

Honest to God – Tough Questions from the Psalms (Part 6 of 8)

“How Long, O Lord?” Psalm 79

A Psalm of Asaph.

¹ O God, the nations have come into your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins. ² They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the heavens for food, the flesh of your faithful to the beasts of the earth. ³ They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them. ⁴ We have become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those around us. ⁵ How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealousy burn like fire? ⁶ Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call upon your name! ⁷ For they have devoured Jacob and laid waste his habitation. ⁸ Do not remember against us our former iniquities; let your compassion come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low. ⁹ Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name's sake! ¹⁰ 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! ¹¹ Let the groans of the prisoners come before you; according to your great power, preserve those doomed to die! ¹² Return sevenfold into the lap of our neighbors the taunts with which they have taunted you, O Lord! ¹³ But we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise (Psalm 79).

Life is hard; the Psalms are honest; God is good. This is why we love the Psalms so much. They help us deal with the reality of life in its raw and painful moments. They give voice and verse to some of our deepest wrestlings. And they point us toward God, serving as a bridge between the pain of life and the power of God.

I wanted to spend some time in these Psalms because I know that all of us will experience deep pain at some point in our lives – it is only a matter of time. Second, I know that the time to build a theology of suffering is before the suffering takes place. Good pastors and good churches teach their people how to suffer. You have to know how the Bible handles this subject.

But you also need to know yourself. I began this series by explaining that I’ve often seen two extremes when it comes to pain:

- **Denial** – There are some people who do not want to acknowledge how much they are really struggling or how hard the situation really is.
- **Dissection** – Other people are guilty of constantly examining the reason behind the problems in their lives. They over-analyze, over-think, and are constantly looking for the answer to the “why” question.

Denial and dissection make mistakes in the excess. Living above your circumstances is not necessarily being in denial. Asking what God might be doing or even if there is a direct cause for the suffering can be a good thing. The problem is taking those things too far.

This distinction is important because most of the other Psalms that we've looked at so far assume some level of innocent suffering. But Psalm 79 is different. And I'd like to use this psalm and an important text from the book of Hebrews to look at the very important subject of suffering as discipline.

Psalm 79: The Pain of Discipline

This psalm introduces us to the pain of discipline – suffering that comes for the purpose of dealing with sinful actions. My guess is when you heard the title or the phrase “How Long, O Lord?” in the text that you assumed that it was referring to innocent suffering. But that is not the case in Psalm 79. The phrase is the groaning of a man who is dealing with the discipline of God. In other words, his hard question relates to how long must he suffer under God's painful correction.

This is an enormously important issue. It is a question that I've personally asked. It sounded like this: Did God cause the stillbirth of our daughter Sylvia because of some sin in my life? Do you feel the weight of that question? Do you see how loaded it is? When you are going through some level of suffering, I think you can't help but ask this question – if you even dare ask it.

Psalm 79 is very helpful in that it provides a different angle on honest questions. Let's see what the text is saying:

Tough Consequences (vv 1-4)

The first four verses identify the challenging and painful circumstances that the psalmist and the entire nation of Israel is experiencing. There is devastation, desecration, death, and shame. It appears that Israel has been invaded, Jerusalem has been destroyed, and the destruction has been enormous.

¹ O God, the nations have come into your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins. ² They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the heavens for food, the flesh of your faithful to the beasts of the earth. ³ They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them. ⁴ We have become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those around us (Psalm 79:1–4).

Don't miss the emotionally loaded and shame-filled metaphors. The picture here is of destruction that leaves dead bodies, unburied, to be picked apart by animals, and the spilling of blood that is as common as water. And the effect of this is a deep humbling of God's people. They have received the rod of God, and it is as humbling as it is painful.

Now you might wonder what historical event the psalmist is referring to. The most likely occasion is the Babylonian destruction in 586 BC. Israel as a nation was previously divided into the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. The North fell through the invasion of Assyria in 722 BC, and the Southern Kingdom fell 136 years later, and thus began what is called the Babylonian captivity, which lasted 70 years.

This captivity was in response to the nation's sinfulness and lack of allegiance to God. Jeremiah the prophet speaks for God in this regard:

⁷ Even the stork in the heavens knows her times, and the turtledove, swallow, and crane keep the time of their coming, but my people know not the rules of the Lord. ⁸ "How can you say, 'We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us'? But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie. ⁹ The wise men shall be put to shame; they shall be dismayed and taken; behold, they have rejected the word of the Lord, so what wisdom is in them? ¹⁰ Therefore I will give their wives to others and their fields to conquerors, because from the least to the greatest everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. ¹¹ They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace. ¹² Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among the fallen; when I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord (Jeremiah 8:7–12).

The psalmist is lamenting the difficult and divinely-designed consequences that are right in front of him.

Conflicted Means (vv 5-7)

The death and destruction were bad, but it was also quite challenging to see a pagan nation like Babylon be the means by which God brought the people to their knees. It was quite conflicting to see God use such a wicked nation as his vehicle of discipline. We hear this in verses 5-7.

⁵ How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealousy burn like fire? ⁶ Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call upon your name! ⁷ For they have devoured Jacob and laid waste his habitation (Psalm 79:5–7).

