

THE CRY OF A WOUNDED PEOPLE

SERIES: THE HEART OF THE PSALMS

By Scott Grant

Weeping for the plague

People who believe there is such a thing as truth—and especially those who believe that truth is revealed in Jesus Christ—are in the minority in the Western world. As such, those of us who follow the Jesus of the scriptures have been marginalized, particularly here in the Silicon Valley.

What should we do? Whatever we decide to do, we must also learn to lament. We must learn to bring our pain before our God. Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno says: “I am convinced that we should solve many things if we all went out into the streets and uncovered our griefs, which perhaps would prove to be but one sole common grief, and be joined together in beweeeping them...It is not enough to cure the plague; we must learn to weep for it...Perhaps that is the supreme wisdom.”(1)

We would do well, therefore, to turn to Psalm 79. This psalm is the cry of a wounded people whose best days as the people of God are seemingly behind them. It is a lament for our times. Having been marginalized as followers of Jesus, we share with them a common grief and we must learn to weep for the plague.

The setting for the psalm appears to be the aftermath of the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The title connects the psalm to Asaph. Perhaps it was written by a descendant of the musician under King David (1 Chronicles 6:39). It takes the form of a lament, with a particular national, or corporate, emphasis. Asaph is lamenting not his own plight but that of his people.

The psalm begins with a lament (verses 1 through 4) and ends with a vow (verse 13). The interior of the psalm features two questions (verse 5, verse 10a) and two petitions (verses 6 through 9, verses 10b through 12).

Lament: Babylonian invasion (1-4)

**O God, the nations have invaded Your inheritance;
They have defiled Your holy temple;
They have laid Jerusalem in ruins.
They have given the dead bodies of Your servants for food to the birds of the heavens,
The flesh of Your godly ones to the beasts of the earth.
They have poured out their blood like water round about Jerusalem;
And there was no one to bury them.
We have become a reproach to our neighbors,
A scoffing and derision to those around us.**

The psalmist brings to God's attention the invasion of the "nations," or the Gentiles, who are in this case the Babylonians. Their aggression in 586 B.C. ruptured three powerful symbols in the national life of Israel: God's inheritance, God's temple and God's city. God's inheritance is the land of Canaan, which he gave to his people. The temple was the most holy place, set apart for God's presence. Jerusalem served not only as the city of God but the city of his people.

In verses 2 through 4, the psalmist describes what the Babylonians have done to God's people. Not only have the invaders killed God's people, they have left their bodies to be scavenged by the birds and the beasts. Such a fate, which was thought to await only the unloved, was considered humiliating. But the Babylonians spilled so much blood that it flowed like runoff throughout the city. The siege was so intense that the survivors were unable to bury the dead.

In verse 4, the psalmist's thoughts turn to how Jerusalem's demise has affected the surrounding nations. The neighboring nations would have concluded that Israel's God was powerless to defend her or that Israel had been unfaithful to her God. In their eyes, Israel has become a joke.

The psalmist uses the possessive pronoun "your," in reference to God, four times in the first two verses: "your" inheritance, "your" holy temple, "your" servants, "your" godly ones. He thinks that the invasion should get God's attention because of his intense personal attachment to his place and people.

Invasion of ideas

This lament relates to our world in at least two ways. First, in many parts of the world, to be the people of God means to invite the kind of attack that devastated the Israelites. To follow Jesus in such places means that those in power may invade your land, defile your place of worship and leave your dwelling place in ruins. You live with the fear of death, knowing that your blood, and the blood of those you love, may one day be poured out like water in the streets. This is not a threat that we live with here, though some of you can tell horrifying stories about the places from which you or your family came. However, we must see ourselves as belonging to the same church as those who face such threats. They are our brothers and sisters. Their lament is our lament, and we must take it up for them and with them.

Second, in the West, where we live, God also has his enemies. They wouldn't call themselves his enemies, for they either don't believe that he exists or that he exists in a way contrary to the testimony of the scriptures. They have mounted a bloodless assault against God and his people; they have fought, and mostly won, a war of ideas.

There was a time, in Europe and in North America, when faith in Christ and the authority of the scriptures were respected, but that time has long since passed. Some trace the beginning of the invasion back to 1610, when French mathematician Rene Descarte, who resolved to doubt everything, famously postulated, "I think; therefore I am." But the Enlightenment that followed in the 18th and 19th centuries, made humanity, rather than God, the center of the universe. By the end of the 19th century, almost all the great writers, artists and intellectuals of the West had abandoned faith in Christ, and many had completely abandoned belief in God.

