

Advent Psalms | Longing for the Humble King

“Restore Us, O Lord of Hosts”

Psalm 80

12.3.23

For the choir director; set to El Shoshannim; Eduth. A Psalm of Asaph. Oh, give ear, Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock; You who are enthroned above the cherubim, shine forth! ² Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up Your power And come to save us! ³ O God, restore us And cause Your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved.

⁴ O LORD God of hosts, How long will You be angry with the prayer of Your people? ⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears, And You have made them to drink tears in large measure. ⁶ You make us an object of contention to our neighbors, And our enemies laugh among themselves. ⁷ O God of hosts, restore us And cause Your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved.

⁸ You removed a vine from Egypt; You drove out the nations and planted it. ⁹ You cleared the ground before it, And it took deep root and filled the land. ¹⁰ The mountains were covered with its shadow, And the cedars of God with its boughs. ¹¹ It was sending out its branches to the sea And its shoots to the River. ¹² Why have You broken down its hedges, So that all who pass that way pick its fruit? ¹³ A boar from the forest eats it away And whatever moves in the field feeds on it.

¹⁴ O God of hosts, turn again now, we beseech You; Look down from heaven and see, and take care of this vine, ¹⁵ Even the shoot which Your right hand has planted, And on the son whom You have strengthened for Yourself. ¹⁶ It is burned with fire, it is cut down; They perish at the rebuke of Your countenance. ¹⁷ Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand, Upon the son of man whom You made strong for Yourself. ¹⁸ Then we shall not turn back from You; Revive us, and we will call upon Your name. ¹⁹ O LORD God of hosts, restore us; Cause Your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved.

Today, we begin a short Advent Series preparing us for the celebration of Christmas. We're using five *Psalms* suggested in *The Common Lectionary* – a schedule of Scripture passages read all over the world in churches as a reading and worship plan.

This *Eightieth Psalm* is very likely from around the time we've been reading on Sunday mornings in *The Book of Kings*. After Elijah and Elisha and after 200 years of a whole society's blatant rejection of the God of Israel, 200 years of spiritual adultery where Israel worshiped idols (sometimes employing the sacrifice of children) finally God said "Enough!" How many marriages could survive 200 years of unfaithfulness?

It turns out, God's patience and restraint are uniquely durable... BUT... NOT unlimited.

And now that God's patience has reached that limit, the devastated Church in the North is reduced to tears (5 & 6) and wallowing in confusion, questioning *WHY WOULD GOD DO THIS?* The people asked

Moses in the Exodus, *“Have you brought us into the desert to kill us?”* (Exo 17.3 et al) and this Psalm sort of parallels that question in vv. 4 and 11 – *“How long will you be angry and why have you stopped protecting us? We’ve become a bad advertisement for YOU, like ‘WOW, if THAT’S how God cares for His people – I don’t want to BE His people!’ And, LORD, You don’t seem to care!”*

That’s the question: why doesn’t God keep His people from decline, difficulty and sometimes from outright ruin – EVEN WHEN, God’s apparent neglect becomes the reason why God’s enemies laugh at God’s people, God’s purposes in the world and even at God Himself? It’s like the writer is asking, *“Lord, aren’t You embarrassed? Isn’t OUR failure a bad reflection on YOU? Aren’t all the pagan nations saying, ‘Whoa! I’m glad I don’t have THEIR God – He evidently can’t care for His people or He’s so weak that He can’t protect them! His house is a wreck!’”*

If you’ve ever suffered real devastation and worried about HOW your Non-Christian relatives will now be reinforced in their unbelief – *“Wow! What good is it to be a Christian if THIS is what happens!?”* If you’ve even wondered whether YOUR life is a good endorsement for Christianity because you’ve NOT had an easy go of it... THIS is a Psalm for YOU!

**I want to look at: 1) The Disorientation of Decline and Devastation
2) The Reasonable Request for Restoration
3) The Firm Feel of Freedom**

The Northern tribes evidently did NOT believe the Prophets, Elijah and Elisha (and many others whom God sent). And finally God awakens the sleeping giant, Assyria, to come against Israel as God will do again with Babylon against Jerusalem and the Southern Tribes over a century later.

