

A Cry for Justice? **Psalm 79**

Imagine Australia's been overrun by Cuba. The Cuban armies have marched in and taken over. Our military defences simply crumbled. It's not that they didn't put up a fight – they did. A war happened. Destruction's everywhere. No Harbour Bridge. No Opera House. No CBD. Even Bathurst didn't escape. The Council Chambers are a black hole. The Anglican Cathedral's a pile of rubble. No houses are left standing in Windradyne.

You're still alive – just. Your house is destroyed – only one room left intact where you eke out an existence of sorts. Your spouse was killed. Your son's in some gaol in Cuba. Your daughter simply disappeared when the army swept through town.

The Cuban propaganda machine has closed all churches – not that many were left standing. They've proclaimed: the God of the churches didn't protect you; the God of the churches simply doesn't exist.

As a Christian, how do you react?

- God, why did you let this happen to me?
- God, why didn't you protect my family from these heathens?
- God, are You really there? Do You really care for me? Are You really all-powerful?
- God, I know we've been a sinful bunch – but surely we're not as bad as this lot!
- God, how can you let these guys get away with saying You don't exist?

For most of us – if not all of us – it's hard for us to truly put ourselves in that situation. Australia simply hasn't known that sort of devastation. We haven't known it.

- Sure, we've seen the news reports of that sort of thing from other parts of our world.
- Sure, we've seen the Hollywood blockbusters like *Independence Day*.

Yet, we don't know the reality. We haven't faced that sort of devastation. We haven't experienced that sort of deprivation. We don't know how we'd relate to God – or even if we'd relate to Him – in that sort of situation.

The Destruction of Jerusalem

But the guy who wrote this psalm did. He speaks from first-hand experience. Verse 1:

*O God, the nations have invaded Your inheritance;
they have defiled Your holy temple,
they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.
They have given the dead bodies of Your servants
as food to the birds of the air,
the flesh of Your saints to the beasts of the earth.
They have poured out blood like water
all around Jerusalem,
and there is no one to bury the dead.
We are objects of reproach to our neighbours,
of scorn and derision to those around us.*

Who are the nations in verse 1? Probably the Babylonians – and those who assisted them. They destroyed Jerusalem in 587BC. They ransacked the houses. They burned the temple. They broke down the walls. They left the city as rubble. Yet, it's not simply that we identify them as the particular nation of Babylon. Rather, they're part of the nations of Psalm 2:

- the nations that conspire against God;
- the nations that stand against God;
- the nations that want to throw off God's rule.

They came to Jerusalem – to Zion – and they destroyed God's city.

How did such a thing happen? How could God allow this to happen to His people? The answer has two levels.

- At one level, it's not that God allowed this to happen – He actually brought it about. The psalm expresses that later on. God's people suffer here because of their sin. They did the wrong thing. They turned away from God – and they did it time and time again. God acted against them in anger – in judgment. God brought the nations against Jerusalem to discipline His people.
- Yet, at another level, this happens because of the Babylonians' wickedness. Why did they attack Jerusalem? Was it because they wanted to please God? Did they come because they wanted to worship the one true God – the Maker of heaven and earth? Of course not. They came because of their own greed. They came because of their own pride. They conquered and destroyed in order to extend their own empire. They loved wealth and power – not God.

You can see that in the description of their destruction of Jerusalem. It's not simply that they were content to beat their enemy and take them off into exile. No – they pulverise Judah – they crush them and mash them and chop them up into little pieces. Look again at the psalmist's description:

- They defile the temple.

- They reduce the city to rubble.
- They pour out blood like water.
- They dishonour the dead.

I want to move to the next part of the psalm – to the part that raises all sorts of questions for us – but I think it's important we don't get there too quickly. We need to remember the real situation.

- These are not just Judah's enemies that have done this – these are God's enemies. It's the nations who conspire against God and want to throw off God's rule – they're the ones who've done this.
- And it's not simply Judah they've done it to – these are God's people. It's God's possession experiencing these calamities.
- And they're no ordinary calamities. The destruction was wanton. It went beyond what was necessary to achieve a simple victory. Evil's involved in what these nations do to Jerusalem.

