

Psalm 81
To the chief Musician upon Gittith, [A Psalm] of Asaph.
Theme: A Song of Deliverance

God laments over what might have been. As He ponders the history of Israel, His chosen people, God mourns over what He could have done for them and through them, if only they had obeyed Him.

To understand this psalm 81, we need to understand the setting. The psalm was to be sung at a feast day (81:3), which most of the scholar's think was the Feast of Tabernacles. The seventh month was ushered in with the blowing of the ram's horn (Num. 29:1). On the tenth day was the Day of Atonement, and on the fifteenth day, at the full moon (81:3), began the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths.

The Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated for seven days. The people made little booths and lived in them. The focus of the celebration was to remind Israel of their redemption from Egypt, God's protection, and sustenance in the wilderness when they did not live in homes. It was also a time for giving thanks for the harvest which had just ended.

Following upon the Day of Atonement as it did, the feast was a time of celebrating the joy of forgiveness and reconciliation with God and His bountiful provisions for His people. It was the most joyous of the Jewish feasts. The rabbis used to say that one who had not witnessed the celebration of this feast did not know what joy was (J. J. Stewart Perowne, The Book of Psalms [Zondervan], II:96).

If you're tracking with me, you may be wondering, "Why did this fellow, Asaph, write a psalm like this to be sung at a festival like that? Was he some sort of spoilsport? Joy sapper? When everybody is having a joyous time celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles, why have them sing a song that focuses on the dismal record of disobedience of God's people?"

It seems to me that the answer is that the psalmist realized that it is possible for God's people to go through the motions of religion outwardly, and yet inwardly to have hearts that are stubborn, self-willed, and disobedient to the Lord God. The psalmist is simply saying, "Yes, come, rejoice, and celebrate the feast. But in your rejoicing, remember the past. Remember what might have been, if only God's people had obeyed. And let that remembrance strike a solemn note in your rejoicing, so that you do not repeat their mistake."

As we examine the psalm, we need to keep this historical setting before us. It's possible for any of us to come and sing praises to God and go through all the outward motions of religion, and yet to be living in total disobedience to our God. The psalmist is saying, "Beware! The way to avoid a wasted life is to walk in obedience to God."

As we stated earlier, the background of the psalm appears to be the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:34-44), which reminded the people of God's law and constituted the feast of ingathering (Exodus 23:16). The psalm is composed of three distinct parts. First, a hymn (verses 1-5a), calls the people to praise God and reminds them of the ordination of the Feast of Tabernacles and its relationship to the Exodus (verses 3-5). Next an abrupt change in (verse 5b), introducing a prophetic oracle unto the psalm. A prophet may well have come forward at this point in the ceremony and delivered the oracle contained in (verses 6-16). It recalls the miraculous deliverance at the Exodus (verses 6-12) and applies its significance to the present: trust the Lord and see His deliverance (verses 13-16). The verbs of this latter section should be retranslated to reflect a wish for the future, not for the past: "Oh that my people would hearken unto me", and so on.

The psalmist called the people together to worship the Lord, but then the Lord's messenger received a special message from God and delivered it to the people. The occasion of this psalm was intended to be used in the celebration of one of the feasts of Israel, most likely the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles. After the call to worship (verses 1-5), the psalm presents a message from God in the first person (verses 6-16). This oracle pleads with Israel to "listen" to Him (verse 13), so that He might pour out on the nation the blessings of the covenant.

The strength of Israel, who, by strength of hand, and a mighty arm, brought Israel out of Egypt. God protected and upheld them in the wilderness, and brought them to, and settled them and established them in the land of Canaan.

Psalm 81:1 "Sing aloud unto God our strength: make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob."

And who is the strength of every true Israelite, from whom they have both their natural and spiritual strength. So that they can exercise grace, perform duty, bear afflictions, withstand temptations, fight with and conquer enemies, and hold on and out unto the end. And therefore, have reason to sing the praises of God with great fervor, zeal, and affection.

