A Prayer from the Ashes

Psalm 74

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There are some things in life that don't make sense until after the fact. Sometimes it isn't until much later that you can see how all the pieces work together. While this is often a frustrating part of life, when we see the same thing happen in movies, we love it.

I think of the movie *The Sixth Sense*, which still sticks in the minds of many as a classic plot twist very few saw coming. The movie is nearly 30 years old at this point, so I don't feel bad spoiling the plot for you. The movie is about a child therapist, played by Bruce Willis, trying to help a young boy with some of the things he is dealing with in his life. The major plot twist comes late in the movie with the child's revelation, "I see dead people." Eventually all the pieces come together and we discover that the therapist has been dead all along. When you re-watch the movie with that knowledge in mind, everything make much more sense, and you begin to pick up on things you didn't before (such as the presence of the color red in scenes dealing with death or the fact that everyone gets cold when the therapist comes around). It's fun to watch a second time because you understand the way the pieces fit together in a way you couldn't have on your first watch-through.

Often, life is the same way. There are many scenes in our lives that we can't understand until after the fact. Many things happen that don't make sense until later, when we can see how all the pieces were intended to fit together all along.

The pages of scripture are replete with such examples, and we can find comfort in reading these examples, knowing that even when we don't see how the pieces fit together, God does. He has consistently shown Himself faithful, even when we can't understand how.

Psalm 74 is written by someone during one of those times. The writer does not understand what God is doing or why He has allowed things to happen as they have. It is a psalm of lament—a prayer that reveals frustration, confusion, and a desire for the Lord to act. But it is also a prayer that relies on faith and trusting in God, even when the writer didn't understand.

Background

Psalm 74 is described as a psalm of Asaph and seems to have been written shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem, which occurred in 586 BC. God had sent many prophets to the people of Israel and Judah, condemning their evil actions and told them that if they continued in the same path, He would allow foreign nations to destroy them. And that's exactly what happened. God allowed the northern kingdom of Israel to be destroyed by the Assyrians and then allowed the southern kingdom of Judah (which contained Jerusalem and the temple) to be destroyed by the Babylonians.

When the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, they basically burned everything to the ground. The temple was looted and destroyed, and the walls of the city were torn down as well. The city was a shell of what it once was. The Holy City, the pride of Israel, had been reduced to a pile of ash. We can't be sure if Asaph was still in Jerusalem, or whether he was writing from Babylon at this point, but whether literally or figuratively, Asaph was praying from the ashes of Jerusalem.

The Complaint

We see Asaph's complaint in verses 1-8,

> [1] O God, why have you rejected us so long? Why is your anger so intense against the sheep of your own pasture? [2] Remember that we are the people you chose long ago, the tribe you redeemed as your own special possession! And remember Jerusalem, your home here on earth. [3] Walk through the awful ruins of the city; see how the enemy has destroyed your sanctuary. [4] There your enemies shouted their victorious battle cries; there they set up their battle standards. [5] They swung their axes like woodcutters in a forest. [6] With axes and picks, they smashed the carved paneling. [7] They burned your sanctuary to the ground. They defiled the place that bears your name. [8] Then they thought, "Let's destroy everything!" So they burned down all the places where God was worshiped. (Psalm 74:1-8, NLT)

Asaph begins by asking the Lord a pointed question: Why have you rejected us so long? Why is your anger so intense against the sheep of your own pasture? From Asaph's perspective, it didn't make sense why God would allow a godless nation like the Babylonians to attack and destroy God's chosen people.

Of course, the scriptures answer this question for us. The prophets (most notably Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah), had been prophesying for decades that this would happen if the people didn't repent. God was working through this godless nation to punish and correct His chosen people.

This should serve as a stern reminder to us today. Any nation that turns its back on God is in danger! No matter how strong and secure you may think yourself, God will discipline His people when they stray, and sometimes that discipline is severe! We should take heed of God's treatment of Judah, lest we experience the same kind of destruction in our land today.

Asaph continued by talking about all the destruction he had seen. It almost sounds as though he was standing amidst the rubble of Jerusalem while writing these words. He recalled the battle that burned the city to the ground and the way that even the temple had been desecrated and then destroyed. This, it seems, was what weighed most heavily on Asaph's mind.

The temple was the symbol of God's presence on earth, and especially in Jerusalem. The Israelites did not believe the Lord was confined to the temple; they understood He could not be contained by a building. But they did see the temple as a reminder of

God's presence and His splendor. Seeing the temple destroyed would have seemed like an affront to God, and may cause someone to question whether a God who would allow His own temple to be destroyed was even real.

Asaph did not question whether God was real (as we'll see in the succeeding verses), but he was questioning why God would allow these people who were so godless and living in absolute defiance of Him to be victorious.

