

# Exile

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[ 0 : 00 ] Welcome to St. John's if you're visiting this morning. I'd love to meet you after the service. You picked a doozy of a week to visit. We heard Psalm 18 where God is described sort of like a dragon.

And now I'm taking you into Psalm 79. We're in the middle of a sermon series looking at God's big story from Genesis all the way to Revelation through the voices of the Old Testament Psalms. And we rehearse God's story as our story, as the church, as the new covenant people of God belonging to Jesus Christ and to all his promises.

So Psalm 79 is a song of lament. And lament means a public, a passionate expression of grief and sorrow in response to loss, to suffering.

It's not something we do very well in modern Western culture, is it? And Psalm 79 is a lament in a particular context, a lament over Israel's exile.

[ 1 : 08 ] What is exile? Exile is homelessness. Exile is banishment and deportation. And it's the longing to return home.

So in 586 BC, the Babylonian Empire utterly destroyed Jerusalem and utterly destroyed God's holy temple in Jerusalem.

And Scripture tells us that the Lord allowed this to happen as a judgment against Israel. Against Israel's endless cycle of idolatry, even though God continued to be faithful.

So the author of Psalm 79 seems to have been an eyewitness to this catastrophe. We see that by looking at verses 1 to 3, where the event is described in all its grisly detail.

Have a look with me. It's great to have your Bibles open to page 490. Starting at verse 1, O God, the nations have come into your inheritance. They've defiled your holy temple.

[ 2 : 09 ] They've laid Jerusalem in ruins. So first, there's sacrilege. A foreign army has desecrated the holiest site of Jewish worship. The temple represents the very presence of God.

It's where the glory of God dwells with His people. And now it is in smoldering ruins. God's dwelling place is gone. Verse 2 and 3 continue. They've given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the heavens for food, the flesh of your faithful to the beasts of the earth.

They've poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem. There was no one to bury them. So second, there's humiliation. There's so many dead Israelites that the survivors don't even have time or energy or numbers to be able to bury all the corpses.

Mass graves or no graves at all. It's utterly humiliating. And we're not just talking about soldiers.

We're talking about men and women and children all slaughtered. Sacrilege and humiliation lead us finally to verse 4.

We've become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those around us. So now the survivors are the laughingstock of all their neighboring countries. In verse 10, we learn that these other nations are also mocking God Himself, not just the Israelites.

[ 3 : 31 ] They say, why should the nations say, where is their God? So neighbors are sneering, where's your God? What happened to Him? If He allows evil, if He allowed this evil to happen to you, it must either mean that this God is too weak or that He doesn't care about you.

So what kind of God is that? So friends, that's the historical context of this psalm. It comes from the darkest days of Israel's history. And perhaps you read psalms like this and you find them challenging to connect with.

You find them even more challenging to pray along with. You may be wondering, what possible relevance does this have for me today?

Well, great question. So listen very carefully to what I'm about to say. Exile is not just a historical event in God's story.

Exile is not just a historical event in God's story. Exile is a spiritual reality for all those who belong to Jesus Christ now, today, for all time.

[ 4 : 47 ] If you are a Christian, then you are an exile in this world. Not exiled as judgment for sin, as Israel was 2,500 years ago.

No. It's not the same. Rather, you are exiles because we no longer belong to this world. But we are born again in Christ Jesus into the family of God.

And this is such an important point that I want to take a little break away from Psalm 79 to have a look at what the New Testament teaches us about our status as exiles. We need to get this straight before we can come back to Psalm 79.

So listen first to what Peter calls the Christians in Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey, in his first letter to the church. He begins this way, Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion.

And then again, a little further on, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile. And one final verse from chapter 2, verse 11, Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh.

[ 5 : 58 ] Is it just Peter, though? Well, the New Testament letter to the Hebrews actually goes even one step further. The author says that actually all of God's people from the very beginning have actually been exiles.

From Adam and Eve to Moses and Abraham, they've all been exiles on a journey towards their true home. So here's chapter 11, verses 13 to 16. These men and women, men and women like Abraham and Sarah, Adam and Eve, they all died in faith.

Not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. And then skipping ahead a few lines, they desired a better country that is a heavenly one.

So as the church, we are exiles. Even if we own a home in the city, even if you've lived in Vancouver for more than 30 years, you're in exile. Miroslav Wolf says, we must not underestimate a new estrangement with the world which a Christian way of life creates.

A new estrangement with the world. St. Paul calls us citizens of heaven who eagerly await our Savior Christ's return. And as exiles, we therefore should expect, come to expect, the persecution and discrimination which all refugees, all exiles throughout time have always experienced.

