

# How Long, O LORD?

Psalm 79, Acts 9:32–43

September 23, 2001

“O God, the heathen have come into your inheritance;  
they have defiled your holy temple;  
they have laid Jerusalem in ruins.  
They have given the bodies of your servants  
to the birds of the air for food,  
the flesh of your saints to the beasts of the earth.  
They have poured out their blood like water  
round about Jerusalem,  
and there was none to bury them.  
We have become a taunt to our neighbors,  
mocked and derided by those round about us.  
How long, O LORD? Will you be angry for ever?  
Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?” (Psalm 79:1–5)

We are not the people of Israel. We do not live in Jerusalem. We, as America, are not simply God’s chosen people, though we, as Christians, understand America to exist by the grace of God. This Psalm was not written for us. And yet, this Psalm speaks to us and even speaks for us. It is the word of God yet today. For our buildings have been defiled. Our cities have been laid in ruin. Our citizens have been killed. Our enemies laugh at us and rejoice in our losses. And so we cry out to God. All of this raises severe questions for us: Where is God? How long will this last? What does the future hold? These are heavy on our hearts today. How shall we answer them? Let us turn to the word of God:

“How long, O LORD? Will you be angry for ever?  
Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?  
Pour out your anger on the nations  
that do not know you,  
and on the kingdoms  
that do not call on your name!  
For they have devoured Jacob,  
and laid waste his habitation.  
Do not remember against us the iniquities of our forefathers;  
let your compassion come speedily to meet us,  
for we are brought very low.  
Help us, O God of our salvation,  
for the glory of your name;  
deliver us, and forgive our sins,  
for your name’s sake!  
Why should the nations say,  
‘Where is their God?’” (Psalm 79:5–10a)

According to the Psalm, this question belongs to, and comes from, the enemies. By their taunts, they force it upon us. Where is God? Where is God in all of this? Where was God on September 11, 2001? Where is God now? Many are turning to God now. Many are looking for God. Many are rejecting any talk of God. Where is God? The question assumes, includes, and builds upon a temptation. The temptation is to doubt, or even to deny, the presence, the existence, the reality, the power, and the goodness of God. The temptation is to say that God is not here, that God is no where, and that there is no God. That is what our enemies want us to think. That is what our enemies want us to believe. That is what our enemies want us to say. That is what our enemies want us to live. If we do so, they have already won. If we deny the existence or the presence of God, we might as well give up now.

Where is God? The question is severe. The answers are not easy. And yet, it is absolutely crucial that we not fall prey to the easy but false suggestions made by our enemies. Where is God? God is here, and in New York City, and at the Pentagon, in the midst of our suffering and loss, allowing human freedom and evil to run their course, at least for a while. This will not go on forever.

How can we say that God is here? That is our faith. That is the witness of scripture. That is the only way we make sense of our lives and of existence. Considering the circumstances, it is significant that we even have Psalm 79. If the people then had yielded to the temptation to deny the existence of God, they would not have been singing the Psalm. They would not have addressed it to God. They would not have cried out in prayer. They would not have understood their existence to be framed within the will of God. But they did not yield to the temptation. They did not fall prey to the suggestions of their enemies. And so we have much to learn from them.

In the depths of their suffering and misery, they cried out to God in song and prayer. With the temple defiled and the city destroyed, they cried out to God in song and prayer. With every reason to think God had abandoned them, they defiantly cried out to God in song and prayer, asking for his mercy, asking for his help, asking for his forgiveness, asking even for vengeance. The Psalm is breathtaking in its honesty, startling in its directness, and instructive to us in its faith. Instead of giving up on God, they cried out to God. When God seemed to be absent, they called out to God to show himself present, to vindicate his people, and to do so for his own name's sake, for the glory of his name.

This underlying faith in the existence, the reality, the goodness, and the faithfulness of God provides the only context for answering our second question.

“How long, O LORD? Will you be angry for ever?  
Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?” (Psalm 79:5)

That is to say, How long will this last? How long will this go on? How long can we stand this? How will the world survive? “How long, O LORD?” The question is not answered immediately in the scripture. The very asking of it implies that the people perceived that they were in the midst of a long haul. Yet, at the same time, the very asking of the question teaches us that it is appropriate to ask for the suffering to end and, even more importantly, the very asking of the question teaches us that the events of the history of the world are in the hands of God.

“How long, O LORD? Will you be angry for ever?  
Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?”

Pour out your anger on the nations  
that do not know you,  
and on the kingdoms  
that do not call on your name!” (Psalm 79:5–6)

This Psalm simultaneously understands their predicament to be the result of an attack by pagan enemies and also to be the discipline, if not the punishment, of God. That is to say, while the enemies are responsible for their own actions, on a human level, the people of God refuse to believe that it is possible that their enemies have somehow defeated God or in any way undone his good will for their lives. They would rather believe that God has somehow allowed the horrible, the unimaginable, even the unbearable, to happen and to come upon them. There is a confidence that God can extract good from evil, that God can use even an attack by an enemy to work out God’s good purposes for the people of God and for the kingdom of God.

