

Doubt

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[0 : 00] O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? Remember your congregation, which you have purchased of old, which you have redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage.

Remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt. Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins. The enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary. Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place.

They set up their own signs for signs. They were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees, and all its carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammers.

They set your sanctuary on fire. They profaned the dwelling place of your name. Bring it down to the ground. They said to themselves, we will utterly subdue them.

They burned all the meeting places of God in the land. We do not see our signs. There is no longer any prophet, and there is no one, none among us, who knows how long.

[1 : 07] How long, O Lord, 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.

Yet God, my King, is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. You divided the sea by your might. You broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters.

You crushed the heads of Leviathan. You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. You split open springs and brooks. You dried up ever-flowing streams.

Yours is the day. Yours also the night. You have established the heavenly light and the sun. You have fixed all the boundaries of the earth.

You have made summer and winter. Remember this, O Lord, how the enemy scoffs and a foolish people reviles your name. Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild beasts.

[2 : 10] Do not forget the life of your poor forever. Have regard for the covenant, for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence. Let not the downtrodden turn back in shame.

Let the poor and needy praise your name. Arise, O God, defend your cause. Remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day. Do not forget the clamour of your foes, the uproar of those who rise against you, which goes up continually.

Well, please turn back to Psalm 74. I'm sorry I didn't get a handout outline in time, but there's space there for you to make notes on the back of your service sheet.

I'm sure you've seen in the news over the last couple of weeks that it's nearly 20 years since the death of Princess Diana. Her death was met with extraordinary public expression of grief.

Three million mourners and onlookers came to London for her funeral procession. Her funeral itself was watched by 2.5 billion people worldwide, aired to 200 countries in 44 languages.

[3 : 24] Elton John's version of Candle in the Wind became the second best-selling single behind White Christmas. I know you're thinking that in your head. selling around 33 million copies worldwide.

I remember the funeral well because it was my 12th birthday. I was round my best friend's house wanting to celebrate, but he just wanted to watch the funeral. It's how every 12-year-old wants to spend their birthday.

But I remember seeing the roses being thrown onto the car and the windscreen wipers batting them away. They couldn't keep up. I remember seeing thousands of people in tears, people who'd never met her, but yet feeling this awful grief.

The death of Princess Diana was described as a national tragedy, intense grief felt by millions across the country. It's an event that's been in the papers for 20 years and it doesn't seem like ending any time soon.

Well, the backdrop of Psalm 74 is another national tragedy, but a far greater tragedy and a far more significant one. You see, the situation to which this psalm is written is the Babylonian destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 587 BC.

[4 : 43] And most of the people were carted back in exile. You may remember people like Daniel from the Bible who was taken there. And the psalmist here acts as a spokesperson for the whole community, the people of God.

And this psalm goes through three stages or three movements, if you're musical, reacting to what has happened to Israel. And although this is a specific moment in Israel's history and it hasn't happened to us, hopefully there are some parallels to how we can react and pray in times of deep distress, of doubt, of when God seems distant, not in control, when enemies are on top and triumphant.

So we have the first movement in the psalm, which is this, grieve when God's name is reviled. Grieve when God's name is reviled.

That's verses 1 to 11. You see, the tone of the first 11 verses is gloomy. It's battleship grey. It's dark clouds overhead.

It's likely the psalmist witnessed firsthand the destruction of the temple and the following national disaster. And you can picture the intense grief, the tears running down his face, struggling to even get the sentences out.

[6 : 12] Verse 1, have a look down. Oh God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? And then verse 10, how long, oh God, is the foe to scoff?

Is the enemy to revile your name forever? The people had a close relationship with God. It was one of sheep and shepherd, people who God has purchased, redeemed to be his people, his congregation.

He dwelt with them through the temple. But God did warn that disobedience would result in the exile and it had happened. And the psalmist knows this is why God's judgment is falling on them, that their anger was smoking against them.

And it comes through the enemy of Babylon. And the psalmist gives this description of what is going on in quite colourful language. Verse 3, have a look down. The Babylonians are on the hunt for prey.

They've come into the beautiful sanctuary of the temple and they've smashed it up. The enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary. Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place.

They set up their own signs for signs.

[7 : 28] They were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees. Beautiful cane panelling around. Lots of artefacts, work of art, butchered with hammers again and again and again.

Like Islamic State desecrating historic monuments in Iraq and Syria. Their aim, the Babylonians, verse 8, they said to themselves, we will utterly subdue them.

They burned all the meeting places of God in the land. They want to get rid of God and his people. But the grief of the psalmist is not in the physical buildings that he wanted to preserve, like a Jerusalem version of English heritage.

But instead it is what it signified, imposing a super injunction of God, deleting him from history, a complete reviling of his name. Have a look down.