[ 7 : 36 ] And I'd like to suggest that most of the time when we find ourselves struggling with the suffering that we are facing in the world, when we find it too confusing and we can't quite understand it, it's because we've forgotten about this status that we have as exiles.

We sort of start to think that maybe we're actually Israelites back in the promised land rather than exiles in the Babylonian captivity which is how Peter pictures us.

So these are the circumstances of exile that Psalm 79 so powerfully expresses, describes. And now we're ready to go back to that Psalm but not as a historical document, no.

It is a prayer for us today as exiles, for us the church waiting for Christ's return. Let's have a closer look at the Psalm.

There's one key point in this Psalm. One key point that I've managed to divide into nine sub-points. Just kidding. One key point which informs our journey as exiles.

[ 8 : 50 ] One central promise from God. This is what it is. The Lord will act for the glory of His name. The Lord will act for the glory of His name.

So verse nine. Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name. Deliver us and atone for our sins for your name's sake. And out of that one central promise, out of that one central truth, the psalmist then has two prayers that pour out.

Two prayers that I want to examine more closely. The first is a pleading for deliverance. It sounds like this. Deliver us from our enemies. And the second one is much more surprising.

The second one is a song of praise and thanksgiving. We're going to need to wrestle with that second one. But first, we need to unpack that central promise before we go into the prayers.

That central promise that God will act for the glory of His name. What does that mean? We've seen already how the psalmist approaches God with righteous indignation in verses one to three so that he lays out a blow-by-blow account of the atrocities against God's people.

[ 10 : 03 ] But who does he say has been most wronged? It's the Lord Himself. Not the people of Israel. The Lord Himself. 21 times, the psalmist points to God as the victim of these wrongs.

So in verse one, it's your inheritance, Lord, your holy temple that's been desecrated. Verse two, your servants, your faithful that have been slaughtered. Verse 12, they've taunted you, O Lord. And so on. So the psalmist reminds God that it's His name, His reputation that's been damaged by allowing judgment to come upon Israel. Because all the other nations know that Israel belongs to the Lord.

They're His covenant people. And so when they see Israel fall on hard times, it's God's reputation that gets mocked. Verse six, pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you, on the kingdoms that don't call on your name.

Verse 10, we saw this already. Why should the nations say, where is their God? So let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants be known among the nations before our eyes.

[11:13] It's not that the psalmist is disputing whether or not Israel is guilty and deserved judgment. He's not. They were. We'll get into more of that later.

But rather, the issue raised here is about God's reputation. God's name cannot remain tarnished because His name reveals His character and His character reveals His glory.

God's glory is His godness, if you will. And this, this is above all else the most important thing to God, the glory of His name.

And nothing can be allowed to compromise it. And so the Lord will act for the glory of His name. And the psalmist is appealing to this reality, this truth, as he brings these two prayers.

So let's have a first look at the request, the pleading. Deliver us from our enemies. That's the first prayer. In the last book of the Bible, Revelation, we're offered a glimpse into the heavenly throne room.

[12:22] And in that throne room, under the altar, are pictured all of the saints, all the faithful souls of God's people who have been martyred and have died for following Christ.

These men and women, they are crying out from under that altar in a loud voice. And what do you think they're saying? It's words from Psalm 79. Here's what they say. How long, O Lord, before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?

And then John gets this picture. They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers and sisters would be complete who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

A few years ago, David Short spent a while in the hospital. And while he was there, someone took a photo of him in his hospital gown. I'm sure he was thrilled.

Well, they brought that photo and printed it at our office and put it up on the wall. And beneath the photo, a loving staff member wrote a quote from Revelation 6. They said, he has been given a white robe and told to rest a little longer.

[13:33] How long, O Lord? That's the cry of every faithful heart in exile. How long until you bring justice and make things right? Psalm 79, verse 9. Help us, O God, of our salvation, for the glory of your name.

So we know from history that God's people did return from exile to the promised land. But not before God had shown to his prophets while in exile.

He had shown them something about his plan for salvation. And shockingly, he showed them in exile that this plan was going to actually bypass, was going to actually transcend the earthly structures of the land and the temple.

And it would be fulfilled by sending his own son, Jesus Christ. And so when we get to the beginning of Luke's gospel, and Luke is in the process of introducing Jesus before he's born, Jesus is called the horn of our salvation, and he will come so that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, so that being delivered from the hand of our enemies, we might serve him without fear.

