

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE BLOOD OF THE LORD'S SHEEP POURED OUT LIKE WATER

Psalm 79: The Blood of the Lord's Sheep Poured Out Like Water

1. Verses 1-5: The Nations Have Laid Waste to Israel
 - a. Psalm 79 declares that the worst-case scenario has come to pass. Having repeatedly broken faith with the Lord, Israel has finally fallen under the worst of the curses stipulated in their covenant. And not just some of the tribes, either. Since this psalm references the temple being defiled and Jerusalem laid in ruins, this can only be about the Babylonian Exile.¹
 - b. To understand how devastating the destruction of the Temple was, we must remember what it really was to the Israelites. It was the clearest, most enduring sign of God's dwelling with his people, even despite their great sin.
 - i. As we have seen from the Leviticus readings each week recently, this arrangement could only be maintained with extremely strict regulations because of the inherent dangers of a holy God living with sinners. But the fact that it continued to stand signified to the people that their God had not yet left them.
 - ii. Recall that all the worship and major festivals that they had was supposed to be centered around the Temple, with its priests and sacrifices. So the ruin of the Temple meant the sudden and dramatic end of the main ways they practiced their devotion to the Lord.²
 - c. Notice how from the very start the psalmist presents the destruction of Israel as an attack on the Lord. He says that the nations have come into *God's* inheritance when they seized

¹ This does create a tricky issue with the authorship of the Asaphic psalms. The most obvious Asaph in Scripture whom you would expect to write psalms is the chief of the musicians appointed by David in 1 Chronicles 16:5, but of course, that Asaph would not have lived to see the Babylonian Exile several centuries later. So the possible explanations are: 1) Asaph knew the Exile would eventually come and wrote prophetic psalms about it. This is possible, but it seems to reference later revelation that came after David's lifetime, such as the book of Jeremiah, so it is unlikely, in my view. 2) The phrase, "Psalm of Asaph" should be understood more loosely as "Psalm for Asaph" in the sense of dedicated to or in the style of Asaph's psalms. The problem with this is it makes basically all the ascriptions in the psalms unintelligible because we are given no clues in the context whether a given psalm is written by or for the name mentioned. Why would the psalmists even include these ascriptions, if they are so ambiguous? 3) There was simply more than one Asaph who wrote psalms. This last one seems the most plausible. It would make sense if Asaph's family continued to name sons Asaph for generations afterward, down even to the Exile.

² This is why Ezekiel's vision of the Lord leaving the Temple in Ezekiel 10 is so ominous. It marks that they truly have gone past the point of no return, and the Lord is ending the arrangement of his covenant that had stood for centuries, since the days of the Tabernacle at Mt Sinai. At that moment, the divorce was final, so to speak.

the promised land. What does this mean? Isn't this supposed to be the children of Abraham's inheritance?

- i. There are, in fact, a few places in the Old Testament which present the people of Israel themselves as the Lord's inheritance.³ One of them is the previous psalm.⁴ This shows that God actually desires his chosen people as his reward, so to speak, for faithfully keeping his covenant with them.
 - ii. Ephesians 1:18 speaks of Christians in a similar way, as the Lord Jesus's inheritance for accomplishing his work of salvation.⁵ Although the word is not present in the High Priestly Prayer, it seems clear that the idea is there because of how Christ asks the Father to preserve his disciples for his sake, unto everlasting life together.⁶
 - iii. The main point here is that an attack on God's people is an attack on God himself, because he has voluntarily bound himself to them.
- d. In verses 2 and 3, the psalmist vividly describes the horrors of the battlefield around Jerusalem.
- i. The unburied corpses are mentioned because they were obviously a sign of great national shame to Judah. In the ancient world, the inability of one side to bury their dead from a battle was taken as emblematic of total defeat. If anyone had been left at liberty to do so, some at least would have been buried.
 - ii. Living in a dry climate, you would of course never want to recklessly pour out massive amounts of water on the ground. So the reference to the people's blood being poured out all around Jerusalem suggests the extreme waste of so many lives here. Their precious blood has spilled out onto the earth and vanished into the soil.
- e. Verse 4 focuses on the burning shame that all the Jews bore as a result of this national disgrace. This is one of the most common themes about the pain of the Exile. In modern times it is more difficult for us to understand both 1) the sense of being rooted in a very specific place, and 2) their strong sense of shame carried around almost like it was a physical burden.
- i. The first is hard for us to grasp because we move around much more, from state to state and even country to country. Very few people today live on land that has been in their same family for 2 generations, much less dozens.
 - ii. The second is because we actively discourage any sense of personal shame or guilt as oppressive, in our culture. If we feel any shame at all, we are generally

³ For example, Psalm 106:5 says, "that I may look upon the prosperity of your chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation, that I may glory with your inheritance."