At least two things are notable about this. On the one hand, the people who sang the Psalm were ready to confess their sin and to beg for God’s mercy. They perceived their devastation to be the result of God’s righteous anger. This is not something the people of America even want to think about. This is not something we are ready for. We do not want to go there. Any suggestions in that direction have been hastily and firmly rejected. That does not mean we are right. It may mean we are not ready.

On the other hand, the people who sang this Psalm understood their devastation to be the result of a religious war, an attack by a people who did not believe in the God of Israel. Again, there is an honesty here from which we can learn much. The people who attacked our nation did not do so out of simple jealousy about our wealth or dislike for our freedom. Those are not sufficient reasons to account for the motivation for multiple suicide attacks. That would make no sense. No, the only motivations that make sense are religious ones.

The attacks on the United States of America were carried out by Islamic terrorists who despise the God of Israel and the people of Israel, Islamic terrorists who despise the God and Father of Jesus Christ and people who are Christians. And while the attacks were carried out by radicals, we have to understand that their motivations run to the heart of Islam. It is not an open or tolerant faith. Its adherents are not half-hearted. They are totally committed believers. And their faith is diametrically opposed to our own. At this very hour, Christian missionaries are being held in Islamic countries, awaiting execution for the crime of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. We hear every day in the media that this war is not a religious war. That cannot possibly be true. The sooner we wake up to reality, the better. If we do not understand and admit that this war is a religious war, we will never understand or know our enemy, and we will not have a chance to do what we need to do.

“How long, O LORD? Will you be angry for ever?  
Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?” (Psalm 79:5)

It will last only so long as God is willing to allow attacks by those who do not call on his name, only so long as God is willing to absorb such profanity, only so long as God is willing to allow his name to be dishonored. Some day he will grow tired of such nonsense, and then it will be no more. May that day come soon! God, have mercy on us.

“Why should the nations say,  
     ‘Where is their God?’  
 Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants  
     be known among the nations before our eyes!  
 Let the groans of the prisoners come before you;  
     according to your great power preserve those doomed to die!  
 Return sevenfold into the bosom of our neighbors  
     the taunts with which they have taunted you, O Lord!  
 Then we your people, the flock of your pasture,  
     will give thanks to you for ever;  
     from generation to generation we will recount your praise.” (Psalm 79:10–13)

The Psalm ends with a promise of praise. It swells with prayers for retaliation and revenge, but it ends with a promise of praise. It yearns for the glory of God, and for a people to glorify God. The purpose of the people’s existence is the worship of God. The very goal of their lives is thanksgiving to God. This is who we are. This is what we live for. We can do no other.

World events of the past two weeks have pressed severe questions upon us. Where is God? God is present, even if hidden, present and never defeated. How long will this last? So long as God wills, and not a moment longer. What does the future hold? The future holds the mercy and goodness of God, the forgiveness of sin, and the promise of salvation. Praise be to God!

Today’s reading from The Acts of the Apostles tells of two miracles. In the first, a man who had been paralyzed for eight years was healed. In the second, a woman who was dead was raised to life. Both of these happened at the command of the apostle Peter but not at his power. As he said, “Jesus Christ heals you.” This was the power at work. It was not the strength of the apostle which healed. It was the direct power of Jesus Christ. There is no other explanation. And in both cases, the miracles led many to faith.

It continues to be true today that the power of God at work in Jesus Christ is greater than the power of disease. The power of God at work in Jesus Christ is greater than the power of death. The power of God at work in Jesus Christ is greater than the power of sin and evil. And the power of God at work in Jesus Christ is greater than the power of terrorists to destroy, greater than the power of Islam to disrupt, greater than the power of fear to cripple, greater than the power of hatred to divide, greater than the power of our enemies to tear down. This is the power to which we must turn. This is the name upon which we must call. This is the grace which underlies and sustains our lives. This is the faith by which we must live. This is the good hope by which alone we face the future.

What does the future hold? The future belongs to the God and Father of Jesus Christ. This applies not only to heaven but also to this world, to our lives, and to the existence of nations. Why would anyone want to line up on the losing side of history? Why would anyone want to ignore God, to deny God, or to worship any other god? We would do well to be aligned with him now. We have known God’s love. We have known God’s forgiveness. We have known God’s power. We have known God’s healing. We should join the residents of Lydda, Sharon, and Joppa in turning to, and believing in, the Lord Jesus Christ.

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     Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?

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For they have devoured Jacob,  
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Do not remember against us the iniquities of our forefathers;  
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*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

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