That's to be the fulfillment, the answer to that cry, how long? Deliver us, O Lord, from our enemies. But you and I know that although Jesus won the victory over sin and Satan at the cost of his own life on the cross, our status as exiles in this world, it's a constant reminder that we live in an in-between time, that we're still crying out, deliver us from our enemies.

[15:10] That there's an already, but there's also a not yet. That there is suffering and there's glory. We live between Jesus' first and his final coming. And so we're continually crying out, how long, O Lord?

How long? There's a story that came to my attention recently from China. You may know that persecution of Christians in China has rapidly increased the last couple of years.

It was a Chinese Christian who was arrested in May and he was arrested for attending a banned church service.

So at the police station, he was handcuffed to a chair and they began to beat him. And here's his recollection of just one part of that ordeal. A policeman slapped me four times in a row and said, the book of Matthew, the New Testament, the sixth chapter, verses 38 to 42.

He then said, I see anger in your eye. Christ taught you to love me. You shouldn't anger me with your anger. You should move me with your love. He slapped me once more.

[16:22] As Christian exiles, we're targeted by those who feel threatened and offended by the radical good news of the gospel. But we don't take matters into our own hands.

We don't rise up to overthrow our persecutors so that we can take control and then we can finally settle the score. No, we call out to the Lord who is sovereign over all, trusting that the Lord will act for the glory of his name.

He'll act in the midst of our suffering. He'll act in the midst of that circumstance. He'll act through it. And he will also overcome it. He will also judge it.

He will also bring justice one day. And as we were saying the Apostles' Creed this morning, I was thinking about that line, that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. And if you ever wonder why we need to say the Creed every single week, because we need a constant reminder, don't we?

That God will come again. That Jesus will bring justice. That he will act for the glory of his name. And that brings us to the second prayer that we pray with the psalmist as exiles.

[17:33] And this second prayer, you know, for some of us, that first prayer is difficult. We have a hard time praying, deliver me from my enemies. We may have an easier time actually singing praise.

And then for others, it's very easy to call down judgment. But it's much more difficult to give thanks and sing praise. So look with me at the last verse, verse 13.

But we, your people, the sheep of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever. From generation to generation, we will recount your praise. It's a very, it's a completely upside down ending to the psalm.

It almost makes you wonder if somebody added it on because they are just so uncomfortable with this lament. They had to add a little good news at the end, but I don't think that's the case. The question though is how can the psalmist rejoice while still in exile?

Well, to start with, he remembers, he remembers that, that we are God's people, the sheep of his pasture. That's the first thing he quotes.

[18:36] The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. It is only possible to praise God in this way because we know that he will act for the glory of his name.

So remember the martyrs in Revelation crying out, how long, O Lord? Well, we meet those martyrs again in the next chapter, Revelation chapter 7. And this time, listen to what they're doing.

A great multitude that no one could number from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages were standing before the throne before the Lamb clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands crying out with a loud voice, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

They're singing praise. And lest we mix up who they are, John asks, who are these people? Like, who could this possibly be that's singing praise? And he says, these are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.

These are the ones, the very ones that were martyred. They have been washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb. And remember that persecuted Chinese man in that jail cell.

[19:45] Well, do you think that he was able to sing praise and thanksgiving in that context, in the midst of his suffering? Listen to how he concludes his story.

These are his words. Jesus did not save me from the devils, but he comforted me with his words and gave me power so I could persist.

When I was beaten, the scene of Christ began, the scene of Christ being beaten by the soldiers was reenacted in front of me, I began to understand why the apostles began to spread the gospel again immediately after being persecuted.

He's referencing here Acts chapter 5 when the Jerusalem council beats the apostles, charges them, stop preaching the name of Jesus. And what do they do as soon as they leave that jail cell? They rejoice that they are counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus, and they go on preaching and proclaiming the good news. As we conclude, if we are in Christ, we live as exiles in this world.

[ 21 : 01 ] And what a gift, the gift of Psalm 79 is a gift for that difficult journey. It's a gift that reminds us that our triune God will always act for the glory of His name, and this is such good news.

Friends, it's such good news because the glory of His name is reliable. It's steadfast. It's unchanging. It's the fulfillment of promises.

And the glory of His name shines brightest in the face of His Son, Jesus Christ. So look to that face when you're in trials and when you're in joys. Don't hesitate to pray with Psalm 79, How long, O Lord?

Deliver me from my enemies. And yet, I hope that with the Lord's help, you will also be able to sing this praise of thanksgiving. And I'd like to end together with verse 13.

If we could say this verse aloud as we close. Will you say verse 13 with me? But we, your people, the sheep of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever.

[ 22 : 07 ] From generation to generation, we will recount your praise. Amen.