Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

A week or so ago we saw images of the hospital in Ukraine that had been bombed. It had the Russian word for children painted in huge letters on the carparks at each end of the building, but that was not enough to keep it from being targeted. And I think I read that around 300 lives were lost. And earlier in the war, there were those horrific images of the family of four that were killed by an exploding artillery shell. Their suitcases were just standing there, and their dog was barking at them, seemingly asking them to get up so they could carry on fleeing the city, together. But they would not get up, ever. War is horrific, isn’t it.

And sadly, the death and destruction that war brings is nothing new, as we see in Psalm 79. It is the second of our Psalms of DISorientation. And surely, nothing is more disorienting than war. When there is peace and order, we might at least be able to maintain a good outlook and perspective, but when you are in the midst of chaos and starvation and torture and death, it must be very hard to keep a grip of reality and make sense of things. And that is exactly what we see in this Psalm. The Psalmist is deeply troubled by what has happened; he has political concerns, economic concerns, and social concerns, but as we shall see, his biggest concerns are theological or religious.

So, in contrast to last week’s Psalm, which was an *individual* lament, this Psalm is a *communal* lament; a lament on behalf of the nation of Israel. And in this Psalm, **God’s People Express Their Longing for Justice and Mercy**.

And again, our key aim today is to understand how this Psalm indirectly points us to the person and work of Jesus Christ. And we also want to see how this 2500 year old Psalm about the invasion of Jerusalem speaks to us today. And to get there, we will use the same headings as we used last week with Psalm 26 – The **Setting** of the Psalm, the **Structure** of the Psalm, and finally, the **Saviour** in the Psalm.

1. So, first of all, let’s consider the **setting** of the Psalm.
   1. The title of the Psalm reveals that this is a Psalm of **Asaph**. And Psalms 73-83 are all Psalms of Asaph. And that is a fact I had never noticed before. Now, the title **does** **not mean that Asaph himself wrote this Psalm**. In **1 Chronicles 6**, we read about various Levites whom David put in charge of worship music, so to speak. And one of these was Asaph. But he was assisted by his sons in this work, and there was eventually a whole group or school of Asaph’s descendants who continued his tradition of ‘worship music.’ And whatever music they composed were Psalms of Asaph.
      1. Now, in **1 Chronicles 25**, we read that these musicians “prophesied” with various musical instruments. And this means that, using their knowledge of Scriptures, they composed songs that taught and encouraged and warned the people about the Lord, about the history of Israel, about the law, and about God’s promises.
      2. And this is very much a secondary point, but it is worth remembering here that the people of Israel did not have a smart phone with the Bible on it or even a hard copy of the Bible at home. The printing press was still 1000’s of years away and many common people could not read or write. So, the Scriptures they knew were the Scriptures they memorized. And what is one of the best ways to memorize something? Put it in a song! So, these Psalms were written to help the people memorize Scripture and to learn Scripture truth.
         1. And you know what, congregation? The power of song to teach, encourage, and warn remains today. **Colossians 3:16** says, “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*.” If you want the word of Christ, by which is meant the Scriptures, to dwell in you and your children, richly, sing Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs!
         2. This is exactly what the early church did:
            1. Already in the second Century AD, a Roman governor wrote a letter to the Emperor, describing the Christian worship that he had observed. And he wrote, “They were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god.”
            2. And a Fourth Century church father wrote, “For who does not know . . . all the psalms and hymns written from the beginning by faithful brethren, which sing of Christ as the Word of God and address Him as God?”
            3. Indeed, many of the oldest and best hymns, which we still sing today, were written in response to theological error. And that is because the composers of the hymns understood the power of song to teach.
         3. So, **I hope you have a Psalter/hymnal at home**. You can use it as part of your devotions. Just read a psalm or hymn and meditate on the words. In the back of the hymnbook, you will find the Scripture references for each song. And you should sing the songs by yourself or with your flatmates or your family. And if you can’t read music or hold a tune, no problem! Just find a song on Youtube, press play, and sing along! And in this way, the word of Christ will dwell in you and your children, richly!

* 1. But getting back to the setting of this Psalm, the scene described in verses 1-4 best fits the **invasion and destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC** by the Babylonians. You can read about this invasion in 2 Kings 25 and 2 Chronicles 36, and it is also described in Psalm 74 and the Book of Lamentations. It took place after two years of being under siege, with all the hunger and thirst that that brought. And when the Babylonians finally broke through and entered Jerusalem, they showed no mercy, killing young and old, and tearing down buildings, including the temple.
     1. Now, you and I have not experienced the invasion of Jerusalem. And few if any of us know war, first-hand. But history is a powerful teacher. The Lord Jesus said that there will be wars and rumours of wars until He returns again. And we see that on the nightly news. We also saw in our 1 Peter sermon series that we can expect persecution. And illness or crime or financial hardship can bring loss and pain to our lives. And perhaps the ultimate invader is death. On Friday, we laid the body of our brother \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ in the ground. So, there is much teaching and warning and encouragement for us, today, as the people of Jesus Christ, in Psalm 79.

