

**Psalms for the Summer: Psalm 74**  
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church  
June 11, 2023 AM Sermon  
Reverend Peter Jonker  
Psalm 74

Last week we kicked off our Psalms for the Summertime series by looking at Psalm 1. There the psalmist proclaimed a foundational truth of the world. Blessed are those who delight in the works and ways of God. They will be like a tree planted by streams of water. They will prosper. Whereas the wicked will be like chaff that the wind blows away. That's a true statement, a foundational statement. But if we are honest, it also sounds as if it was written on a clear and sunny day when God is in his heaven and all is right with the world. Psalm 74 is a very different kind of psalm that was written on a very different kind of day. Psalm 74 is a psalm of lament. There are lots of these kinds of psalms in the Psalter. These psalms come from a place of loss and disappointment. As we read it, see if you can identify the specific situation that provokes these words of lament.

Where Psalm 1 proclaims confidently: the wicked are like chaff and the righteous flourish, Psalm 74 is not so sure. What has shaken the psalmist's confidence? Can you tell the event that has given rise to all these questions and all this lament? It was the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians in 587 BC. It sounds like, as he writes these words, the psalmist might actually be standing in the wreckage of the temple, standing in the middle of the 'everlasting ruins' as verse 3 puts it. As he stands there, the sights and sounds of the battle come back to him. The roar of the troops as they storm through the city. The bodies of friends and neighbors lying twisted in the street where they'd been cut down. The sickening crunch of the axes as they demolish the beautiful carved panels that adorned the temple. The acrid stench of the smoke as all the beautiful furnishings of the temple burn like so much garbage. The sight of the invaders as they carry off the ark of the covenant with careless hands, planting the Babylonian flag in its former resting place.

Standing here, remembering the carnage, the tidy words of Psalm 1 stick in his throat. Psalm 1 is not the right song for this place and so the psalmist sings a new song, not a song of praise, but a song of lament. It's not tidy; it's full of hard questions and pointed words. 'God are you just going to let the enemy mock you!? Lord, you and your prophets are silent. I can't hear your voice, but believe me, I can hear the roar of your enemies, I can hear the roar of my troubles loud and clear.' To me the most pointed words are in verse 11 where he says, 'God why do you hold back your hand! Take your hand out of from the folds of your garment and destroy them.' If you were to update those words, the psalmist is essentially saying, 'God take your hands out of your pockets! Take your hands out of your pockets and do something for heaven's sake!' That's a remarkable thing to say to God. You've heard a lot of pastoral prayers in your life; have you ever heard someone tell God to take his hands out of his pockets in a prayer? Me neither.

We've never experienced anything like the Babylonian invasion of Israel. But many of us have been in a similar emotional place. What was the temple to Israel? It was the conduit of God's presence. It was the place they went to meet God and to know his presence in their lives. We have people and institutions in our life who function like that for us; people and institutions who are a steady source of God's presence and hope for us. People and institutions that the Holy Spirit uses to build our faith. Losing them is a catastrophe.

Someone who is absolutely a central supporting pillar of your life dies. Maybe your spouse, maybe a parent, maybe a dear friend. This is a person who is a spiritual rock for you, they are the presence of God for you. Their words, their example, have sustained you through your struggles. When you are stressed or need someone to talk to they're the ones you turn to, when you need godly advice they're the ones you call. They are like a temple of the Holy Spirit; God's gift to you. And then suddenly, way to soon, while you still need them, they are taken away. Cancer. Cancer comes in like an invading army. Wielding its axe, it smashes the wall of their interior organs and takes them away, and you are left with a grief that won't leave. It just persists. And it makes no sense to you. "Lord why would you let cancer do this? This was one of your people! She was still needed in this world. She was doing so much good. And you just let cancer stomp on her! Lord God please... take your hands out of your pockets." I don't think any of us will experience exactly what the psalmist felt and saw in the fall of Jerusalem and the loss of a temple, but at some point most of us will find ourselves in the

same place that he's in. This psalm is written out of that place. This psalm is written for that place. This psalm is given by the Holy Spirit for people in that place.

What does the Holy Spirit have to say to us through this psalm for the place where evil is loud, and it seems like God has his hands in his pockets? What help does this psalm give us for the day when we find ourselves in that place? I think the psalm does several things and ultimately all these things work together to keep the person who prays this psalm rooted by God's stream.

First of all, let's think about those really pointed words in verse 11, 'God take your hands out of your pockets.' We may think, 'that's not how you talk to God,' but I think that phrase points to the poet's deep relationship, his closeness, with his God.