"Make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob": Or Israel, being the God that had made a covenant with them, had chosen them for his peculiar people, and had redeemed them out of the house of bondage, and bestowed peculiar favors upon them. And therefore, were under obligation to show forth his praise vocally and audibly, and with strong expressions of joy. And the spiritual Israel of God much more so, who have an interest in the covenant of grace, and share in electing, redeeming, and calling grace. By all which he appears to be their God and Father, in a special sense.

What I find so interesting is that people get excited about ball games and other worldly things, and they think it is a sin for us to get excited about God. In the verse above, we see excitement and joy. Sing aloud to God who is our strength. Notice, that noise does not bother God. I feel He would want us to be loud and noisy as we worship Him.

Luke 9:26 “For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory, and [in his] Father’s, and of the holy angels.”

This passage of scripture, if nothing else, gives us ample reason to sing praises to our God publicly. We should not ever cease praising our God. We should be a sweet, sweet sound in His ear. In song, it is so easy to tell God how much you love Him. Have you ever thumbed through and read the beautiful hymns that men and women of God have written under the anointing of the Holy Spirit of God? They are so beautiful, and soon you will be crying. Singing is a beautiful way of expressing what you want to say to God, when you can’t think of the words or anything to say orally. I believe worshipful singing brings your spirit in close contact with God. Question – What is your personal song to unto God? Mine is I love you; I love you; I love you Lord today because you cared for me in such a special way.... What is your personal song unto the Lord?

Psalm 81:2 “Take a psalm, and bring hither the timbrel, the pleasant harp with the psaltery.”

“Harp”: A musical instrument with a long and narrow neck resembling a guitar. This word is rendered as *lute* by some translations.

It was the custom of the Jewish people to sing Psalms in their worship. Many churches today have begun to sing the Psalms in the Bible. The song that the Lord and His disciples sang just after the Lord’s supper probably was a Psalm. The psaltery was like a lyre. This is saying to play beautiful music with your song.

Verses 3-5: The psalmist calls Israel to once again celebrate the “New Moon” festival, which was a memorial of Israel’s deliverance from “Egypt” (Num. 29:6; 1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:4).

Psalm 81:3 “Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day.”

“New moon ... time appointed”: The seventh month of Israel’s year (Tishri; Sept. / Oct.) culminated the festival year with a succession of celebrations. The month began with the blowing of the trumpets, continued with the Day of Atonement on the tenth day, and celebrated the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles, on the fifteenth day when the moon was full. The Feast of Tabernacles praised God for His care in the wilderness wanderings, and pointed to the coming kingdom (Matt. 17:1-4).

The blowing of the trumpet was to alert the Israelites to the sacred month. The trumpet was blown on the beginning of feast days as well. Jesus will blow the silver trumpet of redemption when we are called to meet Him in the air. There were appointed times to blow the trumpet. Each time the trumpet blew, it was for a specific purpose. It must be blown a specific way to let the people know what they were to do. One of the times it was

blown was for the gathering of the people for worship. It was also, blown to call them to war. It must give off a certain sound for each occasion. Look, with me, at the following Scripture about the blowing of the trumpet.

1 Corinthians 14:8 “For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?”

You can see why it was important to blow it correctly.

Psalm 81:4 “For this [was] a statute for Israel, [and] a law of the God of Jacob.”

It was not a piece of will worship, or device of the children of Israel, but was of divine institution; that the Passover should be kept at the time it was. And that the trumpets should be blown on the new moon, or first of Tisri. And that the Feast of Tabernacles should be kept on the fifteenth of the same month.

“And a law of the God of Jacob”: And therefore, to be observed by Jacob’s posterity. The law for the one is in (Exodus 12:18), and for the other is in (Lev. 23:24). And so, all the ordinances of Christ, and of the Gospel dispensation, are to be regarded on the same account, because they are the statutes and appointments of God. And the Feast of Tabernacles is particularly put for them all (Zech. 14:16).

In the books of Leviticus and Numbers, the laws and statutes concerning the blowing of the trumpet are given.

Psalm 81:5 “This he ordained in Joseph [for] a testimony, when he went out through the land of Egypt: [where] I heard a language [that] I understood not.”

“Language ... understood not”: Either the psalmist heard a message, the meaning of which he did not grasp, in which case this message is presented as an oracle in the following verses: or, the psalmist is referring to the Egyptian language, which the Jews did not know.

