

Grief with Hope

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[0 : 00] Well, if it's your practice, please do have your Bibles open at Psalm 74. There are terrible events which seem to define a generation.

If you are of a certain age, you might be asked the question, where were you when you heard that Kennedy was shot? Or more recently, where were you on September 11, 2001?

Events where the world seems to change overnight and the old certainties seem to be lost forever. For the people of Judah, no event was more traumatic or bitter than that which occurred in 587 BC when Babylon captured Jerusalem, destroyed its temple and sacked the city.

It left a deep psychological scar on the minds of God's people as they were left crying and weeping over the remains of what had been.

And this psalm is a lament of that destruction. It is a deep, anguished cry from the heart.

[1 : 34] And yet, I think for many of us, it might feel a little strange. Our society does not do laments anymore.

We might use the word. But as one commentator put it, it is natural that men should be moved by such destruction.

And it is a mark against the humanity of modern man that the 20th century's vast ruins from Stalingrad to Hiroshima stir no song, stir no poetry and small pity.

And we ourselves might wonder the same from all the awful destruction that we have seen only 20 years into the 21st century.

Even in the church, there can be a resistance to mourning those things that we ought to mourn. This will be different depending on the church environment that you grew up in or that you're in.

[2 : 43] But in some churches, there can be a level of superficiality. There can be a lack of realism, a constant drive to always be happy and smiling. Now, not every service needs to be sad.

We know there are times of great celebration in the Christian life. But to claim that every Sunday that everything is going to be great and we have to have a good time is surely a contradiction of common sense, let alone biblical teaching.

In other churches, the opposite can be true. It isn't that there is an air of superficiality, but an air of emotionlessness. Instead of pretending to be happy, people are pressured to keep a stiff upper lip, to pretend that nothing affects them, good or bad.

But this psalm will not let us get away with either attitude. The psalms call on us to be emotional. More than this, they train us how we ought to feel. What things should move us to joy?

[4 : 05] What should move us to sorrow? And that's right, isn't it? Because the psalms are a book of songs teaching us what it means to be Christ-like in worship.

And you cannot read the Gospels of the New Testament without being deeply impacted of the emotions of our Lord Jesus Christ as he walked the earth.

Whether of times of exaltation in the Spirit, through to times of weeping at the grave of a friend. This evening, this psalmist is teaching us when to be sorrowful, that there are times to weep.

But it isn't the grief of desperation, but one which looks to the Lord and gains hope from him. It is grieving, but it is grieving with real hope as well.

I want to take it in three parts. Firstly, weeping over the temple, verses 1 to 11.

[5 : 17] Secondly, remembering the truths about God, verses 12 to 17. And then finally, praying with real confidence, from verses 18 to the end.

Weeping, remembering, and then praying. So firstly, weeping over the temple, the psalmist weeps over the destruction of this temple.

He cannot understand why God allows it to continue as a ruin. The psalmist is in deep grief. He's wondering how long God will leave it in this state.

Will it be forever? However, he cannot make sense of it. After all, they are supposed to be the sheep of his pasture, the ones that he cares for, the flock which he himself brought out of Egyptian slavery.

He brought them through the wilderness to the promised land. They are his congregation. They are the religious community which he gave his own law to at Mount Sinai.

[6 : 24] They are the tribes of his heritage. The ones who he gave the promised land to, including Mount Zion, the very place where the temple was built.

The very place where God himself lived amongst his people. The whole of Israel's history was leading up to this point.

An earthly kingdom with God dwelling with his people. It should have been a source of joy. He purchased them. He redeemed them.

Yet when the psalmist compares what God's people should be to what they are now, there is only weeping. God's anger smokes against them, he says.

They seem to have been cast off forever. Was it all for nothing? Of course, thinking theologically, if we know our doctrine, we might be tempted to say, well, that's a silly question.

[7 : 35] Anyone who is truly a member of God's people and has been redeemed by him is eternally safe. God will keep them with him forever. Praise God.

But, when God is absent, or when darkness is closing in around you, doesn't it feel like forever? And as this psalmist looks across the empty rubble, he feels it. Especially as he says in verse 9, there is no prophet.

