

Yet God, My King, from of Old  
Psalm 74  
June 14, 2026



When I first read this text, and considered the scene the Psalm pictures, it brought to mind the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Today, in 2026, it's a mosque. Before that, for many years it was a museum. But first, for over a *thousand* years, it was a church.<sup>1</sup>

At least, it was a building where those that followed Christ gathered. That is, until 1453 when the Ottoman Empire captured the city of Constantinople. Though it's a huge city, those conquerors quickly made their way to this building, the well-known center of Eastern Christianity. Inside, a congregation of people prayed while the enemy gathered, outside. After repeated axe blows, the four-inch-thick door of the Sophia crashed open; and troops poured in. In his account, Roger Crowley writes this: "Above them (the troops) the mosaic figure of Christ in blue and gold watched impassively, his right hand raised in blessing, and in his left a book inscribed with the words, 'Peace be with you.'"<sup>2</sup>

Within an hour, the congregation was bound. Symbols in the room were hacked to pieces, rooms and floors ransacked. Then the leader of the Ottomans, Mehmet, called for an imam to go up into the pulpit and, *there*—in the spot where men like Chrysostom preached—recite the Muslim call to prayer. Christ was worshipped there for 1100 years. But in May 1453, no longer.

If you walked into the Hagia Sophia today, that history would be alive and well—visually. In fact, the juxtaposition is jarring. Because one might stand in a spot, look *down* at a baptistry, and then look *up* to read New Testament Greek.<sup>3</sup> And then, looking around, *beside* and among those Christian images<sup>4</sup>—read Arabic words of a false god. In 1453, truths were painted over. And new symbols were raised.

I bring this up as an example of the lesser to the greater. Because the kind of thing that happened in Constantinople in 1453 happened in more devastating measure in Jerusalem in 586 B.C. And *that* is what Psalm 74 describes. As well as how someone might respond to destruction that surrounds.

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<sup>1</sup> In saying that, I'm *not* saying it was a healthy church. Any consideration of "church" history from AD 300 to 1400 would include scores of caveats—way too many for a sermon introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Crowley, *1453*, 227. Much of my explanation of the scene comes from this book.

<sup>3</sup> Though at this point it's obvious they were painted, plastered over, and only recently restored.

<sup>4</sup> Again, caveats in the footnotes, we'll talk about the second commandment in the fall.

## 1. A Psalm that Laments (vv. 1-11)

The Psalmist begins verse 1 with questions: **O God, why do You cast us off forever? Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture?**

As we've said many, many times, one danger of a verse like this one—and really of *every* verse in the Bible—is to isolate it from its context. To speak from a purely human perspective, every poet or songwriter I've ever known wants the *entirety* of what they wrote read. The intention of the author is that we read *each* line in light of the whole.

Further, if we were to consider this principle from the perspective of the God that inspired Asaph or David or some other Psalmist, we'd emphasize context even *more* strongly. Because He breathed life into each word of 150 Psalms.

Now, why bring this up right off the bat? Because these questions in verse 1, when considered in light of the *entire* Psalm, should be seen as questions of faith *more* than they are questions of doubt.<sup>5</sup> By isolating verses, some push the Psalms *too* far, giving themselves license the Psalms do not give. So, yes, “why” and “how long” questions are modeled for us in the Psalter, but there's a *way* they're voiced, a context *in which* they're spoken, and a posture in which they're asked. Even here, acknowledging the anger of God, the seeming rejection, the Psalmist makes *sure* to declare that they are still His people, **the sheep of Your pasture.**

So, before we get too far into this, there's the danger of separating lament from faith, that is, encouraging someone to lament in whatever way it seems or *feels* right to them.