AND the unfaithful bride is now wondering WHY God has allowed this. The Psalm is a lament, a complaint against God. It evidently originates in the North as the writer speaks of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, all tribes of the North.

Sometimes something so terrible happens that people, even those who never pray (as the saying goes, *“There are no atheists in a foxhole.”*), but sometimes people who are desperate enough cry out to God and even promise to serve Him or do great exploits for God. Reuben Feffer played by Ben Stiller has a date, they *“go back to her place”*. He suffers from *Irritable Bowel Syndrome*; uses her bathroom and... the toilet overflows – he cries out to God and promises to serve Him forever. Sometimes the pain, the fear, the panic of loss is acute, and people call out into the darkness for God to take away the pain and make everything better.

But in THIS Psalm there’s an awareness that, *“I brought this pain on myself”*. It could be that playing fast and loose with the truth drives a person’s friends away and he/she becomes lonely – the result of lying.

Or a person becomes addicted to food (eating not out of hunger but for comfort) or to pornography (and loses the ability to be truly intimate with another person). Or a gambler loses control and incurs gigantic debt or worse.

The point is, most of the time the pain comes from the vice itself.

But sometimes the pain is unrelated to the vice OR the person doesn't make the connection, and only gradually does he/she see that, "Maybe God is getting my attention." C.S. Lewis famously said that God *"whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."* (*The Problem of Pain*; Harper, pp. 88-89).

But for THIS writer, there's another level – he not only feels the pain personally and goes on to see it as a spiritual consequence, but he sees it as coming from and directed by God Himself. *"How long will YOU be angry with our prayers? ... YOU fed us with tears... Why have YOU broken down its hedges?"*

And then, another level, deeper still: "this is NOT simply about ME but US! The end of v. 2 says, "come to save US! You're angry with OUR prayer... You make US an object of ridicule... Cause Your face to shine on US..."

He's seeing that God's people are suffering. Something bad has happened to Israel, to Joseph, to God's Church/people... God's MOVEMENT is floundering at best and flagging at worst. The nation with whom God entered into COVENANT is in grave disrepair. The MISSION OF GOD IS IN DECLINE and IN REAL DEVASTATION and God could stop it... but what's so perplexing and unfathomable is that GOD is evidently CAUSING THE DEVASTATION!" Others asked the same question.

And here, the psalm-writer knows that God is almighty. He's "God of hosts" meaning God of the armies of heaven. He has all the powers at His disposal. He controls the forces of nature, the minds of the kings, the multitude of angels *"and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands"* (Rev. 5.11). He commands all supernatural beings; principalities and powers and thrones and dominions – these are ALL at God's beck and call. "He's ABLE but NOT WILLING to help us... He's sacrificing His own cause!"

Of course, God's cause is people. He's saving the world and using the people of Israel to represent Him AND THE REAL TRAGEDY IS: THEY ARE ONLY MISREPRESENTING HIM. He is faithful, they are unfaithful. He is holy, they are common. He is righteous, they are corrupt and evil. He is loving; they are selfish. And God simply WON'T perpetuate that lie – He WILL have a faithful, holy, righteous, loving people to represent Him in the world.

So, the poet, feeling the profound disorientation of decline and devastation is now getting reoriented to see the situation as God sees. He embarks on a reasonable request for restoration. He is dealing with the True God – not a genie in a bottle or a force trapped in a statue, but the King enthroned above the cherubim – the God who is the Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

This is the God who shepherded Jacob all his life (Gen 48.15) *the Shepherd of Israel who led Joseph like a flock* (v. 1).

The poet issues like 14 requests in this brief psalm. Put all the requests together and he's basically asking for God to restore. Shine forth, stir up Your power, come to save us, RESTORE US.

I called it a reasonable request because the poet now sees – this is NOT simply my personal pain – this is God's mission to save us and through us to save the world. Our corporate character does NOT match God's character. WE NEED GOD TO SHEPHERD US!

And it's NOT like He hasn't done it before. "LORD, we need NOW what You did for us in the past..." