

## **Psalms: Book Three (Part Two)**

### **A Prayer Amid Destruction**

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Well, today is the Sabbath. It is July the 25th for those of us who use the Gregorian calendar, which is a calendar that is based on the way the earth orbits the sun. And we are pretty biblically literate folks so we know that not everybody uses a calendar that is based on the sun. We, of course, know that the ancient Hebrews used a calendar that combined aspects of both the lunar and the solar properties so that it balanced out over a year. Unlike, let us say the Arabs, who use a calendar that is strictly lunar and that is why you find Obama keeping Ramadan in February and then a few years later, it is in July. That is because the time of Ramadan progresses through the calendar because they go strictly by a lunar calendar.

So while Jews today, and just as they have for many, many generations, call this day the Sabbath, just like we do, it is not July 25th to them. That is Gregorian. They do not have it a month of July. Today is the eighth day of the fifth month. Well, if today is the eighth day of the fifth month, that means that at sundown, it is the ninth day of the fifth month, and many of us know that the ninth day of the fifth month has another name, which is Tish a'Bv, the ninth of Av. That is starting just this evening, and tomorrow, Sunday, is that day.

It is a national day of mourning in the State of Israel and it is kept very solemnly by Jews all over the world. In Israel, by law, shops and restaurants and various other venues are closed. They have to be shut down. Many Jews consider it inappropriate to laugh, tell a joke, or even to greet another person warmly on the ninth of Av. And as on the Day of Atonement, most people that are Orthodox Jews will fast, neither will they wash themselves. Their women, nor I guess their men, will not use cosmetics, and some of them even go so far as to go sit in a dark room and sit on the lowest stool possible for long portions of the day. All these are signs of mourning to them.

In some quarters, they go so far as to even forbid the reading of the Bible on this day. The only places, the only books that they allow you to read are Lamentations and certain parts of Job.

Now, indeed, some very terrible things have happened to the Jews on the ninth of Av and I want to give you a listing of these things. I have 10 of them, 10 historic events that have happened on the ninth of Av. I mentioned two of these last time in my sermon and that was the destruction of both Temples. So that would be the destruction of Solomon's temple in 586 BC and the destruction of Herod's temple (or the second temple) in AD 70. Separated by a little bit more than 600 years, but they fell on the same date, ninth of Av, the ninth day of the fifth month.

But these are not the only things that have happened on this date (or tomorrow's date).

Tradition holds that it was the ninth of Av when God refused to allow the children of Israel to enter Canaan after the spies returned a bad report, except for Joshua and Caleb. And of course, what they did was they rebelled, the people rebelled that day and tried to go over themselves and they ran into a buzz saw known as the Canaanites. So they were destroyed, many of them. That is found in Numbers 14. That is one that even predates the destruction of the original Temple in AD 71. This was one year to the day after the second Temple fell. The Romans came back, they plowed the earth where the Temple was, and salted it so that nothing would grow on it, which was salt in the wounds, literally, to the Jews.

Another one says that Rome crushed the Bar Kokhba revolt on this day in 135 AD at a place called Betar, just a few miles west of Bethlehem. And thousands of Jews were killed. That was the last hurrah basically of the Jews in Judea and they were from that point on dispersed all over the world. Another one is that the first Crusade officially commenced on Av the ninth in 1096. What this did was cause the the Christians that joined the Crusade to kill Arabs (Muslims) and Jews who they said killed Christ. This was part of the blood libel stupidity; that all Jews are cursed forever because of killing

Christ. At least 10,000 Jews died within a month or so of that date. Of course many, many communities in France and the Rhineland were completely destroyed.

In 1290 the Jews were expelled from England on Av the ninth. About 202 years later, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain issued a degree that said that Jews had to leave Spain. So, they were expelled from Spain and the date that they had to be out of the country by was Av 9.

Last two here. I do not know if you are aware of this but World War I was declared on Av 9 in 1914. This was when Germany declared war on Russia. And the mobilization, especially in Russia, caused pogroms of Jews, a rash of anti-Semitism, and it not only killed many Jews, but it forced the remainder into exile, and believe it or not, many of them found their way to Israel. It was the first modern return of large groups of Jews to Israel.

The final one in 1942 on the eve of Tisha b'Av, this day, the mass deportation of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka got underway.

So lots and lots of things have happened on the ninth of Av. Almost all of them have been bad for the Jews and it is very clear, this is quite a list, 10 *very* significant things that happened, and it cannot be a coincidence that God has down through history continued to point out to the Jews, make them think back, look, this is the time and you still have not repented and they are really still under judgment because of their idolatry and they have not drunk completely of the Golden Calf, as it were. They have not gotten the point.

But these events point to rebellion, forsaking God, judgment, exile, destruction, and death. And all of these that I just mentioned are themes that go into Book Three of the Psalms. They are all there if you just look into these psalms a little more closely. So it is no wonder that the Jews remember this day as they do that. That it is a national day of mourning, a day of fasting, a day of sitting on a low stool in the dark and sucking your thumb, wondering what is going to happen that day. And I use those words pointedly because that is how God looks at them. Let us see that. What does God think about this keeping of the ninth of Av as they do?

