

May 20

Scriptures: Read Psalms 79 & 80

Key Verse: “Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; cause Your face to shine, and we shall be saved!” (Psalm 80:19)

Overview

Psalm 79 is closely related to Psalm 74. Both were composed by Asaph and deal with the terrible destruction of Jerusalem, which had been prophesied (79:1-2; Jer. 9:11; Micah 3:12) and later fulfilled by the Babylonians (2 Chronicles 36:16-20). Psalm 74 is mainly a lamentation for the destruction of the city, but Psalm 79 concentrates more on the destruction and persecution of the people.

The main purpose of the psalm is to plead for God’s divine justice, in order to bring vengeance upon their enemy (79:6,12). They asked that He be their blood avenger since the enemy had killed many of God’s saints and shed innocent blood (79:2-3; 10b; cf. Deut. 19:11-13). They based their request upon the compassion and mercy of God, who would hear the groaning of the survivors and preserve those whom the enemy had appointed to die (79:11). Their first order of business, however, was to ask God to forgive them of their iniquity, for they recognized that the calamity was because of their sin and the wrath of God upon them (79:5, 8). They reasoned that those who did not know God and had never called upon Him should receive even a greater portion of God’s wrath (79:6).

Another reason the people of Judah asked for God to destroy the enemy was that by allowing these idolatrous people to remain the victors, it brought shame and reproach upon the people who served God. The fact of greater importance, however, was that it brought reproach upon God, and they were concerned that God’s name be glorified. They did not want to see the neighbouring heathen nations question God’s existence and mock Him because of the destruction of His people (cf. Ezekiel 25; Obadiah 12). They prayed: “For the glory of Your name”, “help”, “deliver”, “save”, “and provide atonement for our sins” (79:9). When they would receive this and see God’s retribution upon their enemies, then the sheep of God’s pasture said they would give Him praise and thanks forever.

The Levite Asaph had a burden in his heart for the salvation of the Northern tribes, particularly the Joseph tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. In Psalm 80, he pleads that God would be their Shepherd. The occasion of the psalm, however, appears to be after the division of the Kingdom, therefore the author may have been a descendant of the Asaph, unless he wrote it himself prophetically. The distressful situation portrayed here seems to be when the Northern Kingdom was defeated by the Assyrians and carried away captive (2 Kings 18:9-12).

Asaph petitions God to once again show His favour (“cause Your face to shine”) so that His lost sheep might be saved. The psalmist’s love for these desperate tribes causes him to identify himself with them and give voice to their prayers of repentance: “restore us, O God” (80:3; cf. Jeremiah 31:18). Interestingly, each time this same refrain is repeated, the name they use to call upon God reveals that they are drawing closer to Him. In the second refrain, they call Him “O

God of hosts” (80:7), recognizing Him as a mighty God who is victorious in bringing deliverance. In the third refrain, the personal name of their covenant God is used, “Yahweh”, usually translated as “Lord” (80:19).

As in Psalm 79:5, the defeated Israelites ask God: “How long will You be angry? (literally “smoking”; 80:4). They wonder when all their prayers will finally stop God’s wrath from fuming against them. They are like a vineyard that has been burned with fire at the mere rebuke of God, because His countenance had ceased to shine upon them (80:16; compare 44:3). If the vine does not receive the sunshine upon it, it will perish. The reason God did this was because His high quality vine had degenerated (cf. Jeremiah 2:21).

The metaphor of the vine has often been used for Israel (cf. Isaiah 5:1-7; Hosea 10:1; Luke 20:9ff), and Jacob used it for the Joseph tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 49:22). Asaph shows how God had nurtured His people as a caring vinedresser, who transplanted them from Egypt to Canaan and caused them to take root in the Promised Land and cover the large area from the Mediterranean Sea to the Euphrates River (80:11). Now, however, the walls around them have fallen and foreign beasts have entered, plundered, uprooted, and destroyed the vine (80:12-13). Asaph calls upon God to once again visit His vine and revive it, making special mention of the branch (Ephraim) that He had once made very strong (80:15).

What was the answer for this desperate and degenerate vine? Jesus came as the true vine for all the degenerate people of the world. He was what Asaph called “the man of Your right hand” (cf. Heb. 1:3; 10:12; Acts 7:56) and the “son of man” (Matt. 18:11), whom God would make strong for Himself (80:17). The branches of the vine are now all those who believe in Jesus, and if they abide in Him they will have life and be able to bear fruit (see John 15:1-11). He is the Light of God, and because He shines within us, “we shall be saved!” (80:19).

Prayer

Thank You, Father, for the restoration You have made available through Christ for all degenerate mankind. We pray that our new life in Jesus, the vine, will bear fruit as we reach out to others with Your love.