However, on the other side, there's the danger of separating faith from lament, as if those that trust Christ never mourn anything. The Psalmist does ask “why?” What had unfolded was, in one sense, unrelenting.<sup>6</sup> And it seems as if the concern is over the apparent *finality* of what surrounded him—as well as *them*.<sup>7</sup>

But before he describes that, before he continues the lament, the Psalmist first recalls the history of God and His people. Verse 2: **Remember Your congregation, which You have purchased of old, which you have redeemed to be the tribe of Your heritage! Remember Mount Zion, where You have dwelt.**

Though we've noted literary context, for historical context it's *most* likely that the Psalmist is writing *after* the destruction of the temple.<sup>8</sup> That means we've moved forward in Israel's history a long way from where we've been in Exodus. The language the Psalmist uses makes this fairly clear. In verse 1 they are His sheep. In verse 2, they are His congregation, His purchased congregation, as well as His tribe, His heritage (or inheritance). That certainly sounds like the time period we've been considering on Sunday mornings. However, the Psalmist *also* asks the Lord to remember His dwelling on Mount Zion, almost certainly a reference to the time of David.<sup>9</sup>

The Psalmist asks the Lord to remember hundreds and hundreds of years of history. And with that in mind, to do something. Verse 3: **Direct Your steps to the perpetual ruins; the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary!**

Last week when we were in Jackson, MS, Julie and I had some time between the wedding rehearsal and the wedding. After lunch on a town square, we walked to an art gallery that was basically next door. Inside were all sorts of paintings, beautiful ones, of beautiful places—in

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<sup>5</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, TOTC, 294.

<sup>6</sup> Marvin Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, WBC, 241.

<sup>7</sup> Kidner, 294.

<sup>8</sup> Tate, 247. Asaph can mean “sons of Asaph.”

<sup>9</sup> The Psalmist is describing what's unfolded in the history of the Hebrews. And it could be said that their redemption—out of Egypt—and God's dwelling in the midst of them—in Jerusalem—sums it all up. Kidner, 294.

Mississippi, in France, and in Italy. The lady working in the gallery told me a phrase I'd never heard before—that the artist only did “plein air” paintings. That’s a French word, meaning everything in the gallery he’d painted—not from a picture, but while looking at it.

I bring that up because the language in verses 3–9 includes all kinds of verbs that give the sense of an eye-witness view.<sup>10</sup> When the Psalmist says, **the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary**, he’s likely saying that *while* looking at it. The same thing can be said about verse 4: **Your foes have roared in the midst of Your meeting place; they set up their own signs for signs.**

He’s looking at the effects. Like wild beasts,<sup>11</sup> those that opposed the Lord infiltrated where He’d met with His people. Once they’d busted in, they’d raised their own standards as signs. We talked about this, somewhat, when we considered “The LORD is my banner” in Exodus 17. That is, it was quite common to have military insignia on poles raised high in the air. And should a place be conquered, to lift that banner was a sign of conquest.<sup>12</sup> This was certainly the case in the Hagia Sophia in 1453. It’s been the case throughout history. Today’s Flag Day. We *get* the idea. But, in the case the Psalmist describes, to have heathen emblems in the sanctuary was pure humiliation.<sup>13</sup>

There was so much history in that place, so much good, so much God-centeredness. To see *that* pagan sign hanging in that sacred space would bring about utter disbelief. How is *that* here? And it would not merely prompt anger, but lament.

Looking at what he looks at, the Psalmist asks the Lord to direct His steps to the sanctuary, so that He might see it too. Further, he recounts how it all came about. The signs didn’t make their way to the temple via some peace treaty. Verse 5: **They were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees. And all its carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammers.** To get at the sense, it might be helpful to read 1 Kings 6 sometime. Because inside the temple was beautiful wood, carved into images of palm trees and flowers, overlaid with gold.<sup>14</sup> The interior of this space was to reflect, in some sense, the beauty of Eden.

Hatchets, hammers, and axes were swung at *that*—at Edenic trees. We *might* say that pictures something else. But we *must* say that the Psalmist laments rightly. Because not all tears are an evil.<sup>15</sup> Though this Psalm doesn’t *leave* us in lament, it doesn’t bypass it. As creation groans, often we will too.