So the tension here is not just about the actual suffering, but it is also about the fact that God has used a seemingly evil people to accomplish His purposes. The effect of this is such that it looks as if God's people have lost and evil has won. God appears to have sided with Babylon, and this is really conflicting.

God's use of wicked people and bad events is challenging. Sometimes people try to resolve this tension by saying that God "allows" things to happen. While that is true, in this case, God is clearly behind them. He is empowering an evil nation to be victorious over his people. Listen to how God positions this with Jeremiah when the prophet is asked by the king of Judah to seek God for deliverance from the coming Babylonian invasion:

⁴ 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Behold, I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon and against the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the walls. And I will bring them together into the midst of this city. ⁵ I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger and in fury and in great wrath. ⁶ And I will strike down the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast. They shall die of a great pestilence. ⁷ Afterward, declares the Lord, I will give Zedekiah king of Judah and his servants and the people in this city who survive the pestilence, sword, and famine into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and into the hand of their enemies, into the hand of those who seek their lives. He shall strike them down with the edge of the sword. He shall not pity them or spare them or have compassion' (Jeremiah 21:3–7).

God is behind these events as conflicted as that seems. And the Psalmist cries out "How long, O Lord?"

Humble Repentance (vv 8-10)

The next set of verses is an appeal to God for forgiveness and mercy. We have no idea if the psalmist was part of the faithful, God-fearing remnant in Israel who experienced the discipline of the entire nation. But he, like Daniel in Daniel 9, identifies with the collective sinfulness and waywardness of God's people.

Further, notice that the psalmist appeals to God's name and His glory as the basis of any mercy. In other words, he doesn't ask because they are so broken but because of God's greatness. Take note of this because it is one of the great benefits of discipline; it brings you back to what is really valuable and glorious. Humility birthed through hardship helps you see and value God's holiness.

8 Do not remember against us our former iniquities; let your compassion come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low. 9 Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name's sake! 10 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! (Psalm 79:8–10).

This is what suffering does, even if the suffering is because of the sinful actions of other people. It reveals our frailty, brings to the surface our sinfulness at many levels, and crystalizes our understanding of our need of God. But even more, it reminds us that the ultimate purpose in life is designed by God and for God. Suffering reminds us that life is not about our plans, our comfort, and our agenda. It reminds us externally that we are not God and shows us internally how unlike Him we really are. Suffering brings to the surface our need of a Savior, and for those who know Jesus, it shows us the remaining sediments of self-sufficiency.

Future Hope (vv 11-13)

The psalm ends with a final appeal rooted in hope-filled praise. It is remarkable and instructive that the psalmist ends this way. Remarkable because he is in so much pain; instructive because this is where a biblical understanding of discipline leads – to worship.

¹¹ Let the groans of the prisoners come before you; according to your great power, preserve those doomed to die! ¹² Return sevenfold into the lap of our neighbors the taunts with which they have taunted you, O Lord! ¹³ But we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise (Psalm 79:11–13).

In this moment it feels as if God is completely done with his people, as if He has condemned them. But this is not the case, and this is a very important point to note here because it becomes the basis of hope.

God had made a covenant with his people – they were His people. And He is going to use this pagan nation of Babylon to bring them back to himself. So while they were under the pain of discipline, there was still hope.

¹⁰ “For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile (Jeremiah 29:10–14).

Don’t miss this! The discipline of God doesn’t mean that He has broken his promise. His promise is sure and steadfast even in the midst of great pain. The discipline is part of His divinely-designed plan for the ultimate deliverance of his people. I’ve said it this way before: “hard is hard; hard is not bad.”

The Psalmist ends his cry of “How long, O Lord?” with a very confident promise-oriented thought: “we, your people, the sheep of your pasture will give thanks to you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise” (79:13). That’s an amazing thing to say when you are in the middle of hard circumstances.

But there is still another promise in play here, and God gives it to Jeremiah when he is struggling with God’s purposes and plans. What Jeremiah doesn’t know, and what the people of Israel do not know (and what you do not fully know), is that God has purposes beyond what we can even imagine. Listen to what he says to Jeremiah:

³⁶ “Now therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning this city of which you say, ‘It is given into the hand of the king of Babylon by sword, by famine, and by pestilence’: ³⁷ Behold, I will gather them from all the countries to which I drove them in my

anger and my wrath and in great indignation. I will bring them back to this place, and I will make them dwell in safety.³⁸ And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.³⁹ I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them.⁴⁰ I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.⁴¹ I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.⁴² "For thus says the Lord: Just as I have brought all this great disaster upon this people, so I will bring upon them all the good that I promise them (Jeremiah 32:36–42).

Don't miss that last statement! The comfort and hope in the midst of difficult circumstances is that God is the one who is behind it all. He is true to His word, faithful to His promises, and worthy of our trust.

So does this sound at all like something you could pray? Are you able to see hard circumstances through this lens? Can you see your hardship through this paradigm? I meet many people who see every bad situation through a lens of: "this has to be fair," "it has to make sense to me," "it has to be over soon," and "God must not be behind it." And the problem with that is that there is no hope there. None.