⁴ "from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance." - Psalm 78:71

⁵ "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints..." - Ephesians 1:16-18

⁶ Note especially verse 24, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world."

encouraged to deny that it could be legitimate and seek positive affirmations, instead. A common sign of this attitude is when people refer to their “Catholic guilt” or some similar phrase, meaning they ascribe their feelings of guilt and shame to a religious upbringing they have since rejected, rather than to their conscience.

- f. Verse 5 asks three questions, each of which is critical to understanding this psalm.
 - i. The first is the most straightforward, asking what every believer wants to know when going through an intense trial. How long will this go on?⁷
 - ii. The second question is certainly the most troubling. “Will you be angry *forever*?” The psalmist’s deep discouragement and frustration is plain here, suggesting the Jews have already been suffering in exile for some time at the writing of this psalm.⁸
 - iii. The third question strongly suggests the background reason for Israel’s destruction as a nation. Not only had they broken God’s covenant in a variety of ways, but they had specifically broken faith with the Lord in the *worst* way: spiritual adultery. They abandoned the worship of the Lord, provoking his jealousy with all kinds of foreign deities from the nations around them. It doesn’t take an in-depth study of the Old Testament prophets to see that this was the greatest cause of the Lord’s wrath against them.⁹

2. Verses 6-10: Avenge Us, O Lord

- a. The psalmist calls on the Lord to turn his just wrath towards the nations who have destroyed Israel. He can be so bold to demand this because the Lord had actually promised it in several places.¹⁰
- b. In verse 8, the psalmist plainly recognizes that Israel deserved this destruction. He acknowledges their iniquity led to this, even as he pleads for mercy.¹¹
 - i. This helps to explain why Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego speak the way that they do to Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3: “our God whom we serve is able to deliver

⁷ Some commentators at this point will say that asking “how long, O Lord?” shows that the psalmist is confident God will keep his promises. This interpretation is difficult to sustain in light of the next question, however: “Will you be angry forever?” Taking these questions together, I believe the psalmist is expressing some genuine doubts here, though he still has an underlying foundation of faith which ultimately comes out the stronger by the end of the psalm.

⁸ Consider how the Jews felt when they returned from 70 years exile in Babylon, still profoundly feeling that they remained under God’s judgment. As the people pray in Nehemiah 9:36-37, “Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.” Indeed, even at the time of Christ the Jews still felt this way, living then under the Romans rather than the Babylonians or Persians, but in many ways just as oppressed and frustrated.

⁹ Consider almost the entirety of the book of Hosea, or lengthy passages in the other prophets like Jeremiah 3.

¹⁰ For example, in Jeremiah 25:12-14, “Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the LORD, making the land an everlasting waste. I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations. For many nations and great kings shall make slaves even of them, and I will recompense them according to their deeds and the work of their hands.” The following verses expand the scope of this judgment to all the surrounding nations Israel knew of, even well beyond Babylon.

¹¹ He no doubt would have been familiar with the covenant curses in Deuteronomy 28:15ff, which are very directly fulfilled in the Exile.

us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”¹² They don’t quite have the confidence that David did in the Lord’s preservation because they know their nation as a whole is under God’s.

- ii. One of the explicit pronouncements of judgment that is likely in the background of this psalm is Jeremiah 17:1-4, because it specifically speaks of Judah giving up their inheritance and the Lord’s anger burning forever.¹³
 - iii. The God of Israel loves to show his strength by saving those who cannot save themselves, and the psalmist knows this well. Therefore Psalm 79:8 appeals to the Lord’s compassion and the fact that the Jews were brought “very low.” They are in exactly the kind of helpless state which the Lord has frequently saved them from before.
- c. Verse 9 shows us the whole lesson that the Jews were supposed to learn from the Exile. The Lord put Israel through all this so they would see that they cannot earn and maintain an inheritance from God. God must deliver them again, as he did in the Exodus, and make atonement for their sins, or they will just lose it all again. No amount of recommitting themselves to the Law of Moses will be enough to make up for their faithlessness.
 - d. Verse 10 continues to emphasize that God ought to save his people, not because of their own inherent merits, but for the sake of his own honor.
 - i. In the ancient world, your relationship to a god was deemed real based almost entirely on how much worldly success that god gave you. Therefore a god that did not stop his people from being taken captive would be looked on as either weak or fickle, and they would get these mocking questions.
 - ii. The psalmist demands that the blood of his people be avenged “before our eyes” because of course God can punish people in the afterlife, but that doesn’t affect his reputation in the here and now. Remember that the psalmist is concerned with God’s name among the nations here, so that it not be associated with weakness and doubt.

