

November 3, 2024

WHEN IT FEELS LIKE GOD IS SILENT AND DISTANT

Psalm 74

(2 of 9 in a series of selected Psalms)

What does it look like to grieve as a Christian? This might not be a question that we give much thought to. When we think of the basic aspects of living the Christian life, we might think about reading our Bible, praying, evangelizing, gathering faithfully with the saints, giving, serving, and the like, and these are all good things. But I wonder how little thinking we give to the role of grieving as a Christian. And it's not as if we don't think about it because it's seldom needed. It's perhaps needed more than any other expression of emotion in this world where Satan, sin, and death are so obviously present.

We feel the deepest levels of grief as our spouse is unfaithful, we watch someone we love suffer day-in and day-out through health issues, another loved one is snatched away in death, we watch a child walk away from the faith, and on and on. These events are crushing, and they're just a sampling of what we all experience. I've walked with many of you all through the details of what causes you grief, and it's heart-breaking. I've never longed for the Lord's return as much as when I consider the pain and heartache endured by so many simply in our congregation. So what then do we do in those moments? How do we express our sorrow? What does it look like for us to grieve as Christians?

The answer to this question is found in the Psalter, the book of 150 Psalms that we find in the middle of our Bibles. With the Psalms, the Lord has given us expressions of what it looks like to rejoice, to praise, to cry out to the Lord, and, yes, to grieve. In fact, there are more psalms where the author expresses his grief and complaint to the Lord than any other category of psalms. It's as if the Lord is saying, "I know you'll need more of this kind of psalm than any other." We call these psalms where the author expresses his grief and complaint to the Lord "psalms of lament."

They are psalms that show us how to grieve as believers. They show us how to express our sorrow, frustration, and heartache. And they are given to us by our Lord. What this means is that they are given to us in order to help us grieve to him. I've noted before that we might compare this to a parent who is training an impatient and demanding child. When your young child comes to you saying, "I want that," you will tell them, "No, that's not how you speak. Rather, you can say, 'Dad, may I have that?'" And that's just one of a thousand things that we train our children to say, even down to giving them the proper words to use when they speak. That's what psalms of lament are. It's as if the Lord is saying to us, "I know you feel sorrow and need to grieve deeply at times. When you do, here's how you can do it and what you can say."

The Psalm we're looking at this morning—Psalm 74—is one such psalm, a psalm of lament. You can see that it's a psalm of grieving and complaint simply by the questions that are asked in the psalm. There are five questions the psalmist asks. And as you hear them, you can tell that these aren't the kinds of questions we ask in the midst of happiness and blessing but in the midst of

our sorrow and complaint. Asaph (the noted author of the psalm according to the superscript) asks, “O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand?” (vv. 1, 10-11).

These are questions of pain, and we can see why as we see the picture described in the psalm. It appears as if this psalm is written after the Babylonians came and destroyed Jerusalem, hauling off many Jews into exile. Asaph speaks of God’s enemies destroying the city and the temple, where God dwelt in the midst of his people. They’ve destroyed everything that was once beautiful and set it on fire. The house where Israel could once look to and say, “Here our God dwells with us” has been reduced to a pile of ashes. And it gets worse.

It's not just that the temple and city have been destroyed. God is also silent. What I mean is that the means he used to speak to his people was through his prophets. But now, there is no prophet among them, as Asaph notes in verse 9. This probably means that he writes this while in Jerusalem as Jeremiah and Ezekiel—the Lord’s prophets—have been taken away from the land. And so here Asaph sits, feeling the Lord’s absence (as the temple where he dwelt is smoldering ash) and silent (as his prophets have been led away). And in that moment of God’s seeming absence and silence—to which there is no end in sight—he pens this psalm of lament. As we read it, then, it shows us his pain, but perhaps more importantly, it teaches us how to express ours to our Lord. What then does the psalm teach us? First, we must turn to the Lord in our grief.

Turn to the Lord in your grief

Have you ever noticed, as you’re reading the OT, how much the prophets speak about coming judgment? Whether it’s a prophet telling the northern kingdom of Israel that judgment is coming ultimately at the hands of the Assyrians or the southern kingdom of Judah that judgment will come ultimately at the hands of the Babylonians, it can feel like the most predominant message the Lord gives to his people in the pages of the OT is that judgment is coming to his people by these foreign nations.

But why? Why does the Lord spend so much time pronouncing this coming judgment? One reason, of course, is so that his people would repent. But another is so that when the judgment came, his people would understand that this was the work of his hands. But why is that important that they understood that? Here’s why. Each nation had their own god or gods that they worshiped. And in their minds, the god or gods of each nation sought to protect and defend their people. Therefore, if one nation conquered another nation, they interpreted it as evidence that the god of the conquering nation was greater than the god of the conquered nation. That makes sense, right? We even see that in the Exodus. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob shows himself more powerful than the gods of Egypt as he shows off his might and glory, takes his enslaved people, frees them, and destroys many Egyptians.