The Psalmist continues. Verse 7: **They set your sanctuary on fire.** The destruction is *more* than that which an axe might bring about. Verse 8 tells us **they burned all the meeting places of God in the land.**

But note that it’s not *just* the building he grieves. It’s the rage that brings about the ruins. Not only did they set it on fire, the end of verse 7 makes plain: they **profaned the dwelling place of Your name, bringing it down to the ground.** As we’ll see, this lament is concerned not *only* with the sanctuary, but with the name and fame of God.

Verse 9 reiterates this, pointing out that the destruction extends *beyond* physical damage.<sup>16</sup> **We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet.** Along with everything else, it’s silence that he laments. That’s *partly* why the Psalmist asked “why” at the beginning of this Psalm. No one speaks. Verse 9 goes on: **there is none among us who knows how long.**

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<sup>10</sup> Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day*, 205.

<sup>11</sup> Kidner, 295.

<sup>12</sup> Motyer, 206.

<sup>13</sup> Kidner, 295.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Ash, *The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary*, 304.

<sup>15</sup> Tolkien

<sup>16</sup> Tate, 253.

And this reminds us that there is a cumulative nature to suffering. That is, maybe the single thing that came about wouldn't have troubled you as much as it did, were it not for it being the *latest* thing in a years-long string of difficulty. Sometimes the burden is heavy not *merely* because of suffering's intensity but because of its *duration*. So, we might ask what the Psalmist does in verse 10: **How long?**

And certainly if you're lamenting the advance of evil, you'd ask, **How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile Your name forever?** Again, at root the issue is the name and fame of God Himself. And knowing what we know, we *might* follow the "how long?" question with this one in verse 11: **Why do You hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the fold of Your garment and destroy them!**

This is a Psalm that laments. It questions. The Psalmist doesn't know.

But this Psalm won't *end* with verse 11's questions. In fact, what distinguishes the sad songs of the world and the sad songs of God's people is that God's people do something beyond lament.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. A Psalm that Remembers (vv. 12–17)

Both verse 1 and verse 11 asked questions. But answers were not audible. So, what does the Psalmist do? He takes his thoughts to prior revelation.

The significance is this: in this situation that prompted lament, there was an additional factor.<sup>18</sup> More than one commentator said verse 12's shift was not unlike two words we read in Ephesians 2:4.<sup>19</sup> Verse 12 begins: **Yet God.** "Yet" makes clear that there's something *else* to consider. The Psalmist details this something else in verse 12: **Yet God my King is from of old.** So, yes, ruling powers had overrun the temple courts. Yes, devastation surrounded the one writing this song. And yet, though the nations rage, though rulers take counsel together, the scene in Psalm 74 shifts from earthly monarchs to a heavenly one.<sup>20</sup>

And further, *that* King is **from of old**. Recall that a central concern of the Psalmist is the *duration* of his suffering. What's in front of him *seems* unending.<sup>21</sup> That's why he'd asked, "How long?"

But, he reminds himself, God's people, and us, that there was something else to consider—a much more substantial timeline than the days of his life. The Psalmist remembers that long before his present circumstances, this King had acted for the good of His people, over and over again. What had He done repeatedly in the past? Verse 12 answers, saying that this **King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth.**

Though this King sits on the throne of heaven, that does *not* mean His rule is in any way limited.<sup>22</sup> He works salvation *on* earth. In fact, what the pagan marauders had done in the midst of the sanctuary was *nothing* compared to what God had done in the midst of the earth.<sup>23</sup>

The Psalmist remembers this King of old working on earth. And what's the example he remembers *first*? Verse 13: **You divided the sea by Your might.**<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The apostle Paul contrasts godly and worldly sorrow in his letter to the church at Corinth. I think we could also contrast godly and worldly lament.

<sup>18</sup> Motyer, 206.

<sup>19</sup> Kidner, 297: "But God . . ."

<sup>20</sup> Kidner, 297.

<sup>21</sup> Ash, 306.

<sup>22</sup> Motyer, 207.

<sup>23</sup> Kidner, 297.

<sup>24</sup> Motyer, 207, says this is a reference to the Red Sea.

