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Psalm 79
A Psalm of Asaph.
(NRSV)

- ¹ **O God, the nations (RSV: heathen) have come into your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple;
they have laid Jerusalem in ruins.**
- ² **They have given the bodies of your servants
to the birds of the air for food,
the flesh of your faithful to the wild animals of the earth.**
- ³ **They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem,
and there was no one to bury them.**
- ⁴ **We have become a taunt to our neighbors,
mocked and derided by those around us.**
- ⁵ **How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever?
Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?**
- ⁶ **Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you,
and on the kingdoms that do not call on your name.**
- ⁷ **For they have devoured Jacob
and laid waste his habitation.**
- ⁸ **Do not remember against us the iniquities of our ancestors;
let your compassion come speedily to meet us,
for we are brought very low.**
- ⁹ **Help us, O God of our salvation,
for the glory of your name;
deliver us, and forgive our sins,
for your name's sake.**
- ¹⁰ **Why should the nations say,
"Where is their God?"
Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants
be known among the nations before our eyes.**
- ¹¹ **Let the groans of the prisoners come before you;
according to your great power preserve those doomed to die.**
- ¹² **Return sevenfold into the bosom of our neighbors
the taunts with which they taunted you, O Lord!**
- ¹³ **Then we your people, the flock of your pasture,
will give thanks to you forever;
from generation to generation we will recount your praise.**

Psalm 79 was written by someone who was grieving over the destruction in 587 B.C. of Jerusalem and her Temple. The Temple was the symbol of Yahweh's gracious presence among his people Israel. The destruction of the Temple therefore might signify that Yahweh was powerless before the gods of the other nations. That possibility the Psalmist does not concede. Alternatively, the destruction of the Temple could signify that Yahweh had withdrawn his favor from his People in anger with them. That likelihood the Psalmist acknowledges in verses 8-9, where he speaks a prayer of repentance.

In the New Testament the abode of God's gracious, forgiving presence among his people is transferred from the physical temple to the Body of Christ. That is the significance of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple, according to the Gospel of John 2:13-22. "Destroy *this* Temple," says Jesus, speaking of his own body in contrast to the physical temple, "and in three days I will raise it up." Therefore we today now find God's gracious, forgiving presence in the Body of Christ, the Church gathered around his Word and Sacraments. But that means, paradoxically, that God's *gracious* presence is to be found also in the destruction of the old temple; for the old temple can no longer mediate the gracious presence of God. The old temple is swallowed up by the new Temple, namely, Jesus in his death on the Cross, as that is revealed in the triumph of the resurrection. Hence we Christians can readily incorporate verses 1-4 and other such verses that speak of the violence and destruction of the temple into our devotional life. Violence and destruction are central realities in the Messianic career of Christ and in the life of Christian brothers and sisters around the globe.

Verses 6, 10, 12 are very difficult verses; no doubt it was these verses which led the editors of the LBW, LW, and the LSB (but not the ELW) to decide against this Psalm for Christian worship. In them the Psalmist presumes to ask God to punish the victorious Gentile nations with his anger (verse 6). God should wreak vengeance upon the enemy nations (verse 10). God should repay the enemies with seven times the misery they have inflicted (verse 12). And when God takes such retributive action, that will then give the Psalmist the motivation for once more singing the praise of God (verse 13).

The world-wide Christian community indeed has enemies, and we pray for the victory of God over all his enemies. And while it is easy for us to understand how a believer might *feel* strong retaliatory hostility against the enemies, it is an altogether different matter to ask God to satisfy our base desires. First of all, as we have often noted, the Lord Jesus specifically commands us not to hate, but to love our enemies, just as he himself did when in his first words from his cross of suffering he asked his heavenly Father to forgive his executioners. Secondly, the Apostle Paul, speaking in the Spirit of Jesus, teaches in Romans 12:19-21:

"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

When we Christians therefore come upon this Psalm, if we want to do more than read it merely as an account of an ancient believer, if we want also in some sense to pray this Psalm, then we might try to do so in something like the following manner. We may pray in sympathy with fellow believers

around the globe, feeling their pain and their indignation. We may even experience similar feelings of vindictiveness. But we need also to ask God's help to get beyond all feelings of vengeance and into that grace by which Jesus forgave his enemies, leaving the matter of repayment where it belongs, namely in God's hands. Perhaps that can be the blessing we ask for ourselves as we end with a Christian Psalm prayer.

Prayer to accompany Psalm 79:

Father of mercy, your Son told his enemies that, if they should destroy the temple of his body, you would raise it again in three days. By his death and resurrection demolish our pretensions of strength, and on the ruins build a temple worthy of your name, so that all the world may know the glory of your transforming power, shown in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.