There is no one there to tell them how long this will last. The temple is gone. God is silent. It seems to be without end.

But the psalmist cries out to God in verse 3, direct your steps to the perpetual ruins. He calls on God to see, see what the enemy has done.

[8 : 38] In his sorrow, he wants to make sure the Lord knows the horrors that have been visited on his people. He wants him to acknowledge it. He doesn't want to just be transported away from it, to be distracted from it.

He wants God to come into the ruins with him and see the cause of his grief. It's as if he's reliving that terrible day in his mind, the escalating scale of the destruction when the city was sacked. Where once psalms of praise were sung, the enemy broke in and roared in the midst of the meeting place.

They were like wild beasts yelling and tearing the place apart. They put up signs, their military banners to show it belonged to them now.

The temple had been lined with carved wood panels, beautifully overlaid with gold, depicting a garden scene.

[9 : 44] The temple was like a new Eden in its beauty. But the enemy acts as if it is the darkest of forests.

They hack it apart. They tear down the panels with hatchets and hammers. They strip the gold off anything they can. And then finally, they set it on fire, burning the temple, tearing it down.

This place of holiness, this place of safety with their God has been utterly defiled.

I think it's hard for us to understand what that was like. A couple of months ago, there was a report from Steadfast Global, a group that works with persecuted Christians, I'm sure you know them, of Christians in Ethiopia who had come in one day and found that their churches had been smashed apart by people who opposed Christianity.

The pews and the chairs had been heaped in the middle of the building and had been set on fire. How would we feel? Upset?

[11 : 06] Angry? Confused? But for the Israelites, it was much worse. The temple was the only place they could meet with God.

It was the place they could sacrifice to him. And now, it was gone. The Babylonians burnt all the meeting places of God in the land.

There was nowhere left to worship. The psalmist doesn't understand why the Lord will not act for his people. How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?

Is the enemy to revile your name forever? Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them.

It's a bold plea to say to the Lord, stop holding back. Take out your right hand, the hand which carries a weapon, traditionally, and do something.

[12:14] But it isn't because the psalmist is unbelieving. Rather, in his grief, he wants something to happen. He wants change.

He wants relief. Are we grieved in the same way? Does the attack on the temple move us?

Now, today, obviously, there is no physical temple made of stone and wood. There hasn't been for 2,000 years.

But the New Testament teaches explicitly that we, his church, are the temple of God.

God. And as we read or sing a psalm like this, it should teach us to be grieved for the church when she is under attack, just as the psalmist was grieved by the destruction of the temple.

[13:18] We should have the deepest solidarity with our brothers and sisters around the world as they face persecution. When we read of Christians in Ethiopia or Syria or Iraq being executed because of their faith, Christians in India being murdered by Hindu extremists, Christians in North Korea being sent, well, to work camps from which they probably will not return, we are reading there of attacks on God's temple of which we are a part and they wound us as well.

But we don't just limit it to physical attacks. We're upset by the spiritual attacks on the church as well. False teaching is as damaging as an axe.

when it cuts into the Lord's church or disunity between churches and members which split apart the temple which God himself has built up.

Even within ourselves, we know the battles that are being fought, don't we? The battle being waged by sin and temptation wanting us to defile God's temple.

So, when we sing this psalm, yes, we weep over the state of God's temple. We weep over the state of it then and we weep over the state of it now.

[15:11] It should make us ashamed to be lukewarm instead of putting on a stoic resolve, instead of being emotionless or putting on a facade of happiness.

We mourn over the loss and we fight for change. We long for change. But in the midst of his weeping, what does the psalmist do?

well, he remembers the great truths about God. In the midst of his grief, the psalmist turns to old truths about God while everything which has happened until now feels like it has gone on forever.

The psalmist remembers yet God, yet God. These old truths set what has happened in true context. One commentator who goes as far as to call verses 12 to 17 a creed which the psalmist might have recited to himself. However he might have felt beforehand, however terrible the events around him might be, the reality of who God is is what the psalmist holds onto.

[16:39] As he sings these verses he remembers God is his king, his savior, his conqueror, his creator, his power and his might.

They dwarf everything else. God is my king from of old, he says. God is sovereign over the events which have occurred.

The earthly kings of Judah were failures. They led their people into the hands of Babylon. When foreign powers were lording it over God's people, claiming to have utterly subdued them, the psalmist remembers that all earthly powers, no matter how strong they might appear in the here and now, must ultimately submit themselves to the throne of heaven.

He says that God is king of old. His kingship is eternal. It will never end. And therefore his kingdom is an eternal kingdom.

It cannot be conquered. God is God will last. But the eternal king is not aloof.

[18:17] He is not removed from the events of this world or distance from us. instead, it says that he is working salvation in the midst of the earth.

The Lord is the savior of his people and has done so publicly for all to see. They can look back in time to the exodus to remember what God did for them in history.

just as we can look back at the cross and the empty tomb and remember how he has already worked our salvation.

And this Lord, this king, conquers. He divided the sea. He broke the heads of the sea monsters. He crushed the heads of Leviathan.

In poetry, Leviathan was a hideous, multi-headed monster. Leviathan and the sea more generally were often seen as places of chaos, of disorder.

[19 : 26] Imagine this monster thrashing around in the water, churning up the waves, the water wiped with froth. death. No one can approach it.

Anyone who does will be lost to the chaos. But God takes that seemingly powerful sea monster Leviathan. He crushes its heads.

He kills it and he tosses it out of the water so that it becomes food for the creatures of the wilderness. and those chaotic waters become smooth again.

Facing national and social chaos, this psalmist is remembering the fact chaos is something the Lord conquers.

He subdues it and he puts in place his own order. what the Lord does poetically in crushing the head of Leviathan, he did in reality.

[20 : 35] He bruised the head of the serpent. He defeated Satan and all the forces of evil and chaos in the spiritual realm. And the same will happen to all of the enemy's earthly agents.

From Babylon, to Pharaoh, to all those who oppose him today. The psalmist finishes this section by reminding himself that God is the creator.

The day and the night belongs to the Lord. He created them just as he made summer and winter. And if he made them, he made everything in between.

He made the dusk and the dawn. If he made summer and winter, then it means that he also made the autumn and the spring. The whole of the created order belongs to God.

He made the boundaries of the earth. He said how far the land was to go, where the water should come up to. you can travel anywhere on this planet.

[21 : 55] You can travel anywhere in this universe and you will never be outside of God's domain. It is his.

So as you see day turn into night, as you see seasons change and we go now from winter into spring, it should be a reminder of whom the Lord is.

The God who rescues his people is the same God who created this universe in the first place. It's all his. From beginning to end, he is in control and he conforms it to his will.

So in the middle of suffering, the psalmist reminds himself of the truth about God. He is king, savior, conqueror, creator, creator, with everything which is occurring around him.

The psalmist turns the greatness and the magnificence of God and he trusts in him. Just if you have the Bible open, have a look again at verse 12.

[23 : 10] He says, God, my king, king. It isn't simply that God is king, but God is my king.

These are personal truths which the psalmist clings to. This is where he has his hope and we need to make sure that we do the same.

Is this God your king? king? Do you know him as your king? Sometimes as Christians we can be very reactionary.

An issue blows up, a controversy. And so we all go and we read the recommended book on that issue at that time.

And it's not wrong to do so and there are plenty of good books. Then a new issue blows up so we all go and we rush to read the latest book or the latest blog or the latest paper on that issue and we move just from issue to issue to issue.

[24 : 25] And sometimes we even do that with books of the Bible. Is someone suffering? Oh, then they should go and read the book of Job. Or even with the Psalms of Lament like the one this evening.

Well, we should really read them only during a time of tragedy. That's when they are relevant, it says. But the point is to study these things before you enter into suffering so that you know how to react to it.

When times are good, we need to learn and know the great truths about the Lord. We need to stockpile them, to have knowledge ready to remind ourselves of it and trust in it.

Of course, of course, it is never too late to learn the truth about the Lord. Even in the middle of suffering, we can grow close to the Lord.

And that will be a source of great encouragement. For some of us, it might be our only one during a time of suffering. But if you consider yourself now to be in a time when you feel blessed, in a time of good things, start stockpiling spiritual truths for yourselves.

