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When Sheep Go Astray

Psalm 79

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Certainly one of the things that would mark our culture today is a significant loss in the respect for authority. I think you see that in the home. You see it out in the marketplace. You see it in the schools. And I think you see it in the church. Just about everywhere you look, there is a significant loss of respect for authority.

This loss of respect for authority flows out of what has been called the postmodern mind—where people believe there are no absolutes. Therefore, self becomes the center of the universe, and I decide for myself what's right and wrong and what's good and bad. Basically, the purpose in life is for me to be happy, and whatever needs to happen to make that possible is what's considered "right."

If that's true, then nobody else should tell me what to do, and nobody else should have authority over me. I am the center of the universe. The ultimate expression of that would be, then, a rejection of the authority of God. It would mean God really doesn't have the right to tell me what to do—to define the rules of right and wrong—but I just choose to do my own thing in my own way.

That isn't anything new. It goes all the way back to the beginning in Genesis 3 where we are told we are made in the image of God, and that image means we have the ability to represent God on earth. David says that means being crowned with glory and majesty. But we can use that same image to choose to reject God. We can say to God, "I am going to be God myself, and I am going to decide for myself what's right and wrong and good and bad. I'm not going to be under Your authority. I'm going to be the center of my own universe."

And, of course, that's the choice that Adam and Eve made, and it's the choice that all of us struggle with. We all wrestle with this desire within us to be our own gods and to run our own lives. It's only through the presence of God, through His Spirit within us, that we are empowered to live any differently than that.

This whole idea of being the center of my universe manifests itself in many ways, but perhaps one of the most concerning ways is the casual approach that people take today toward sin. When you go out in the culture, it's hard to even talk about this subject of sin, because sin implies that there is an absolute standard. It implies that there is a law-giver, and He defines right and wrong; and those who disobey are sinners, and those who obey are walking in fellowship with Him.

But that's a difficult message to deliver if people don't believe there are absolutes—if people don't believe anybody else defines reality other than themselves. So there is no concept of sin to me if I decide for myself what's right and wrong and good and bad. Just because something is bad for you doesn't mean that it's bad for me; therefore, it would be judgmental and intolerant to call any behavior sinful. And that's very much the way the discussion goes out in the culture.

But, certainly, that discussion ought to sound very different when it comes inside the walls of the church. Yet I've found even within the walls of the church, with people who

consider themselves to be children of God, there is a very casual approach to sin. Basically we have too often bought into this idea that I am the center of my own universe, and what God really wants—His main agenda—is for me to be happy. Therefore, we find ourselves thinking, *Whatever is necessary for me to do in order to be happy, that's certainly what God wants*, and we use that to rationalize all sorts of sinful behaviors.

In that thinking, God becomes kind of like the Pillsbury Doughboy who just sits up on a cloud, with a big goofy smile on His face. We pretty much do whatever we want, and God just keeps throwing out grace and mercy. We really aren't fearful of God; we have no real reverential respect for God. But He's just like that doughboy, who keeps smiling while we do our own thing, and the goal is to be happy. God is sometimes like a rabbit's foot, which we keep hooked to our belt, saying, "God, you can kind of stay back there, but if I need you, I'll call you." If I get into a pinch, I rub the rabbit's foot, and God should run to the rescue.

Several years ago I had a discussion with someone because I was quite concerned about his behavior. In the course of our conversation, he basically said to me, "You know, I know that I can sin tonight and be forgiven in the morning, so what's the big deal?" I have found that is not an unusual belief among Christians— that we can sin tonight, be forgiven in the morning, so what's the big deal? Well, I'll tell you what the big deal is. The big deal is that sin offends God. Sin offends God, and that's a big deal.