In the wake of the Enlightenment, relativism has displaced truth. Individuals, who answer to no authority, can do whatever they please. The gods of money, sex and power rule the day, leaving people today in a state of despair. They have everything they need, but nothing they want. They live with empty souls and no hope.

The church of Jesus Christ has been devastated by these ideas. As believers in the truth of the scriptures and as followers of Jesus, we have become a reproach to our neighbors and a joke to those around us. Perhaps we, like the psalmist, think that God should be concerned about this state of affairs because of his intense personal attachment to us.

Question 1: How long? (5)

How long, O LORD? Will You be angry forever? Will Your jealousy burn like fire?

Having described for God the plight of his people, the psalmist now questions God, invoking his covenant name YHWH (translated “the Lord”). At this point, we might expect the psalmist to question why the Lord would allow the Gentiles to devastate his people. The psalmist, however, knows the reason. The Lord told the Israelites that he would remove them from the land if they provoked him to anger through persistent idolatry (Deuteronomy 29:22-28). The Lord, in his anger, sought to purify Israel so that it would return to him (Deuteronomy 30:1-3).

The psalmist doesn't question the Lord's anger. He knows why the Lord is angry with his people and that he has every right to be angry. He only questions the duration and intensity of it. The severity of the Lord's anger is rooted in the depth of his love. He is angry because Israel is bent on destroying herself by worshiping other gods. The Lord is so angry because he loves Israel so much. But the psalmist wants to know: Will the Lord's anger last forever? And will the Lord's jealousy burn like fire and destroy Israel? For he knows that “the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Deuteronomy 4:24).

Judgment begins with the household of God

Could it be that God, in his angry love, is disciplining the Western church for its idolatry? Without the voice of a modern-day psalmist who speaks for God, we cannot say for certain. But we can say that judgment begins with the household of God (1 Peter 4:17). And we can also say by and large the church has succumbed to the invaders.

The church itself has de-emphasized the authority of the scriptures, acceded to moral relativism and exalted the individual over against God. Just like the surrounding culture, it has made gods of money, sex and power. If it hasn't capitulated to the ideas of the invaders, it has retreated from the public square to protect a private spirituality that poses no challenges and offers no blessings.

In the face of the onslaught, the church divided into two camps, with some opting for the “social gospel” to meet so-called physical needs and others for the “simple gospel” to meet so-called spiritual needs. However, surely there are not two gospels but one, and surely that gospel addresses the whole

person of every person. God saves both souls and bodies. The apostle Paul says that we await the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23).

As the Lord's church in the West we've been under serious assault since at least the 18th century. If the Lord is disciplining us that he might purify us, we too may want to give voice once again to the ancient lament, "How long, O Lord?" Like the psalmist, we ask, must the attack last this long? Must it be this intense? Will it finally destroy the church of God?

Petition 1: Judgment and deliverance (6-9)

**Pour out Your wrath upon the nations which do not know You,
And upon the kingdoms which do not call upon Your name.
For they have devoured Jacob
And laid waste his habitation.
Do not remember the iniquities of our forefathers against us;
Let Your compassion come quickly to meet us,
For we are brought very low.
Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Your name;
And deliver us and forgive our sins for Your name's sake.**

The psalmist's petition for judgment and deliverance in verses 6 through 9 is based on his description of the invasion of the Gentiles in verses 1 through 3. His petition in verses 10 through 12 is based on his description of the scoffing of the Gentiles in verse 4.

He now asks God to redirect his wrath toward the invaders. He asks God to "pour out" his wrath upon the Babylonians as they "poured out" the blood of his countrymen (verse 3). In the psalmist's mind, this is punishment that fits the crime, and such punishment would also mean deliverance from Babylon.

The Babylonians have been a tool of God's anger, but that doesn't give them carte blanche for "devouring" God's people and "laying waste" to his land. Such extremes only show that they "do not know" the Lord and "do not call upon" his name. They have no understanding that the Lord has raised them up to discipline his people. The psalmist thinks the Gentiles are more apt recipients of the wrath of the Lord.

