

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Psalm 74 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the psalm. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

PSALM 74:1-23 ESV

1 A Maskil of Asaph. O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? 2 Remember your congregation, which you have purchased of old, which you have redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage! Remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt. 3 Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins; the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary! 4 Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place; they set up their own signs for signs. 5 They were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees. 6 And all its carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammers. 7 They set your sanctuary on fire; they profaned the dwelling place of your name, bringing it down to the ground. 8 They said to themselves, "We will utterly subdue them"; they burned all the meeting places of God in the land. 9 We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long. 10 How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? 11 Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them! 12 Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. 13 You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. 14 You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. 15 You split open springs and brooks; you dried up ever-flowing streams. 16 Yours is the day, yours also the night; you have established the heavenly lights and the sun. 17 You have fixed all the boundaries of the earth; you have made summer and winter. 18 Remember this, O LORD, how the enemy scoffs, and a foolish people reviles your name. 19 Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild beasts; do not forget the life of your poor forever. 20 Have regard for the covenant, for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence. 21 Let not the downtrodden turn back in shame; let the poor and needy praise your name. 22 Arise, O God, defend your cause; remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day! 23 Do not forget the clamor of your foes, the uproar of those who rise against you, which goes up continually!

STRUCTURE

- I. Lament that God's anger burns against His own people rather than His enemies (1-9)
 - a. Questioning God's wrath against Israel (1)
 - b. Prayer for God to favor Israel as His worshiping community (2-3)
 - c. Complaint about God's enemies destroying Israel's house of worship (4-8)
 - d. Complaint about God's lingering absence (9)
- II. Lament about God's anger becomes faith for reversal—through remembrance (10-23)
 - a. Questioning God's wrath against Israel (10-11)
 - b. Remembrance of God's work in creation and redemption (12-17)
 - c. Prayer for God to remember the wicked in judgment and His people for salvation (18-23)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

Compilers of Israel's Psalter selected the sequence of the songs carefully. In Psalm 73, God revealed Himself and comforted Asaph—"in the sanctuary of God" (Ps. 73:17). In Psalm 74, Israel's enemy "has destroyed everything in the sanctuary" (74:3). Where can Asaph find hope and peace when God's house has been invaded and desecrated? Israel viewed the temple as God's house and the intersection between heaven and earth. They imagined the end of the temple as coinciding with the end of the world. This tragedy was not just national, like Pearl Harbor or 9/11. To Israel, it felt cosmic. The demon-gods of pagan worshipers had somehow triumphed over Yahweh.

The superscription of Psalm 74 claims Asaph for its authorship; however, nothing in Asaph's life matches the lyrics of this song, which undoubtedly refer to the Babylonian's razing of the temple about four centuries after Asaph. There are numerous ways to harmonize the disparity (see commentary below), but we shouldn't get lost in historical minutiae. The message of the song is clear: when all hope seems lost, "God my King is from old, working salvation in the midst of the earth" (v. 12). Enemies who swing axes "in the midst of your meeting places" (v. 4)

pose no threat to Yahweh's sovereignty, nor do the gods they worship. Israel's God is not one among many, contending for supremacy in a pagan pantheon. In Israel's history, God "broke the heads of the sea monsters" and "crushed the heads of Leviathan"—triumphing over these demonic pagan "gods" by delivering Israel through the waters of chaos and destruction in the exodus and into the Promised Land (vv. 12-15). Not only in Israel's history, but in world history, God triumphed over darkness, establishing the times and seasons (vv. 16-17). If God could conquer both natural and supernatural forces through the works of creation and redemption, He will no doubt conquer puny Babylon, even if it looks here like the bad guys won.