This attitude isn't new; it's been around for thousands of years. The nation of Israel struggled with it all the time. More times than not, they reflected a very low view of God. They lived their lives their own way and they offended God. The prophets tell us that Israel believed that because God's presence was housed in the temple, in the Holy of Holies, and they were God's people, so basically they could do as they pleased and God would just tolerate that. They thought they could live their own lives, and God's presence would always be with them. If they really needed God in a pinch, He was there.

So the Israelites invited the pagan nations to come on in, and they brought with them their pagan gods and their pagan ways, and the Israelites became an idolatrous people. At that point, God would have been very justified in mediating out judgment on them. But because He is a God of mercy and grace, He didn't do that. Instead, He sent prophets to warn them—one prophet after another—with a warning that basically said, "People, clean up your act, or God is going to deal with you." Over and over again God warned them, because what God wanted was not to judge them. What God wanted was to bless them if they would just acknowledge Him as God and live pleasing to Him. But they didn't listen. So 722 years before the birth of Christ, God allowed the Assyrians to come in, and they wiped out the northern kingdom called Israel and hauled them off into captivity.

After that, God continued to send prophets to the southern kingdoms, which were identified as Judah. But even after the judgment of the north, the south still didn't listen. Probably the prophet we would most recognize would be the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah wept over his people because he knew they weren't listening, and he knew God was going to deal with them. But they wouldn't listen. So 586 years before the birth of Christ, the Babylonians, under King Nebuchadnezzar who had conquered the Assyrians, moved in and devastated the southern kingdom. They didn't just conquer it; they devastated it. They tore down the wall that surrounded the city of Jerusalem. They slaughtered the people and left their bodies lying on the ground for the birds to eat and the animals to devour. The psalmist

says, “They poured out blood like water.” They went into the temple and they defiled the Holy of Holies, and then they tore the temple down. By the time they left, it was just rubble.

Imagine what that would have been like. The Holy of Holies was such a sacred place that represented the presence of God, that if someone went in there whom God hadn’t approved, God would strike them dead. But when the presence of God left, it was just a building. And they went in and they defiled it and tore it down, and everything was rubble. The nation of Israel was no longer even a nation. They had no land; they had no culture; they had no economy. They were prisoners of war in captivity under King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon.

It is into that situation that Asaph writes Psalm 79. Psalm 79 really reflects the attitude that God is looking for if He is going to bring hope to what otherwise seems to be nothing but despair.

As we look at Psalm 79, there are some of you who have taken a very casual approach to sin. You have bought into the idea that your happiness is at the center of the universe, and basically you justify whatever behavior needs to be justified in order to be happy. Take this Psalm as a warning. Our God is a jealous God—He will not be treated that way! There are others of you who feel like you’re under the disciplining hand of God. You have lived your own life your own way, and now you’re suffering the consequences of that. You feel that hand of God’s discipline upon you, and you wonder, *How long will it be this way?* Well, I think this Psalm answers that question as well.

Psalm 79, verses 1- 4:

O GOD, the nations have invaded Thine inheritance; they have defiled Thy holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins. They have given the dead bodies of Thy servants for food to the birds of the heavens, the flesh of Thy godly ones to the beasts of the earth. They have poured out their blood like water round about Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them. We have become a reproach to our neighbors, a scoffing and derision to those around us.

In those first four verses, Asaph establishes what is the tone of this psalm. It’s a very important lesson to learn. He goes through and describes the devastation. He talks about the bodies being devoured by the animals instead of being buried. To a Jewish person, that is as bad as it gets. That’s the ultimate reproach—the ultimate in humiliation—total defeat. But as you go through these verses, Asaph’s perspective is very important. Often, when we find ourselves under the disciplining hand of God, we think, *Poor me—look at my circumstances. Poor me—look at my situation. Look at my sorrow. Look at what I’m going through.* Everything is about me, and at some point along the way, I finally say, “God, I’m really sorry about this. I’ve made a mess of things.” That’s when we just want God to make everything better. We want God to kind of clean up the mess.

