

Sunday 13 September 2020

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# SONGS FROM A STRANGE LAND

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## Psalm 79: “Where is their God?”

*Merciful and forgiving God,*

*in sorrow and shame we come before you –  
to confess our unworthiness of your goodness,  
to confess we have not loved you  
or one another as we should,  
to confess we have failed to appreciate your many gifts,  
and broken your commandments.*

*Lord of all, hear our prayer.*

As I come into God’s presence I choose to praise him in the words of Psalm 98:1-3.

- <sup>1</sup> O sing to the LORD a new song,  
for he has done marvellous things.  
His right hand and his holy arm  
have gotten him victory.
- <sup>2</sup> The LORD has made known his victory;  
he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
- <sup>3</sup> He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness  
to the house of Israel.  
All the ends of the earth have seen  
the victory of our God.

This morning, two Psalms collide with one another. One, Psalm 98, is a Psalm of praise that expresses the very opposite of emotions poured out in Psalm 79. In this second psalm deep, dark feelings, that may make us feel uncomfortable, find an outlet in cries for revenge. But Psalm 79 has found a place through the centuries since it was written, allowing God’s people to articulate their sense of injustice and pain. These are the common feelings of many overwhelmed by the world around them. So in Psalm 79:8–10 we read:

- <sup>8</sup> Do not remember against us the iniquities of our ancestors;  
let your compassion come speedily to meet us,  
for we are brought very low.
- <sup>9</sup> Help us, O God of our salvation,  
for the glory of your name;  
deliver us, and forgive our sins,  
for your name’s sake.
- <sup>10</sup> 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.

This psalm arises from a specific historic event, the destruction of Jerusalem and desecration of the temple by the Babylonians in 587 BC. The ire of the psalmist, however, is not directed solely at the Babylonians but also at Israel's neighbours, who, seeing Israel's downfall, ridicule the people asking, "Where is their God now?" (10) But this question comes not just in the taunts of the nations but also through the doubts and fears of God's people. And as we look around and see a broken world haunted by all manner of evil, we still ask the question, "Where is God?"

For all the anguish expressed in this psalm, anguish we may all feel at some time, the psalmist insists that we see all suffering from the perspective of faith. The psalmist never loses sight of the harsh realities facing the people of God, but also never loses hope.

The temptation is to view the suffering of the faithful as a sign of God's weakness—God no longer rules—or as a sign of God's punishment—God is forever angry. But in the face of catastrophic suffering, the psalmist continues to affirm the goodness of God, and so opens the way for a new understanding of God's sovereignty as power made perfect in weakness. It opens the way to the claim that God's love will ultimately be experienced as compassion, not jealousy. It opens the way to an embrace of suffering as something other than an indication of alienation from God. In short, the psalmist's affirmation in the face of adversity prepares the way for a time when a cross—the emblem of suffering and shame—will become a symbol of power and grace, the ultimate answer to the question, "Where is God?"

We pause and pray for all for whom the question, 'Where is God?' is a painful reality.

#### *Pause and pray*

Just as the psalmist does not hide from the realities of life, or from his gut feelings about what he experiences, he makes no claim to innocence. His appeal to God is based only on the honour of God's name. When Paul asks a similar question, he receives a more direct answer.

He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:9f)

#### *Lord of all*

*touch my heart with your living presence  
and fill my life with your grace,  
so that my love for you may grow,  
my faith be deepened,  
and my service strengthened.*

*Lord of all, hear my prayer,*

*in the name of Christ. Amen.*

NEXT WEEK: Psalm 102