Well, imagine what the Assyrians or Babylonians thought when they conquered the Israelites. They too would have thought that their gods were showing themselves mightier than the God whom the Israelites worshiped. We actually know that's what they're thinking because they explicitly state it at times (e.g., Isaiah 36:18-20). That's one key reason the Lord declared what was coming ahead of time through the prophets, with the clear message that this judgment was the work of his hands, and no "god" was getting the best of him.

This is key for Asaph. After the fall of Jerusalem, as Asaph sits in the ruins of his beloved city and its temple, he does not think, "I guess God could do nothing about this and can't do anything now." He doesn't turn to the gods of the Babylonians and look to appease them, thinking they must be greater than the God of the Bible. He turns to his God whom he knows is the only true God.

Asaph interprets everything from the perspective that God is in control. He prays, "O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?" (v. 1). Again, when he asks these questions in verses 10-11, he sees this as the work of God's hands, asking him why God is letting his enemy scoff and revile God's name. Asaph knows that God is more powerful than any so-called God the Babylonians worship. He just doesn't understand why God is doing nothing to judge his enemies and save his people, especially when the Babylonians are thinking they're greater than Israel's God—who is the one true God. Do you see Asaph's struggle?

This is key for us to see. No matter what you're going through, it is never the case that Satan, evil, or anything else has gotten the upper hand on the Lord. God is still in control and still sovereign. He still rules and reigns. And so our first move is to turn to him in our grief. He is our hope, and there is none above him. So, direct your heart to him in your grief. He alone is the Lord. That is step one. Second, pour out your heart to him.

Pour out your heart to him

Notice how Asaph pours out everything that he is feeling and seeing to the Lord in this psalm. We've already noted that he's asked God why he seems to be absent and unwilling to act, but now he describes in detail to God everything that is causing him pain. In verses 4-9, he details the destruction of the temple and the fact that no prophet is around to tell them what God wants them to hear. He writes, "Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place; they set up their own signs for signs. They were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees. And all its carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammers. They set your sanctuary on fire; they profaned the dwelling place of your name, bringing it down to the ground. They said to themselves, 'We will utterly subdue them'; they burned all the meeting places of God in the land. We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long."

Asaph sees this as a direct assault on the Lord. "They destroyed your house, intentionally demolishing and profaning all the glorious woodwork and burning it," scoffing and reviling God

the whole time. And God is silent. To Asaph, it feels like the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, if God had remained silent and distant as Elijah cried out for fire and his enemies had won the showdown. Asaph can't understand it. God's seeming inactivity and silence makes no sense to him, and he cries out to the Lord.

You may be there too. You can't understand why the Lord didn't turn the heart of your spouse or child to him, and you don't understand why he doesn't do it now. You don't know why God doesn't heal the cancer or lessen the pain. It seems like such an obviously good thing to you, and it's crushing you. Whatever the pain is, pour it out to the Lord. The answer isn't merely to turn to others, nor to bottle it up, and definitely not to run *from* the Lord. Rather, turn to him and share your pain, your disappointment, your complaints, and your grief. It's not just acceptable to do that; through psalms like this one, the Lord is showing us that he *wants* us to do that. Turn to him because he's your only hope and go to him with your pain. Hold nothing back.

I can't overstate how crucial this is. I can think of a woman right now whose life has been filled with such pain, and who feels such resentment toward the Lord over it. And I think those things exist in her heart today because she never poured out her pain and grief toward the Lord. This means the Lord has given us to persevere in the faith—pour out your grief to him. But we don't stop there. As you lament, reflect on the Lord's greatness, works, and ways and trust him.

Reflect on the Lord's greatness, works, and ways and trust him

Lament, if done poorly, could result in you developing bitterness against God or coming to stand in judgment over him, neither of which is acceptable for a believer. That's why this next step is crucial. As you lament, you reflect on the Lord's greatness, works, and ways and trust him.

In psalms of lament, this is seen over and over. After the psalmist pours out his grief, he reflects on who God is and expresses his trust in the Lord. This section in a lament psalm is usually marked by the words "but," "yet," or "however." Here we see it in verses 12-17. Asaph, after crying out to the Lord about all that he's seen and God's seeming absence and silence, declares, "Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. You divided the sea by your might; 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. You split open springs and brooks; you dried up ever-flowing streams. Yours is the day, yours also is 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."