Let us go to Zechariah 7 because this question is asked in this book, should they keep these fasts now? There are more fasts than just the ninth of Av. But this one in particular is the one we are interested in today. But as we will see here, there was a fast in the fourth month, there was a fast in the fifth month (which is this one), there is a fast in the seventh month, and a fast in the tenth month. So Jews are doing all this fasting and they are all basically centered around the destruction of Jerusalem.

The fast in the tenth month is when Nebuchadnezzar came up against Jerusalem. The fast in the fourth month is when he began to breach the city. The fast in the fifth month, of course, is the fall of the Temple. And the fast of the seventh month is when Galli, the governor that was appointed by the Babylonians, was murdered and those elders that were with him were also murdered. And so they all have to do with this particular time in history when God judged Judah for its sins.

And so what we have here in Zechariah 7 is a group of men from Bethel coming up and asking the question: Should we keep these fasts like we have over these past many years?

**Zechariah 7:1** Now in the fourth year of King Darius it came to pass that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, on the fourth day of the ninth month.

The fourth day of the ninth month; we are getting toward the fast of the tenth month here, which is Chislew, that is the month the people sent these men to the house of God to pray before the Lord to ask the priests who were in the house of the Lord of hosts, and the prophet saying,

**Zechariah 7:3-7** "Should I weep in the fifth month and fast as I have done for so many years." Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me saying [here is God's reply], "Say to all the people of the land, and to the priests: 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during these seventy years, did you really fast for Me—for Me? When you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink for yourselves? Should you not have obeyed the words which the Lord proclaimed through the former prophets

when Jerusalem and the cities around it were inhabited and prosperous, and the South and the Lowland were inhabited?"

He is bringing their attention back to the reason why all this suffering and destruction had happened in the first place and trying to get them to think of the cause.

**Zechariah 7:8-11** Then the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Execute true justice, show mercy and compassion everyone to his brother. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. Let none of you plan evil in his heart against his brother.' But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders [as if it was nothing], and stopped their ears so they could not hear" [they totally turned their backs on God].

Think of it this way. Remember I told you that they [the Jews] would go into a dark place and sit on a low stool and act like they were mourning? And I told you that that was kind of like a child. Well, what is this? God is describing the Jews as children again. What do children do when they rebel against their parents and they do not want to listen to them? They refuse to heed, shrug their shoulders, and stop their ears! It is just like they are little bratty kids and just not listen to God at all. They think if they close their eyes, He cannot see them. They did not get the point and they have not gotten the point.

**Zechariah 7:12-14** "Yes, they made their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets. Thus great wrath came from the Lord of hosts. [Yeah. When kids do that to their parents great wrath should fall on them as well for their disrespect and their disobedience.] Therefore it happened, that just as He proclaimed and they would not hear, so they called out and I would not listen," said the Lord of hosts. "But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations which they had not known. Thus the land became desolate after them, so that no one passed through or returned; for they made the pleasant land desolate."

Let us just drop down to chapter 8, verse 14 because actually His answer goes through these two chapters. It takes Him two chapters to answer this question fully so that they understand that this is something, that God's actions here in reaction to them and what they did was actually part of a much larger process that was going on here. He wanted them to understand what He was doing here. And their asking about whether they should keep on fasting had to do with this long-term state of affairs, which is called the Plan of God. And so what He is telling them through this long answer is "Get with the program here! I'm doing something and I'm leading somewhere and if you want to get with the program, start doing these things," as He mentions in verse 9, execute true justice, show mercy and compassion everyone to his brother, quit being evil, quit making up your little schemes to get ahead, stop doing that, stop your pity party every couple of months and get with the program here.

**Zechariah 8:14-19** "For thus says the Lord of hosts" 'Just as I determined to punish you when your fathers provoked Me to wrath,' says the Lord of hosts, 'and I would not relent, so again in these days, I am determined to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. Do not fear. These are the things you shall do: Speak each man the truth to his neighbor; give judgment in your gates for truth, justice, and peace; let none of you think evil in your heart against your neighbor; and do not love a false oath. For all these are things that I hate,' says the Lord." Then the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, the fast of the tenth, shall be joy and gladness and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah. Therefore, love truth and peace.'

What is He telling them to do? He is saying, quit sulking, quit pitying yourself, turn around and make them into joy and gladness and feasts because you are doing righteousness; and God loves you and is trying to do good and bring good to you, but you will not see it. So what we have here is a very long-term prophecy about how it is going to take generations for all of this to happen. And finally you get to the time at the end, and by the end of Zechariah, you have Judah turning and weeping over the One that they have pierced. The light goes off. We did it to Him! We killed Him! That was our Savior and He was all about redemption, truth, righteousness, love, mercy,

and we turned our backs on Him time and time and time again. And it is no wonder we have had all this trouble.

