



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



# The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 74

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# Introduction

- This Psalm is titled *A Contemplation of Asaph*
- According to the title the author is Asaph, the great singer and musician of David's era (1 Chronicles 15:17-19, 16:5-7, 25:6)
- Asaph was one of David's three chief musicians, along with Heman and Ethan (who seems to have been also called Jeduthun)
- Some think that Asaph, the author of this Psalm, was not the same that lived in the times of David, but another of the same name, one of his descendants that lived after the Babylonish captivity, since the Psalm talks about things that were done at the time the Jews were carried captive into Babylon, or after



# Introduction

- But according to 1 Chronicles 25:1 and 2 Chronicles 29:30, Asaph was a prophet in his musical compositions, and he composed this Psalm prophetically
- This Psalm is a plea and a prayer in great sorrow from the destruction of the sanctuary and the city
- It is a Psalm of lament but, it is also a Psalm that displays great trust and confidence in God
- The psalmist is crying out to God and pleading with Him to remember His people
- God has always been faithful in the past and now the psalmist calls on Him to be faithful once again





# Introduction

- This Psalm was written at a time when the temple was ruined, Jerusalem burnt, and the prophets scattered or destroyed
- Some believe it refers to the days of Nebuchadnezzar and the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians
- In 586 B.C. the nation of Israel experienced one of the most devastating events in their history as a nation
- Because of their sin and their rebellion God allowed the Babylonians, under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar, to take the capitol city of Jerusalem
- They tore down the walls, ravaged the city, destroyed the Temple and then burned it (2 Kings 25:8-15)



# Introduction

- But some argue that this Psalm refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Chaldeans in B.C. 586, and the oppression of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes in B.C. 170–165
- Yet some say it refers to the desolation that took place under the Romans about the seventieth year of the Christian era
- In several ways Psalm 74 can be looked to as a model prayer
- Many of us will find ourselves at times in our lives standing in the midst of the ruins; it may be a consequence of sin
- We may even feel like God has *cast us off*
- Psalm 74 is helpful guide for how we should pray in times like these



# Introduction

## Psalm Outline

- The Psalmist Pleads with God 74:1-3
- The Wickedness of their Enemies 74:4-8
- Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17
- A Plea for Relief from Oppressors 74:18-23



# The Psalmist Pleads with God

## 74:1-3



- Asaph lived and served during the reigns of David and Solomon, which were generally times of security and blessing for Israel
- This verse gives us an indication that this is a prophetic Psalm
- The Psalm begins with an initial plea to God for forgiveness
- The psalmist feels *cast off* and forsaken
- He is very aware of the anger of God toward His people
- Although the psalmist feels abandoned by God, his response is prayer
- He goes to God with his frustration and his requests

# The Psalmist Pleads with God

## 74:1-3



- St. Augustine comments on *why* and says, “He criticizes not, but inquires ‘wherefore,’ for what purpose, because of what have You done this?”
- One thing that is repeated in the first two verses is the psalmist appeal to the nation’s relationship to God
- They are His sheep, His congregation, His purchased and redeemed people
- The psalmist appeals to God’s demonstrated love for His people, by referring to them as *the sheep of Your pasture*
- He appeals to the compassion and tender care of the shepherd



# The Psalmist Pleads with God

## 74:1-3



- Can the shepherd slay his sheep?
- God never did nor will ever *cast off*, nor cast away, His people
- Sin is usually at the bottom of all the hiding of the Lord's face
- When one is under chastisement, he ought to have the wisdom to ask God to reveal that sin, that he may repent of it, overcome it, and from that day forsake it
- God is never weary of His people so as to forsake or despise them, and even when His anger is turned against them, it is but for a small moment for their own good

# The Psalmist Pleads with God

## 74:1-3



- *Your anger smoke*, The presence of smoke indicates fire, and the language here is such as often occurs in the Scriptures, when anger or wrath is compared with fire, Deuteronomy 32:22; Jeremiah 15:14
- From such despair Asaph asked God to change the way He feels towards them and to *remember* that Israel belonged to Him, and was His *congregation*
- He asked God to remember that Israel was His *purchased* people, bought out of the slave market of the nations
- The reference is to the redemption out of Egypt (Exodus 15:16)

