Psalm 74

Maschil of Asaph

The Inscription for Psalm 74 reads, “Maschil of Asaph.” The word “Maschil” simply means instruction. The idea is that the following might give guidance to the believer as to how to deal with problems that may arise in his/her life. This particular Psalm seems to be prophetic in nature since the context is that of the invasion and destruction of Jerusalem, especially the sanctuary, and this did not occur in the days of Asaph. It may, however, have occurred in the days of one of his descendants. The trouble here is that the specificity of the account excludes both the invasion at the time of the Babylonian captivity as well as that of Antichius Epiphanese later on. It seems rather to be a prophetic vision of the various struggles of God’s people throughout time. For in every age, the people of God have been plagued by the attack of various enemies. Perhaps Asaph, who was viewed by some as a seer (2 Chr. 29:30), had a general vision of the persecution of the redeemed. Either way, much can be discerned about the appropriate attitude of God’s people in these types of trials. We will examine this Psalm in three parts.

First, we see ***the Desperate Plea of the Redeemed*** in verses 1-11. Notice firstly, ***the destination*** ***of this plea***. It is directed at none other than God himself. The Psalmist cries out in verse 1, “O God, why hast thou cast us off forever?” In times of tribulation, let us ever direct our pleas for help unto the hills from whence it comes. Too often, we look to ourselves in these times. Many a blessing has been forfeited because we failed to call upon the only one that could help us. Here, the Psalmist feels as if the people of God have been cast off. At no point in this Psalm does it appear the he doubts the ability of Go to help. He only wonders if God is willing to help. This is the right attitude to have toward God. As the man in the Gospels said, “If thou wilt, thou canst make me whole.” On what grounds though does the Psalmist cry unto God? For God is the Creator and the Holy One of Israel. How can one that is a mere man cry unto God and expect to be heard? In verse 1 he says, “why doth thine anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture?” In verse 2 he asks God to “Remember thy congregation, which thou hast purchased of old: the rod of thine inheritance, which thou hast redeemed; this mount Zion, wherein thou hast dwelt.” He calls God’s attention to the fact that this attack on Israel is an attack on the blood bought possession of God himself. He cries out as a child to his Father, with every right to do so. If God is to hear our prayer for help, we must be his children. He then, in verse 3, requests that God act with haste for the sake of the sanctuary. Secondly, we see ***the description of this plea***. Here the Psalmist begins to describe the desolation that has been brought on by these wicked persecutors. In verse 4 he speaks of their roaring. They seemed to drown out all remnants of joyful sound. The singing had stopped. The laughter of playing children had ended. Only the deafening roar of the enemy remained. Also in verse 4 he describes how the enemies had set their banners over Jerusalem. This signified that they had defeated them. It showed their allegiance to the Pagan gods and weakened the spirit of the captives. This is how it is when we fall under attack. When the enemy rages we forfeit our song and joy, and as we assess the damage he has caused it is easy to be disheartened. It is then our faith is put to the test. In verses 5 and 6 we find that those things held dear to the Israelites are the very things targeted by the intruders. The carved work was a source of pride for these craftsmen. No doubt much time had been invested in them. They probably hung in a conspicuous location so that all would notice them. Now they lay broken and battered. The enemy had taken away the point of their pride. This seemed to Asaph to be a travesty, but often times it is what God orders that we may take our eyes off of the temporal and put them on things above. Verses 7 and 8 tell us that they had burned the synagogues to the ground. This would have been especially grievous to the Jews. For the synagogue was central to their worship as well as daily life. So ought it to be in our lives. The house of God ought to be the most important place we go, but sadly if it burned tomorrow many so-called “Christians” wouldn’t even notice. Next we see ***the despair of this plea***. In verse 9 they despair over what is gone. First the “signs” or flags no longer wave. This is most likely because the standard bearer had been captured, killed, or had just surrendered. The standard bearer was a source of hope for the people. They drew strength from the sight of their colors waving. It gave them a sense of patriotism that made them feel it was worth the fight. Oh, how discouraged they must have been when they sought to lay eyes upon the flag and could not find it, but instead saw those of the enemy. Let us wave on the banner of Christ as long as we can, which with his help, will be to the end. Second the prophets had stopped prophesying. The prophet’s job was to talk to the people on behalf of the Lord. They were his messengers. During this time there was no Word from God. He had sovereignly decided to be silent. God does this in our lives as well for various reasons. He knows best and sometimes it is difficult to accept these periods of silence, but we must continue on with our last orders until new ones arrive. The despair is further emphasized in verse 10 when the Psalmist asks “how long”. He anxiously awaits the end of this horror as he sees his brethren fall one by one. However, what concerns him the most is that the enemy continually blasphemes God. He wishes God would act so he would no longer have to hear them mock him. How precious the name of Christ is to his followers!