The turning point of the song comes in verse 12 and following, where the psalmist remembers God's sovereignty. In the first stanza (vv. 1-9), the psalmist mostly complains about God (vv. 1, 9) and the ravaging enemy (v. 4-8), raising his head for only a brief moment to pray (vv. 2-3) before sinking back into despair. The dual-questions of verses 10-11 parallel those in 1, signifying that the psalmist has not yet departed from despair. Only after the intentional remembrance of verses 12-17 can he keep his head above water for long enough to pray for a grand reversal. In the final section (vv. 18-23), the psalmist sustains his prayer to the end. He asks that God cease judging His people through His enemies and instead bless His people and judge His enemies. Psalm 74 models how we respond to the pain and disorientation of tragic loss.

We remember God's sovereignty and salvation.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 A Maskil of Asaph. O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? 2 Remember your congregation, which you have purchased of old, which you have redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage! Remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt. 3 Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins; the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary!

—"Maskil" is typically understood as a musical term related to wisdom or instruction. Worship songs should teach. Corporate worship turns orthodoxy into doxology, doctrine into delightful melodies of the heart.

—"Asaph":

- He served under King David, leading worship teams and serving as a priest. However, the setting of Psalm 74 resembles nothing in David's reign. The reference to a desecrated temple almost certainly refers to the Babylonian captivity, which occurred in 586 BC. David ruled over four hundred years prior, so Asaph was long gone by then.
- Some commentators suggest that "Asaph" refers not only to the man who served with David but to the choirs he founded. In that case, the psalm would have been written by successive worship leaders in the musical rotation he established.
- Perhaps Asaph penned a similar song that was later adapted by Babylonian exiles. Or maybe those exiles used Asaph as a pseudonym, as was common in those days.
- Regardless of how this came about, the song in its present form must have been written after the Babylonian captivity.

—"O God, why do you cast off forever"?

- The song opens with a volcano burst of pain and confusion.
- "O God" means that the psalmist has not abandoned God despite these extreme feelings. The question should not be read as a dismissive accusation but as an expression of desperation.
- The question is rhetorical. God does not answer questions in the psalms; He resolves them. We can't expect God to send us an email explaining the mysteries that confound us. Instead, we can expect God to meet us in our pain and one day redeem it.
- "cast off": one pictures a divine hand, flinging someone away. The psalmist feels dismissed by God.
- "forever": the Babylonian captivity would not last forever; it would last seventy years as Jeremiah prophesied. Jews sometimes used the word "forever" to mean something less than "eternity"—like a "really, really, long time." We do the same. Children waiting in line might say to a parent, "This is taking forever!" This is the sentiment of verse 1.

—"why does your anger smoke"?

- The back-to-back questions of verse 1 match the back-to-back questions of verses 10-11. These markers divide the song into two thematic halves (vv. 1-9, 10-23).

- The song's second half turns more confident as the psalmist remembers God's sovereignty over creation and redemption. Understanding these divisions helps us journey with the psalmist from pain and confusion to hope and peace.
- The imagery depicts God's anger as fiery hot—smoking. The psalmist doesn't experience it as cold, seething anger that leaks as passive-aggression. He perceives it as divine wrath that burns with the intentionality of a laser.
- The image of fire captures the severity and totality of God's anger. The question "why" reflects the psalmist's knowledge that God's anger burns with intentionality. It has a purpose—a "why"—behind it.
- God had already explained through Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk that the Babylonians would invade. The psalmist could have consulted these oracles if he only wanted info. What he really wanted, instead, was to vent his pain and confusion.

—"against the sheep of your pasture":

- God is a shepherd; we are His sheep. The psalmist employs this gentle image to complain of the contrast between the role of a shepherd—to care for the sheep—and God's actions.
- It is fair game to complain this way to God. At the same time, God does not exclusively reveal Himself as a shepherd. He is also a Father, and fathers discipline their kids. Israel is being chastened for rejecting God over many generations.

—"Remember your congregation":

- "Remember" does not just mean "call to mind"; it implies action. See Exodus 2:24-25: *"And God heard their groaning, and God **remembered** his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew."* I love the verbs: "God heard... God remembered... God saw... God knew." The fourfold sequence emphasizes not just observation but action. God heard, remembered, saw, knew—and therefore intervened to redeem His people. Many other examples could be cited. The plea for God to "remember" appeals for intervention.
- Israel is not just "the sheep of your pasture," whom God has obligated Himself by covenant to care for; Israel is also God's "congregation"—a community of worshipers.
- Furthermore, these are not just random sheep of a random pasture or random worshipers of strange gods. They are "your" sheep and "your" congregation. We all care more about what belongs to us. The psalmist is yanking on God's heart strings. By his example, the psalmist releases us to do the same. Pull on God's heart strings! Appeal to Him on the basis of who you are (His child) and what He has done to grant you that status (sent His Son).

—"purchased... redeemed":

- This refers to the exodus generation, which God "redeemed... from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Deut. 7:8; cf. 13:5; Micah 6:4).
- Because Jesus is our "Passover Lamb" (1 Cor. 5:7), our version of the same complaint might be, "Remember your congregation, which You purchased and redeemed by the blood of Your Son, Jesus!"
- All these complaints focus on communal pain. The psalmist is not suffering alone. The whole congregation has suffered the same collective trauma.

—"tribe of your heritage": often translated as "inheritance."

—"Remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt!"

- The first "remember" petitioned God on behalf of His people; the second "remember" petitioned God on behalf of their possession—Mount Zion.
- Mount Zion referred most directly to the temple mount where "you have dwelt." The Babylonians destroyed the temple.
- Sometimes, "Mount Zion" referred to more than the temple complex, including Jerusalem or even all of Israel. We use language similarly, for instance, when we say "The White House" to refer either to the literal address in Pennsylvania, the decision-makers who convene there, or even the whole nation (e.g., "The White House committed more funds to ____ cause").

—"Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins": the poet portrays God in human form to request His return to the temple, which now lies in a heap—the "enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary." God is

everywhere, but by portraying Him in this manner, the psalmist highlights His relational nature. Despite the pain, he has not given up on God.

4 Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place; they set up their own signs for signs. 5 They were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees. 6 And all its carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammers. 7 They set your sanctuary on fire; they profaned the dwelling place of your name, bringing it down to the ground. 8 They said to themselves, "We will utterly subdue them"; they burned all the meeting places of God in the land.

—The psalmist now elaborates on the horror of the temple's desecration by "your foes". We are "your sheep... your congregation... your heritage." They are "your foes."

—"roared": the enemies behave like wild beasts that roar proudly over helpless prey.

—"in the midst of your meeting place": these "foes" work destruction "in the midst" of the temple, but God "is working salvation in the midst of all the earth" (v. 12). This contrast between verses 4 and 12 highlights God's bright intervention against the dark backdrop of violence. See more on verse 12 comments.

—"they set up their own signs for signs": probably refers to the military standards erected by Babylon in the temple precincts. Contrasts later with God's "signs" in verse 9. See comments.

—They broke down the "carved wood" of its holy articles like reckless lumberjacks swinging "axes" and "hatchets." Kidner labels this "a picture of furious destructive energy."

—Next, these enemies burned it with "fire," which reminds us of the "smoke" of God's wrath in verse 1. God exhibited His wrath against Israel through the wrath of Israel's enemies. At first, this troubles us. How could God endorse what these Babylonians did to His own people and sanctuary? After reflection and study, however, such sovereignty becomes a comfort. If God is not sovereign over enemies, then we are chiefly subject to their will, not God's.

—Spurgeon: "There is no attribute more comforting to His children than that of God's sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe trials, they believe that sovereignty has ordained their afflictions, that sovereignty overrules them, and that sovereignty will sanctify them all. There is nothing for which the children ought to more earnestly contend to than the doctrine of their Master over all creation – the Kingship of God over all the works of His own hands – the Throne of God and His right to sit upon that throne...for it is God upon the Throne whom we trust."

—In Isaiah 10, God refers to Assyria as the "rod of my anger", which He employs to punish wicked nations, including Israel. However, when God has finished wielding His rod, Assyria, he will punish it also for cruelty and boasting. You cannot limit a sovereign God. He fulfills His purpose using saints, angels, rebels, and devils.