3. Verses 11-13: Final Appeal

- a. The last three verses of the psalm reiterate the three main reasons for God to judge his enemies and save his people.
 - i. The first is his own great compassion for the needy and defenseless, which we already saw in verse 8, and now again in 11. “Those doomed to die” is likely meant figuratively for the people as a whole, rather than for some particular Jews on death row. The idea would be that ordinarily, people groups whose homes are

¹² Daniel 3:17-18.

¹³ “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of their altars, while their children remember their altars and their Asherim, beside every green tree and on the high hills, on the mountains in the open country. Your wealth and all your treasures I will give for spoil as the price of your high places for sin throughout all your territory. You shall loosen your hand from your heritage that I gave to you, and I will make you serve your enemies in a land that you do not know, for in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn forever.”

destroyed and forcibly resettled usually don't survive with their national identity intact. This was not a time where people had any notion of multiculturalism, so you and your family would be *heavily* pressured to assimilate. You would not have the same privileges as your neighbors, and therefore would feel like prisoners or slaves until you had fully surrendered the last traces of your distinct national identity and "died" as a people.¹⁴ The psalmist is asking the Lord to reverse this process and preserve their people.

- ii. The second is the Lord's concern for his own name and honor. A king cannot rule well if all his subjects think of him as a joke, and so the Lord must not allow the arrogant to go unchallenged forever. As we saw in Psalm 73, mocking God is connected to all kinds of horrible social ills, as well, such as running roughshod over God's image-bearers.¹⁵ We must remember that God's honor does not just affect him alone, but we as his image-bearers and all the rest of his creation, as well.
- iii. The third and final reason is that God's people may be deeply sinful, but he has bound himself to them in covenant and there is the faithful remnant that do really trust and praise him. Thus, those who sing this psalm from the heart really are "we your people, the sheep of your pasture," since they have the faith of Abraham their father, and not merely his bloodline.¹⁶

4. Persecution Transformed by Christ

- a. Given that the Jews desperately desired national liberation from Gentile oppressors, Jesus's opening to the Sermon on the Mount could not be more shocking. Rather than presenting his Kingdom as gloriously triumphant over their enemies in the here and now, Jesus says his people will be meek and merciful. Worst of all, they should actually expect persecution and see it as a sign of *blessing*.¹⁷
 - i. To us in the US, this does not seem to have been our experience. We can point to persecution in a different sense, from the devil and our own flesh, in the form of various temptations. We can also point to a kind of persecution from the vast array of false teachers and charlatans that have plagued our nation for centuries, often

¹⁴ Consider how easy it was for Haman to convince King Ahasuerus to murder all of the Jewish people throughout his lands. All he said was, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them. If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries." - Esther 3:8-9. Merely pointing out that the Jews were resisting assimilation and keeping their own laws and traditions was all it took for the king to accept this bribe and sign a genocidal death warrant.

¹⁵ For example, 73:6 says, "violence covers them as a garment" and verse 8 says, "They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression." Those who have no fear of God will treat their fellow man with contempt, as well.

¹⁶ Next week, in the New Testament reading, we will hear Christ declare that the Jews accusing him were not, in fact, children of Abraham and therefore entitled to the Covenant, because they did not respond to God's revelation in the way he did. Abraham received the Word of God in faith and believed in his messianic offspring: "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." - John 8:56

¹⁷ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." - Matthew 5:10-11. Note the shift to the second person. Christ wanted to make it absolutely clear that yes, I am talking about *you*, the ones listening to me, suffering persecution for my sake. It's the only beatitude he repeats like that, so he clearly wanted to really drive this one home.

scoffing at the truth as they go. But thankfully, we have not yet experienced the kind of direct, widespread, and violent persecution that our brothers and sisters do in many other parts of the world.