So what does God think of the fast of the ninth of Av and the continued whining and crying 'Poor us, poor us!'? He certainly has compassion on the fact that they have gone through terrible things, but He wants them to change and turn to Him. And what have they done? They followed a false religion, a false religion based on what my dad has been going over in this super-righteousness response to the paradox [Ecclesiastes and Christian Living, Part Ten]; when they see themselves in comparison to the prosperity of others they are trying to impress God by how good that they keep the law and it does not do them a whit of good because they are trying to force God to act for them.

They are doing the same exact thing as their fathers did in the wilderness. It is a problem that has stayed with the Israelites since all the way back. They have this in with God because God called them out of this world and put them as His nation and they get all these benefits from Him and then they refuse to do what He says. And every time they get in a scrap, they go to God and say, "You promised! You promised to do all this stuff for us." And He says, "I only promised to do that if you love Me, you put Me first, you do all these things, and you keep My commands. And so because you should have known better, you get crushed more than everybody else." And they cannot ever seem to learn the lesson. It is sad. It is frustrating.

But you know what? It is typical. It is not just Israel, everybody does this—and we do it too. And because we are in this position in the church of God where we are close to Him, we have the tendency to do the same things. And so these are object lessons for us, that we have to make sure we do not fall into these same patterns of refusing to follow God and blaming Him for all the problems we have when we brought them all on ourselves through disobedience.

So God's answer to the question, should we weep and fast like we've done all these years is, "No. You can fast all you like. But your fast and your character needs to be transformed." See, He does not mind people fasting. As a matter of fact, fasting is a part of our response to Him. It is a tool we can use to draw us near to Him.

But He wants us to do these fasts whenever we do them for the right reasons. And He wants these fasts to spur change. Not in Him. Fasts are not designed to make Him change or do anything! Fasts are designed to change *us*, fasts are designed to humble *us*, to help *us* submit to Him so that we will do what He says: keep His commands, live righteous and godly lives. Because what fasting does is it makes us understand that we are very weak creatures and we need Him. And because He is so great and awesome, such a master of all things, we need His help to do it. And so we then allow this pretense of our own goodness and strength to fall off us and we say, God, please forgive me. Help me to understand You and what You want of me and let us go forward from here.

If you want to look to see how He in another place where He responds like this, it is Isaiah 58. You have been fasting for strife, He says there. He says, but really fasting is to open up time and the right mind for you to give to others and to do well for others, not for yourself. They got it all upside down and backwards, which humans normally do. It is just the way that it is.

Instead the Jews, as we see it here in the Bible, they thought that all their grief—which one commentator said was selfish regret and another one called simply self-pity—all their put-on humility and afflicting their souls, would force God to hear them and act on their behalf and make their enemies go away and make them the greatest nation ever. But in reality, as I said, they were testing God, not repenting. They were trying to get Him to act in their behalf. And so He calls them children sulking in a corner.

Let us go to Matthew the sixth chapter and we will see toward the end of this time period after the exile, after the Jews come back, after they have been nearly 500 years in Judea again, and Christ is now on the scene. These are the descendants of the same people who said, should we keep on fasting? And God said no, and they just kept on fasting. Even that they did not get right. But here in Matthew the sixth chapter, Jesus has to correct them.

**Matthew 6:16-18** "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites [not like all the rest of you, the Pharisees], with a sad countenance. [is that not kind of what we are feeling out of some of the descriptions of the fast of the ninth of Av?] For they disfigure



their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast [He is talking to us], anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees you in secret will reward you openly."

Now, what is He telling us there? Not just the fact that we should not appear to be fasting, but He is telling us there that this fast is directed primarily at the Father and it is to return us into a good relationship with Him. Then He will respond. He will reward you and you will see the reward if your focus is right, if your focus is not on yourselves and how you appear to other men, but your focus is toward God and wanting to please Him and do what He says. So this is, in a way, a similar answer to what was given back there in Zechariah 7 and 8.

**Matthew 6:19-21** [He goes on in the meanwhile] "Do not lay up treasures on earth, . . . lay up treasures in heaven, . . . for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

**Matthew 6:25** "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"

He goes on in His stream of consciousness, let us say. He gets to the point here where we are asking for all of these physical needs. And He says, is not life so much more than just that? And of course, He goes on and says, God has provided all those things. If He provides for the fields, if He provides for the birds, if He provides to all of these things that He has created, He is certainly going to provide for us because we are the apple of His eye!

**Matthew 6:32** [He says] "For after all these things the Gentiles seek. [Those without even any contact with God want food and clothing and all these good things for their bodies. That is silly. That sure is physical and shortsighted.] For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."

Why are you asking for things that 1) He already knows you need and 2), He has already provided. It is kind of a waste of breath, is it not? Are you not asking for things that, you know, really in the long run do not mean a whole lot, especially in terms of eternity? We are not going to remember that piece of lasagna or that nice silk blouse or whatever it is that we think is so good to enjoy now, in the Kingdom of God. It is going to be so much better. Those are the things that we should be thinking about and putting our hopes on.