As a matter of fact, there have been many times, as I’ve sat and talked with people, that it’s very evident they have lived their lives their own way. They have made sinful choices and now they are suffering the consequences of those choices. And at some point along the way they really break. They’re tired of the sorrow and the suffering and all the stuff that goes with that, and they say, “God, I’m really sorry about this.” Then they ask me, “Why doesn’t God do something? Why doesn’t God respond? If God is loving, why doesn’t He just clean up this mess?” That reflects that the attitude at the core still hasn’t changed. There

is still a core belief that I'm the center of my own universe, and ultimately what matters most to God is for me to be happy. It's the thought, *Why doesn't God make me happy? I told Him I was sorry.*

What you see in verses 1 through 4 is just the opposite of that. Asaph is grieving, but it's not grieving for their circumstances. It's not grieving for their sorrow. It's grieving because they have dishonored the name of God. They have made God seem powerless; they have made God a mockery; they have made God a laughing stock. And Asaph's heart breaks because of what they have done to the name of God. In verses 1-4, he says, "The nations have invaded *Thine* inheritance; they have defiled *Thy* holy temple...the dead bodies of *Thy* servants...the flesh of *Thy* godly ones." Asaph realizes ultimately that this is about God, and this is about what they've done to God. They have dishonored the name of God. It's about God's reputation and God's name, and that is the source of his grieving.

God's purpose for His people was that God would give them a land flowing with milk and honey. God wanted to pour out His blessings upon them in a way they couldn't even imagine. And through that, the surrounding nations would see God's goodness and they would want to know the God of the Israelites. That was meant to be a witness to the other nations. But what happened was they chose not to walk in obedience, and God ultimately disciplined them by allowing another nation to come in and conquer them. Suddenly, God seemed powerless. Suddenly, God seemed absent. God became a source of mockery to the pagans. As a matter of fact, that's what it says later in the psalm: that pagans were saying, "Where is your god? If he's such a big, powerful god, where is he? We've conquered him." Asaph is hearing that, and he is saying, "God, we have made a mockery out of You. We have dishonored Your name." And that's the source of his grief.

What allows me to be a witness to those around me is that they see God alive and real in my life. They should see a soul that's satisfied, and they should see a certain joy. They should see a certain abundance in my life that they say, "That's what I want. Whatever you have, that's what I want." But when I choose to live my own life my own way, and I make myself the center of my own universe, then I suffer the consequences of that, and I'm under the disciplining hand of God. Do you suppose people look at me in that miserable condition and say, "I want what he has; I would like to know his God"? No, God's mission and God's purpose has been lost because of my choices. Then God becomes a source of mockery. God's name is dishonored, and God has become a reproach.

One of the things I must understand is that ultimately this isn't about me. This is about God; and until I understand that, there's not a whole lot that is going to change. The very attitude that caused me to make those bad choices is often the attitude that continues to be reflected when I experience the consequences. That has to change to realize, "God, this isn't about me—it's about You," and that's the source of our grief.

Verse 5: "How long, O LORD? Wilt Thou be angry forever? Will Thy jealousy burn like fire?" If you have the imagery that Asaph is sitting on the side of a hill somewhere writing a poem, verse 5 certainly dispels that. Asaph is feeling the agony of this discipline. He's hurting, and he's crying out to God, saying, "God, how long does it have to be this way?" Certainly, when he talks about God's jealousy burning like fire, he is remembering the Ten Commandments.

This is a portion from Exodus 20:

You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

Our God is a jealous God, and He will not be treated that way. Asaph cries out to God, “God, how long will your jealousy burn?” Then, in verses 6-12, Asaph cries out to God in a prayer. It’s a very interesting prayer because, in one breath he asks God to bring forth justice to the pagan nations, but in the very next breath he says, “But God, reign down mercy on your people. God, give justice to them—mercy to us.”