The psalmist believes the intensity of God's anger is in part attributable to the "iniquities of our forefathers." God explained his prohibition against idolatry this way: "For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate me" (Exodus 20:5). God's jealousy is burning because of Israel's ongoing and deeply rooted idolatry, which was fostered by previous generations and continues to the psalmist's day. He accepts his generation's solidarity with previous generations but asks the Lord to pardon the sins of the past as he turns to God, for the sake of Israel, in the present.

In the psalmist's time, there was already a hint that a new covenant was coming that would bring to an end a proverb bemoaning the effect of one generation's sins upon another (Jeremiah 31:29). And there was always Exodus 20:6 to fall back on: If the Lord visited the iniquity of the first generation on

third or fourth generation, he would show his “lovingkindness to thousands” of generations who would love him. The psalmist, in this national prayer on behalf of Israel, is turning toward the Lord. He asks that the Lord’s compassion rush to Israel’s side like an ally in a time of desperate need. If the Lord’s compassion would “come quickly,” it would vanquish the notion of the Lord’s anger lasting “forever.”

In appealing to the Lord for help, the psalmist calls him the “God of our salvation.” The Lord is in the business of saving Israel. The appeal is based on the “glory of your name” and “your name’s sake.” It is not based on any worthiness within Israel but on God’s faithfulness, honor and reputation. He has attached his name to his people, and although they may drag it through the mud, the connection remains. The psalmist is counting on that connection. He’s basing the future of Israel on it.

The psalmist’s specific appeal, which sums up the petitions of verses 6 through 9, is for deliverance from Babylon and for the forgiveness of sins. Deliverance would be evidence that forgiveness had been granted.

If the prayers of verses 6 through 9 are answered, the answers to the two questions of verse 5 would be an emphatic no. “Will you be angry forever?” No! “Will your jealousy burn like fire?” No!

Judgment for them, deliverance for us

If God is going to be angry with people, it makes sense to us that he should be angry with his enemies, with those who have espoused ideas that have devoured and laid waste to his church, which is now his habitation. Perhaps, we may think, he has cause to be angry with his people. If so, how much more cause does he have to be angry with his enemies? In this light, we may find ourselves inclined to ask God to pour out his wrath on those responsible for espousing ideas that are hostile to him and his people.

Like the psalmist, we are aware of the iniquities of our forefathers—those in the late 19th and early 20th centuries who either capitulated to the ideas of the day or withdrew from the public arena. We find ourselves in solidarity with them. They are our forefathers in the faith. They are part of us. And, sadly, we find ourselves repeating their sins. So we pray to God, “Do not remember the iniquities of our forefathers against us.”

We might care to remind God that a new covenant is in effect, in which the current generation of believers can move beyond the sins of the previous generations. We might care to remind him that he promised to show his lovingkindness, his loyal love, to thousands of generations. We might, as his people, turn to him and stand in prayer on behalf of the church. We might ask for God’s compassion to rush to our side and vanquish the notion that this state of affairs will last forever. If his anger is great, his compassion is greater still: “but where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20).

In some ways, through capitulation, withdrawal or obnoxious involvement, we have dragged God’s name through the mud, but it is still attached to us. Let us therefore pray to God that he would deliver us from our persecutors and forgive us for our sins on the basis of his name, not on the basis of any worthiness we find within ourselves. For we all were once enemies of God, and he has staked his

reputation to our ultimate welfare. If our prayers are answered, God will thereby confirm for us that he will not be angry with us forever and that his jealousy will not burn like fire and consume us.

Question 2: Why? (10a)

Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?”?

The psalmist again asks a question of God, this time with the scoffing of the Gentiles, already mentioned in verse 4, in the background. In the face of the devastating victory of the Babylonians, the nations are saying concerning the Israelites, “Where is their God?” Potential answers to the Gentiles’ question include: The Lord is powerless. The Lord doesn’t care. His people aren’t worth it. But the psalmist’s question does not concern why they are saying this but why the Lord would allow them to say it. If the Lord cares about his name, the psalmist expects that he would want to do something about it.

Today, if those who don’t believe in our God say something like, “Where is their God?” their assumption is that he doesn’t exist, at least not as we conceive of him. If he existed as we conceive of him, their reasoning says, we’d be in better condition. Like the psalmist, we can understand why they would think such a thing, and like the psalmist, we may have a more difficult time understanding why God would allow them to say such things and, by his apparent inaction, seem to validate their assertions. We might expect that he would want to do something to vindicate his name. We must admit, however, that more often than not, from our perspective, he doesn’t seem to be doing very much.