Possibly the reason Joseph is mentioned here is because it was Joseph who preserved the family of Jacob (Israel), in Egypt. Another thought is that Joseph’s descendants, who were part of the 10 tribes that broke off, are to keep the blowing of the trumpets as well as Judah who remained. Joseph was not an Egyptian when he went to live there. Perhaps that is what is meant by a language that I understood not.

Psalm 81:6 “I removed his shoulder from the burden: his hands were delivered from the pots.”

“Hands ... delivered ... pots”: The Israelites in Egypt were forced to carry bricks and clay in baskets.

God, with His Mighty Hand, removed the burden of slavery in Egypt from the Israelites. The mention of the pots, perhaps, has to do with the mortar they made for bricks. They were in hard bondage, until the Lord delivered them from Egypt.

Psalm 81:7 “Thou calledst in trouble, and I delivered thee; I answered thee in the secret place of thunder: I proved thee at the waters of Meribah. Selah.”

“Secret place of thunder”: Probably a reference to God’s presence on Mt. Sinai at the giving of the law (compare Exodus 19:16; 20:18).

“Waters of Meribah”: Meribah, which means “strife” or “dispute”, marked places where Israel tempted God (compare Exodus 17:1-7; Num. 20:1-13; Psalms 95:8; 106:32).

The Scriptures say that God heard the cry of the family of Jacob, and He delivered them. We could go through the account of their exodus from Egypt, and we will find time and time again when God heard their cry for help, and He helped them. Such as at the Red Sea. God spoke to them at the foot of the mountain, and it sounded like thunder. We have all been (in a sense), to the waters of Meribah. Sometimes when we have had trials and tribulations, we have not been successful in having enough faith to overcome the problem. If we do not find enough faith to overcome the problem, then we must pass by Meribah again, until we do have enough faith to overcome. Selah again, means stop and pause and think on these things.

Verses 8-16: We cannot look for too little from the creature, nor too much from the Creator. We may have enough from God if we pray for it in faith. All the wickedness of the world is owing to man’s willfulness. People are not religious, because they will not be so. God is not the Author of their sin, he leaves them to the lusts of their own hearts, and the counsels of their own heads; if they do not well, the blame must be upon themselves. The Lord is unwilling that any should perish. What enemies’ sinners are to themselves! It is sin that makes our troubles long, and our salvation slow. Upon the same conditions of faith and obedience, do Christians hold those spiritual and eternal good things, which the pleasant fields and fertile hills of Canaan showed forth. Christ is the Bread of life; he is the Rock of salvation, and his promises are as honey to pious minds. But those who reject him as their Lord and Master, must also lose him as their Savior and their reward.

Psalm 81:8 “Hear, O my people, and I will testify unto thee: O Israel, if thou wilt hearken unto me;”

Of himself, his being, and perfections. What he was unto them, had done for them, and would do for them, as in the following verses. Or “testify in thee”, bear witness to their spirits, that they were his people, and he was their God. This is a witness which the people of God have in themselves. It is the inward testimony of the Spirit. Besides which, there is the outward testimony of the word, and which also may be here meant; for it may be rendered.

“I will give a testimony to thee”: The law is a testimony of the will of God to his people, what he would have done, or not done. And the Gospel is a testimony of his grace, and the whole word testifies of Christ, his person, offices, obedience, sufferings, and death. Some render it, “testify against thee”, for their murmurings, rebellion, and idolatry (as in Psalm 50:7). And they are called upon to hear the voice of God in his word, and in his providences, being his people. And as such he addresses them, which bespeaks interest in them, affection to them, and an acknowledgment of them, and carries in it a reason why they should hear him.

“O Israel, if thou wilt hearken unto me”: This explains who are meant by the Lord’s people, Israel. The posterity of Jacob, a chosen and special people, who are exhorted not only to hear, but to hearken and to obey. Suggesting, it would be well with them, if they did as in (Psalm 81:13). And some take these words to be a wish, as there; “Israel, O that thou wouldest hearken unto me” (see Isa. 48:18).

