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The Psalms of Lament

PART 5: Psalm 74, 82, 102

He's Never Failed Me Yet

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- **Shuffle the Deck**
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- **What Are You Holding?**
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Part 6 – Psalm 74, 82, 102

Shuffle the Deck

1. Close your eyes for 5 minutes and just LISTEN. Open your eyes and list all that you heard.
2. *“Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky.”*

List everything that is valuable or precious to you and why you value it.

Deal the Cards

I sat frozen in my home office staring at the television, my hand covering my mouth. Only moments earlier my husband had called to say planes had slammed into the two World Trade Center towers. One might have been an accident. But not two. I turned on the tube and watched in horror as one of the towers collapsed before my eyes like a mess-kit cup.

A few months after 9-11, I spoke with a friend from India who lives in the U.N. complex. I asked him what it was like to live in New York City after such devastation.

He looked out the window. “Everyone asks that, and I appreciate their concern,” he said. “But there are other horrors in the world—greater horrors.”

“Like [the earthquake in your country this year](#) that killed about five thousand people?” I asked.

He turned to look me in the eye. “Now you are speaking my language.”

Yes, there are other horrors in the world—greater horrors:

- A missionary in Bosnia tells of children going years without any public schooling because there’s no school to attend. The entire country has been in too much turmoil to hold school. People are trying simply to survive.
- UNAIDS reports that in the year 2003 alone, there were 2,300,000 AIDS-related deaths in Africa.
- Of the world’s six billion people, 2.8 billion live on less than \$2 per day, and 1.2 billion try to survive on less than \$1 a day. In the poorest countries, one in five children don’t live to see their fifth birthday.

At some point every thinking believer in such a crisis asks, “Where is God at such a time?”

The psalmist wondered that very question. When he penned Psalm 74, he had just witnessed the devastation of his great city. *God’s* city! Rewind back about twenty-six hundred years to 586 B.C. The Babylonians have invaded Jerusalem, carried off its citizens, and left the temple of Yahweh in ruins.



In the midst of the chaos, the psalmist pours out his heart to the Lord. He describes the scene around him, remembers what God has done in the past, begs for mercy, and calls for judgment on those who would do such a thing!

1. Read his words...

Psalm 74:

Why, O God, have you permanently rejected us? Why does your anger burn against the sheep of your pasture?

Remember your people whom you acquired in ancient times, whom you rescued so they could be your very own nation, as well as Mount Zion, where you dwell. Hurry and look at the permanent ruins, and all the damage the enemy has done to the temple!

Your enemies roar in the middle of your sanctuary; they set up their battle flags. They invade like lumberjacks swinging their axes in a thick forest. And now they are tearing down all its engravings with axes and crowbars. They set your sanctuary on fire; they desecrate your dwelling place by knocking it to the ground. They say to themselves, "We will oppress all of them." They burn down all the places where people worship God in the land.

We do not see any signs of God's presence; there are no longer any prophets and we have no one to tell us how long this will last. How long, O God, will the adversary hurl insults? Will the enemy blaspheme your name forever? Why do you remain inactive? Intervene and destroy him!

But God has been my king from ancient times, performing acts of deliverance on the earth. You destroyed the sea by your strength; you shattered the heads of the sea monster in the water. You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you fed him to the people who live along the coast. You broke open the spring and the stream; you dried up perpetually flowing rivers. You established the cycle of day and night; you put the moon and sun in place. You set up all the boundaries of the earth; you created the cycle of summer and winter.

Remember how the enemy hurls insults, O Lord, and how a foolish nation blasphemes your name! Do not hand the life of your dove over to a wild animal! Do not continue to disregard the lives of your oppressed people! Remember your covenant promises, for the dark regions of the earth are full of places where violence rules. Do not let the afflicted be turned back in shame! Let the oppressed and poor praise your name! Rise up, O God! Defend your honor! Remember how fools insult you all day long! Do not disregard what your enemies say, or the unceasing shouts of those who defy you ([NET Bible](#)).

2. What stands out to you in this prayer of lament? Why?



3. Notice a few details: The psalmist cries out, *“Why, O God, have you permanently rejected us? Why does your anger burn against the sheep of your pasture?”*
 - A) Do you think the psalmist truly believes there’s no hope?