Now I know that there are other challenges with believing that God is ultimately behind all the events of my life – even the painful ones – and there are divinely appointed purposes behind everything that happens. I know that this perspective doesn't solve every problem or answer every question. But, in the end, discipline at any level is hopeful only if God is actively and personally orchestrating it.

Hebrews 12 and Romans 8: Painful yet Loving Purposes

Gratefully, we have other texts in the New Testament that bring this issue out with even greater clarity. In the book of Hebrews, we find the author providing advance encouragement to this group of believers about suffering. I say advance because we are told (v 4) that they have not yet shed any blood. In light of coming hardship, He gives them the following instruction:

5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. 6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." 7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:5–11).

Notice what he says here:

1. Don't be discouraged when hardship comes (v 5)
2. Discipline is a token of God's love (v 6)
3. Understanding discipline helps us endure (v 7)
4. Discipline, while difficult, is for our ultimate and spiritual good (v 11)

The book of Hebrews is filled with warnings about starting out strong spiritually and then falling away. The book regularly calls professing believers to prove that they are real by enduring all the way to end. And discipline serves the purpose. It is divinely designed hardship to keep rooting out areas of sinfulness in us, pushing us toward Christ-dependency and Christ-likeness. The hope of discipline is that God is using everything for our good.

Romans 8 echoes these themes:

- Regarding discouragement: ¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18).
- Regarding God's love: ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us (Romans 8:37).
- Regarding our ultimate good: ²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

But then we hear something that sounds very similar to the cry in Psalm 79, "How long, O Lord!", in Romans 8:26: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."

"How long, O Lord!" is the honest cry of a man or woman, under the weight of hard circumstances, who is clinging to the promises of God.

How to Think About Discipline

In light of what we've seen today in Psalm 79, Hebrews 12 and Romans 8, let me summarize some key thoughts for us to think about and ponder.

1. The Bible's perspective on hard but loving purposes in discipline only applies to those who are followers of Jesus.

I've talked today at length about the subject of discipline, attempting to show you the dual nature of discipline, which includes hard circumstances but loving purposes. Unfortunately, this doesn't apply to everyone. Discipline needs to be distinguished from condemnation or punishment. And the difference between these two categories is one's relationship to Jesus. The message of the Bible is that Jesus takes the punishment for sin that we deserve. The good news is that God counts Jesus' death as a sufficient payment for those

who receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior. But for those who do not receive Jesus, His death doesn't apply to them. If that's you, it means that you are presently under God's judgment, and your destiny is eternal condemnation. Therefore, the whole concept of loving discipline doesn't apply to you.

2. God has poured out His wrath for sin on Jesus, and discipline should be distinguished from condemnation and judgment.

This is an important distinction because condemnation and judgment are entirely different than discipline. Condemnation is the justified retribution of a holy God upon sinful people. The aim is just punishment, and it is terrible. Discipline is still hard, and often painful, but the end product is our good. Condemnation is harmful justice. Discipline is loving instruction.

This is extremely important to understand since you might be tempted to think, in the midst of a painful trial, that God is against you. But God is always for you, His child. Don't confuse the pain of discipline with the pain of condemnation.

3. Some discipline is directly linked in a cause/effect relationship with specific and known sin.

There are some discipline moments that have a clear cause/effect dynamic to them. You might think of this as disciplinary consequences. You did something wrong; God graciously uncovered your sin, and there were consequences which serve as a reminder of what you did and as a deterrent for the future. There are examples of this in the Bible, including the wilderness wandering after Kadesh Barnea, Moses' inability to enter the Promised Land after striking the rock, and the death of David's illegitimate child because of his sexual sin with Bathsheba.

How do you know when discipline is for a specific sin? Since neither you nor God is served by not knowing when they are linked, my pastoral answer is: "You know." It is obvious and clear.

4. All hardship has a disciplining effect, surfacing latent sin at varying levels, so that it might be dealt with and produce more Christ-likeness.

At the end of the day, all discipline is because of sin – not necessarily specific cause/effect sin, but indwelling sin that hinders us from becoming like Christ. Every hardship is a part of God's overall plan to surface what we do not see in ourselves, and there is nothing that does that better than hardship. Difficulties, illnesses, disappointments, challenges, conflicts and a myriad of other hard circumstances "bump our beaker," and they reveal the sediment of ugliness that still remains in us. That is why the Bible views suffering, as hard as it is, as a positive thing. And this also brings a hope and a freedom to the life of those who know Jesus, because there is no pain that is pointless.

5. God is able and willing to use all things – good and evil – for divinely designed and righteous purposes.

The really beautiful thing is that God is sovereign over everything – including good and bad things. While Satan may be the active agent in evil, he is not free! He unknowingly serves God's purposes and aids in the accomplishment of God's plan. This, my friends, is a liberating truth that brings so much hope because it means that there is nothing – absolutely nothing – that happens which is outside of God's power to use it for our good. Everything has divinely designed and righteous purposes.

The implication of this is stunning: it means you can say "How long, O Lord!" while also saying "but we, your people, will give thanks to you forever." It means you can say: "This is hard, but it is not bad."

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