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Psalm 74: A Maskil of Asaph

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Psalm 74
A Maskil of Asaph.
(NRSV)

- ¹ O God, why do you cast us off forever?
Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?**
- ² Remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago,
which you redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage.
Remember Mount Zion, where you came to dwell.**
- ³ Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins;
the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary.**
- ⁴ Your foes have roared within your holy place;
they set up their emblems there.**
- ⁵ At the upper entrance they hacked
the wooden trellis with axes.^(a)**
- ⁶ And then, with hatchets and hammers,
they smashed all its carved work.**
- ⁷ They set your sanctuary on fire;
they desecrated the dwelling place of your name,
bringing it to the ground.**
- ⁸ They said to themselves, "We will utterly subdue them";
they burned all the meeting places of God in the land.**
- ⁹ We do not see our emblems;
there is no longer any prophet,
and there is no one among us who knows how long.**
- ¹⁰ How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?
Is the enemy to revile your name forever?**
- ¹¹ Why do you hold back your hand;
why do you keep your hand in^(b) your bosom?**
- ¹² Yet God my King is from of old,
working salvation in the earth.**
- ¹³ You divided the sea by your might;
you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.**
- ¹⁴ You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
you gave him as food^(c) for the creatures of the wilderness.**
- ¹⁵ You cut openings for springs and torrents;
you dried up ever-flowing streams.**
- ¹⁶ Yours is the day, yours also the night;
you established the luminaries^(d) and the sun.**
- ¹⁷ You have fixed all the bounds of the earth;
you made summer and winter.**

- 18 Remember this, O LORD, how the enemy scoffs,
and an impious people reviles your name.**
- 19 Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals;
do not forget the life of your poor forever.**
- 20 Have regard for your^(e) covenant,
for the dark places of the land are full of the haunts of violence.**
- 21 Do not let the downtrodden be put to shame;
let the poor and needy praise your name.**
- 22 Rise up, O God, plead your cause;
remember how the impious scoff at you all day long.**
- 23 Do not forget the clamor of your foes,
the uproar of your adversaries that goes up continually.**

Footnotes:

- a. (v.5) Cn Compare Gk Syr: Meaning of Heb uncertain
- b. (v.11) Cn: Heb *do you consume your right hand from*
- c. (v.14) Heb *food for the people*
- d. (v.16) Or *moon*, Heb *light*
- e. (v.20) Gk Sry: Heb *the*

Psalm 74 is a plea for help in a time of national humiliation. It is basic to an understanding of this Psalm that Israel is God's chosen people, to whom he has revealed himself as the LORD (Yahweh), their God. This covenant-bond which Yahweh thereby enacted is so strong and so intimate that any assault upon Israel is by that fact also an assault upon God.

It is important for us Christians who pray this Psalm to remember that God is the covenant God not of Israel-as-nation, but of Israel-as-People of God. This distinction may be hard to maintain in the Old Testament, but it is absolutely necessary from the point of view of the New Testament. The successor of the Old Testament People of Israel is not any contemporary nation, not the state of Israel, not even the United States. The successor of the Old Testament People of God is first of all Jesus Christ himself, the Son of God, who is the People of Israel reduced to one. Then derivatively it is all those who are "in him," the Body of Christ, the Church. Thus the speaker of the Psalm may be the original Psalmist; or it may be our Lord Jesus, who was despised and rejected for us; or it may be each one of us individually as members of the Body of Christ. And in some deep sense it is all of these simultaneously.

Verses 1-3 are a lament that God seems to have rejected his People in his wrath; for evidence one need only look to the destruction that has been wrought against them. Verses 4-8 are a description of the damage that has been inflicted. Verses 9-11 complain that there is not even a prophet among

them, and that by doing nothing God is allowing the foe to gloat over them and to desecrate the Name of God. Verses 12-17 recall the power and the goodness of God, *my God*, as the Creator, who once divided the waters of the Red Sea for the salvation of his People. Verses 18-21 plead with the LORD Yahweh not to allow Israel, his poor little dove, to be eaten by wild animals. Verses 22-23 then appeal to God, because the impious enemies are in reality God's own adversaries, and he must defeat them.

It is hard for us in the American church, who do not experience such frontal attacks for confessing the name of Christ, to pray this Psalm. Hence, when we do pray it, either we must think of the more subtle enemies of the Church which erode or corrupt our faith, or we must think of those Christians in other lands, who are fellow members of the Body of Christ with us, and who do suffer direct, physical persecution.

Prayer to accompany Psalm 74:

Lord our God, remember the covenant sealed with the blood of your Son. Make the Church your spiritual house and make us living stones built upon Christ, so that a full and true temple may be raised to your glory; for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.