- ii. As a result of this, many American Christians fall into one of two extremes these days. Either 1) they look at these New Testament passages on persecution and think it's not worth trying to influence the culture in any way. Just hunker down or wave it away until Jesus comes back. Or 2) they ignore or explain away these texts and claim that, actually, Christians ARE supposed to triumph over their enemies before Christ's return and set up just, Christianized governments and societies. Some even want to go back to having a kind of state church, despite the long history of continuous religious warfare and persecution of the truth by state churches.
- iii. A better way than these is to examine and separate our *expectations* for the world from our *motivation* in interacting with the world around us. Basically, we must recognize and hold to two key truths that feel as though they are in tension with each other. These are:
 1. Christians *should* expect persecution, and not just because of the Beatitudes. Many have noted that every single book of the New Testament contains some reference to believers suffering. It was understood to be the norm for the people of God after Christ's first coming and before his second.¹⁸ Also, as noted earlier in the exposition of Psalm 79, it is normal for God to deliver his people right at their darkest hour, when they are most defenseless and therefore could not claim any glory for themselves.
 2. At the same time, we are commanded to love our neighbors, including our enemies, as ourselves and this applies to the political sphere as much as any other. The purpose of participating in our secular civil societies should *not* be to chase after a Christianized utopia, which has not existed and never will in this age. The fact is quite simply that if we lose fundamental rights like religious liberty, protections for defenseless lives among us (the unborn), as well as general peace and stability in our country, it will harm *all peoples*, not just us. Therefore if we want to obey Christ and bear witness to him in the world, we must seek to mitigate these evils.¹⁹ We cannot hide away in bunkers or insular communities. Christians, seeking to bear witness to Christ's love in the world, ought to seek to use their gifts and vocations to persuade even unbelievers to see these basic, commonsense truths revealed in nature.
- b. The reason for this change from the Old Testament, where suffering and persecution are seen as signs of God's curse, to the New, is because of the astounding work of salvation our Savior has wrought for us.

¹⁸ Notice how, for example, James tells believers to be patient in their suffering for a very specific reason: "Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand." - James 5:8. The true and ultimate end of our suffering will only come with Christ's return.

¹⁹ This, I believe, is the meaning of Christ's famous "salt and light" metaphors in Matthew 5:13-16. The world does not *become* salt and light, but it does recognize, and some appreciate and give glory to God for the salt and the light. These efforts are worthwhile in and of themselves, even if we do not "take back" the country.

- i. Suffering now *cannot* be because of the curse of the Law, as the Babylonian Exile was, because Christ took that curse upon himself, for us. Galatians 3, in particular, is absolutely clear about this.²⁰
- ii. Therefore the persecution of believers now takes on new meaning, as a fitting reflection of Christ's own sufferings on our behalf. This is an extremely common theme in the Gospels,²¹ as well as the epistles.²²
- iii. Because of this parallel (though obviously our suffering does not atone for sins, as Christ's did), the persecution of Christians serves to bear witness to the truth of what we believe. The fact that so many Christians have died publicly in faith, as martyrs for Christ, has driven the spread of Christianity in every corner of the world. In the earliest centuries of the New Testament Church, many spoke of persecution for the sake of Christ as an *honor*, reflecting the Beatitudes.²³

5. Divine Justice Accomplished.

- a. We actually see the real answer to Psalm 79's demands for justice in Revelation. It is a great pity this chapter is usually only consulted for controversies about the Millennium, because its clearest teaching is so excellent and needs to be heard more often.
- b. In verse 4 of this chapter, great thrones are set up to judge Satan and all who followed him in his kingdom. And who does John make special mention of here? "I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God" taking their places on these thrones. Christian martyrs are the very ones to pass judgment with Christ on their persecutors, exacting perfect, divine justice for their blood shed so heinously all over the earth. In my view, the amillennial view, this is already ongoing even now, but regardless of whether it has been happening already or will happen in the future, we may rest assured that God will not be mocked forever. He will not forget any believer's blood shed by his enemies. The only way for those persecutors to escape this wrath to come is for them, like Saul of Tarsus, to throw themselves on Christ's great mercy and depend on his atonement, as we do. Therefore, like the Jews in the Exile, let us commit justice to the Lord in prayer and not seek to avenge ourselves.

²⁰ "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." - Galatians 3:13-14.

²¹ For example, "If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours." - John 15:19-20

²² For example, "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." - Hebrews 12:3-4

²³ This way of speaking completely pervades the letters of Ignatius of Antioch. For example, he concludes his letter to the Ephesian church by saying, "Pray for the church in Syria, from where I am being led to Rome in chains, as I—the very least of the faithful there—have been judged worthy of serving the glory of God." In other words, Ignatius says he has absolutely nothing to boast about, *except* that he has the privilege of being carted off to Rome to be killed for Christ. Elsewhere in the same letter he speaks of this experience as the true beginning of his discipleship to Christ.