—"profaned the dwelling place of your name": they made the holy place common. God should take an interest, for His "name" once dwelt there.

—After boasting, "We will utterly subdue them," they turned "all the meeting places of God" into ash. Some say this referred to synagogues, but these did not yet exist. Sometimes Israel sacrificed in "high places," which God frowned upon. Perhaps it refers to those. Either way, the enemy burned them to the ground.

9 We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long. 10 How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? 11 Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them!

—"We do not see our signs... no longer any prophet":

- The Babylonians held their "signs" up high—military standards on long wooden poles, announcing their presence and power.
- God, in contrast, gave no "signs"—miracles testifying of His presence and power. The word "signs" (same in Hebrew) links the verses to suggest God didn't show up for battle. The enemy came with his signs, but God didn't bring His.
- The "signs" connect to the "prophet" because prophets like Moses and Elijah gained notoriety by the signs they performed.
- We are reminded of 1 Samuel 3:1, a season of judgment in Israel's history, where we read that "visions were rare in those days." One sign of God's judgment is the absence of "signs." This would include both miracles and revelations.

- Some Christians think, “God (pretty much) stopped doing signs and wonders because I don’t see any!” It is done to them according to their faith.
- If the psalmist had thought this way, he would have developed a theological argument for why God stopped doing signs and wonders. Instead, he complains about it (74:9), recognizing it as a sign of divine judgment (74:1).
- What if we see fewer miracles in the West because we have abandoned Christ to worship the god of secularism and self? What if “visions are rare” because the church in the West participates in the same nasty sins as the world—but with the added sin of hypocrisy—because we cover it up?
- A lack of signs and wonders is not an immutable truth to be accepted but a problem to be reflected on and prayed about. That’s how the psalmist viewed it.
- Miracles and prophets are gifts to God’s people.

—“How long... Why...”: the psalmist’s first concern is how long he’ll suffer; his second concern is that God make sense of it.

—“hold back your hand, your right hand...”: the right hand symbolizes God’s strength. The psalmist complains that God has withheld His strength and left Israel weak.

—“Take it from the fold in your garment and destroy them”: In other words, “God, get your hands out of your pockets!” The psalmist feels that God is being casual about catastrophe. He requests that God instead act to destroy the ones who caused this mess.

12 Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. 13 You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. 14 You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. 15 You split open springs and brooks; you dried up ever-flowing streams.

—“Yet”: the psalmist shifts, launching a new, brighter section. Every lament psalm shines somewhere, if only with faint glimmers.

—“God my King”: as so often occurs in the Psalter, the lyricist finds hope in God’s kingship, which we call His sovereignty. God rules over all things, including Israel’s judgment by wicked Babylon.

—“is from old”: in the coming verses, he will depict the exodus and creation. God is eternal, predating both. In contrast, suffering is seasonal for God’s people. No matter how long it lasts, God outlasts it.

—“working salvation in the midst of the earth”:

- “working”: present tense. God saved Israel from slavery; He still saves today. God is a saving God. That’s why we call Him Savior.
- Usually, “salvation” in the Psalms refers to an earthly deliverance from enemies. That is the sense here. God is working financial salvations, marital salvations, salvations from death, hurt, and loss. As New Covenant believers, I think we over-spiritualize salvation sometimes. Praise God, He takes us to heaven when we die! But the God of salvation saves “in the midst of the earth” from all kinds of trials. Let’s praise Him for that, too. Let’s also expect Him to save us from whatever in our lives needs saving!
- At the same time, with New Covenant eyes, we can read this verse about “salvation” in a more fulsome sense. The psalmists ranged from no idea about the afterlife to a hazy understanding. Jesus enlightened us about heaven, hell (and hades), and our eternal home—the renewed universe. With this in view, we can celebrate God’s “salvation” in a way that goes beyond what the psalmist envisioned.
- “earth” can be translated as “land”—as in, “the land of Israel.” But since the immediate context refers to Israel’s exodus, which began in Egypt, “earth” is more suitable.
- In verse 4, God’s enemies reaped devastation “in the midst of your meeting place”, but in verse 9, God works salvation “in the midst of the earth.” God’s enemies de-create, but the Creator redeems—that is, He re-creates.
- I’m reminded of Revelation 11:18: “the time has come... for destroying the destroyers of the earth.” Before God makes all things new, He must eliminate sinners—here, “destroyers.” In God’s new world, no one will tear it down. Sin de-creates, but God re-creates. Redemption is a form of creation. It is new creation. That’s why the themes link so closely in Psalm 74. Verses 12-15 focus