Second, we see ***the Deliverances of the Past Remembered*** in verses 12-17. The Psalmist first directs our attention to ***the instigator of deliverance***. “For God is my King of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth”, he declares. God is accredited with a throne and with the ability to save. This speaks of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in salvation. An individual cannot be saved without first submitting to the King of eternity. Salvation is truly and solely of the Lord. He has to instigate and complete the work of salvation in every sense, whether in the sense of redemption or in the sense of that from Satan and his snares. Next, in verses 13-15, the Psalmist names some ***instances of deliverance***. Here he lists some various times when God had proven his ability to deliver. Though these particular events may be unique to the Jews, every Christian throughout history can point to times in their own lives when God has wrought mighty deliverances for them. The Psalmist now begins to speak of ***the immensity of the deliverer***. In verses 16 and 17 he reminds us of the work of God in creation. As we gaze out into the world before us, we see the immense power of our God on display at every hand. This is a very encouraging path of thought in troublesome times. If our God can speak this universe into existence, is there anything too hard for him? Is any enemy too great? If God be for us, who can be against us? I submit unto us, no one! When we find ourselves under attack, let us think upon the times when God has delivered us, and as we gaze into his creation, rest assured that he is able to once again deliver us.

Third, we see the ***Detection of the Problem’s Root*** in verses 18-23. We find, in these verses, that the enemy’s real problem is exposed. Although they have leveled an attack upon the children of Israel, their true animosity is toward the God of Israel. In verse 18 they blaspheme, not the name of Israel, but the name of the Lord. In verse 20 we see a glimpse of the motive for this hatred of God. The contents of the “dark places of the earth” are said to be “full of the habitations of cruelty”. The heart of man is so wicked and depraved that the thought of answering to anything higher than itself is disgruntling at the least. As we journey through this life we may encounter those who would seem to hate us. They may mock us and scorn us. They may even someday try to eradicate us, but let us remember that the real object of their hatred is our God. They will not have this man to reign over them, and the fact that he reigns over us is disturbing to them. The bottom line is that the unregenerate man hates God with every fiber of his being. Thanks be to God that he is able to intrude into the dark places with his marvelous light. When the wicked rise up against us may we remember verse 22. It reads, “Arise, O God, plead thine own cause: remember how the foolish man reproacheth thee daily.” We must bear in mind that the battle is not ours, but the Lord’s. Let him fight for you. For he is well able!

We shall conclude with verses 19, 21, and 23, in which the Psalmist rehearses his cry for help. Notice the low state he emphasizes them to be in. They are poor in verse 19, and oppressed, poor and needy, in verse 21. This is the state in which the child of God is most likely to receive help from on high. Until we recognize our need it will not be met. In verse 19 he refers to the Israelites as the Lord’s turtledove. This he does to remind the Lord of his love for his people. The people he had redeemed and had chosen to place his name with. How precious God’s people are to him! In verse 23 he closes with a call for God to remember the voice of his enemies and their audacity in rising against him. This he does that the Lord may make haste in bringing deliverance.