[25 : 46] start thinking these things through and reminding yourself of them. It's one of the reasons that we catechize our children, isn't it?

We hope to give them a knowledge and a doctrine which will last and which they can trust in even when everything else seems to be falling apart. This remembering what the Lord is really like by the psalmist is an act of faith.

It is to trust in God even when everything else has been taken away from you. And it results in our final point this evening, praying with confidence.

Because having been reminded of who God is, what he has done, the psalmist now prays confidently. It doesn't mean that the grief has gone. It doesn't mean the situation has been transformed and there's no more suffering.

It really hasn't. The temple is still in ruins. The people are still oppressed. The land is full of violence. He says that himself. In many ways, the things which are prayed for at the end of this psalm, things from verse 18 onwards, are very similar to the things which were prayed at the beginning of the psalm.

[27 : 06] They are still looking for relief, but now the orientation, the priorities, of these prayers have changed.

The desperate questions have been removed. They no longer ask why or how long. It's not that those were sinful questions to ask, but the focus has changed to God himself and this means the pleas, the requests are more forceful.

Arise, O God, defend your cause. Before this, the psalmist seems to make himself the center of what was occurring.

Why do you cast us off? His experiences were central, but now the Lord is at the center of his world again, and the psalmist prays for his name.

Remember this, O Lord, how the enemy scoffs, and of foolish peoples revile your name. The glory of the Lord is what this psalmist is now concerned with.

[28 : 13] It's the same priority that our Lord Jesus teaches us when he taught us how to pray. Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be your name.

The name of the Lord is holy, it is set apart. He will not allow it to be dragged through the mud. He will not allow it to be mocked. All things are done for his namesake.

And this psalmist recognizes that. He knows the glory of the Lord comes first. Even in the middle of suffering and hardship, the psalmist seeks to glorify God.

So putting the Lord first, he changes the way that he speaks about himself and his people. There's no hanging on to the pride of the past. Instead, they come humbly before the Lord and say truthfully, we are your poor, downtrodden, needy.

They don't have anything of value to bring to the Lord, no merit to stand on, but rather they plead, have regard for the covenant. Lord, you promise to bless us.

[29 : 24] Keep your promises. Not because we're good or deserve blessing, but because you are gracious and righteous and you keep your word.

There's even a change in the way which this enemy is viewed. Before, the enemy were seen as destructive conquerors. They seemed to be unstoppable as they rampaged through the temple. But with God at the center of their thoughts, the psalmist calls them foolish people. They are foolish because they have no fear of the Lord.

They have stupidly blasphemed against the maker of the universe itself. The enemy is still dangerous. They're called wild beasts compared to the gentle and defenseless dove of God's people.

But they are wild beasts who are facing off against the Lord Almighty. And for all of their apparent strength, as they oppress and as they destroy, there really is no comparison, is there?

[30 : 39] The confidence of these prayers shine through. Even as the psalmist prays this, the expectation is that this prayer will be answered.

God's people, his beloved dove, his poor and needy will be rescued. The Lord will rise and defend his cause.

He will remember how foolish the others have been for scoffing at him. He will not forget the clamour of his foes. We can pray confidently ourselves because of who the Lord is.

Jesus has said that he will put down all opposition to his reign. He will eradicate the evil from this world. He will purify us.

so that we no longer struggle with sin or temptation. It's frustrating. And to be honest, wicked.

[31 : 44] When supposed Christians say something like, well God is just too loving to judge. Oh God would never do that. My friends, if God does not judge evil, we have no future.

But because he does judge evil, we who are in covenant with him are totally secure. Anything we suffer in this life is temporary.

Pain, even the worst of it, has an expiry date. when we look at the church, we see many reasons to grieve.

The attacks, the failures. We are God's chosen people, but we don't always look at it. We don't always look like we are God's chosen people to the world around us.

And this psalm teaches us that we can and we should weep over the attacks against the church. If we aren't grieved, we need to pray that we would be to learn from the psalm.

[32 : 59] But it also teaches us to look to the Lord, to remember the truth about who he is, and from that position come back to him in confidence.

We grieve, but we do so as a hopeful people, knowing that one day it will end, and the Lord will reign unopposed forever, and we will live under him for eternity.

Amen.