In your Bible studies this morning (in Psalm 66) you saw that *one* response to the Exodus is praise. That's entirely appropriate, biblically modeled, and encouraged. However, that's not the *only* way one might respond to and apply the truths of the Exodus. In the midst of lament, considering God's deliverance of the Hebrews can, in one sense, deliver *again*.

As something of a side-note, that's not a side-note at *all*, it's not *only* true that the Psalms speak on the breadth and depth of human emotions, it's that the Psalms are actually instruction for our expression.<sup>25</sup> So while there are *thousands* of books that tell us how to process our grief, or manage our "inner life," because the Bible itself is authoritative, it can actually give direction to our affections.

Especially if we consider the Psalms in light of the entire Bible. That is, in his lament, the Psalmist looked back hundreds and hundreds of years to what God had done, how He'd worked salvation on the earth. And what the Psalmist does, where he looks, instructs us. Because we can do the same. The difference is we look to a better Moses, a more profound deliverance, and a surpassing covenant. In our grief, *even* in our lament, the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ continue to be our hope. What Yahweh did in Egypt steadied the Psalmist. What Christ did in Jerusalem steadies us. The Red Sea Victor conquered the tomb.

Probably because we're *about* to start Romans 8 on Wednesday nights, I almost immediately thought of Romans 8:32. In a chapter that speaks *often* of suffering, Paul writes this: **He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?** (Rom. 8:32).

The Psalmist looks back. But as he does, he sees broadly. Because what happened at the Exodus was *bigger* than the Exodus. Recall what we've attempted to emphasize, that is, in the plagues and in the Exodus, the true combatants were not *merely* Egypt and Israel, nor *merely* Moses and Pharaoh, but the God of Creation and the scores of false deities.

Verse 12 goes on to, seemingly, reference *some* of those false gods, noting some common pagan myths of the era. Verse 13 continues: **you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.** Interestingly, the Greek version of the Old Testament translates both of these terms "dragon,"<sup>26</sup> seemingly an allusion to pagan mythology. However, that does *not* mean the author disconnects it from what happened in Egypt. Again, what happened at the Red Sea was a cosmic struggle.<sup>27</sup> The *primary* enemy of God was the false god(s) of Egypt. And the Psalmist's point is this: if sea monsters or Leviathan were to exist, all would be subservient.<sup>28</sup>

Since we don't talk about dragons all that much, let me quote G. K. Chesterton on the subject, "Fairy tales, then, are not responsible for producing in children fear . . . (nor) the idea of the evil or the ugly. That is in the child already, because it is in the world already. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon."<sup>29</sup>

However, maybe *what's* most important, whatever it is that false gods had *claimed* to do in the realm of myth, God had *actually* done in the realm of history. He crushed the serpent's head. And He'd done it on behalf of His people.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See Sidney Griedanus, *Preaching Christ from the Psalms*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Ash, 307.

<sup>27</sup> Ash, 307.

<sup>28</sup> Motyer, 207.

<sup>29</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles*, quoted here: <https://firstthings.com/chesterton-on-fairy-tales-and-evil/> By the way, in both Ezekiel 29:3 and 32:2, the prophet describes Pharaoh and Egypt in these terms, as sea monsters, dragon-like creatures. Of course, a dragon shows up in Revelation too.

<sup>30</sup> Kidner, 297.

In verse 15, the Psalmist continues to remember: **You split open springs and brooks; you dried up ever-flowing streams.** He does *both*, turning the Red Sea into a dry path and turning the desert wilderness into a sea of plenty.<sup>31</sup> And He does so because He's over all things. Verse 16: **Yours is the day, Yours also the night; You have established the heavenly lights and the sun. You have fixed all the boundaries of the earth; You have made summer and winter.** So, not *only* is He Redeemer, He's the Creator. And of course, what is redemption but the restoration of the proper order of creation.<sup>32</sup>

His power as Creator reorients us, even when we don't have answers. Consider the close of the book of Job. What is it that God highlights, but His laying the foundation of the earth?<sup>33</sup>

The Psalmist laments. But the Psalmist also remembers, both the character of God and what He's done. That's *one* of the things he does in order to process his lament, to spur trust in the Lord, and to work through it. But it's not the *only* thing he does.