**Matthew 6:33** "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

That is His answer to the Jews about whether they should weep and fast in the fourth month, the fifth month, the seventh month, the tenth month. He says, seek the Kingdom, seek righteousness. If you do that, if you focus on these priorities—the mission statement again—if we focus on these things, then we do not need to fast. We will not need to weep because our situation is so terrible, because we think all is hopeless, that we have been pressed down by our enemies. God is going to provide. We will have our minds in the right place and He will give us what we need and we will be faithful and assured that they are exactly what we need.

So that is the answer. Who cares about those fasts? You know, God only commands one fast and that is the Day of Atonement, obviously. These that they did were their own making—super-righteousness. They thought they would add four fasts to the calendar in order to be righteous before God, to be pious, to show God how they really felt in their grief. He said, I did not ask for any of this. I want you guys to seek the Kingdom of God and righteousness and that is the very thing you will not do. It would get you out of this mess.

But people—humanity, not just the Jews—humanity refuses to do it. And that is the problem. But this is the key. If you do these things, then those fasts, those days of mourning will not be necessary.

These are the themes, part of them, of Psalms, Book Three. The answer to all the misery caused by God's judgment, which come as a result of sin of the people, and all that destruction that goes on because of God's judgment, the answer is humility, submission, repentance, reform, and thanksgiving.

Remember, those fasts would be changed to feasts of thanksgiving and joy. And so there is not only these things—humility, submission, repentance, reform—but there is also the thanksgiving that realizes that we did not do it ourselves, that God gets all the credit, He gets all the thanks. And so we thank Him for who He is, what He has done for us, how He has covenanted with us and given us so many promises and He has come through on them—and that we do not deserve these things that He is giving us.

But Israel has consistently refused to do these things and so they always get the punishment that they justly deserve. It is a pattern; just the way it is. Someday that will change. But we are going to have to wait until the very end to see it happen.

Let us go back to the book of Psalms. Last time I was going to read Psalm 148. Compare the keynote psalm of Psalm 73 to 148 because they kind of flow into one another. Psalm 148, of course, is the summary psalm. So I want to read it because it has a similar theme to the last few verses of the keynote chapter. Like I said, they kind of flow together. But I am going to just read through Psalm 148 because this gets to the point of the praise and thanksgiving that I was talking about just a moment ago.

**Psalm 148:1-14** Praise the Lord! [hallelujah in Hebrew] Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise Him in the heights! Praise Him, all His angels; praise Him, all his hosts! [You probably are singing the song already.] Praise Him, sun and moon; praise Him, all you stars of light! Praise Him, you heavens of heavens, and you waters above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the Lord, for He commanded and they were created. He has also established them forever and ever; He has made a decree which shall not pass away. Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all the depths; fire and hail, snow and clouds, stormy wind, fulfilling His word; mountains and all hills; fruitful trees and all cedars; beasts and all cattle; creeping things and flying fowl; kings of the earth and all peoples; princes and all judges of the earth; both young men and maidens; old men and children. Let them praise the name of the Lord, for His name alone is exalted; His glory is above the earth

and heaven. And He has exalted the horn of His people, the praise of all His saints—of the children of Israel, a people near to Him. [Hallelujah] Praise the Lord!

Now let us go back, before we get away from this particular psalm or this the ideas in this psalm, to Psalm 73, verses 25 through 28. This is the end of that psalm where Asaph went to the sanctuary after he had envied the wicked, and he got turned around and finally, by the end of the psalm, he is seeing things clearly.

**Psalm 73:25-28** [he says] Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish; You have destroyed all those who desert you for harlotry. But it is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all Your works.

And then if you flip back to 148: "Praise the Lord!" It is like at the end of chapter 73 he is just about ready to go into a song of praise, but it stops. And that is why I was going to finish with Psalm 148 because it just seems to flow so naturally into this psalm of praise.

But what he is saying here at the end of Psalm 73 is that finally it dawned on Him. He realized that God is unique! There is no one like God, no one for him in the same way. There is no one on earth that wants the things for him that God does. He cannot turn to anyone on earth and get the things that God can give to him easily.

And not only that, not only is He a great giver, a great sovereign, He has great power, but He is also trustworthy. He can have faith in Him, that when God says something, He is going to stick by His Word and do whatever it is that He said, whether it is a help or a promise or a reward, what have you, God is going to give it. If He said it, He will do it. His Word does not come back to Him empty. When He sends it out, it always comes back fulfilled.

That is just the way God is. We can trust Him because of that. And He has the power, like I said, to redeem, to forgive, to heal, and to transform, which

Asaph there in Psalm 73, realized. That God had been working with him and once he got in touch with God in the sanctuary, God began to transform Him, transform his mind, transform his thinking, so that he was on God's wavelength. And that is when things began to turn around and he began to have the right perspective. And he saw that God is our rock and He is our, as he says at the end of Psalm 73, He is our lot. He is our reward. He is our inheritance forever.