1. Well, that’s the **Setting** of the Psalm. Let’s look now at the **Structure** of the Psalm.
   1. Psalms of lament typically begin with the invocation and then move to the complaint and then the expression of confidence. But Psalm 79 swaps the invocation and complaint around, with the complaint coming first. But notice the first two words of verse 1 – “*O God*.” For they are an invocation. So, even the complaint part of the Psalm, verses 1-4, begins with a cry to God. And notice also how **the psalmist involves God in his complaint**. He describes Israel as “*your inheritance*,” and he refers to “*your holy temple*,” and the victims of this invasion as “*your servants*” and “*your faithful*.” He is saying, Look, O God, at what they have done to your people and your land and your city and your temple. And in this way we see that while the Psalmist is describing a very real human tragedy, with all its awful political, economic, and social impacts, his chief concern is the **theological tragedy**.
      1. You see, back in **Genesis 12**, God revealed His plan to bless all the nations through the descendants of Abraham. And in Old Testament times, the descendants of Abraham was the nation of Israel. And so, in **Exodus 19:5-6**, God said to the people of Israel, “*Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*.” So, Israel should have been a shining light to the nations around them. As they obeyed God and He blessed them, the nations around should have been attracted to the God of Israel. But that is not all that God said to Israel, is it. He also said, If you disobey me; if you worship idols and commit injustice and immorality, I will curse you, and I will use the surrounding nations to punish you and bring you to repentance.
      2. So, as we read Psalm 79, it is clear that Israel has failed to obey God’s covenant law. So, rather than attract the nations to God, the nations have been used by the Lord to punish Israel.
   2. And that brings us to verses 5-12 and the **invocation**. And notice the first line: “*How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealousy burn like fire?*”
      1. Boys and girls, **being jealous is usually not a good thing**. If you see someone who has lots of friends and they are good at sports, you can be jealous of them. But jealousy can also be a good thing. I am sure you heard that at the recent Oscar award show, the host, Chris Rock, made a joke about a woman who was there, which was hurtful to her. And so, her husband, who was there also, was angry and offended. In other words, he was jealous of his wife’s honour. And that sort of jealousy is good and noble. Now, what he did about it was wrong. But that’s not our focus. Our focus is God’s jealousy about His place in the life of His people. He wanted them to worship and love and honour Him alone, but they were worshipping idols.
      2. And so, the Psalmist recognized that what had happened was a result of God’s anger and jealousy. And it was **deserved** because of Israel’s unfaithfulness. Israel had sinned and what had happened is what God had patiently and repeatedly warned Israel would happen if they did not repent. So, the Psalmist was not complaining about the judgment. What he was pleading for was two concurrent or side-by-side things:
         1. First, he was pleading for **justice**. He wanted the Lord to turn His anger toward the Babylonians for what they had done to the Lord’s people. And he asked this because the Babylonians were not a godly people. As the Psalmist says in verse 6: They “*do not call on your name*.” And so, in verses 5-7 and 12, the Psalmist calls on God to avenge Israel. In verse 6, he says, “*Pour out your anger on the nations.*” And in verse 10, we see that the Babylonians interpreted their victory as meaning that the God of Israel was weak or non-existent, so they said, “*Where is your God?*” In other words, they taunted or were making jokes about God. And so, he says in verse 12, “*Return sevenfold*” on them because of “*the taunts, with which they have taunted you, O Lord!*”
         2. But the second thing the Psalmist asked for was **mercy**. And we see this in verses 8-11. In verse 8, He begs the Lord not to remember their former iniquities. Again, he knew that the judgment was deserved. What he was asking for was that the Lord would give them what they did not deserve – mercy, compassion, and in verse 9, atonement.
      3. Now, we have been learning about how the **middle of a Psalm** **is often very important to understanding or making sense of the Psalm**. And while verse 9 is not the middle of the Psalm, it is the middle of the invocation: “*Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name’s sake*.” Where did the Psalmist look in his distress and turmoil? Where did the Psalmist point the people of the Lord in their distress and turmoil? To the God of salvation, deliverance, and atonement!
         1. Now, here is a test of my preaching and your memory, what book and chapter of the Bible does the word **Atonement** remind you of? Leviticus 16 is where we read about the Day of Atonement. On that day, two lambs were chosen. One died and its blood was sprinkled on the altar and on the people. And the High Priest would confess the sins of the people and ‘lay’ them on the head of the other lamb, and it would be taken out into the wilderness, symbolizing that the sins of the people were taken away. Now, what could that be a picture of, I wonder? Jesus Christ, right! The Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world, as John 1:29 says. The whole gospel message is that God sent His Son Jesus to deal with our sin and guilt – to make atonement – to make us AT ONE with God.
            1. If you look around you at war and crime, you see sin and its consequences. But if you look at your own life, you will see sin in you – jealousy, anger, frustration, lust, greed, laziness, selfishness… So, what you deserve is God’s judgment, now and in eternal hell. Your only hope is that God would choose not to remember your iniquity. And He does that for all those who believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins.
            2. And it is here in shadow form in Psalm 79. Have you put your trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins?

