

*Oh God! Your anger burns hot against us continually. You have forever cast off the sheep of your pasture. Why? Psalm 74*

The enemy has so defiled your sanctuary that it is perpetually desolate. The sounds that are heard in your congregations are the blasphemies, the debates, railings, revilings, fights and wranglings of your enemies. The signs and symbols of idolatry, witchcraft and demon worship are brought in and set up. Pagan "holy days" are paraded and touted as Christian, supplanting the gospel and worship of the true and living God.

Once a man was considered great who undertook the thick and thorny issues of Christian life and doctrine, shaped and formed them into practical and profitable principles and tools for the saints. He built up Zion. Now the man is admired who attacks with axe and club the most precious and glorious of the church's tradition, practice and doctrine. What they have been unable to break down by direct assault they have craftily kindled little fires here and there, fanned and fed them until they have burned down every meeting place of the saints, every dwelling place of your name in the land.

We no longer see any signs of your power, your favor, your blessings, your Presence. The tokens that encouraged us in the faith are no longer to be found. There are no more prophets. The true man of God has ceased to exist. No one sets forth your infallible word any more.

This paraphrased synopsis of the lamentations in Psalm 74 seems to be a perfectly ordered reflection of the desolations of today's Christian scene. But this Psalm was written at a time prior even to the establishment of synagogue worship. The only worship place was the temple at Jerusalem. It is therefore a prophetic psalm. That is presents a strikingly accurate picture of what we observe today is not as marvelous as we might think. The fact of the matter is, these sorrows are no more unique to our time than they are to any other. At any time in the history of God's people the comparative state of the church in the world has been just as desolate. The rare exceptions to this rule are the revivals, the spiritual awakenings that have occurred from time to time. These blessed periods of spiritual refreshings when the church, the gospel and righteousness has risen to a dominant role in world affairs have been extremely brief and far between. They have, however, in those brief periods accomplished enormous strides, restored vital life and truth, and lain again rock-solid principles upon which the saints could prosecute the gospel for generations to come.

While we wait and pray for such awakenings and join the psalmists with our own lamentations it might be profitable for us to make a few observations.

First, this state of things is no cause for alarm. It is not abnormal. We should not be shocked or surprised. We, the church, are aliens in a hostile land. We are in a state of conflict, fierce warfare against an enemy hell-bent on destroying us. Our Lord nowhere promised us immunities against ravages from such assaults, only final victory. Every generation of Christians have felt that theirs was the worst that ever existed. But we should bear in mind that the grief we bear in our time are like our other trials, none that are not "common to man."

Second, we should note that some of the things that are said here are not literally true. Either the psalmist, like ourselves often, thinks things to be worse than they are (we have an Elijah/Juniper tree complex and imagine ourselves the only ones left), or he is speaking in hyperbole. We often do that, too. For example, God is not angry with His blood-bought people: They have been eternally and perpetually reconciled through the blood of Christ. He has certainly not cast off the sheep of his pasture even temporarily, let alone eternally. God's sanctuary is not, nor shall every be, entirely desolate. Not all the meeting places of God's people have been consumed in the enemy's fire. There are multitudes of fresh, vital, living gatherings of God's people every day. The evidences of God's powerful workings, of the blessings of His presence, the tokens of His assurances are yet plenteous among us who yet see all things working unto His glory and for our salvation. And God's people have never been, nor shall ever be without His faithful prophets.

Finally, we must dispel from our minds any notion that these lamentations betray a discouraged, pessimistic, despairing heart. The very opposite is true. The psalm is filled with not only hope, but strong confidence and expectation of the imminence of God's arising to rectify all the wrong that is rampant. "How long do You intend to put up with this?" (he knows it is not going on forever). "Why have You withdrawn Your mighty right hand? Get it out of Your bosom." "Our God is the Eternal King Who never has ceased, and will not cease from working salvation in the midst of this earth. He orders the seasons. He doesn't have to wait for the sunshine, clouds or rain, for darkness or daybreak. He is the cause of all circumstances and climate. A company of fools are blaspheming the name of the great God, threatening His beloved purchased people. They are poor and needy, dwelling in an earth filled with cruel enemies. You are the avenger of the poor and needy, and You will surely arise to the vindication of Your own Name, Your own cause, and will with mighty power silence the tumult of all who have risen up against You."

It is part of the great mystery of fervent, earnest and prevailing prayer that we keenly feel the real distress, awful sorrow, terrifying dangers and threats of our present circumstances. We are not always bright-eyed and cheerful. Sometimes our souls are bowed extremely low with the awesome evils closing in upon us, our eyes red with weeping and our voices cracked with crying. Yet in our prayers at such time there is a faith, a confidence, a hope and expectation that we shall be heard, that the vaunting, taunting wickedness oppressing us shall not triumph, that our Great God hears us, and that truth, righteousness and salvation is imminent. This is an unresolvable paradox. Without both, prayer is not real. It cannot be sincere petition without the first, and without the second it is no more than the vain repetitions and babblings of unbelief.

Let us therefore count the awful weight of oppressing evil about us, know the ruin of our religious scene, feel our impotence to rectify it, and then, in confident expectation, lay hold of the promises of our able and faithful God. C. M.