This is a case where we can see the answers to Asaph's questions with the benefit of hindsight. We know that the nations that God used to judge His people were ultimately destroyed themselves. The Assyrians destroyed the nation of Israel but were themselves destroyed shortly thereafter.

We know that Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king who destroyed Jerusalem, was eventually judged by God, and seemingly even came to faith in God. And shortly after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, God caused them to be conquered by the Medo-Persian Empire! During their time in captivity, faithful Jews served as a witness to the power of God and made a significant impact on the nations that enslaved them. Ultimately, God caused the Persian Empire to fund the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple under Nehemiah and Ezra.

God will not be mocked. No one who stands against Him will ultimately be successful. He will even use those who oppose Him to accomplish His purposes! And sometimes, God allows circumstances as a way of bringing the message of the gospel to others who need to hear it. It is hard for us to know the why of God's actions, but what is clear is that God's actions are always purposeful, and no one will defy him or live in rebellion to Him without consequences.

Recounting What's True

Though Asaph was clearly frustrated by what he saw and freely admitted that he didn't understand why the Lord had allowed this destruction to happen, he began reciting what he knew to be true.

> 9 We no longer see your miraculous signs. All the prophets are gone, and no one
> can tell us when it will end. 10 How long, O God, will you allow our enemies to
> insult you? Will you let them dishonor your name forever? 11 Why do you hold
> back your strong right hand? Unleash your powerful fist and destroy them.
> 12 You, O God, are my king from ages past, bringing salvation to the earth. 13 You
> split the sea by your strength and smashed the heads of the sea monsters.
> 14 You crushed the heads of Leviathan and let the desert animals eat him. 15 You
> caused the springs and streams to gush forth, and you dried up rivers that never
> run dry. 16 Both day and night belong to you; you made the starlight and the sun.
> 17 You set the boundaries of the earth, and you made both summer and winter.
> (Psalm 74:9-17, NLT)

He first laments the fact that all the prophets are gone and that no one can tell him when this trial will end.

Neither of those statements is entirely true, because God continued to speak through prophets like Daniel and Ezekiel, but they were in Babylon. God had also spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, who was still in captivity in Jerusalem. Asaph must not have been familiar with Jeremiah's words, or maybe he simply didn't understand them, because Jeremiah had provided answers to the very questions Asaph was asking! Listen to what Jeremiah said,

> [8] And now the Lord of Heaven's Armies says: Because you have not listened to me, [9] I will gather together all the armies of the north under King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, whom I have appointed as my deputy. I will bring them all against this land and its people and against the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy you and make you an object of horror and contempt and a ruin forever. [10] I will take away your happy singing and laughter. The joyful voices of bridegrooms and brides will no longer be heard. Your millstones will fall silent, and the lights in your homes will go out. [11] This entire land will become a desolate wasteland. Israel and her neighboring lands will serve the king of Babylon for seventy years.
>
> [12] "Then, after the seventy years of captivity are over, I will punish the king of Babylon and his people for their sins," says the Lord. "I will make the country of the Babylonians a wasteland forever. [13] I will bring upon them all the terrors I have promised in this book—all the penalties announced by Jeremiah against the nations. [14] Many nations and great kings will enslave the Babylonians, just as they enslaved my people. I will punish them in proportion to the suffering they cause my people." (Jeremiah 25:8-14, NLT)

Jeremiah had answered all of Asaph's questions in advance! He explained why God was allowing destruction to come (as judgment for their disobedience), how the destruction would come (through King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon), what would happen (utter destruction of the nation followed by captivity), and how long it would last (70 years). He also explained that God would ultimately punish the Babylonians for the evil they inflicted upon Israel.

We don't know why Asaph felt so lost when Jeremiah had given such detailed prophecies. Maybe he didn't know about them. Or maybe he just didn't understand them. Sometimes we cannot fully understand God's promises or instructions until He brings something into our lives that gives us the perspective we need to understand them. Jesus repeatedly told his disciples that He was going to be killed at the hands of the religious leaders, but they didn't understand these things until after the resurrection. This is why we must be good students of His Word. If we will study it continually, we will find that He speaks to us in fresh ways, sometimes through passages we may have read dozens of times before. Sometimes our questions aren't because God hasn't given us answers, but because we aren't able to understand the answers He's given yet.

To Asaph's credit though, he did not question God's character. As a matter of fact, Asaph chose to remind himself of God's power. He began reciting all the ways he had

seen the power of God on display. Rather than questioning God's power, he reflected on it. This led him to conclude that God had not been defeated. And if He had not been defeated, then He must have a plan. This is a good reminder for us any time we find ourselves sitting in the ashes—reflect on God's power, which reminds us that He is still in control. And if He is in control, He has a plan and we must choose to rest in Him.

Call to Action

The last section of this psalm is Asaph calling on God to act.