Petition 2: Vengeance (10b-12)

**Let there be known among the nations in our sight,
Vengeance for the blood of Your servants which has been shed.
Let the groaning of the prisoner come before You;
According to the greatness of Your power preserve those who are doomed to die.
And return to our neighbors sevenfold into their bosom
The reproach with which they have reproached You, O Lord.**

As in verses 6 through 9, the psalmist’s petition for vengeance concerns both the Gentiles and Israel. Whereas in verses 6 through 9 he dealt first with the Gentiles and then with Israel, in verses 10 through 12 he sandwiches Israel between the Gentiles.

If the nations are asking concerning the whereabouts of the God of Israel, the psalmist wants the Lord to make them aware of his presence and to make Israel aware that he is making them aware. He wants the Lord to make a public appearance, visible to all. Specifically, he wants vengeance for the blood of the Lord’s servants.

The psalmist’s petitions resonate with the Song of Moses, which features the Lord’s words against his enemies. Note the words and themes from Deuteronomy (32:35-37; 41-43) that reappear in Psalm 79.

“Vengeance is Mine, and retribution.

In due time their foot will slip;
For the day of their calamity is near,
And the impending things are hastening upon them.”
For the Lord will vindicate His people,
And will have compassion on His servants;
When He sees that their strength is gone,
And there is none remaining, bond or free.
And He will say, “Where are their gods,
The rock in which they sought refuge?”

“If I sharpen My flashing sword,
And My hand takes hold on justice,
I will render vengeance on My adversaries,
And I will repay those who hate Me.
I will make My arrows drunk with blood,
And My sword shall devour flesh,
With the blood of the slain and the captives,
From the long-haired leaders of the enemy.”
Rejoice, O nations, with His people;
For He will avenge the blood of His servants,
And will render vengeance on His adversaries,
And will atone for His land and His people.

In asking the Lord to avenge the blood of his servants, and in finding resonance with Deuteronomy 32, the psalmist is asking the Lord to do what he said he would do. The current enemies of God’s people say, “Where is their God?” But if the Lord were to answer the psalmist’s prayers, the psalmist could envision the Lord saying of the enemies, in the vein of Deuteronomy 32, “Where are their gods?”

The psalmist, along with other biblical authors, sees the current plight of God’s people at the hands of the Babylonians as being similar to their former plight at the hands of the Egyptians. Egypt held Israelites captive, but the Lord heard their “groaning” and rescued them by the “greatness” of his “arm” (Exodus 6:5, 15:16). Similarly, the psalmist asks that the Lord would hear the groaning of those taken prisoner by Babylon and that he would, literally, by the greatness of his “arm,” rescue those who are otherwise destined to die at the hands their enemies.

In verse 12, the psalmist again refers to the Gentiles. His request for vengeance in verse 10 concerned the Babylonians. His request in verse 12 concerns the scoffing neighbors. Again, he’s asking that justice be served in an appropriate way.

The request that the sins of the neighbors be returned to them “sevenfold” is based on Leviticus 26:18-28, where the Lord vows to punish Israel “seven times more” for its sins if it does not respond to his initial rebukes. The judgment in Leviticus 26 is clearly redemptive. The number seven evokes the Lord’s concept of judgment rather than humanity’s (Genesis 4:15, 24).

In reproaching the people of God, the Gentiles were reproaching God (verse 4). Their question in verse 10 also constitutes a reproach. In asking that the Lord reproach the neighboring Gentiles in a manner that fits their reproach of the Lord, the psalmist is asking, once again, that the Lord stick up for his name. He is concerned here, and throughout this psalm, evidenced also by verses 9 and 10, for the reputation of the Lord. If the prayers of verses 10 through 12 are answered, the Lord would respond to the Gentiles' facetious question, "Where is their God?" in an emphatic way.

Placing vengeance in God's hands

In the face of injustice, we often lose patience with the unseen nature of God and his work. We might prefer—and pray for—a public appearance. If we are to join the psalmist in asking that God would avenge the wounds inflicted upon his people, we are asking God to do what he said he'd do, way back in the days of Moses. In petitioning God for vengeance, we are not executing it ourselves. In placing vengeance in the hands of a just God, we are not asking for anything more than justice.

Our desire for vengeance-justice, though it often wells up in us because of the wrongs done either to us as individuals or to others, is finally grounded in concern for the name, or reputation, of God. We want the God of justice to administer justice and be known as a God of justice. If he answers our prayers, those who ask us, "Where is your God?" may find our God one day asking them, "Where are your gods?"

