

B. Psalm 74 – Sonship and Communal Lamentation

Scriptural lament is grounded in Israel's sonship and reflects and gives voice to the struggles of that sonship, whether on the part of individual Israelites or the nation as a whole. Thus lament is a predominant theme in the Psalter, with dozens of psalms focusing on personal and communal lamentation. Whether personal or communal, and whatever the specific circumstance and matter of focus, all such psalms (as indeed every instance of Israelite lament) express the burden, agony, and longing that arose from Israel's intractable inability to fulfill its calling as son of God.

1. Psalm 74 is a good example of Israel's psalms of lament, and like the thirteenth psalm considered previously, it contains the essential elements of lament. But unlike Psalm 13, which gives voice to David's personal burden, Psalm 74 expresses the nation's collective lamentation. And yet both psalms – as indeed all of the psalms of lament – have the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel as their fundamental premise and primary point of concern. Even when the lamentation is deeply personal, it is always covenantal; like all of the psalms, the psalms of lament are songs of *sonship*.

Psalm 74 is one of the twelve ascribed to *Asaph* (Psalms 50, 73-83), a Levite (descendent of Gershom) and music composer appointed through David as one of the leaders of the worship choirs (ref. 1 Chronicles 6:31-39, 15:16-19, 25:1-8; 2 Chronicles 5:1-14, 29:30). But this ascription raises questions, in that the psalm describes a circumstance of immense calamity and desolation that didn't exist during Asaph's lifetime.

- a. Some scholars believe the psalm refers to the Babylonian siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., while others associate it with the carnage and desecration perpetrated by Antiochus Epiphanes in the middle of the second century B.C. Either way, Asaph was long dead, and couldn't have penned the psalm. This has led some to conclude that the ascription (*A Maskil of Asaph*) either indicates that the psalm was composed by one of Asaph's descendents, or that it reflects Asaph's style of writing. Others believe that Asaph did indeed pen it, but that he wrote as a *prophet* (ref. again 1 Chronicles 25:1-2), enabled by the Spirit to perceive the future desolation of Jerusalem and its temple.
- b. The other option is that Asaph was writing about a crisis in his own day (perhaps Absalom's insurrection against his father David), but treated it hyperbolically for the sake of rhetorical effect. That is, he was using the language of invasion, calamity and destruction to convey the gravity and implications of Israel's unfaithfulness and rebellion against the Lord (ref. esp. vv. 18-21).

Though certain descriptors in the psalm are consistent with the desecration of the sanctuary by Antiochus Epiphanes during the Maccabean period (vv. 3-4), the overall description and lament seems to best suit the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army in 586 B.C. Not only does the psalmist refer to the burning of the temple (v. 7), he attributed that calamity to God's rejection and punishment of Israel (v. 1; cf. 2 Chronicles 36:11-21; Lamentations 1-2), which was not the case with the Maccabean situation. If this view is correct, it indicates that the psalm's ascription pointed to a descendent of Asaph, or another psalmist connected with him somehow.

2. The psalm is composed in three distinct sections that reflect the dynamics of scriptural lament. It begins with the psalmist crying out to Yahweh in view of calamity that had befallen him, his Israelite brethren, and Yahweh's dwelling (vv. 1-11). He then extolled God's sovereignty and power as Creator and hinted at His enduring purpose for His creation (vv. 12-17). Lastly, the writer called upon Yahweh to remember His covenant with His people Israel – not only because that covenant serves His creation and its destiny, but also out of zeal for His own integrity and testimony in the world (vv. 18-23).

- a. Echoing other psalms of lament, Psalm 74 opens with a cry of desperation: "*O God, have You rejected us forever? Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture?*" (cf. 6:1-3, 10:1, 13:1-2, 17:1, 25:1-2, 28:1-3, 38:1-3, 88:1-9, 94:1-7, 102:1-11, 130:1-2, etc.). Whereas many of the lament psalms are deeply personal, this one is overtly communal; the psalmist raised his voice on behalf of the household of Israel: "the sheep of Your pasture," "Your purchased congregation," "the tribe of Your inheritance that You redeemed" (vv. 1-2a). And inasmuch as he was concerned for the covenant *nation*, he was equally concerned for the covenant *habitation* (v. 2b). For it was Yahweh's presence with them that distinguished Israel as His covenant people – His *son* (cf. Exodus 4:22-23, 6:1-8, 15:17, 25:1-8, 29:42-46), and it was precisely Yahweh's rejection and departure from them that the psalmist was lamenting.