# The Psalmist Pleads with God

## 74:1-3



- The psalmist, in speaking of God's past blessings on the children of Israel, calls Israel *Your congregation, purchased, and redeemed*
- It is a good thing in prayer to remind God of His past mercies toward us, because in doing so, we are reminding ourselves of God's past work in our lives
- Asaph asked God to remember that He had *dwelt* among His people in Jerusalem *Mount Zion* in a special way
- Asaph thought that if God would only *remember* His special care and connection with Israel, He would rescue them
- He therefore brought many reasons and appeals to God in prayer



# The Psalmist Pleads with God

## 74:1-3



- St. Augustine says, “Can this by any means be the voice of the Gentiles? Has He possessed the Gentiles from the beginning? Nay, but He has possessed the seed of Abraham, the people of Israel even according to the flesh, born of the Patriarchs our fathers: of whom we have become the sons, not by coming out of their flesh, but by imitating their faith.”
- Some scholars agree with St. Augustine and believe that by saying *Your inheritance which You have redeemed*, he means the redemption of the church of God from sin, Satan, the world, hell, and death by the blood of Christ; who are the chosen by the Lord for His inheritance

# The Psalmist Pleads with God

## 74:1-3



- The psalmist next turns the attention of God to the destruction upon the house of God, the Temple in Jerusalem, by His enemies
- He asked God to hasten to view the desolation of the Temple and come speedily to their rescue
- God had deserted His sanctuary, symbolic of the divine presence
- In consequence, the heathen people had invaded that holy place, and *has damaged everything*
- So, Asaph here supplicates and urges God's return to them, as that which alone could restore their temple, city, and country to their former happy state

# The Psalmist Pleads with God

## 74:1-3



- *The enemy has damaged everything*, may mean the profaning and destroying the temple by Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus, and Titus
- Or by antichrist sitting in the temple and church of God, setting up idolatrous worship in it, and blaspheming the tabernacle of God, and those that dwell therein, 2 Thessalonians 2:4
- Some say that *the perpetual desolations* speaks to the prophetic nature of this Psalm
- When the Temple was destroyed before the Babylonian captivity, Ezra and Nehemiah were back in Jerusalem a mere 70 years later to begin to rebuild the Temple



# The Psalmist Pleads with God

## 74:1-3



- So, the ruins were by no means *perpetual* at that time
- The Temple truly became *everlasting ruins* only after the destruction by the Romans in 70 AD
- After that destruction, the Temple still to this day has not been rebuilt; only the remnants of retaining walls remain of those *the perpetual desolations* or *everlasting ruins*

# The Wickedness of their Enemies 74:4-8



- Asaph asked God to defend His sanctuary, His tent of meeting
- The enemies of God declared victory over Him by placing their own victory banners in the Temple
- *Your meeting place*, may mean the tent of meeting or the Temple
- Here probably the Temple is meant
- Its courts were filled with the enemies of God instead of reverent worshippers
- They declared wild shouts of triumph instead of the praises of Israel

# The Wickedness of their Enemies 74:4-8



- Instead of the voices of priest and choir, there have been heard the brutal cries of the heathen as they shouted at their work of destruction like lions roaring over their prey
- *They set up their banners for signs*, Idolatrous symbols like statues and images used in war were set up over God's altar, as an insulting sign of victory and of their complete authority over it
- In verse 5 the enemy are compared to wood-cutters chopping down a forest (Jeremiah 46:22-23)
- The ruthless destroyers go to work like woodcutters in a forest—the carved pillars are no more than so many trees to chop
- Those who oppose God had come with *Axes and hammers* to destroy



# The Wickedness of their Enemies 74:4-8



- They destroyed the magnificent artwork and woodwork made by the children of Israel to honor God
- Formerly it was an honor to be employed in cutting down a tree for the building of the temple
- But now all its fine carved work, which Solomon made, 1 Kings 6:18, was demolished at once in an offensive manner *with axes and hammers*
- Which may have been done either by the Chaldeans in Nebuchadnezzar's time, or by the Syrians in the times of Antiochus, or by the Romans in the times of Titus Caesar Vespasian

# The Wickedness of their Enemies 74:4-8



- *Axes and hammers* were not sufficient for their purpose, so *They have set fire*
- The psalmist uses vivid language to describe the enemy, their obvious disregard for God and their thorough destruction of the city, especially the Temple (Lamentations 2:5-9)
- The original burning of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar is described in 2 Kings 25:9
- The Temple was later defiled by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who set fire to the gates of the second Temple, (1 Maccabees 4:38)