It is like you have a deed. And when you finally go to collect on that deed, it is God Himself, our inheritance. He is our lot, our plot in the Promised Land. Those Israelites, they just got acres of land. We get *God* as our inheritance and that is so much better! And He gets us, we are the heritage of the Lord.

Our sole task, then, as he gets to the end of Psalm 73 (which seems to be the theme for the day), is to draw near to Him, to be faithful to Him, to witness of Him in this world through reformed lives. And we do this by loving Him with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our might, with all our mind. We keep hearing different iterations of this mission statement. They are all throughout the Bible. God wants us to key in on those things and understand that if we just *do these things*, it is not that hard. But if we just get the right perspective in our minds and say, yeah, God, You are the only one for me, and then respond to that, react to that, do that, then things will be okay. Even if things are going to hell around us, things will be ok.

So Psalm 148 boils down to that one response: that God deserves unending praise from everyone and everything because He is our Creator. He is our Sustainer. He is the great Governor of all things. He should be exalted and honored by all the things on this earth for His glorious works, and not only on earth, in heaven too.

But did you notice what happens at the very end of the psalm, verse 14? Here he is talking about the heavens and the heights and the hosts and this, and that, and the other thing, and all these external things that are out there that we can see. Where does he get to, though, at the very end? He gets to "and He has exalted the horn of His people, the praise of all His saints." Even though he has encompassed the entire universe in this praise of God, it comes back down at the very end to His people, personal. To those He has called out.

What I find very interesting here is that "He has exalted the horn of His people." The horn is a symbol of strength. So we could say that the horn of His people is a little bit separate group from His people. He is talking about the strong ones of His people. He has exalted the strength of His people.

Now, what is the strength of a man and a woman as it is in the Bible? The first born. The first one is called the strength of his father a couple places in Scripture. You know why I think this is true, that that is what he is getting at, a very select few, a remnant we might call them? It is because of what he says next, "The praise of all His saints." He has exalted that small number that He considers His saints, His called-out ones. That is how we would translate it, let us say in the New Testament: the ones that He has called out, separated.

But that is not the word here, it does not mean holy ones. This is really very touching actually because the word is His chaste ones, the ones on whom He has endowed His lovingkindness, His grace.

So he brings it all back around to what God has done for us, His particular special people, those that He has drawn, as he says here at the end of verse 14, those He has drawn near to Him. This is why we can praise Him and exalt Him, because He has exalted us. He has taken this small group, the horn of His people, the strength of His people, the ones who have proved by their changing and their drawing near to Him that they are strong. They are the ones upon whom He has given His love to and made a covenant with. And these Israelites of God, as it were, have been exalted.

Why can we not praise Him all the time for that? We have a good reason to praise Him all the time for everything that He has done, for all the good that He has done for us. And we should never allow all of these things that He has done to get far from our mind because that is how we can remain faithful to Him. We remember! That is one of the big themes of Book Three. Remember! A lot of times it is people telling God, remember what You did, remember what You did. But it is really us saying to ourselves, God, I remember what You did, please continue to do it or do it again. And so we

can, in this way, continue to draw near to Him and keep our eyes on the beam, because we recognize what He has done for us and how He has made us a special people. So it is a bit emotional.

Just think: what is a greater honor in this world than being chosen by God, lifted up, exalted to be near to Him and to be His chosen ones upon whom He has lavished His love and His grace. He has not only brought us near to Him, He has allowed us to share His life. He is promised us that we will at one point share not only His holiness, but His character also, and His glory. I would call that exaltation. What could be a greater honor than that? What physical circumstance that we could go through would cancel that, would make that seem like a small thing? Would make us forget that? It should not. And so that is why this psalm ends, "Hallelujah!" When we really realize what has been given to us, it makes everything pale.

Let us go back to Psalm 74. I am sorry, but we are going to have to get back into the nitty gritty of things because that is what Psalm 74 does, it puts us right back in the midst of the destruction of Jerusalem and it makes us feel for those people. But by the end of it, I think we should have a good perspective of an attitude—our attitude—during times of great trial. Psalm 74 follows immediately on the heels of Psalm 73. But Psalm 74 and Psalm 73 are a bit different even though they are both similar to the extent that they are dealing with a problem, a trial.

I do not know if it is the same author, they both are called the Psalm of Asaph. But there are many people who believe that Asaph was indeed a person, but the psalms were written by different people who were in his group. And it is kind of easy to see because Psalm 73 seems like it was written perhaps in the time of Solomon or something like that when Israel may still have been together or only shortly after they split apart. But Psalm 74 definitely has a post-fall of Jerusalem feel to it. So it was probably that the Asaphites were a group, probably those descended from Asaph who had particular talents and they were used to write these psalms.

There are two ways in which these psalms are very different and I want to give you both of these. The first is that whereas Psalm 73 is a personal psalm, there is lots of "I's" in it. I did this, I envied the wicked, I did this and that, and then I went to the sanctuary etc.. It is written from one man's point

of view. Psalm 74 though is communal. There are lots of "we's" in it and "us"—why have You forsaken us? What are we to do? That sort of thing. So, it is written from a community or a group aspect.