New Testament revelation

The language of Psalm 79, and other psalms of lament, leads us to the New Testament. Is there anything more to say about deliverance and forgiveness, vengeance and justice?

God has delivered his people from their enemies, most especially Satan, and has forgiven them at the cross, where God exacted vengeance-justice for the sins of the whole world. At the cross he publicly displayed his righteousness so that he might be both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:25-26). Yet, God's complete deliverance and final justice await the royal appearance, or second coming, of his Son.

Most especially in light of both the cross of Christ and the return of Christ, we know that God's anger toward his people is a loving anger. He will not be angry with us forever. His jealousy will not burn like fire and consume us. It will purify us.

How does the psalmist's prayer for God to avenge the blood of his servants mesh with the New Testament? After all, Jesus said, "I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). On the other hand, the New Testament is not without a prayer for vengeance. Revelation 6:9-10: "When he broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'"

Love for one's enemies is not incompatible with desire for vengeance-justice. We love those who persecute us and pray that they might encounter justice at the same place we encountered it: the cross

of Jesus Christ. We are not like those whom Dickens depicts in “A Tale of Two Cities,” the participants in the bloody French Revolution who discarded the crosses around their necks and replaced them with models of the guillotine.(2) They sought vengeance for the sake of vengeance. No, it’s not the justice of the guillotine that we crave; it’s the justice of the cross.

But we do not, we must not, give up our hopes and prayers for justice. If the enemies of God’s people refuse to encounter his merciful justice at the cross, we will finally be content for them to encounter it in another way. So we pray with the apostle John the last prayer in the Bible: “Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

Vow: Give thanks (13)

**So we Your people and the sheep of Your pasture
Will give thanks to You forever;
To all generations we will tell of Your praise.**

With the word he uses to begin verse 13, “so,” the psalmist anticipates an answer to his petitions. He expects the Lord to honor his name, deliver and forgive his people, and punish his enemies.

The psalm began with a description of the devastation of God’s people and God’s land, but it ends in sharp contrast, with a pastoral scene: God’s people are pictured as the sheep of his pasture; God’s people will be restored as his sheep; and, God’s land will once again be his pasture. For this, and for the answers to his prayers, the psalmist, speaking for the nation, vows to offer the Lord never-ending thanks, which will be effected by speaking of God’s greatness from generation to generation.

Seeing the future

If the psalmist expected the Lord to honor his name, deliver and forgive his people, and punish his enemies, how much more should we? We can see into the future more clearly than the psalmist could. The New Testament tells us that one day God will make a public appearance in the presence of his Son, Jesus Christ, the world’s true King, in response to the psalmist’s prayer and to our prayers. When he comes, “every eye will see him” (Revelation 1:7).

We are the sheep of his pasture. God will restore us. The entire new creation will be his pasture, and we will graze on the beauty of his presence in the land of plenty. He will heal his wounded people. Our best days are not behind us, they’re ahead of us. For that we can, and we will, offer the Lord never-ending thanks, beginning now and extending from generation to generation.

The songs of the Gypsies

For several weeks during the summers of 1992 and 1993, I stayed in a Gypsy village in Bulgaria and taught the scriptures at a church there. Several thousand people lived in the village, but only a few were followers of Jesus. The Gypsies are a persecuted minority wherever they live so in this village, the believers were a minority within a minority.

They spoke two languages: Bulgarian and their own language, Gypsy. The words to most of their worship songs were in Bulgarian. Some of them were even American songs that had been translated into Bulgarian. Every once in a while, though, a song would begin in a minor key. Then they sang as if with different voices, with even more passion and power. I soon came to understand what was happening: they were singing one of their own songs in their own tongue. The songs of the Gypsies were songs of lament. I can still hear one of the melodies in my mind's ear.

So we learn not to cure the plague but to weep for the plague. We learn to lament the plight of God's church. We bring before God our complaints, our questions, and our prayers for forgiveness, deliverance and justice. Why? We do it because we need a new perspective. We need to believe that today is not forever. Through the practice of lament, we find ourselves renewed as God's people. And we find new strength to be his people in his world.

NOTES:

(1) Quoted by Colman McCarthy, *Inner Companions*, © 1975 Acropolis Books Ltd., Washington, D.C. P. 227.

(2) Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*. P. 777.

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5th Message

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