Verse 4, your foes have rode in the midst of your meeting place. Verse 7, they set your sanctuary on fire.

[8 : 37] They profaned the dwelling place of your name. And again, verse 10, how long, O God, is the foe to scoff, the enemy to revile your name forever?

And so, with this complete reviling of God's name, hatred of God's name, opposition to him, he's left with questioning. Verse 11, why do you hold back your hand, your right hand?

Take it from the fold of your garments and destroy them. to paraphrase, why don't you take your hands out your pockets and do something? Act.

They're laughing at us. They're laughing at you. Do something. Well, again, we are not in the same situation today. This was a very specific event in Israel's history.

We don't meet with God today through the temple. Church buildings aren't temples today. You can probably notice that from looking around. But they want to subdue God.

[9 : 40] You see, we are still God's people and God's name is still reviled from his enemies. They want to silence him and his people and especially today when it comes to contentious issues like

sexuality perhaps.

And worse, it seems to be working. And it seems as though God is not doing anything about it. Christians tortured, imprisoned and killed around the world for their faith in Jesus. Islamic State claiming Christians are their favourite prey. God mocked and told to get with the times. The scorn directed at prominent Christian politicians for their beliefs and in turn God himself. God being mocked at school, a complete disdain for his name. We don't have to look far to see God and his name reviled by those outside the church and sadly by people inside the church. Churches appointing ministers who don't uphold the gospel, denominations moving further and further away from biblical truth, picking and choosing what to accept about how God has revealed himself in the Bible.

[10:56] And so how do we react to that? Does it bother us? Well the right answer is yes but the real answer is perhaps no.

Well at least it is for me a lot of the time or at least not that much. Perhaps God's name being mocked and reviled has become so commonplace that we react with shrugged shoulders. Actually it doesn't, we don't feel it anymore. It fails to shock us like a plaster that has been ripped off many times. But so often the Psalms help us to put in order our disordered affections. If we felt about the honour of God's name like this psalmist does here, it should affect us. It should lead us to ask why? Why is this happening?

And how long will it last? When God's enemies are on the up, triumphant, indeed has God forgotten his people? Is that a question you've ever thought before?

[12:05] But if we stopped with grieving and questioning God, then we'd be tempted to give up, to despair, that maybe God isn't in control and can do something about it.

That's perhaps how this psalmist is feeling. Is God actually in control? But instead, the psalm moves from the first movement to the second movement in verse 12, from grieve to believe. And that's the second point, believe in God's past sovereign acts. Believe in God's past sovereign acts. That's verse 12 to 17.

You see, the colour scheme of the psalm moves from battleship grey to perhaps a vibrant yellow, from a funeral dirge to a fanfare. Because where does the psalmist turn to in such a bleak situation? Well, he turns to what he already knows to be true about God, what he believes about him, what God has done in the past. Verse 12.

[13:13] Yet God my king is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. It's a deeply personal response. God is my king.

And then he gives us a history lesson of God's sovereign acts. Verse 13. He recalls the exodus from Egypt and the salvation of God's people through the Red Sea.

Have a look down at verse 13. You divided the sea by your might. You broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan. You gave him as food for creatures of the wilderness.

The sea in the Bible for the Israelites represents chaos, disorder, hostility. Yet God divided it with his power. God's enemies, the Egyptians, are pictured as sea monsters, Leviathan, and yet God defeated evil with ease.

They were like ants to him. Ten years ago off the coast of New Zealand, fishermen caught a toothfish. But as they started hauling it on board, they discovered that underneath a colossal squid had become entangled on the toothfish.

[14:24] It was 39 feet long, basically a length of a London bus. It had eyes the size of dinner plates and calamari rings the size of tractor tires.

Imagine meeting one of those alive. It took two hours for them to haul it on board. The psalmist wants us to feel here the terror of evil and Satan by describing God's enemies as sea monsters, bigger than colossal squids.

But he also knows that God is far more powerful than real sea monsters and supernatural monsters of evil, that he is totally in control of every situation.

And to push that further, the psalmist then goes to back what he knows about God about creation. Verse 16, yours is the day, yours also the night.

You have established the heavenly lights and the sun. You have fixed all the boundaries of the earth. You have made summer and winter. God is not just the rescuer, but the creator.

[15 : 31] But why turn to these things in particular? Why turn to the Exodus? Why turn to creation? Well, God's sovereignty is pretty relevant when you see people destroy the temple.

When you're in exile and you're thinking, why is God in control? How long is it going to last? But by looking at God's track record, the psalmist has a way of judging his current circumstances so he doesn't jump to hasty conclusions about God.

He reminds himself and others who holds the real power. You see, the temple is rubble, the prophets are gone, the people are in exile under foreign rule, and yet God is in sovereign control over all things.