> [18] See how these enemies insult you, Lord. A foolish nation has dishonored your name. [19] Don't let these wild beasts destroy your turtledoves. Don't forget your suffering people forever. [20] Remember your covenant promises, for the land is full of darkness and violence! [21] Don't let the downtrodden be humiliated again. Instead, let the poor and needy praise your name. [22] Arise, O God, and defend your cause. Remember how these fools insult you all day long. [23] Don't overlook what your enemies have said or their growing uproar. (Psalm 74:18-23, NLT)

Asaph asks God not to let these evil people win. He asks for the Lord to return to His people and to restore them. He asks God to silence those who have defied Him, even as they stood in His temple.

I don't believe Asaph was leveling charges against the Lord, but that this was a statement of faith. He knew that the Lord had the power to right all the wrongs that had been done, and he was now pleading with God to do what he knew He could.

This is an honest prayer. You may have prayed prayers like this before as well. It is not wrong to complain or lament to God. It is not wrong to ask Him to intervene. But it is important to maintain the right kind of heart. While it may sound like Asaph was telling the Lord what to do, I think it is more accurate to say he was pleading with God to act. Asaph was reaffirming his own trust in the Lord's power and might. He was struggling to understand why God was not acting as he thought He should but was reminding himself that God will not be mocked and He will keep His promises.

Wrestling with why God does the things (or doesn't do the things) we think He should is not sin. But we must recognize that we don't see things as clearly as He does. We must remind ourselves of God's character and remember that He will keep His promises. This was what Asaph was doing, even as he sat amidst the ashes of the city he loved.

Conclusion

So, as we look at this prayer of lament, what can it teach us? I've got a few suggestions. **First, God will judge godless nations.** God loved the people of Israel. He wanted them to follow Him fully. He sent prophets for hundreds of years to try to turn them from their sinful practices and godless ways. They refused to listen, so He ratcheted up the pressure, ultimately allowing them to be conquered and destroyed. He allowed them to be humbled so they would turn back to Him. He used another godless nation to do His bidding—but He ultimately punished them for their evil as well. We must not imagine ourselves immune from God's judgment. As we live in a nation that is increasingly

godless, we should feel an increasing push to change the current of our culture. That must begin with us, and then we must strive to lead others to see the futility of our current pattern and call them to turn back to God. If we do not, there will be consequences, and the Lord may use the godless nations of our day to discipline us, just as He did with the people of Israel and Judah.

Second, the right response to God's judgment is repentance. Sometimes when bad things happen, people use them as an excuse to turn away from the Lord. They conclude that if God is going to turn His back on them, then they will turn their back on Him. But sometimes God allows trials into our lives to bring us to repentance. When hard times come, the right response is to begin asking what the Lord desires from us in that circumstance. Is there something He wants you to change? A lesson He wants you to learn? Does He want you to be an example to others? When trials come, look for ways in which you may need to repent, and strive to be obedient to Him in all things.

Third, trials are not forever. For Asaph, in the midst of the rubble of Jerusalem, it seemed that all hope was lost. If you've ever found yourself sitting in the rubble of destruction: the ruins of a house destroyed by fire or a natural disaster, a courtroom where you are watching your life and family be dismantled, or a hospital where you are waiting, fearful of the outcome, you know how this can feel. It can feel hopeless. But what Asaph couldn't see at this time was that God was still in control, He was still working, and the story wasn't over yet. This destruction wouldn't last forever. God had an end-date for the trials. When hard times come, remember that God is still working, they will not last forever, and He already has a plan to use them for good. Hold tight to Him, choosing to rest in His plan and His character.

Finally, lamenting to God is ok. Sometimes we feel like it's bad to complain to God, but we see this consistently throughout the psalms. But there is a key to lamenting well—and that is continuing to bring yourself back to the character of God. Asaph complained to the Lord, he lamented the destruction that he saw around him, he confessed that he didn't understand why the Lord hadn't intervened. But he also reminded himself of God's power, God's promises, and God's faithfulness. It is ok to confess to the Lord that we don't understand and that we are frustrated. But the right response is to ask Him to help us understand and help us wait. We may not know the how, the why, or the when of God's plan. But we can know the God who is writing it.

There are a lot of things in life that don't make sense until after the fact. Often, it is only after all the pieces have fallen into place that we can look back and see what the story was really all about. Just as that's true in movies like *The Sixth Sense*, it's true throughout our lives. The Lord has a plan and a purpose for all things. When we look back, we can begin to see how He was orchestrating things all along, in ways we couldn't have anticipated. Sometimes in the middle of trials, the best thing is to go back and replay the other times we've seen God's faithfulness on display. When we do that, we can wait expectantly to see how God will work—because while we can't see it yet, we know whatever plot twist He has planned will be worth it in the end.

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