Prayer for Deliverance

It's in that context that Asaph prays. I think he asks for two things. The first is relief – deliverance. The question in verse 5 sums it up.

*How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever?
How long will your jealousy burn like fire?*

This prayer doesn't come from innocence. It's not:

Lord, we're in this really bad spot. We don't know why this happened to us or why You allowed it to happen to us – but could You please get us out of it? Asaph doesn't ask "why" – he knows exactly why they're suffering. Whether he'd personally heard Jeremiah or Ezekiel, we don't know – but he knows the reality of the

message they preached. They're suffering because of God's judgment. They're suffering because of their spiritual adultery – because they'd forsaken the true God and chased after false gods. They're suffering because God's angry with them – and it's right that God's angry with them. They deserved this.

And so, verse 8:

*Do not hold against us the sins of the fathers;
may Your mercy come quickly to meet us,
for we are in desperate need.*

*Help us, O God our Saviour,
for the glory of Your name;
deliver us and forgive our sins
for Your name's sake.*

He acknowledges their sin. They have done wrong.

- Their ancestors did wrong (v.8).
- They themselves did wrong (v.9).

Thus, Asaph asks for forgiveness. He asks God to blot out the accumulation of their sin. He asks that God not continue to hold this wickedness against them.

On what basis does he ask this?

- Because they're a smart bunch of people?
- Because they show good potential?
- Because they're somehow worthy?

No. He can only appeal to God's mercy. They don't deserve rescue. They don't deserve to have God act on their behalf. Rather, they can only acknowledge their guilt, submit to Him and hope He'll act to rescue them from their distress.

The reality is: this is the only basis on which any human can approach God – can ask God for help. No one can

stand before God and say:

Look at all these great things I've done. Look at how I've exceeded Your expectations. Look at how I've gone beyond what You asked of me. I'm here to claim an appropriate reward.

All humans – except Jesus – have failed to meet God's expectations. We can't claim a reward. We can't claim that God owes us. We can only ask for God's mercy.

Asaph also appeals to God's name. Several possible aspects are behind this.

- First there's God's promise to Abraham – to make him into a great nation and to be their God and to bless all the peoples of the earth through him. The hope is that, because of His faithfulness to His word, God's still working out that promise – even though they don't deserve it.
- Secondly, there are God's actions in the past. God demonstrated the greatness of His name – of His reputation – when He rescued them from Egypt. He acted for them in a mighty way. He showed His greatness in defeating the power of the Egyptians' gods and the might of the Egyptian army.
- Thirdly, there's God's character. God showed Himself to Moses and proclaimed His name – slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. When you appeal to that sort of God for mercy, you have good grounds for hoping He'll say "yes".

That's all consistent with standard Biblical teaching. It's the storyline of the Old Testament.

- God made promises to this people.
- God acted on those promises – He rescued them

from Egypt and gave them their own land.

- God established His covenant with this people – He told them what it meant for them to be His people. They agreed. They wanted Him as their God.
- But they failed – time and time again. They didn't treat Him as God. They didn't do as He said.

And so again and again – especially after God disciplined them – they repented and came back to Him. They acknowledged their failure and asked for mercy. And God was merciful.

It's also the appeal of the New Testament.

- Jesus is the descendant of Abraham through whom the blessing of God comes to all the nations.
- The way that happens is by Jesus dying on the cross in our place to take God's judgment that's due to us because of our sin – our rejection of Him.
- Because of Jesus' death, forgiveness is now offered to everyone. What Asaph prays for here is offered to all who want to be part of God's people.

But it's never deserved. It's only ever on the basis of God's mercy – and because of God's glorious name. God asks you to accept His offer of forgiveness.

Prayer for Retribution

So, that's Asaph's first request: that God forgive them and deliver them from their suffering and from His judgment.