We, I am talking about us moderns here in this day and age, tend to be individualistic. We would probably think more and relate more to Psalm 73 maybe than Psalm 74 just for this reason. Individualism is the credo of our time. We are taught to think for ourselves and frankly, we are taught to think only *of* ourselves and how we can get along in this world and how we can succeed and do all this for us, us, us, me, me, me. I should even say that when somebody actually puts an institution above himself or puts his country before himself and his own desires, we think of that person as altruistic or even a hero.

But this was a common way of living for people like the Israelites who were very tribal. Of course, they had human nature, they thought of themselves, but they were taught from very early on to think of tribe, clan, nation. Actually, I should go back even further. It should be more like family, clan, tribe, nation. They are all part of something a little bigger and what happens to the family happens to the self. What happens to the clan happens to the self. What happens to the tribe happens to the self, etcetera. And so they thought more in terms of group rather than self. Obviously, they thought of themselves, but they were taught to think beyond themselves in many ways. Unlike us; we are taught only to think of ourselves.

This psalm reflects the feeling that the individual is part of something greater. The whole is greater than its individual parts, individual members. And if you want a kind of a New Testament feeling of this same thing, go and read about the church in I Corinthians 12 where we are all members of one body and when one weeps, we all weep. When one is joyful, we are all joyful. That is kind of the way this particular psalm is written.

The second thing that is different about this psalm than Psalm 73 is that the problem that is focused on in Psalm 73 was motivated from the inside. Remember, the psalmist envied the prosperity of the wicked. It was something that he felt from inside and he had to work it out inside. He has had to change his mind about things. Psalm 74 is somewhat different because the problem was externally motivated. The problem was there was a huge



army of Babylonians out there and they were destroying the city and killing a lot of his people.

So both the problem and the perspective is different in Psalm 74 than Psalm 73, so this is different for us too. I am talking about the second one, that the problem is not externally motivated. You know, we have not had a whole lot of problems in this age that come from the outside. I am talking on a national scale. Most of our problems that we face are personal. Someone cut us off in traffic, someone called us a bad name, let us say our company closed down and we are out of a job. It is actually a small thing in comparison to something that might come upon the whole nation like a war, like an invasion. And so we do not have a whole lot of experience coping with these major external problems.

But this is what we are dealing with in Psalm 74—something that has come upon us from the outside that we did not cause, not really as we tend to think of it. "Oh, it's those guys up in Washington, they just don't know what they are doing!" And they are causing this great problem and we are going to be invaded by, you name the invader, because of what *they* did. Well, that is not how this psalm approaches it. At least by the end we get the feeling that there is something else happening here. But that is the idea that this is a major problem, a major external problem, not necessarily an internal problem. What is happening is going on outside of us, not inside us.

Now, I want to mention here that the problem is not just an irritation. This is a major existential problem. We could die. This could be the end of our life, definitely the end of our *way* of life. What we find though is that the problem, even though it seems to be that there is this terrible nation coming upon us and wreaking all this destruction and bad, bad, bad enemies, really, once we get to it, we find out that *we* caused the problem by forsaking God in the first place. Really, the problem is internal, even though it looks on the outside to be external.

**Psalm 74:1** O God, why have You cast us off forever? Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture?

This is the way He starts off. Wailing! God, where have You gone? Why are You letting this happen to Your people? And this states the problem very

plainly. It is not a matter of *if* God had rejected His people. He had! The question is *why* had God forsaken His people? It is a done deal. God is gone. He is out of there. They cannot find Him anywhere, they had looked under every stone. No God, God is gone. And not only that, the psalmist uses the word "forever." This is not just God went down to the corner grocery store to pick up a gallon of milk and He will be right back. This is God left the country—He is out of here! He might even be headed toward another galaxy. He is that far gone.

That is the impression that the psalmist gives, that they cannot find any evidence of God anywhere working on their behalf. They called Him up. He did not answer. They call Him up again, they call Him up again, they call Him up again. All they are getting is dial tone. No one is at the other end of the line. He will not respond because He is not there. He is gone. That is the feeling of verse 1.

I want you to understand how forsaken they felt. God shut, locked the door, left the key under the mat, He will not be back. I do not think I am overstating it. That is how they felt. And He had. It says here in verse 1 that He had left them in anger, He was mad at them. He was totally shut of them. He had had it up to here. They done all these things against what He told them to do time and time again. They never listened. They always went in that corner and sulked. And so by the time we get here, He had had enough. He was angry. And He was gone.

He calls them, the people of Israel, the sheep of His pasture. And it makes me think of Psalm 23. Back then they said, "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want." But now he is saying, "The sheep have lost their Shepherd. He's gone. He's not coming back. He's down the mountain, He has gone somewhere else. You just have to fend for yourself from now on out."

Now, what we see here, this relationship between shepherd and sheep had reached a breaking point. And God had said, "You left Me such a long time ago. Now, it's My turn to leave." It reached a breaking point. It was done. Verse 2. The psalmist changes tack here.