on God's redemption of Israel from slavery, establishing it as a new creation, a formalized nation in a new world flowing with milk and honey. Verses 16-17 then focus on the OG creation.

- Another contrast with verse 4: enemies are limited to destroying in the temple, but God's salvation extends to the whole earth.
- The quality and expansiveness of God's work are superior. His enemies de-create; God re-creates. His enemies work in a building; God works throughout the earth.
- The temple contained artwork of Eden and creation. In the beginning, the whole earth was God's temple, and Eden His holy of holies. The temple was like a "micro creation." When we think of it this way, it helps us see how Babylonian fires and axes tear down God's creation. It makes sense why the psalmist soon focuses on creation imagery.

—"divided the sea... sea... waters... split open springs and brooks... dried up ever-flowing streams":

- The focus is first on water, which represents the powers of chaos and destruction. It resembles the chaos and destruction of these enemies in the temple. God conquered the raging waters in Israel's exodus, so the puny Babylonians didn't stand a chance.
- The image of water reveals another way in which redemption is re-creation. God created the world out of a watery ball of chaos; God saved and established Israel through the Red Sea; God saves us (or seals His salvation) through baptismal water.
- God splitting "springs and brooks" and "ever-flowing streams" goes beyond Israel's exodus through the Red Sea. This miracle repeats for Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha. These "mini-exoduses" point toward the "greater exodus" in Christ. Luke refers to Christ's death on the Cross as a "departure" (Luke 9:31). This is the Greek word for "exodus." Jesus' death was an exodus. Like Moses parted the waters—swallowing up Israel's enemies—Jesus' death parts the waters for us, swallowing up Satan, sin, death, and hell. We follow the footsteps of our Greater Moses through the waters of baptism.
- In Revelation 15, martyred saints sing "the song of Moses" and "the song of the Lamb" as they park beside a flaming "sea of glass"—more water—calmly under God's dominion. Having conquered the "Beast of the Sea"—antichristian empire—these martyrs celebrate their exodus from death to life. In Revelation 16, that exodus continues, as God pours out Egyptian plagues over the whole earth, rescuing His people for the new creation, where, incidentally, "the sea was no more" (Rev. 21:1). No more water, no more tears. No more destroyers. Only new creation.
- Putting these "exoduses" together: Jesus' death is an exodus; we participate in that exodus through baptism; God continues that exodus through physical death and entry into paradise; God completes that exodus in the redeemed universe at Christ's return.

—"broke the heads of the sea monsters.... Crushed the heads of the Leviathan":

- Heiser (his book, *Demons*): "Chaos imagery in ancient literature explains humanity's fundamental struggles by relating them to comparable struggles in the divine realm. Biblical writers framed this situation in light of their belief in God's sovereign control and the involvement of evil spirits in the threats they faced. The metaphor of violent, untamed monsters was common in both biblical and ancient Near Eastern literature. These chaos beasts hailed from the sea (Leviathan, Rahab) and land (Behemoth). These monsters 'represented forces of chaos held in check by the power of the creator deity' (quoting Douglas Mangum and Matthew James Hamilton). When Leviathan is mentioned in the Old Testament, the text is generally asserting Yahweh's power over the sea monster (see Job 3:8; 41:1; Pss. 74:14; 104:26; Isa. 27:1). The conflict between Yahweh and these creatures is fundamentally different than the similar conflicts in Canaanite and Mesopotamian mythology."
- Again quoting Mangum and Hamilton, Heiser's book continues: "Unlike the mythological stories of struggle between Ba'al and Yam or Marduk and Tiamat, Yahweh and Leviathan are not both divine creatures and equals. Yahweh is the sole divine creator, and Leviathan is mere creation... The physical description of Leviathan in Job 41 clearly depicts a creature that cannot be tamed or subdued by human power. In this case, the writer of Job clearly appropriated imagery to make the rhetorical point that only Yahweh is powerful enough to keep the forces of chaos in check."