Trials and tribulations will quickly go away, if we learn that our help is in the Lord. God is speaking. Pay close attention to what He is saying. Do not be like those who have ears and do not hear. Hear and understand. God will give us the answer if we will just let Him. God is still talking to His people today, most of us are not listening.

Psalm 81:9 “There shall no strange god be in thee; neither shalt thou worship any strange god.”

Or in the midst of thee, owned and worshipped as God. Or in thine heart, for whatever engrosses the affection, or a man puts his trust and confidence in, that he makes his god, and is a strange one. Thus, if any friend or relation, father or mother, wife or children, are loved more than God, they are set up as such in his place. Thus the epicure, that seeks the gratification of his carnal lusts, makes his belly his god. And the covetous man his money, in which he trusts, and therefore is called an idolater. And the self-righteous man his righteousness, on which he depends for salvation. Hence, we read of idols set up in the heart, from which they are disengaged in conversion, and kept from (Ezek. 14:7).

“Neither shall thou worship any strange god”: Only the Lord God is to be worshipped (Matt. 28:19), and there is but one God. Though this is to be understood not to the exclusion of the Son and Spirit, who are with the Father the one God, and to be worshipped equally with him, and are (see Matt. 28:19).

This is the first of the ten commandments of God. God had defamed all the gods of Egypt with the plague. These people, who had known all of this, should have no problem carrying this out. Anything or anyone, that you elevate above God can be a false god. Not only physical Israel needs to heed this, but spiritual Israel as well.

Psalm 81:10 “I [am] the LORD thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt: open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it.”

The marvelous promise, “open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it”, has sometimes been used to wrongly justify a lack of preparation, as in, all they have to do is open their mouths and the Lord will give them a message. The true meaning, however, is that If God’s people come to Him with great petitions, He will grant them (103:5).

The first part of the verse above leaves no doubt at all who He is. What will God fill their mouth with? His Word.

Matthew 4:4 “But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.”

We are cautioned to eat the Word. If we are filled with the Word of God (Jesus Christ), we are filled with Jesus.

Galatians 2:20 “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless, I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.”

Psalm 81:11 “But my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me.”

Neither as exhorting them to the above duties, nor as promising the above favors; would neither hearken to the voice of the law, nor to the voice of the Gospel. But were like the deaf adder, which stops its ear to the voice of the charmer, charming never so wisely.

“And Israel would none of me”: Would not attend to his word, acquiesce in his will, nor delight themselves in him, and in his worship and service. Would have none of his salutary doctrines, or wholesome reproofs, nor of his laws and government. Would not have him to reign over them, nor to be their Savior, though the only one, and there is none beside him. Though the chiefest good, and from whom all good things come, and is the portion and exceeding great reward of his people (see Prov. 1:25).

If you are not filled with God’s Word, then you do not know the will of God in your life. Decisions made in your carnal mind that please your flesh, will not please God.

Psalm 81:12 “So I gave them up unto their own hearts’ lust: [and] they walked in their own counsels.”

Sometimes God gave them up, when they sinned, into the hands of the Moabites, or Ammonites, or Philistines, or other neighboring nations, for their chastisement. But to be delivered up unto their own hearts’ lust is worse than that. Nay, than to be delivered to Satan. Salvation may be the consequence of that, but damnation of this. And yet it is a righteous judgment; for as men like not to retain God in their knowledge, it is but just with him to give them up to vile affections, to a reprobate mind. To do things not convenient (Rom. 1:24). There is nothing men are more desirous of than to have their hearts’ lusts.

And there is no greater judgment can befall them than to be left to the power of them, which must unavoidably issue in their ruin here and hereafter.

“And they walked in their own counsels”: Which were bad; after the imagination of their own evil hearts, and not after the counsels and directions of God in his word, and by his servants.

If we are not full of the Word of God, then we have a wicked heart. Walking in their own counsels means that they did what was pleasing to their flesh.

Psalm 81:13 “Oh that my people had hearkened unto me, [and] Israel had walked in my ways!”

