

Psalm 74

Prayer during the Day Tuesday Week 3

Jerusalem has been devastated. Judah's enemies mock Jerusalem's God. The psalmist wonders why God, who conquered chaos, does not intervene, but allows the fury of the enemies to prevail. Why is God so angry against his people? Why does God not come to protect the downtrodden and the poor who cry for help? It is likely that this psalm was composed in response to the destruction of the city and temple in 587BC. The language is reminiscent of the Lamentations. See also Psalm 102. There are also similarities with a lamentation on the destruction of Sumer and Ur which can be found in the Ancient Near Eastern Texts (ANET 3a ed. 611-619). In contrast to Psalm 44 and Psalm 79 there is no mention here of sin or innocence. The title reads: 'A Maskil* of Asaph*'.

Thematic Introduction

It makes no sense that God would allow to be undone what he himself has done, to reject what he Himself has chosen, to repudiate what he has redeemed, to choose his dwelling and then let it be burned, to consecrate it and then let it be profaned!

Compare the following:

Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke,
because YHWH had descended upon it in fire;
the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln,
while the whole mountain shook violently.

– Exodus 19:18

The earth reeled and trembled;
the mountains were shaken to their foundations,
they shuddered at his terrible anger.
Smoke issued from his nostrils,
a scorching fire from his mouth;
and fiery rocks erupted.

– Psalm 18:7-8

A people who provoke me to my face
continually are smoke in my nostrils,
a fire that burns all day long.

– Isaiah 65:5

**¹O God, why do you leave
us abandoned? Why do you
blaze with anger* against
the sheep of your pasture?**

**²Remember your congrega-
tion, which you acquired
long ago, which you re-
deemed* to be the tribe
allotted especially to you.
Remember Mount Zion,
where you came to dwell.**

Where is God in this devastation?

Part One. A description of the enemy's fury

³Direct your steps to where everything lies in ruin, to the devastation that the enemy has caused to your sanctuary.

The city was devastated by the Babylonians in 587BC. It was also devastated by the Syrian forces in the early second century BC.

All the army assembled and went up to Mount Zion. There they saw the sanctuary desolate, the altar profaned, and the gates burned. In the courts they saw bushes sprung up as in a thicket, or as on one of the mountains. They saw also the chambers of the priests in ruins.

– 1Maccabees 4:37-38

⁴Your foes have filled the place of assembly with commotion; they have set up their standards there.

Our holy and beautiful house,
where our ancestors praised you,
has been burned by fire,
The places we loved most have become ruins.

– Isaiah 64:11

⁵They have hacked their way in as one takes an axe to the thickest part of the forest.

⁶And then, with hatchets and hammers, they smashed all its carved work.

⁷They set your sanctuary on fire; they desecrated the dwelling place of your name, bringing it to the ground.

⁸They said: 'Exterminate the whole nation. Burn all the meeting places of God in the land'.

⁹We do not see our emblems; there is no longer any prophet, and there is no one among us who knows how long this will last.

The psalmist gives expression to the people's bewilderment and disorientation. All familiar supports have gone. Where does this leave God's promises? Where does it leave the covenant? What is the meaning of Israel? Will this tragedy ever have an end? Compare 1 Maccabees 4:46; 9:27; 14:41.

¹⁰How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever?

God brought them out with mighty arm from Egypt. Why not now?

¹¹Why do you hold back your left hand; why do you keep your right hand in your bosom?

Part Two. God's victory in creation

'The sea' is the primeval 'sea', but also the Red Sea. 'Dragons' seems to refer to Rahab, the mythological sea serpent and Leviathan, a monster of chaos in Canaanite mythology. God is portrayed as defeating Rahab at creation and so bringing order out of chaos.

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of YHWH!
 Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago!
 Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced
 the dragon?

– Isaiah 51:9

YHWH brought Israel out from among them
 with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.
 He divided the Red Sea in two.

– Psalm 136:11-13

By his power he stilled the Sea; by his understanding he
 struck down Rahab.

– Job 26:12

You pierced and crushed Raha.
 you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.
 The heavens are yours; yours is the earth;
 the world and all that is in it –
 you have established it all!
 You created the north and the south;
 Tabor and Hermon joyously acclaim your name.
 You have a mighty arm; your left hand is strong,
 your right hand is sublime.

– Psalm 89:10-13

YHWH your God is bringing you into a good land, a
 land with flowing streams, with springs and under-
 ground waters welling up in valleys and hills.

– Deuteronomy 8:7

He turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty
 ground ... He turns a desert into pools of water,
 a parched land into springs of water.

– Psalm 107:33,35

As long as the earth endures, seed time and harvest, cold
 and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not
 cease.

– Genesis 8:22

**¹²Yet you, O God, are my
 King from of old, bring-
 ing saving help* to the
 land.**

**¹³You divided the sea by
 your might; you broke
 the heads of the dragons
 in the waters.**

**¹⁴You crushed the heads
 of Leviathan; you gave
 him as food for the crea-
 tures of the wilderness.**

**¹⁵You cut openings for
 springs and torrents; you
 dried up ever-flowing
 streams.**

**¹⁶Yours is the day, yours
 also the night; you estab-
 lished the moon and the
 sun.**

**¹⁷You have fixed all the
 bounds of the earth;
 you made summer and
 winter.**

Part Three. A further plea for God to intervene

¹⁸YHWH, remember this. See how the enemy scoffs, and how a foolish people reviles your name.

Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'

– Psalm 14:1

I feared provocation by the enemy, for their adversaries might misunderstand and say, 'Our hand is triumphant; it was not YHWH who did all this.' They are a nation void of sense; there is no understanding in them. If they were wise, they would understand this; they would discern what the end would be.

– Deuteronomy 32:27-29

¹⁹Do not deliver the life and hopes of your turtle dove to the wild animals.

'Life and hopes' translates the Hebrew *nepeš*. Not only their life is at risk, but everything that gives meaning to their lives. The dove is Israel's heraldic emblem:

The wings of a dove covered with silver,
its pinions with green gold.

– Psalm 68:13

Do not forget the life of your poor* forever.

²⁰Have regard for your covenant*, for the dark places of the land vomit forth violence.

²¹Do not let the downtrodden be defrauded; let the poor* and needy* praise your name.

²²Rise up, O God, plead *your* cause; remember how the impious scoff at you all day long.

Their cause is YHWH's cause, for YHWH is their God and they are YHWH's own people:

YHWH, contend with those who contend with me.

– Psalm 35:1

You be my judge, O God.

– Psalm 43:1

Plead my cause.

– Psalm 119:154

²³Do not forget the clamour of your foes, the uproar of your adversaries that is becoming ever more strident.