### 3. A Psalm that Prays (vv. 18–23)

Before we look at how the Psalmist prays, in *this* Psalm, it might be worth thinking more broadly about the Psalms of Lament. A few years back, we did a study on a number of them. For that reason, this week's text was *sort of* familiar. By that, I mean that throughout the Psalms of lament you'll find *similar* elements, whether that's the description of the suffering, the expression of the emotions, the recall of God's promises, or prayers for deliverance. Those elements run *throughout* the Psalms. However, what I want to point out today is that there is no set order. There's no formulaic approach to suffering that *immediately* delivers. Unlike the best-seller, it's not "Do these five steps, and then all will be fine."

There are things modeled, including remembering who God is, what He's said, and what He's done. However, that does *not* mean once we remember, we no longer pray. Here, the Psalmist considers the Exodus. But that doesn't solve it. He continues calling out. Verse 18: **Remember this, O LORD, how the enemy scoffs.** By the way, maybe you notice the all-caps. This is the first use of the divine name in this Psalm, the name revealed at the burning bush. I might think that incidental, if not for the next clause: **Remember this, O LORD, how the enemy scoffs, and a foolish people reviles Your name.** As we noted earlier, his lament was centered on the Lord, in particular on His name. So is his praying.

But that doesn't mean it's unrelated to His people. Verse 19: **Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild beasts; do not forget the life of Your poor forever. Have regard for the covenant.** It's not a stretch to say that the honor of His Name was tied to the promises He's made His people. Covenantal promises were made to Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, and 17. Covenantal promises were made to Moses in the book of Exodus. And by the time of this Psalm, covenantal promises had been made to David. So, we might ask: what was true *before* the lament? This covenant. What will be true *after* the lament? This covenant. What's true in the *middle* of the lament? The covenant God made with His people, based on a love that's steadfast.

So, the Psalmist is *right* to appeal to the promise. And with that in mind, plead, as verse 20 goes on: **For the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence. Let not the downtrodden turn back in shame; let the poor and needy praise Your name.**

The Psalm ends calling upon the Lord who'd acted—to act once more. Verse 22: **Arise, O God, defend Your cause; remember how the foolish scoff at You all the day!** If I'm being a bit

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<sup>31</sup> Kidner, 298.

<sup>32</sup> Ash, 308.

<sup>33</sup> Kidner, 298.

redundant, it's only because the Psalm is. Again, what's happened *certainly* affected the Psalmist, but he repeatedly portrays the profaning of God's house, the attempted snuffing out of His people, as ultimately about Him. It's *His* foes that clamor (v. 23). The uproar that goes up continually is of those that rise against Him (v. 23).

So, the Psalmist lamented in faith, he looked in faith, and he prays in faith: "Arise. Defend Your Cause."

## Conclusion

The Scriptures do not model for us a willful ignorance. We don't close our eyes, in particular when it comes to those that revile the name of God. We know a hatchet has been taken to Eden. We see the destruction around us, both in the world and, *sometimes*, in the church. And when we see it, we grieve. We lament. We might ask, "Why?" And we might ask, "How long?"

But that's not where we *stay*. We *can't* stay there. Because what we're seeing in front of us is not the entire story. The LORD has made Himself known. And not only as mighty, but as the Deliverer of His people. So, if it's not *now*, it's not because He *can't*, nor because He doesn't *care*.

And *when*, not if, things unsettle us, trouble us, we approach the One we know, asking Him to deliver, both for the sake of His name and for the good of His people.

With that in mind, I skipped a word earlier that's vital for our lament. Because the Psalmist didn't merely say, "Yet God," nor did he merely say, "*a* King from of old." He said, **Yet God, my King, is from of old.** It wasn't *any* king, it was *his* King that worked salvation on the earth. For us, what Christ did in Jerusalem steadies because what He did is ours. He's not *just* acted in history. He's not just ruled over *all*. He acts in *my* history, and His gracious reign is over *me*.