Thus the focus of the psalmist's lament wasn't the nation's suffering, but the desolation of the Lord's dwelling place. He cried out to Yahweh to bring retribution against Israel's enemies, not because of what they had done to His people, but because of what they were doing to *Him*: defiling and ultimately destroying the place of His enthronement, thereby demonstrating their arrogance and brazen challenge to His authority and rule as King (vv. 3-8). It was this pagan affront that most vexed the psalmist, and he was perplexed and troubled that the Lord was silent concerning it, and perhaps even indifferent toward it (vv. 9-11).

- b. Having raised his complaint to God, the psalmist extolled Him as *his king* – the sovereign Creator-Lord who works His wonders in the earth, bringing deliverance to His own as part of His commitment to sustain His creation and its order (vv. 12-17). Though deeply vexed by the destruction wrought by these adversaries and their sneering disdain for God and His people, the psalmist knew that Yahweh remained Lord of His creation, and therefore King over all men. He had shown Himself faithful to His covenant and His people in the past, and the writer affirmed this by drawing on images of God's sovereignty in the natural order:

- The One who wields all power over the earth's creatures and natural processes is the One who divided the sea by His strength and crushed the Egyptian leviathan (vv. 13-14; cf. Isaiah 51:9-10, also 26:1-27:1).
- He set the boundaries of the sea and dry land and controls the rain and streams that water the earth (v. 15; cf. Psalm 104:1-13), and He provided His people with springs of water in the wilderness and brought them into Canaan across a dry riverbed (Exodus 15:22-27, 17:1-6; Joshua 3-4).

- He is the God who created the luminaries and separated day and night (v. 16; cf. Genesis 1:1-5), and He caused light to illumine His people and their habitation while dispatching darkness to enshroud His adversaries (ref. Exodus 10:21-23; cf. also Joshua 10:12-14; Isaiah 38:1-8).
- c. It was *this* God – the God who is ever-faithful to His creation and His intent for it – that the psalmist knew, acknowledged, and appealed to. He knew that his God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who had covenanted with the children of Israel on behalf of His creation, and thus he was convinced that Yahweh would not remain silent and unresponsive forever; He would yet act on behalf of His people and deal justly with those who opposed both them and Him

Thus the writer appealed to Yahweh to take note of the enemies that had spurned His name and afflicted His covenant children (vv. 18-19), and consider their high-handed opposition in the light of His covenant and His unyielding commitment to it (v. 20). Surely that would motivate Him to arise as their deliverer and not abandon them to their adversaries like a turtle dove that is devoured by a wild beast (v. 19). The psalmist believed that Yahweh would hear and respond to his pleas because He is a faithful God, a God who always “keeps covenant.” And so, when He acted on their behalf, He would also display and exalt His own righteousness. *By honoring His people’s pleas, Yahweh would be pleading His own cause* – not just before Israel, but in the sight of His adversaries (vv. 22-23).

3. This sort of appeal wasn’t unique to this particular psalmist, but echoes the pattern of thinking and interaction exhibited by the Lord’s faithful ones throughout Israel’s history. Abraham demonstrated it when he refused to accept the spoils of victory from the king of Sodom, recognizing that his triumph was *God’s* triumph, and unwilling to do anything that would suggest otherwise (Genesis 14). So Moses pled with God to relent from destroying His people out of jealousy for His own reputation and honor and accomplishing the outcome for which He had called them (Exodus 32:1-13). The same perspective is reflected in numerous other psalms (ref. 25, 31, 44, 59, 79, 83, 109), and the pleas of God’s leaders and prophets (cf. 1 Samuel 17:1-47; 2 Kings 19:1-19; 2 Chronicles 6:13-33; Nehemiah 9; Daniel 9; Jeremiah 14; etc.).

All of this underscores that human faithfulness is simply enacted faith in God’s own faithfulness; it is unshakeable confidence and trust that He will uphold all that He has purposed, disclosed and promised, and bring it all to pass exactly as He intends. Human faith and faithfulness, then, is recognizing and living into the truth of being scripted into God’s comprehensive story. Such faith doesn’t merely concede that God works all things with a view to His own glory, but that He manifests and has determined to perfect His glory by transforming and flooding His creation with its effulgence. *The One who is eternally and infinitely glorious has determined to attain the consummate fullness of His glory by summing up everything in the heavens and the earth in His glorified Son.*

The lament of God’s faithful children, then, is *eschatological angst*: It is their agonized longing, not for relief from earthly suffering, but for their glorious revealing that will see the whole creation liberated and taken up in that glory as their Father becomes all in all.