 - B) If so, why would he say such a thing to God?

 - C) How do his prayers answer those who say it is wrong to ask God “why”?

4. The author goes on to say, *“Remember your people whom you acquired in ancient times, whom you rescued so they could be your very own nation, as well as Mount Zion, where you dwell. Hurry and look at the permanent ruins and all the damage the enemy has done to the temple!”*
 - A) What does he want God to do?

 - B) What is God’s relationship to His people according to this section?

 - C) Why has God rescued His people in the past?

5. The psalmist lists the atrocities that the enemy has committed:

“Your enemies roar in the middle of your sanctuary; they set up their battle flags. They invade like lumberjacks swinging their axes in a thick forest. And now they are tearing down all its engravings with axes and crowbars. They set your sanctuary on fire; they desecrate your dwelling place by knocking it to the ground. They say to themselves, “We will oppress all of them.” They burn down all the places where people worship God in the land. We do not see any signs of God's presence; there are no longer any prophets and we have no one to tell us how long this will last.”

 - A) Make a list of what the Babylonians have done. Note that the psalmist seems most incensed over what the enemy has done to the dwelling place of God.



B) How would you feel if you had watched an army desecrate a place so holy that no human entered more often than once a year?

C) Why is the psalmist bothered by God's response (or lack thereof)?

6. The psalmist prays, "*How long, O God, will the adversary hurl insults? Will the enemy blaspheme your name forever? Why do you remain inactive? Intervene and destroy him!*"

A) Note the frustration with God's seeming inactivity. Remember how Mary of Bethany told the Lord, "*If you had been here, my brother would not have died!*"? List times when unanswered prayer or God's apparent absence, slowness, or reluctance to act has troubled you.

B) What questions does the author ask here?

7. Read the following and note how the psalmist consoles himself:

"But God has been my king from ancient times, performing acts of deliverance on the earth. You destroyed the sea by your strength; you shattered the heads of the sea monster in the water. You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you fed him to the people who live along the coast. You broke open the spring and the stream; you dried up perpetually flowing rivers. You established the cycle of day and night; you put the moon and sun in place. You set up all the boundaries of the earth; you created the cycle of summer and winter."

A) List what we learn about God from the psalmist.



B) Why do you think he mulls over God's past actions?

C) What is on your list of God's past great actions that remind you He is in control?

Leviathan. This refers to a powerful sea-serpent dragon from West Semitic mythology. The sea was associated with chaos—scary and fraught with the unknown. Here the author may be talking about God creating the world by bringing order out of the chaotic sea; or perhaps he is referring to the exodus, when He drowned the Egyptians in the sea waters. Either way, Yahweh is much stronger than the strongest, scariest force.

8. The author writes this:

“Remember how the enemy hurls insults, O Lord, and how a foolish nation blasphemes your name! Do not hand the life of your dove over to a wild animal! Do not continue to disregard the lives of your oppressed people! Remember your covenant promises, for the dark regions of the earth are full of places where violence rules. Do not let the afflicted be turned back in shame! Let the oppressed and poor praise your name! Rise up, O God! Defend your honor! Remember how fools insult you all day long! Do not disregard what your enemies say, or the unceasing shouts of those who defy you.”

A) List the number of times the psalmist asks/demands something of God in this section.



B) What comparisons and contrasts do you find here?

C) Write your own prayer, begging God to intervene. If things are going well in your life right now, pray on behalf of others. Pray for the missionary left widowed when Muslims who opposed their family's ministry burned her husband and two sons to death in their Jeep. For AIDS orphans and widows.

10. Read [Psalm 102](#) in your own Bible. Notice how the writer addresses God, his complaint, what he wants God to do, and what he knows about God.

11. Now read [Psalm 82](#) (below).

A psalm of Asaph

God stands in the assembly of El; in the midst of the gods he renders judgment. He says, "How long will you make unjust legal decisions and show favoritism to the wicked? (Selah)

Defend the cause of the poor and the fatherless! Vindicate the oppressed and suffering! Rescue the poor and needy!