**Psalm 74:2-3** Remember Your congregation, which You have purchased of old, the tribe of Your inheritance, which You have

redeemed—thus, Mount Zion where you have dwelt. Lift up Your feet to the perpetual desolations. The enemy has damaged everything in the sanctuary.

So his questions here turn to pleas. Perhaps the psalmist thinks that if God would just remember the good old days, back when He had redeemed Israel from Egypt and brought them out of slavery, purchased them with the blood of the firstborn, all that He had done, all those miracles, all those wonderful works, bringing them through the Red Sea. Was that not fun, God? We had such a good time together. We were so close! Will You not remember that? And remember some of those warm feelings You had toward us and how You fought for us and worked for us. Do that again! We would love it.

Then he goes and says, "Remember Mount Zion! That is where Your house is. You lived here with us just a few weeks ago. We had a swell time, didn't we? You were our God, we were Your people. Maybe, God, if You remember us, living cheek by jowl here in Jerusalem, everything will be ok." Silence. Then he goes on, he says, "Hurry back, God, from wherever You are." That is what lift up Your feet means, that is, running. That is what you do when you run, you lift up your feet. He is saying, "Hurry back, hasten back to us." But he says, You have got to get back here fast because the enemy has come in and they have damaged Your house. You have got to get back here and correct all this problem because Your house is falling down. That is actually *had* fallen down because then we get a description in verses 4 through 8 of what had actually occurred.

**Psalm 74:4-8** Your enemies roar in the midst of Your meeting place; they set up their banners for signs. [They are saying they have taken down all Your signs and they put up signs of their own, they own it. Now he says] They seem like men who lift up axes among the thick trees. [They are a bunch of lumberjacks. They came in there with axes.] And now they break down its carved work, all at once [They go in there with a big mass of men. All of them have axes and hammers and they just go chopping away.], with axes and hammers. They have set fire to Your sanctuary [So once they got it all into kindling, they threw a torch in there and (whoosh!) there went the sanctuary there, there went the Temple.]; they have defiled the dwelling place of Your name to the ground.

They said in their hearts, "Let us destroy them altogether." They have burned up all the meeting places of God in the land.

He is saying, "God, look! They directly attacked Your house. What were they after? They were after *You*, not us! They came and destroyed *Your* house. They took down *Your* sanctuary, and not only that, they burned it down and then they went around and found all the places where we would meet, those of us who are faithful toward God and we would come and worship in these various places (because you cannot get millions of people in the Temple), we call them today churches, where you worship God, and you know what they did? They went around all Jerusalem and all Judah and they burned every one of those down so that we can't come near to You anymore. You've got to hasten back, God. Pick up Your feet, make a quick trip back here so we can be saved."

What he is saying here is, "Look, God, this isn't just all about us. We need You to come back and see that this was about You. These enemies came in and they wanted to destroy You from the face of the earth. This is Your reputation that's being maligned here. They're reviling You. So what are You going to do? They're disrespecting Your name. Your name declares what You are. They're trying to tear all that down and say that You're weak, that You can't protect Your own." Trying to use psychology on God here.

But then we get to this point where the psalmist, I think, begins to wake up. He has made this appeal and then he gets to verse 9. We are going to read 9 through 11 here and we will see that things start to change a little bit. He gets a little bit less emotional, but he starts to begin thinking about them, not so much God.

**Psalm 74:9-11** We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet; nor is there any among us who knows how long. O God, how long will the adversary reproach? Why do You withdraw Your hand, even Your right hand? [that is, the strong hand, He has taken away His strength] Take it out of Your bosom and destroy them.

Now, what he admits here in verse 9 is that God has forsaken them even in their worship. He has not sent a prophet to them. He has not given them anybody with any kind of revelation or knowledge or foresight to see

whether God was going to actually answer them, whether He was going to return, whether this was going to go on for just a day or two or a few months or maybe years, they did not know anything. Now, you understand why they felt totally forsaken. There was no one speaking for God. Jeremiah was in Egypt. Daniel was in Babylon, so was Ezekiel, and God had not raised up any more for them.

He was gone; and he was beginning to see that there was something going on here about them. They were the reason why God was gone. God had not bugged out because He saw the Chaldeans over the hill and said, "I gotta go now." He left because of *them*, the people of Israel, people of Judah, and their idolatry and all the things that they had done against Him. "There is no prophet among us. We don't have any preachers. We don't have anybody telling us what God wants. We don't have anybody reading to us from God's Word. We don't know a thing." They were in a bad state already because I am sure the knowledge of God had declined quite a bit toward the end. They felt totally abandoned.

Then we get to verse 12. Verse 12 is where everything starts to really change because you know what he does? Asaph or whoever the author is, throws in a hymn of praise right in the middle of his discourse. Hey, complain, complain; where are You, God? Let us sing a song of praise to God. My New King James shows us this terribly. It is right in the middle of a paragraph. It should be its own paragraph.