When Asaph talks about justice, he is not saying, “Because, God, this is what they’ve done to us.” But he says, “God, this is what they’ve done to *You*.” The focus is still on God. “God, they have challenged you; they have mocked you; they have dishonored you. God, for Your name’s sake, show them who You are. Show them that You really are God.” In other words, he’s saying, “God, correct what we’ve made a mess of.” That’s his motive. When he talks about God’s mercy, he doesn’t say, “God, because we deserve it”...or “because we’re really sorry”...or “because we’ve suffered enough—poor us.” He appeals to God for compassion and forgiveness, based on the character of God, because the focus is still on God. “God, because of who You are, because of Your character...”

Beginning in verse 6:

Pour out Thy wrath upon the nations which do not know Thee, and upon the kingdoms which do not call upon Thy name. For they have devoured Jacob, and laid waste his habitation. Do not remember the iniquities of our forefathers against us; let Thy compassion come quickly to meet us; for we are brought very low. Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Thy name; and deliver us, and forgive our sins, for Thy name’s sake. Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?” Let there be known among the nations in our sight, vengeance for the blood of Thy servants, which has been shed. Let the groaning of the prisoner come before Thee; according to the greatness of Thy power preserve those who are doomed to die. And return to our neighbors sevenfold into their bosom the reproach with which they have reproached Thee, O Lord.”

Asaph appeals to God for justice—not on the basis of their suffering, but on the basis of what they have done to the reputation of God. But he also appeals to God for compassion and forgiveness and mercy, because that is who God is. That God-centered approach is what gives birth to the statement of hope that ends this psalm in verse 13: “So we Thy people and the sheep of Thy pasture will give thanks to Thee forever. To all generations we will tell of Thy praise.”

It’s impressive in verse 13 that Asaph still believes that they are God’s people—that they are still the sheep of His pasture. They have no land. They have no nation. They have no economy. They have nothing—they are prisoners of war in a foreign nation. There is every reason for despair, and there is every reason for hopelessness. But Asaph knows the character of God, and he says, “God, we are still your people; we are still the sheep of your

pasture. And one day you will deliver us, and we will give thanks, and we will offer You praise.”

Seventy years they were in captivity. Most of the people assimilated into the culture—they never came out. But there was a remnant of people that God raised up that really had a heart for God. Under the leadership of Ezra they rebuilt the temple, and under the leadership of Nehemiah they rebuilt the walls. The nation was reestablished, and into that nation would come the Savior of the world. Asaph was right—there was reason for hope!

This isn't a very warm and fuzzy psalm. It isn't going to show up on too many Hallmark cards. In fact, it's a pretty sobering psalm. But it is a psalm that reminds us that our God is holy; our God is GOD, our God is a jealous God, and He expects to be treated like God.

As I mentioned before, there are some of you who have taken a very casual approach to sin. You have bought into the mindset that you are the center of the universe and what God wants is for you to be happy. You have learned to justify whatever is necessary to fulfill that agenda. Let this psalm be a warning to you. Our God is a jealous God—He won't be treated that way.

Others of you feel like you're under the heavy hand of God's discipline. You've lived your life your own way, and now you're living with the consequences, and you just kind of feel God's hand there. Like Asaph, you ask the question, “How long? How long, O God, does it have to be this way?” I think the answer is given in the psalm. It will be as long as it takes for you to realize this is not about you; this is about God. As long as it takes for you to realize that you have been given life, not for you to be happy, but for God to be glorified. And if it takes you the rest of your life to learn that lesson, then you can plan on being miserable for the rest of your life. Because God will discipline us until we realize this is about Him and His name and His glory, and not about us.

For all of us, we are reminded that this is a high and holy God that we serve. If we choose to walk in obedience, God longs to pour out His blessings. God wants to fill our lives with joy and hope and peace. But if we choose not to treat Him as God, He will do whatever is necessary to get our attention until we realize this is about Him.

The Bible says one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God. But for now, God's people have the privilege of doing that by the choice of their will everyday. May we never forget that He is God.