Deliver them from the power of the wicked! They neither know nor understand. They stumble around in the dark, while all the foundations of the earth crumble. I thought, “You are gods; all of you are sons of the Most High. Yet you will die like mortals; you will fall like all the other rulers.”

Rise up, O God, and execute judgment on the earth! For you own all the nations ([NET Bible](#)).

12. Asaph the Percussionist.

A) Three men in the Old Testament have the name “Asaph.” The *psalmist* Asaph has three works of poetry attributed to him: [Psalm 50](#), [Psalm 73](#), and [Psalm 83](#). One of King David’s three chief musicians, Asaph first appears when the ark is carried to Jerusalem. According to [1 Chronicles 15:19](#), what did Asaph do?

B) What do we learn about Asaph from [1 Chronicles 16:4-37](#)?

C) What else do we learn about Asaph from [1 Chronicles 25:1-9](#)? The “sons of Asaph” are mentioned in later times, as well. They went on to form a guild and play a prominent part at each revival of the national religion.

What Are You Holding?

13. Imagine you are one of the king’s top musicians, and you have been asked to perform at the Annual Attorneys’ Association Meeting. We don’t know the original setting in which this psalm was performed, but it would certainly fit well as a text for addressing those who administer justice. Consider, then, that each believer is called to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God” ([Micah 6:8](#)). Re-read the psalm with this in mind.

God stands in the assembly of El; in the midst of the gods he renders judgment. He says, “How long will you make unjust legal decisions and show favoritism to the wicked? (Selah)

Defend the cause of the poor and the fatherless! Vindicate the oppressed and suffering! Rescue the poor and needy!

Deliver them from the power of the wicked! They neither know nor understand. They stumble around in the dark, while all the foundations of the earth crumble. I thought, “You are gods; all



of you are sons of the Most High. Yet you will die like mortals; you will fall like all the other rulers.”

Rise up, O God, and execute judgment on the earth! For you own all the nations.

14. List the “justice causes” that are near to God’s heart according to this psalm:

15. What are some ways you can, with the help of the Lord, defend the poor? The fatherless? The suffering? Here are some suggestions to get you started:

- Volunteer at a pregnancy resource center (www.pregnancycenters.org/)
- Donate diapers and maternity clothes
- Give away unused clothing rather than holding a garage sale; or sell items and donate the proceeds
- Serve food at a gospel mission; donate pillow cases, which are always needed
- Support organizations such as Samaritan’s Purse (www.samaritanspurse.org/home.asp) or World Vision (www.worldvision.org/) or Food for the Poor (www.foodforthe poor.org) , which are helping the more than 19 million widows and orphans who have been victimized by AIDS in Africa the past year alone.
- Sponsor a child with monthly support through an organization such as Compassion International (<http://www.compassion.com/Default>).
- Pray for justice and mercy to reign through the power of the Holy Spirit
- Resolve never to overlook injustices committed by your favorite political party; speak out
- Write letters to the editor
- Go to the International Justice Mission (www.ijm.org) and become familiar with their work; pray for them; give generously to just causes.
- Share the gospel. The best way to bring justice to the world is by spreading the good news that changes lives.

16. Are you rich? Most in North America would say “no.” We don’t bring in close to what Ross Perot, or Steve Forbes, or Bill Gates or Julia Roberts or Oprah make. But the Bible defines wealth as having a change of clothing and food for our next meal without having first to earn the funds to pay for it. If you sold everything you owned, how long would the proceeds feed you? How many garments in your closet? Are you rich?

17. Write a prayer of lament on behalf of others’ suffering.



Group Option

Choose one of the justice causes from [question 15](#) and join together to give practical/ financial assistance. Spend time praying for the cause as a group.

Play Your Hand

Decorate a playing card or a playing-card-sized piece of paper or cardboard that expresses one of the following:

- An injustice that incenses or astonishes you.
- A prayer of intervention for your own situation or someone else's.
- *With one blow you split the sea in two, you made mincemeat of the dragon tannin. You lopped off the heads of Leviathan, then served them up in a stew for the animals. [Psalm 74: 13-14](#)*

Imagine how our All-Powerful God will avenge His name.

- Remember a time when God has “performed an act of deliverance” in your life.

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