- Heiser: "These monsters were not considered real animals one could encounter with unfathomably large dimensions and powers. The metaphor communicated the fearful (and often fatal) struggle with earthly and heavenly rebellion and chaos."
- In layman's terms, biblical authors incorporated the false gods into their poetic imagery to "talk smack"—to put them down. The false gods of the Canaanites (like Yam and Baal) and of Babylon (like Marduk and Tiamat) were no match for Israel's one true Creator God.
- Let us be clear, however, that Israel wasn't talking smack about "imaginary beings." The false gods of the nations were demons (Deut. 32:17; 1 Cor. 10:20). The psalmist is thus showing how Yahweh triumphs over the demon "gods" of the nations. The death and chaos they wreak is being undone as the "King... from of old" works "salvation in the midst of the earth."
- By relating his present situation to Yahweh's ancient triumph over demonic spirits of chaos, the psalmist shows how his battle is spiritual. It is not just a battle between Israel and Babylon but between Yahweh and Marduk. Yahweh has surrendered the apparent upper hand by letting Babylon desecrate His temple. But He is "king." He rules. He sovereignly permitted this. Marduk didn't "win" against Yahweh. Yahweh used Marduk as a tool to discipline rebel Israel.
- Some charismatic Christians refer to a "leviathan spirit" that can demonize people and make them narcissistic. There is evidence of a leviathan spirit in Scripture, but it appears to be more of a principality—a spirit representing an entire region or nation—than a low-level demon (you read that correctly; demons have a hierarchy, as do angels. See Rev. 12:7). In Isaiah 27:1, the "leviathan" is Satan. The prophet predicts the devil's demise in the last days by the "sword" of Christ. Aka, the Cross.
- Ross: "according to ancient myths, creation involved a battle for kingship in which the gods of chaos were defeated by the powerful creating god. The pagan literature is filled with gods in conflict of varying kinds."
- Ross: "In the Canaanite myths Leviathan was a seven-headed monster, the force of chaos and death. In the pagan cult, the defeat of chaos and death was part of the annual cycle of re-creation of the year and the seasons. Here the psalmist employs the language of God's shattering the heads of such forces to declare that he is sovereign over all his creation—even things the pagans deified and worshiped. In applying the idea to the Exodus, the psalmist may have used the word 'heads' with the leaders of the Egyptian army in mind, as well as the spiritual forces of Egypt behind them. They were no match for the LORD; he is the sovereign creator of them all."
- Kidner: "The parting of the Red Sea and the crushing blow to Egypt, that dragon of the deep (cf. Ezek. 32:2ff), invite comparison with the Canaanite boast of Baal's victories over the personified Sea and River, over the Dragon... and over the seven-headed serpent Lotan (the equivalent word to Leviathan). The point here is that what Baal had claimed in the realm of myth, God had done in the realm of history—and done for His people, working salvation."
- The Canaanites claimed Leviathan played a role in earth's seasonality. The psalmist says, "No, Yahweh controls the seasons. He also broke the heads of your demon gods when He rescued His chosen people from Egypt."
- Ross: "In verse 15 the psalmist refers to God's sovereignty over springs and streams of water. In the pagan world rivers and seas were deified (as the gods of Nahar and Yam; see Ps. 24:1). Not only did God control these aspects of nature at creation—and any spiritual forces associated with them in pagan myth, but he also controlled them in Israel's history. And so the first half of the verse finds such an application in the wilderness when God brought water from the rock (Exod. 17:6; Num. 20:8)."
- In other words, the psalmist's smack talk extends from Leviathan to Nahar and Yam.
- Biblical authors do this commonly. Likewise, Augustine's *City of God* transformed Rome by dismantling pagan deities with gospel truth (cf. 1 Cor. 10:3-5). Christians should do likewise. In proclaiming the good news, let us tear down the world's altars of man-worship: godless sex and sexuality, humanism, materialism, and more.