# The Wickedness of their Enemies 74:4-8



- The Jewish historian Josephus describes this: “[Antiochus] compelled the Jews to dissolve the laws of their country, and to keep their infants uncircumcised, and to sacrifice swine's flesh upon the altar” [Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 1:1:2]
- Josephus, who personally witnessed the Siege of Jerusalem by the Romans, also wrote of the burning and defiling of the Temple when the Romans destroyed it
- Having successfully attacked the sanctuary of God, the enemies of the Lord wanted to *destroy* the people of God *altogether*
- They hoped to do this when they *burned up all the meeting places of God in the land*



# The Wickedness of their Enemies 74:4-8



- It seems that there were *meeting places of God* throughout the land of Israel
- When Israel was obedient, these were not places of sacrifice but places of prayer and hearing of the Scriptures
- The Levites were commanded to teach Israelites the Scriptures (Leviticus 10:8-11; Deuteronomy 17:9-12,33:10)
- It makes sense that there might have been *meeting places of God* in many communities even before the synagogue became an established institution

# Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17



- The nation of Israel was used to hearing from God
- He would speak to them through signs and through prophets
- But now the psalmist expresses an absence of communication from God
- Not only have they been defeated, but also God is no longer speaking
- The enemies of God and His people succeeded in badly damaging the spiritual life of Israel
- It is natural to take verse 9 in direct contrast to what verse 4 says of the heathen signs, *Your enemies roar in the midst of Your meeting place; They set up their banners for signs*

# Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17



- While these abominations—rallying points of severe profanity—were visibly set up, the signs of the invisible God’s presence, His wonders done for Israel, are no more seen
- According to St. Augustine, the talk here represents the situation of the Jews after the captivity, when they lost everything
- And when they no longer saw signs which reveal the presence of God in their midst; and when there were no longer prophets, except for a very few
- The definite question is, how long?
- They became as though in darkness and did not know how long it was going to last (1 Kings 4:46,9:27,14:41)



# Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17



- That also applies to the situation of the Jews from the days of the prophet Malachi until the coming of St. John the Baptist; and from the days of the Roman Titus until our present day
- No one *knows how long* the adversity will continue, and when the deliverance will come
- How long the Babylonish captivity would continue was known, that it would be seventy years, and no longer
- The prophets that searched after the time of salvation and redemption by Christ knew how long it would be to it

# Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17



- Daniel fixed the exact time of it; but how long the present times will last, we do not know
- Or how long when the 1260 days of the reign of antichrist, of the church's being in the wilderness will end
- Therefore, some say that this verse fits best the time after the Temple was destroyed by the Romans, even the time in which we live today
- The last *prophet* sent by God to the children of Israel was St. John the Baptist; the last *sign from God* for the children of Israel was the resurrection of Jesus Christ

# Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17



- Then the psalmist in verse 10 begins with an appeal parallel to that in verse 3 where he entreats God to have pity on His people's need, here to have regard to His own honor
- The psalmist stands astonished before God's longsuffering with the wicked who keep on reproaching Him and blaspheming His name
- These may be understood also of many enemies of the grace of God, and of Christ
- Those who reproach and blaspheme the name of God the Father; by denying His sovereignty, omniscience, and justice, and they reproach and blaspheme the name of Christ, by denying His deity



# Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17



- Then Asaph is asking God in verse 11, “Why do You keep back the right hand of Your power, hiding it in Your besom? Why not show forth Your power, and consume them, as it were, in a moment?”
- The hand, especially the right hand, is the instrument by which we use a sword or any weapon and the expression here is equivalent to asking why God did not interfere and save them
- Asaph did not lose confidence in the power or ability of God
- He knew that if God put forth His hand of power against these enemies, He would *destroy them*

# Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17



- The answer to these questions are not revealed
- Asaph does not say that this is how long this suffering would continue
- Nor does Asaph reveal the reason why the nation is enduring these problems
- Every trial consists of these two problematic questions: why and how long?
- So how does Asaph deal with this feeling of distancing?
- How does Asaph cope with his circumstances, not knowing how long or why these things are happening?

# Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17



- While the psalmist has emphasized the devastating nature of the situation and the seeming silence of God, he remains confident in who God is and His power to intervene
- In verses 12-17 Asaph repeatedly refers to the mighty works that God has done in the past
- Comfort rises from the thought of God's previous deliverances of His people, and of His other great mercies
- Each verse begins with the word *You* or *Yours*
- God reigns and continues to rule
- God is the only place that deliverance can be found



# Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17



- If there is anyone who can help us in our turmoil, it is God
- No one else can save; no one else has the power to deliver
- Asaph meditated first on the royal authority of God and then upon His great power
- The same God who *divided the sea by His strength* could rescue His people in the present crisis
- In several places the Bible mentions *sea serpents* and *Leviathan*
- Usually, *Leviathan* is considered to be a sea-monster or dragon that terrorized sailors and fishermen

# Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17



- Some consider these *sea serpents* and *Leviathan* real in history; others consider them to be legendary
- Satan is often represented as a dragon or a serpent (Genesis 3; Revelation 12 and 13)
- *the sea serpents ... Leviathan*, The symbolical monsters being imagined as floating upon the surface of the water
- Some commentators say that the reference here is to the destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea
- Some church fathers say that by His Baptism, Christ *broke the heads of the sea serpents in the waters*

# Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17



- In his message to 'Oceanus', St. Jerome wrote about the blessings of baptism that destroys the power of the devil, saying: "The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" (Genesis 1:2); from which He brought forth the empty earth (the infant world), a symbol of the Christian child coming out of the font of baptism"
- In regard to verse 14, some say that Asaph here recalls the wandering in the desert and how God destroyed the trial of hunger and lack of food in the desert by bringing manna and quail
- *Leviathan*, The antichrist in one of his characters is represented as a sea beast with many heads, which will all be broken in pieces in due time, Revelation 13:1



# Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17



- St. Augustine says, “Of what dragon? We understand by dragons all the demons that war under the devil: what single dragon then, whose head was broken, but the devil himself ought we to understand?”
- God has the power to dry up the mighty rivers; as He did when he made way for His people in the Red Sea, and in the River Jordan
- He has the power, as well, to break open fountains of water from the rocks, as He did by the rod of Moses, also called the rod of God

# Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17



- According to St. Augustine, God could bring forth from the unbelieving Gentiles, who were like the rocks, fountains of water of wisdom and spiritual riches
- He also says, “In some men the Word of God becomes a well of water springing up unto life eternal”

# Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17



- Asaph now remembers that God is the creator of all that we see in creation
- An appeal to the God of nature
- Not only did He work wonders, but even the universe is the work of His hand
- God set things in motion and holds things in their places
- Asaph deals with the feeling of rejection by remember all of the mighty works of God
- He wants God to rise up and destroy the enemies
- But until the situation is resolved, Asaph is going to remember God's power to change any circumstance



# Prayers to God to Act on Behalf of His People 74:9-17



- St. Augustine comments and says, “Who is ignorant of this, seeing that He has Himself made all these things; for by the Word were made all things?”
- According to St. Augustine, the Lord Christ longs for the salvation of all
- He says, “*‘The day is Yours’...Who are these? The spiritual. ‘the night also is Yours’ Who are these? The carnal.... ‘You have made perfect sun and moon’ the sun, spiritual men, the moon, carnal men. As yet carnal he is, may he not be forsaken, and may he too be made perfect.*”

# A Plea for Relief from Oppressors 74:18-23



- In these last verses the psalmist return to prayer after being encouraged by his contemplation of the power of God in history and in nature
- He prays for the sake of God's name and reputation and appeals to God's "*covenant*" with the children of Israel
- The word *foolish* here may refer to them as *wicked* as well as foolish
- Wickedness and folly are so connected
- The foolish people are those who, though they think themselves, and are thought by others, to be wise, yet in truth are fools

# A Plea for Relief from Oppressors 74:18-23



- They are *foolish* because they provoked and *blasphemed* the Name whose powerful anger they can neither resist, nor escape, nor endure
- St. Augustine says, “It was said to Christ in His own nation, ‘a sinner is this Man: we know not whence He is:’ we know Moses, to him spoke God; this Man is a Samaritan.”
- The *turtledove* is a symbol of the defenseless people
- The people of God is fitly compared to a *turtledove*, as resembling it in nature, its cleanness and purity, being simple, innocent, harmless, meek, and faithful



# A Plea for Relief from Oppressors 74:18-23



- They is compared to it for its affection and chastity to its mate, for its being a fearful creature, a weak one, and exposed to the prey of others; all which is true of the church, and may be applied to it
- *Your poor*, The church of God is a congregation of people of which some may be literally poor, but all of them are spiritually so
- The Church of God is never forgotten
- However, it may seem that to them and to others, when they are under divine desertions, or under afflictions, and immediate help is not given; but they are not forgotten, Isaiah 49:14-15