This might have been expected from them, as they were his professing people. And it would have been to their advantage if they had hearkened to him, as well as it would have been well pleasing to him. For that is what is designed by this wish, which does not express the purposing will of God. For who hath resisted that? If he had so willed, he could have given them ears to hear. But his commanding will, and what is his approving one: to hearken to him is not only to hearken to what he commands, but to what he approves of. It is the good and acceptable will of God that men should hearken to the declarations of his will in the law, and to the declarations of his grace in the Gospel. And indeed it is the voice of Christ, the Angel of God’s presence. Who went before the children of Israel in the wilderness, which they were to hearken to and obey, that is here meant (see Exodus 23:20; Heb. 3:6).

“And Israel had walked in my ways”: Which he marked out and directed them unto, meaning his ordinances and commandments. Which to walk in, as it denotes progress and continuance, and supposes and requires life and strength, so it is both pleasant and profitable.

I say one more time, you cannot walk in God’s ways, unless you know what those ways are. The thing that troubles me about this is, God calls them (my people). To be Christian in name only is a very dangerous thing. We may call Him my God, but if we do not do the will of God, we are not His. We cannot do the will of God, until we know what that will is. Read and study your Bible, let God fill you with His Word, so that you will know what God’s will is for you. Obey God’s Word, then you can truthfully call Him MY GOD.

Psalm 81:14 “I should soon have subdued their enemies, and turned my hand against their adversaries.”

“Soon have subdued their enemies”: One of the blessings of obedience promised to Israel in the Mosaic Covenant was victory over its enemies (compare Num. 33:52-56; Deut. 6:16-19; 7:16-24).

God loved them enough to bring them out of bondage in Egypt. He removed their enemy before them, until they became unfaithful to Him. He will bring us out of Egypt (the world), but we must have no other gods before HIM.

Psalm 81:15 “The haters of the LORD should have submitted themselves unto him: but their time should have endured for ever.”

Or, “lied unto him”. Feignedly submitted to him, flattered him, pretended friendship to him, and entered into a league with him. Either Israel, mentioned in (Psalm 81:13), our God, whom and whose worship and people they hated. As every natural man is a hater of God, and all that is good, and enmity itself unto him. But these shall all submit to Christ, sooner or later, in one way or another. And acknowledge him Lord, and that he is superior to them, and themselves not a match for him.

“But their time”: The time of his people. They would have continued to be a happy and a flourishing nation.

“Should have endured for ever”: Perpetually, as long as they continued to be obedient. If a nation were obedient to the will of God; if it wholly obeyed his laws; if it countenanced by statute no form of sin; and if it protected no iniquity. If it was temperate, just, virtuous, and honest, there is no reason why its institutions should not be perpetual, or why it should ever be overthrown. Sin is, in all cases, the cause of the ruin of nations, as it is of individuals.

They could have repented and come to God. They would have received everlasting life in the process. Christians, this is speaking to us. We must obey God and receive His blessings. The penalty for sin is death, but the gift of life is in believing in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Each person must choose sin and death, or life in Jesus Christ.

Psalm 81:16 “He should have fed them also with the finest of the wheat: and with honey out of the rock should I have satisfied thee.”

“Honey out of the rock”: This phrase was first used by Moses in his song of praise (Deut. 32:13). Though honey is sometimes found in the clefts of rocks, the intent of the figure here is more likely to valuable food provided from unlikely places.

“Wheat” and “honey” are symbols of enjoyment and prosperity. “Honey out of the rock” could mean wild honey or, more probably, honey supplied miraculously, like the water from the rock in the desert (Exodus 17:6).

The Great Shepherd knows where the good grass is and feeds His sheep with the finest. When God’s people follow Him and obey Him, there is a wonderful reward awaiting them. They will have access to the tree of Life. Look with me at the provisions that have been made for the true believer in Christ.

Revelation 22:1-5 “And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.” “In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, [was there] the tree of life, which bare twelve [manner of] fruits, [and] yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree [were] for the healing of the nations.” “And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him.” “And they shall see his face; and his name [shall be] in their foreheads.” “And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever.”

Christians, read God’s Book every day and store it in your heart. God’s desire is for you to live with Him in heaven. Do the will of God for your life, and you will not miss your reward.

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