Let me explain. Years ago I went on the overnight field trip up to Sleeping Bear Dunes with my kid's class at Grand Rapids Christian Middle School. As part of that field trip the kids did a service project. They helped the National Park people clear the park of some invasive species. We went into the fields and pulled a whole bunch of an invasive plant. It was a hot day but most of us got right to work pulling this weed. After working for a while, it was clear that not all the covenant children were blessed with the same work ethic. A number of them were slacking off, standing around talking with their hands in their pockets. This irked me, but did I say anything to those kids? No. Because I had no relationship with them. I didn't even know some of their names, so I just smiled and kept working. But now imagine if it were one of my kids and his close friend standing there with their hands in their pockets goofing off. Would I say something then? Absolutely. "Hey! Why don't you two knuckleheads take your hands out of your pockets and get to work!" I would say something and it is because I am close to my kid, because I'm close to his friend, because I have a relationship with them. I would tell them off because I love them.

Of course, as your children get older they return the favor. "Dad do you realize how ridiculously impatient you are when you drive." Huh, that's funny, none of the other people who drive in my car say that. Maybe that's because they aren't as close to me as my kids. Sharp words are not necessarily a sign of a broken relationship; often they are a sign of deep closeness and trust. Is this psalm pointed? Yes. But it is also deeply personal. These are the words of someone who has a deep, intimate relationship with God.

Think about it: after the destruction of Jerusalem, after the trauma of what he's seen, the psalmist could have turned in all sorts of directions. He could have turned to bitterness; cursed God, and thrown his lot in with the Babylonians. He could have gone into hard survival mode, spent all his time and energy and strength figuring out how he and his family would survive in this ruined city. He could have turned to drink; something to sedate himself against the pain. But he doesn't. He turns to the Lord. He keeps praying. He still puts his roots out towards God's stream. He does it because where else would he go. God is his life's companion. God is his God, for better or worse, for richer or poorer as long as he shall live. It's that kind of relationship. Psalms of lament can be very pointed and direct, but it's a directness that comes out of a deep, loving connection.

There's another thing this psalm does to root us. Remember that this psalm is not just the poem of an individual person talking to God about his frustration after the destruction of Jerusalem. It's also a psalm that the Holy Spirit gives to future generations of God's people so that we can pray it together. The psalms aren't just individual expression, they are given to us for our worship and prayer. Along with all the other psalms, the Holy Spirit wants us and our children to pray this pointed psalm regularly as part of our devotions. How does that form us? Well, the psalms help put our hearts in the right place. They train us in good habits of mind.

Think about how psalms of praise work. Left to our own devices, our minds are full of the things we have to do. I've got to mow the lawn, I've got to get groceries, I've got to get my paper done. We have our heads down obsessed with the worries right in front of us. The psalms of praise train us in a different habit of mind. They get our head out of our belly button. The psalms of praise remind us that God is good, and life is good, and our lives are in his hands. We pray them and sing them regularly and God trains our mind to see, "Oh yeah, that's right God is good, and he loves us and we're going to be OK."

The psalms of lament also train us. They train us for when the day of trouble comes. If we pray and meditate on these psalms in the days when life is pretty good and we're doing well, when the day of trouble comes, we will be ready. Our minds will be Spirit-trained. When the day of trouble comes, instead of being blindsided, we will know that this experience too is part of faith. This calamity is not a sign that God has

abandoned me, or that the world is coming to an end. Because Psalm 74, and Psalm 130, and Psalm 13 and Psalm 44, are in our hearts, we know that this dark night of the soul has always been part of human experience.

These psalms of lament also train us to see that when the day of trouble comes, God wants us to let him have it. I mean that in both senses of that phrase. In your day of fear and frustration, God wants you to let him have it. God wants you to give it to him. God doesn't want you to hold in your anger and frustration so that it ferments into bitterness. God doesn't want you to take out your anger out on those around you. God wants you to let him have it. God wants you to let him have it.

In that respect, Psalm 74 and all the psalms of lament that train us to fling our pain at God anticipate the cross. Because there Jesus will take all the pain, all our outbursts, all our frustration, upon himself. We will let him have it, and he will drink it all down and he will swallow up death and sin forever. Which reminds me that ultimately, God does answer the pointed prayer of Psalm 74:11. God takes his hands out of his pockets. In Christ, God takes his hands out of his pockets to save. Though when the hand comes out of the pocket, it doesn't curl into the clenched fist of a fighter, it doesn't grasp a sword; it opens in blessing, it reaches out to touch and heal the weak, ultimately it opens itself up to receive the nails. It opens itself up to all the sin and pain of the world, which is of course the greatest of all of God's works. The work of everlasting mercy by which we are saved. Life is hard, sometimes unbearably so. But God is good, and he is strong, and he will save.

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