The second thing Asaph asks for is retribution. Verse 6:

*Pour out your wrath on the nations
that do not acknowledge you,
on the kingdoms
that do not call on your name;
for they have devoured Jacob
and destroyed his homeland.*

And again in verse 10:

*Why should the nations say,
"Where is their God?"*

*Before our eyes, make known among the nations
that You avenge the outpoured blood of Your serv-
ants.*

*May the groans of the prisoners come before You;
by the strength of Your arm
preserve those condemned to die.*

*Pay back into the laps of our neighbours seven times
the reproach they have hurled at You, O Lord.*

When you read something like that, how do you react? I tend to cringe. I wish it wasn't in the Bible. Why do I react like that? Two reasons, I think.

- One has to do with our culture. We're taught to be tolerant of others. We're encouraged to be peaceful and kind towards others rather than vindictive. We've seen longstanding feuds in other parts of the world and the senseless destruction they bring – and we don't want that.
- The other has to do with my Christian faith. Jesus teaches me to treat others the way I'd have them treat me, to love my enemies, to turn the other cheek, to be kind to those who treat me badly.

Asaph's prayer just doesn't seem to fit in with either my culture or my Christian faith.

So, what am I to do with this stuff? One suggestion is that this just represents the easily understandable human reaction of the psalmist to his circumstances. This is how he feels. He vents his honest feelings to God. It doesn't mean they're particularly godly feelings. It doesn't mean God approves of them. In fact, they're sinful feelings – as

we're taught in the rest of the Bible. And so, I can accept this as Asaph's honest prayer while at the same time rejecting it as an example I should follow. My morality's better than Asaph's.

But, there's nothing in the psalm that says that – that says that Asaph's wrong. Nor is this the only psalm like this – there are quite a few others. None of them indicates the psalmist is wrong when expressing this desire. The fact they're included in the hymnbook rather suggests these desires have approval. And when we get to Revelation 6:10, we find in heaven itself the souls of martyrs calling out in a loud voice:

How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?

So it's likely my cringe is wrong.

- That my cringe wants to remove something important from God's word.
- That my cringe wants to suggest I know better than Asaph what's right and wrong. Indeed, better than God – and that's not a good position to be in.

My mind – and my attitude – needs to be re-educated by what God says.

Now, I don't think I've got all the answers. Better minds than mine have wrestled with this issue. One book I have at home distinguishes ten major approaches to dealing with this matter. It thinks there are problems with each of them. However, I think several helpful things can be said – about this psalm and psalms like it.

First, we must keep the big picture in mind. Think of it in

terms of Psalm 2 – God, the nations and God's King.

- Asaph belongs to God's people. He submits himself to God's King. True, he's failed to do that properly. He acknowledges his sin. But, by his very prayer, he indicates his desire to submit.
- The ones who've destroyed Jerusalem belong to the nations. They rebel against God. They want to throw off God's rule. They don't want to submit to God's King.
- What's Psalm 2 say? God laughs at them. Their puny rebellion doesn't thwart God. God calls them to change. If they continue to resist God's King, they will be overthrown in judgment.

Remembering that overall context is important.

Secondly, the psalmist never comes from a position of innocence. He recognises he's part of the problem. He too is evil. He's failed to submit. He still fails to submit perfectly. He too is liable to judgment – for the way of the evil person perishes. He too deserves the curse of God. He's a participant in the problem – not someone standing innocently on the outside looking in at an academic problem. It's only because of God's grace and mercy – and, from a New Testament perspective, because of Jesus' death – that he's spared.

Thirdly, a prayer for deliverance almost necessitates a prayer for retribution. Think of the situation in this psalm. God's people have experienced great destruction. They're now captive in Babylon. They want to go back home. They ask God to make it happen. If God grants that request, what happens to Babylon.

- Either Babylon has a change of heart – sorry guys, we did the wrong thing by you. We shouldn't have

invaded your land. We shouldn't have knocked down your temple. Sorry we caused you so much pain and suffering. You guys can stop working for us and go home now.

- Or Babylon gets beaten and is forced to let God's people go back home.

When God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, He sent Moses in to ask Pharaoh – the Egyptian king – to let His people go. He refused, so God sent a series of plagues. After each plague, Pharaoh had the chance to change his mind – but he didn't. So God wiped out the Egyptian army in the process of rescuing His people from slavery.

As you read through the book of Daniel, God addresses the Babylonian kings several times. He doesn't specifically ask them to send His people home – but they have the opportunity to respond positively to God. At times it appears they do respond positively – but there's no lasting change. So, they too are destroyed before God brings His people back to their land.

