

## The Exiled Nation (585-535 BCE)

### *Psalms of a People in Exile*

Readings: *Psalms 44, 74, 79, 80, 85, 89*

#### **Reflections:**

- There are ten Psalms that fit well within the context of the Exile. Their themes include reflecting on the sin that has led to the exile, the repentance and prayer for deliverance. As slaves and oppressed people, these psalms capture the aloneness and suffering of the people.
- Psalm 44 is a song that tells the story of past success through God's power and their present suffering. The song declares a confident trust in God. Yet, it also maintains that the people have not sinned. "All this has happened to us, though we had not forgotten you or been false to your covenant. Our hearts had not turned back; our feet had not strayed from your path. But you crushed us...and covered us over with deep darkness." This sounds just like Job. The only difference is that all of the prophets and records show that the people had actually completely abandoned God over and over and over again. How could this song actually have made such a statement? Maybe this reveals that people have a hard time acknowledging their own sin. Maybe this song was written by people unaware of the nation's failure. This seems very unlikely. In light of the constant failure and sin of the nation, it seems best to see this as a song of confidence in God that doesn't yet accept their role in the sin they were consistently committing. This raises the question: "Can the writers of the Bible be this human in their writing? Shouldn't God's inspiration correct them?" It seems that those that wrote the Scriptures were free to be human and that God still worked through them.
- God's all-knowing nature is affirmed as the writer of Psalm 44 states, "...he knows the secrets of the heart..." The wonderful thing is that God knows us and still loves us completely.
- Paul, as someone suffering for Christ, will identify with Psalm 44 in Romans 8:36, "Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." This reminds us that at times Israel suffered for their rebellion against God and the early church suffered for their obedience to God. As we learn in Job, we can't equate righteousness with prosperity or suffering with sin.

- Psalm 74 gives us a window into the destruction of the temple and judgment of God. “They burned your sanctuary to the ground....They burned every place where God was worshipped in the land. We are given no miraculous signs; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be.” For those that suffer and feel isolated from God, it is easy to identify with these words. Everything has gone wrong, God is nowhere to be found, and there is no sense of how long this will carry on. Trusting God in this place is the hardest of all. Yet in this psalm it calls the listener to faith by declaring to God his power to save, “But you, O God, are my king from old; you bring salvation on the earth....Rise up, O God, and defend your cause....” Again we see the importance in times of difficulty to not focus on what is happening around us but rather, focusing on God and who he is.
- Psalm 79 again describes the terrible persecution and suffering of Israel. Yet, in this psalm there is a clear ownership for their own sin: “Do not hold against us the sins of our fathers...deliver us and forgive our sins.” In their pain they turn to God, “may your mercy come quickly to meet us, for we are in desperate need.” And if God delivers them, what do they promise? “Then we your people, the sheep of our pasture, will praise you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise.” Unfortunately in the ongoing story of “what doesn’t work,” we see that whenever God restored the nation they would quickly return to sin. In their pain they repent and cry out for mercy, but as soon as the suffering passes, they are enticed again into sin. We see another example of how important it is for God to change the human heart from the inside out.
- Psalm 80 begins with a wonderful image of God as their shepherd, who leads the tribe of Joseph like a flock. Joseph was declared to be like a fruitful vine (see Genesis 49:22f). As these tribes cry out to God, they pray for God to restore this vine that has been cut down and burned. As they pray, they again declare that if God saves them they will call on his name. This image of the vine is one that is used at times to describe the entire nation of Israel and then is used by Jesus to describe the spiritual life and community that he was bringing in his new kingdom. Consider these words of Jesus: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." (John 15:1-8) Here again we see the deeply relational nature of Christ living in us through the Spirit and how this transformation from the inside out enables us to produce the life and lifestyle God desires.

- Psalm 85 looks back to God's past grace and forgiveness, cries out to God again for his mercy and unfailing love, and declares the true character of God. "I will listen to what God the Lord will say." Again we see how when we are struggling we are so desperate to hear God speak to us and yet when all is well we so easily forget he exists. The passage on the character of God is beautiful: "Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth (what we offer up to God) and righteousness looks down from heaven (what God offers to us). The Lord will indeed give what is good... Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps." A beautiful picture of the intimate love shared between God and his people.
- Psalm 89 is a song that radiates faith and confidence in God. "Righteousness (people in right relationship with God) and justice (people in right relationship with other people) are the foundation of your throne. (These two principles are the basic building blocks of God's kingdom). Love and faithfulness go before you." (These two character qualities capture how God operates). In the middle of this psalm, (89:19ff) the writer begins to focus on the prophecy and promises associated with the Davidic kingdom and how now it is completely destroyed. In the story of "what doesn't work" we see here clearly outlined how the kingdom of Israel completely collapsed without delivering what the people had hoped. Yet we also see in this psalm the echoes of what would be fulfilled through Jesus, "My faithful love will be with him...He will call out to me, 'You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior.'...I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail. I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure." Although this psalm focuses on the Davidic throne we can see how elements of these promises will be fulfilled in the coming of Jesus and his spiritual kingdom. As the psalm begins with confidence, it ends with the deep suffering and pleas of the people. "How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?" In our pain, the clock seems to slow right down and as we journey through the story of Israel, we see how life lived according to "what doesn't work" leaves us in despair. Praise God for the message of Jesus and his power to change us from the inside out and to draw us into intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father.