognize God's authority and submit to it.

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Glory will be given to God. Glory will be given to God. given to God. Thank you.