Fourthly, this prayer is in line with what God's revealed about Himself. God has promised to deal with evil. It's right that He should. Indeed, it's one of the excellencies of God's character that He's angry at evil. This is important – for there's a tendency these days to think it's wrong to speak of God being angry with people – that it somehow devalues God to think in those terms. That's not the Bible's position. God's always opposed to evil.

That's the tone set by Psalm 1. There are only two types of people: the godly and the wicked. There is no in-between. What's Psalm 1 say about the wicked?

- They're like chaff – no substance to them.
- They won't be able to stand at the judgment.
- They'll perish.

Asaph asks God to bring that about – to destroy evil; to make right what is wrong. In effect, we ask God to do the same thing when we pray: *Thy kingdom come*.

Deep down, we don't want a world where evil triumphs.

- We think it's right to be outraged at the atrocities in our world.
- We sympathise with the victims of violent crime.
- We want law and order on our streets – so we can go about our lives in peace and without fear.
- We want the good guy to triumph in our movies.

It's not just Christians who want that.

And so why is it a struggle for some people to accept the idea that God too is outraged at evil – and that God's promised to eliminate all evil from His kingdom? Could it be that instinctively they realise God's sense of evil is much more acute than their own – and that God puts some of their pet attitudes in the evil category? It's much easier to rant and rave at some perceived flaw in God than to give up their own "innocent" vices!

Fifthly, the psalmist asks God to do this. He doesn't take it into his own hands. He submits his request to God. God can say either "yes" or "no". He'd like God to say "yes" – but the very act of praying presupposes submission to God's will.

There's an interesting passage in Romans 12:9ff. Among a list of commands, there are two that seem difficult to hold together.

- The first is in verse 9: we are to hate what's evil and love what's good.
- The second's in verse 14: we are to bless those who persecute us – or, as Jesus says elsewhere, we're to love our enemies.

How do you hold those two things together? If your enemy's doing evil to you – and you're supposed to hate that – how do you love him at the same time? Part of the answer comes in verse 19:

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is Mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

We leave it in God's hands to put things right. In the long run, He'll bring justice.

- For your enemy, that may be via repentance – that, like you, they may recognise their evil and ask for God's mercy on the basis that Jesus has taken the judgment for that evil on Himself.
- Or it may mean your enemy continues to snub God until Jesus returns and experience God's judgment.

Either way, you can leave it in God's hands. It's not your problem. He'll do what's right. There's freedom in leaving the matter to God.

Black and White

Much more could be helpfully said, but I should draw to a close. The assumptions behind this psalm are very black and white – perhaps more black and white than we're used to thinking. Either you're God's friend or God's enemy. There's no in-between. You can't sort of be God's friend – or be God's friend just when it suits you. There's the kingdom of God and the nations of this world. They oppose each other.

For the psalmist, it's pretty clear where the nations who attacked Jerusalem fit in. For us, we don't always see it so clearly – but there's no reason why we shouldn't. The psalms tell us the nations plot against God and His King. They don't want to submit to His rule – and they don't want others to submit to it. They encourage self-rule and self-glory.

It happens in various ways. In some nations, Christians are persecuted simply because they're God's people – they lose their property, are beaten, are thrown in prison, even killed. Jesus warned us to expect this. It still happens.

It doesn't happen in Australia – but that doesn't mean our nation's any different. Our nation also fails to submit to God's King. Our nation also breeds godlessness.

- We're encouraged to find security via building up a supply of material wealth.
- We're encouraged to find happiness by pursuing whatever we think's right for us.
- We're encouraged to find meaning in life by chasing things and experiences and pleasure.

And it's easy for us to fail to recognise this and to simply join them and to get comfortable doing the same things and not to ask whether we're submitting to God's rule in all this. We like to think in gray rather than black and white. It's the path to destruction.

The nations won't triumph. Their evil will be brought to account. God has promised it. Asaph prays for it. They – and all who follow them – will be judged. God will bring His kingdom. Evil won't have the last word. Make sure you join His kingdom now – while the chance remains.