He has shown as much in the past in salvation and crushing his enemies with ease and in his mighty creation acts. And so for us today, when we see people attacking God and his people, when Satan seems to be winning and triumphant and gloating and scoffing, when the church is in ruins and becoming more like the world around us, our reaction is, yes, to grieve, but then to believe, to turn to what we already know to be true about God, his track record.

And just as they could look back at the great salvation through the Exodus, well, God's people today can look back to his supreme work of salvation, through Jesus, his death and resurrection.

[17 : 09] That through the cross, Jesus defeated sin. He paid the punishment for it. He defeated Satan and he has total control over all evil that rears his ugly head against him.

And this is the God we have the privilege to pray to because the God of Psalm 74 is our God. The God is in control over his creation, including his enemies.

So when we doubt God is in control of what's going on, when he seems silent under attack, we are to tell ourselves not how horrible life is, but turn instead to God's saving power and supreme authority over all things.

He is the God who creates, who saves, who provides. God's The psalmist was grieving a national tragedy.

The people were grieving, but in their sorrow and grief, he turns to what he already knows to be true about God. And then he moves from believing to pleading.

[18 : 18] And that's the third movement of the psalm. Plead for God to act for his namesake. Plead for God to act for his namesake.

That's verses 18 to 23. The colour scheme changes again from vibrant yellow to perhaps an intense red. The psalmist comes to the logical conclusion of calling God to act.

God's name is reviled. God is all powerful and can do something about it. So God, please do something. That's the logic of this psalm.

And the basis of his plea is for God to act for the honour of his own name. Have a look down, verse 18. Remember this, O Lord, how the enemy scoffs and a foolish people reviles your name.

Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild beasts. Do not forget the life of your poor forever. Have regard for the covenant. For the dark places of the land are full of habitations of violence.

[19 : 24] Let not the downtrodden turn back in shame. Let the poor and needy praise your name. O rise, O God, defend your cause. Remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day.

The psalmist pleads for God to act on the basis of his own name, his own interests, his covenant, that is his binding promise with his people, started with Abraham back in Genesis and goes all the way through the Bible.

In effect, he's saying when we are cast down, it reflects on your reputation, God, on the covenant you made with your people. An attack on us is an attack on you.

So defend yourself so your name will be praised. Maybe you're familiar with Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, just in case you're not. the NATO Treaty binds together countries in the North Atlantic in mutual defence.

And at its heart, Article 5 means an attack on one ally is considered an attack on all allies. It was invoked for the first time just after a 9-11 attacks against the US.

[20 : 38] And in a similar way, in pleading on the basis of the covenant for God's own namesake, it's like the psalmist is invoking Article 5. He's saying an attack on God's people is an attack on God.

So God, defend your cause and act on the basis of what you have promised, to never forsake your people. But we get to the end of the psalm and we don't know what happened.

And sometimes psalms give us a glimpse of a turnaround, a 180 turnaround in a situation, but not here. And so we get to the end of the psalm and we think, well, was this psalm answered?

Did God defend his cause? Well, yes. These enemies were brought down, simply enough. At Daniel 5, the end of the Babylonian Empire came suddenly at Belshazzar's feast. God's people were eventually brought back to the land and the temple was rebuilt. And although it was a shadow of its former self, God still had regard for the covenant.

[21 : 47] He didn't forsake his people. And but far more than that, this prayer was ultimately answered in Christ. Because we fast forward from Psalm 74 and Jesus comes into the world.

And he is like a walking temple. He is the personal embodiment of the temple, of God's meeting place with his people. He is the temple that never can be destroyed.

He said, destroy this temple or raise it up again in three days. And he did. And they realized he was talking about himself. People all over the world have come to know the true and living God through Jesus.

You see, God answered this prayer more abundantly than the psalms could ever have imagined. So do we still need to pray like this? Do we still need to grieve, believe and plead?

Well, yes. When we see the church in ruins, the enemy on top, triumphant and gloating, we can still pray and plead for God not to forget his people.

[22 : 55] And ask him to help those who stand for the honour of his name. And to thwart those who want to destroy the church and revile his name. So the question to ask in our prayers is, are we concerned for God's own name?

Do we pray for God to act on the basis of his own name? We may say the benefits it may give us. But one way we can pray is for God to act for his own glory, his own interest, his own name's sake, that he would be praised.

And why should God listen to our prayers? Well, because through Jesus, God has purchased us, redeemed us from sin, and we are in that covenant binding relationship with him, which gives us great certainty when we come before God in prayer.

prayer. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we confess that we don't often grieve when your name is reviled and scorned, when people scoff at you and at your people around the world.

Father, please help us to reorder, please reorder our affections. May we be more concerned of your name. And Father, please help us to believe in what you have done for us through Jesus.

[24 : 27] And we pray for you to never forsake your people and to act for the honour of your own name. Amen. Amen. Amen.