Do you see what he's doing? He's reminding himself of why he can trust the Lord. He notes that God is *his* God, who has delivered his people throughout history. He notes that no enemy is more powerful as the Lord has crushed sea monsters and the like. He notes that God controls day and night so that there is never a moment God is not in control. He notes God's control over all the earth, so there is never a place we can be where God does not reign. Do you see how he's reminding himself of why he can trust the Lord?

When you and I come to a time of lament, it can feel as if we're in the midst of darkness and can't see clearly. It can feel as if we're disoriented, and nothing makes sense. That's why it is crucial to pour out your pain, grief, and complaint, as those things are what's blinding and disorienting you. But then it's also crucial that you begin to renew your mind to the greatness, works, and ways of the Lord so that you might trust him.

Remind yourself in prayer, for example, of how he loved you and gave his Son for you. Rehearse his promises to withhold no good thing from his people (Ps 84:11), to work all for our good (Rom 8:28), to never leave us nor forsake us (Heb 13:5), to conform us to the image of his Son (Rom 8:29), and on and on. Renew your mind as to who God is and why he can be trusted, and then put your trust and hope in him. Come to a point in your praying, after you've poured out your grief, where you say, "But I know ..." and then rehearse all that you know of the Lord, his greatness, his works, his ways, and his promises. That is a crucial detail in our lament. And it prepares you for the final step. Make bold requests of God.

Make bold requests of God

It's not just that Asaph turns to the Lord, pours out his grief, and reminds himself of why God can be trusted. He also makes bold requests of the Lord. He does this throughout. First, after questioning why God seemingly has cast off his people forever and expresses his anger toward them, he asks God to come and do something about what has happened. He writes in verses 2-3, "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. Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins; the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary!"

When Asaph asks the Lord to remember, he's not asking him simply to call it to mind as if the Lord has genuinely forgotten. By asking the Lord to remember, he's asking the Lord to act, to take action. When he says in v. 3, "Direct your steps," it's as if he's saying, "Please do something, and don't drag your feet."¹

He repeats this request in verses 18-21 as he writes, "Remember this, O LORD, how the enemy scoffs, and a foolish people reviles your name. 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, for the dark place 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."

Again, the call to remember here is a call to act. And asking the Lord to remember how the enemy scoffs at him and reviles his name is a plea for God to do something. Think, for example, if some little guy were mocking and reviling some big, strong guy, and the big guy was sitting there silent, doing nothing, and simply bearing the ridicule. We might say to the big guy, "Are you going to let him get away with that?"

¹ Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms, vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2013), 579.

Now, in that case, we may well be attempting to manipulate the big guy, and that's not what Asaph is doing here with the Lord—God will not be manipulated. But the idea is similar. He's saying, "Lord, are you really going to remain distant and silent and do nothing when they're destroying your people, your house, your land, and reviling and mocking you along the way?" And lest we miss that this is what Asaph is saying, he makes it even more explicit, saying to the Lord in verses 22-23, "Arise, O God, defend your cause; remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day! Do not forget the clamor of your foes, the uproar of those who rise against you, which goes up continually!"

This isn't a picture of Asaph being shy in asking God to act. He's making big and bold requests of the Lord. And you and I have that same opportunity in prayer. Again, by the Lord inspiring Asaph to write this psalm and preserve it for our sake, the Lord is teaching us in this psalm that he *wants* us to come to him and make big, bold requests. In Hebrews 4:16, we're told to draw near to the throne of grace "with confidence."

We can ask God for big, bold things. Ask him for healing. Ask him to turn the heart of your spouse, child, or sibling around. Ask him to provide for your needs. Ask him for wisdom you don't have. Ask him to give you gifts so that you might minister to someone in need. Ask him. He's the one who shows us here that he wants us to ask.

Now, it's fair that the Lord might not always answer according to our desires. When Paul had a thorn in his flesh, he went to the Lord multiple times, boldly asking the Lord to remove it. But the Lord did not. No doubt Paul's prayer was, "God I can serve you with so much more strength if only you would remove this physical ailment," and the Lord's response was to note that he'd show off his power through Paul's weakness. And yet the Lord gave him grace to sustain him with this weakness. But the Lord wasn't dishonored in Paul making this bold requests. Again, we do so in obedience to the Lord. So, as we lament, let us also make our requests known to God.

How do Christians grieve? We turn to the Lord. We show our pain, our complaints, our frustrations, our sorrows. Then we reflect on who God is, why he can be trusted, and we trust in him. Then we ask him to act. We make bold requests to the one who loved us enough to send his Son to live, die, and be raised for us. So let's spend even this afternoon going to him in our grief, even as he shows us the way to do so in a psalm like Psalm 74. And let's know that he's eager to hear us as we remember his love for us in coming to the table. Amen.