—“wilderness”: this references not only Israel’s wanderings but also “the realm of demons.” That’s how Israel viewed the wilderness. It’s not random that Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness. In context, the psalmist seems to focus on the wilderness as a demonic habitat.

—In our own “wilderness” seasons, the devil exacerbates our suffering. The “roaring lion” attacks the already-bleeding lamb. He does not play fair. He pounces on the weak.

16 Yours is the day, yours also the night; you have established the heavenly lights and the sun. 17 You have fixed all the boundaries of the earth; you have made summer and winter.

—Now, the psalmist moves from redemption to creation. In Genesis 1, God established day, night, stars, moon, and sun. The nations worshiped these, but they were only balls of rock or fire created by the One true God.

—Their purpose is to mark time: “day” from “night” and “summer” from “winter.” In the polytheistic universe of pagans, star gods, moon gods, and sun gods fought for prominence like a celestial game of king of the hill. The “King” who is “from old” reigns over them all.

—“all the boundaries of the earth”: not only does the King mark time with boundaries; He marks the earth with boundaries. This appears to refer to the aftermath of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11), when God assigned the nations with a portion of land (Gen. 10), also assigning demonic principalities to rule over them, while He formed and took Israel for Himself (Deut. 32:8-9).

—The world rebelled, so God handed them over to rebel spirits. Then He plucked a pagan from the nations and made promises: *“Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’*” (Gen. 12:1-3).

—Israel became God’s portion, and those promises find fulfillment in Jesus. Through Him, God blesses the pagan nations that He formerly handed over to false gods. Jesus “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame” (Col. 2:14)—on the cross. Jesus was not the one truly shamed on the Cross; the false demon-gods of the nations were. After Jesus rose again, He re-seized the authority that Satan stole, re-inheriting the nations for Himself. Now it is no longer just Israel that God could describe as “my portion.” The nations are His inheritance!

18 Remember this, O LORD, how the enemy scoffs, and a foolish people reviles your name. 19 Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild beasts; do not forget the life of your poor forever. 20 Have regard for the covenant, for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence. 21 Let not the downtrodden turn back in shame; let the poor and needy praise your name.

—“Remember”:

- The two-fold “remember” of the first half of the song (v. 2) matches the two-fold remember of the second half (vv. 18 and 22).
- The first set focuses on God’s people and the temple; the second set centers on the enemies who attacked both.
- The contrast effectively ends with a note of judgment rather than salvation (although both themes are present). The psalms consistently portray the appropriateness of longing for judgment.
- NT Wright (in *Surprised By Hope*): *“The word judgment carries negative overtones for a good many people in our liberal and postliberal world. We need to remind ourselves that throughout the Bible, not least in the Psalms, God’s coming judgment is a good thing, something to be celebrated, longed for, yearned over. It causes people to shout for joy and the trees of the field to clap their hands. In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance, and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be.”*

—“Remember... the enemy” contrasts with “do not forget the life of your poor forever.” The psalmist asks God to remember the enemy for judgment and remember the poor for salvation.

—“Do not forget” evokes feelings of forgottenness. Even the petition, “remember”, implies it.

—The psalmist’s concern is not merely for his own welfare but especially that of God’s reputation—God’s “name”, which “foolish people” revile. Babylonians are throwing God under the bus, and the psalmist feels like God is okay with that. God has seemingly forgotten both Israel and His own reputation among the nations.