**Psalm 74:12-17** For God is my King from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. You divided the sea by Your strength; You broke the heads of the sea serpents in the waters. You broke the heads of Leviathan in pieces, and gave him as food to the people inhabiting the wilderness. You broke open the fountain and the flood; You dried up mighty rivers. The day is Yours, the night also is Yours. You have prepared the light and the sun. You have set all the borders of the earth; You have made summer and winter.

What this is, is an explanation of what God is and what God has done. And Asaph is saying to himself by including this hymn right in the middle of the psalm, is that I have got to get an understanding of what God really is like!

And God is Lord and master and sovereign Creator, He is all-powerful! And if if you wanted to go chase these down, commentators believe that all these things that he mentions through this section are things either that are gods, that is gods of other lands that were worshipped, or they are powers of other gods.

And what Asaph is showing here, he is showing that God is the master of all of them too. There is no one stronger. And so this cannot be a duel between the god of the Babylonians, Marduk, and God, because God is far stronger than Marduk. Marduk is nothing. Marduk is a figment of people's imagination. At best, he is a demon and God can just smash him at any time.

So, you see, by reviewing these things, "Hey, God. Don't you know He made light, He made the sun, you know, He's in control of all of the climate and guess what? He's able to make it summer, He's able to make it winter. He can control the ocean. He could divide it in two if He wanted to. Are there any big sea serpents out there? He can smash them like a fly, like a bug." He can do whatever He wants. He can cause water to come out of the earth by breaking up the fountains and He can dry up water that is there already. Great rivers of water. He can do *anything* He wants—and He allowed His Temple and His people to be destroyed.

Something else is going on here. This theophany, if you will, is opening up Asaph's mind, whoever the psalmist is, to show that there is more going on here than meets the eye, that God is allowing this destruction for a reason.

Let us go on to verse 18 to finish this up. Let us read verses 18 through 23. He has just gotten finished with this hymn of praise to God and his attitude immediately changes.

**Psalm 74:18-23** Remember this, that the enemy has reproached, O Lord, and that a foolish people has blasphemed Your name. Oh, do not deliver the life of Your turtledove to the wild beast! Do not forget the life of Your poor forever. Have respect to the covenant; for the dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty. [Yeah, the earth is a mean, violent place and we are in the middle of it.] Oh, do not let the oppressed return ashamed! Let Your poor and needy praise Your name. Arise, O God, plead Your own cause;

remember how the foolish man reproaches You daily. Do not forget the voice of Your enemies; the tumult of those who up rise against You increases continually.

Interesting. The hymn of praise here that we see in verses 12 through 17 acts in a similar way to Asaph going to the sanctuary in Psalm 73:17. What it does is it puts him in the proper attitude and gives him a proper godly perspective so that he can beseech God in the present. Here he had been complaining about what had happened, but he had to talk to God about what was going on right now and what needed to happen in the future. He was getting so depressed and full of self-pity by looking around them and seeing what had happened, that he had not really thought about what he needed to do. And so once he figured out that God was doing something great here, that there was something going on that he needed to think about because God could have avoided all this very easily, but He allowed it to happen.

And so he had to think about. "Okay, how am I going to respond now that I'm aware of this?" And that is what he does. Instead of whining and complaining, he asks seven pleas here between verses 18 and 23. Pleas to God to act. And I want to give you these very quickly just in other words so that you can understand what he was asking for. And if you want to at some other time, read Exodus 32 after the incident of the Golden Calf, when God was going to strike Israel from the face of the earth and start over with Moses. Some of these things that Asaph asked reflect what Moses said to God to get Him to relent. But these are the seven things that he beseeches God for.

1. He says, "God, please remember what the enemy did. They blasphemed You." That was true, it was against Him. And so he is saying like Moses did back in Exodus 32, do not let them ruin Your reputation. Do not let anybody think that You are weak because You are not.

2. "Please save our lives. Do as You have done in the past and deliver us from our enemies. Please fight for us."

3. "Remember the covenant and the promises that You made to Israel and You made them to protect us from the evils of the earth. Please remember that."

4. "Turn our shame and oppression into praise and thanksgiving."
5. "Arise as Judge and pass judgment on these sinful blaspheming enemies."
6. "Remember the taunts and the insults that were thrown at You."
7. "Realize that the situation of Your people is not getting any easier in Your absence. In fact, it is increasing in intensity all the time."

Much different attitude between the end of Psalm 74 and the beginning. And Psalm 74 ends on this distressing note, "The tumult of those who rise up against You increases continually." The problem has not been solved. The devastation is still going on. People are still dying. They do not have any control over their lives. They are continuing to be slaves, they are continuing to be in exile. God's intervention has not happened yet.

But the way it ends reflects the reality of how God's people must hope in the midst of a situation that God has heard. They must hope that God has heard and that He will act. We can but beseech Him for help in this time of need. And then wait—wait in faith for Him to act. And even though this was such a terrible thing that had happened to the city of Jerusalem and all of its people, we could possibly say that sometimes the greatest test comes at this point when all the devastation has taken place. And now you must wait for God to act because waiting is hard, waiting patiently and waiting in faith.