* 1. If you have, then you can enjoy the **confidence** that is declared in verse 13. The psalmist says, “*But we your people, the sheep of your pasture*, *will give thanks to you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise*.” Again, because the Lord had promised to hear His people when they cried out to Him in distress and repentance, the Psalmist knew that the Lord would avenge them and show mercy and restore them. And this can be true for you today, also. If you trust in Christ for your atonement, then you will enjoy eternal life in heaven!

1. And this brings us, thirdly and lastly, to the **Saviour in** Psalm 79.
   1. The Psalmist looked forward to the time when God would send His Promised Messiah. And because we have the rest of the Bible, we know that He came to earth about 600 years after this Psalm was written. And by then, the Kingdom of Babylon was no more, the people of Israel had been restored to their land, and Jerusalem and the temple had been rebuilt. So, the Lord had avenged Israel and shown mercy. Sadly though, we are told in John 1 that Jesus came to His own people, but His own people did not receive Him. Instead, they rejected and despised Him, and, with the help of the Romans, they eventually crucified Him.
      1. And if the people of Israel deserved the invasion described in Psalm 79, what did rejecting God’s Messiah make them deserve? Well, we know the answer to that question. In **Mark 13**, we read of a time when Jesus came out of the Temple and “*one of His disciples said to Him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down*.” And with these words, Jesus prophesied what came to pass in AD 70 – the invasion and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Roman army. Israel had not learned the lesson of 587 BC. And now an even worse Judgment would come.
   2. But I wonder if you remember another episode in Jesus’ life. For in **John 2** we read of a time when He cleared the temple of money-changers. And after He did this, some “*Jews said to Him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But He was speaking about the temple of His body. When therefore He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken*.”
      1. So, think about **Christ on the cross** in the light of Psalm 79. Think about Him as the true “temple.” Think about Him as the true “inheritance.” Think about Him as the true “servant” of God. Think about Him as the one who truly was “faithful.” Think about His body hanging on the cross for all to see. Think about His blood having been poured out “like water.” Think about the people and the Jewish leaders taunting and mocking Him: “*You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross … He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him. He trusts in God; let God deliver Him now, if He desires Him. For He said, 'I am the Son of God.'"* The very thing that the Psalmist lamented in verse 10 was what the Jews themselves were doing to Jesus as He hung on the cross!
   3. And what else is the cross but the **perfect demonstration of judgment and mercy**! Jesus receives what He does not deserve – All of the Father’s wrath and condemnation, so that those who believe in Him can receive what they do not deserve – the Father’s mercy!
      1. And there were at least two there that day who received mercy. One was the Roman centurion who said, “*Truly this man was the Son of God*!” And the other was the thief who said, “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*.”
      2. And so, I ask you: Have you received mercy? Have you put your faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life? And I ask you this because today there is still time to repent and believe and receive the mercy of God. But when Jesus comes again, it will be too late. There will be no more mercy, only judgment.
      3. And we read about this in **Revelation 19**, earlier. It says of Jesus that “*He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty”* He will come and make war against beast and the false prophet and the kings and armies of earth, by which is meant the devil and all who refused to believe in Jesus. And using the language of verse2 of Psalm 79, the result of this war is that birds gorge themselves on the bodies of Jesus enemies. And this is just another way that the Bible describes the miseries of eternal hell.

Congregation, Psalm 79 points us to the cross of Christ. It points us to the mercy of God, which we receive by faith in Christ. But it also points us to the coming and terrible Day of Judgment. May we all be found in Christ on that day. Amen.