—“your poor” is the psalmist’s term for all Israel. I love this. I’m guessing that Jesus derived His saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” from the Psalms. At times, even the mighty King David will refer to Himself as “this poor man” (Ps. 34:6). Spiritual health is poverty of spirit. It is having an awareness of our own spiritual bankruptcy apart from Christ and the divine riches He lavishes on us in the gospel. 2 Cor. 8:9: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”

—“your dove... wild beasts”: Israel is God’s “dove”; Babylon is “wild beasts.” I’m reminded of the Song of Solomon, where the bride is called, “my dove.” God feels tenderly toward us.

—“the covenant”: the old covenant. In one way, the covenant resulted in this devastation, for God warned Israel that persistent rebellion would lead to exile. Yet the psalmist clings to the covenant. This shows the other side, which is under-depicted when we discuss the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant not only punished wickedness and blessed righteousness; it also bound God to Israel. We see this in the way God issues it in Exodus 24. It resembles a marriage covenant. God married Israel. The psalmist is saying, “You married us, so stay with us—in sickness and in health!” The covenant condemned the sinner while also giving him something to cling to—a God who never abandons His people or His promises. When speaking of the Old Covenant, it is best to hold these realities in tension.

—The psalmist does not presume on the covenant, as if he/Israel can behave any way they please and still receive blessings (something the prophets often condemned Israel for). True, God “married” Israel, and the people would always remain special to Him. True, the gifts and callings of God on Israel are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29). But the way Paul resolves this tension—between Israel’s requisite obedience and God’s loyalty to unfaithful Israel—is by teaching that Israel will repent and receive salvation at the end of the age (Rom. 11:11-36). In other words, God Himself will give Israel the heart that’s necessary to receive His blessings. He will display His loyalty to unfaithful Israel by giving them new hearts—faithful hearts, empowered by the Spirit-gift of the New Covenant, which they lacked under the Old.

—For our purposes, this means that the psalmist’s prayer for God’s intervention presupposes a heart of turning from the sins of the fathers back to God.

—“downtrodden... poor”: these parallels show us that “the poor” constitutes more than the financially destitute. It consists of all the down-and-outers in society.

—“revile your name... praise your name”: the enemies curse God’s name (18), but God’s poor and downtrodden will praise God’s name (21). The latter expresses faith that God will answer his prayer by judging the violent oppressors and saving Israel.

—It is right to lament, but let us lament in faith. Let us vent our pain and confusion to God while clinging to His promises. After all, we have a better covenant than Israel ever had. Their covenant was based on the blood of animals, but ours is based on the blood of the Lamb. Furthermore, because of the new covenant, we have the Holy Spirit dwelling inside of us. The law is not preserved inside some earthly tabernacle; it is written in our hearts by the Spirit. By His empowerment, we can better obey God and avoid the consequences Israel faced. See 2 Cor. 3 and Hebrews 8 for more on the Old Covenant/New Covenant distinctions.

22 Arise, O God, defend your cause; remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day! 23 Do not forget the clamor of your foes, the uproar of those who rise against you, which goes up continually!

—“Arise”: this is most intense call to action. It suggests that God is “sleeping on the job” (or at least, that the psalmist feels that way), and it calls on Him to get up and do what only He can: judge the wicked; save the righteous.

—“your cause”: Israel’s cause is God’s cause. The church’s cause is God’s cause. We are God’s people, and He has bound Himself to us by covenant.

—The second “do not forget” in this section forms a contrast with the two pleas for God to “remember” the scoffing of His enemies.

—God must “Arise” because of enemies who “rise against” Him. In the end, this is about God’s honor. Desire for vengeance becomes sinful when we take it up into our own hands or disobey New Testament commands to bless our enemies (see sermon on Psalm 69 where I discuss prayers for vengeance). One way we know our hearts are in the right place is when the desire for vengeance attaches itself more to a passion for God’s glory than for our own.