# A Plea for Relief from Oppressors 74:18-23



- The *covenant* intended is probably that made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whereby Canaan was assured to their descendants, as "*the lot of their inheritance*"
- Asaph feels that Israel is being deprived of its inheritance and dragged off into *dark places*
- The prayer here is, that God would remember the sacred promise indicated in that covenant, and that He would intervene to save His people
- Asaph wisely and persuasively called upon God to act in view of His *covenant* with His people

# A Plea for Relief from Oppressors 74:18-23



- In a dangerous world, *full of the haunts of cruelty*, God's people could rely on God's covenant promise
- St. Augustine says, "Have regard unto Your Testament,' not that old one: not for the sake of the land of Canaan I ask, not for the sake of the temporal subduing of enemies, not for the sake of carnal fruitfulness of sons, not for the sake of earthly riches, not for the sake of temporal welfare: 'Have regard unto Your Testament,' wherein You has promised the kingdom of Heaven."
- St. Augustine says that Asaph saw that which was spoken of, the new covenant, Hebrews 8:8-13



# A Plea for Relief from Oppressors 74:18-23



- *the dark places of the earth are full of the haunts of cruelty,*  
Many places of the earth are in total darkness away from the knowledge of God and the knowledge of spiritual and divine things
- So, the church pleads God and His promises, that He would send forth His light and His truth, and cover the earth with the knowledge of the Lord
- Asaph is pleading God to not let this oppressed nation turn their back on Him in shame and confusion at His forsaking them
- *return ashamed!* By not having an answer of their prayer, but still are under the oppressions of their enemies

# A Plea for Relief from Oppressors 74:18-23



- Rather, *Let the poor and needy praise Your name*
- Show them some mercy, some deliverance, which may turn their shame into joy, and call forth from them songs of praise
- St. Augustine comments on *the poor and needy* and says, “You see, brethren, how sweet ought to be poverty: you see that poor and helpless men belong to God, but ‘poor in spirit, for of them is the Kingdom of Heaven.’”

# A Plea for Relief from Oppressors 74:18-23



- Asaph present a final appeal
- He approached God with concern for *His own cause*
- He asked God to act not only out of compassion for His people, but also out of concern for His glory, to rebuke *the foolish man who reproaches You daily*
- *Arise, O God*, As if God were now insensible to the sufferings of His people; as if He were inattentive and unwilling to come to their help
- The war is really made against God and against His honor, law, and authority



# A Plea for Relief from Oppressors 74:18-23



- Any reproach or persecution directed against God's people is counted as directed against the Lord personally
- This, the Lord Christ Himself proclaimed when He said to Saul: "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?*" (Acts 9:4)
- The wicked constantly *reproach* God - either by their language or their conduct; and this is a reason for calling on Him to intervene
- *the voice of Your enemies*, Shouting for the destruction of His people
- The prayer is, that God would bring deserved chastisement upon them for their purposes and their aims against His people

# A Plea for Relief from Oppressors 74:18-23



- It is not necessarily a prayer for revenge; it is a prayer that God will recompense them as they deserved
- *Tumult*, The reference is to the movement of a multitude pressing on to conquest, encouraging each other, and endeavoring to intimidate their enemies by the loud uproar of the war cry
- It is a description of what had occurred among the main events referred to in the Psalm, their roaring in the midst of the sanctuary and the congregation, verse 4, their reproaching and blaspheming voice, verse 10

# A Plea for Relief from Oppressors 74:18-23



- *increases continually*, The cry of their sins, like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, and of the city of Nineveh, Genesis 18:20, was continually going up to God
- Therefore, it might be hoped and expected that punishment in a little time would come down
- Asaph pressed the *urgency* of the plea
- With wickedness on the increase, there was more reason for God to act sooner rather than later
- This Psalm is a good example of prayer based on the promises of God





# Discussion

- What is the major idea of this Psalm?
- What was the initial complaint of Asaph?
- Why did Israel feel deserted by the Lord?
- What are the “everlasting ruins” to which the psalmist referred?

# Discussion



- What motivation did Israel's enemies have for destroying God's temple?
- What did the psalmist remember about God's deeds in the past?
- What imagery is used to celebrate God's work in creation?
- What prayer concludes the Psalm?



# Discussion

- What motive does Asaph repeatedly lift up to God in asking for His deliverance?
- How is this prayer a good model for us to follow?
- In what way can difficulties serve as teachers for us?
- What can we learn from this Psalm about depending on the Lord during difficult times?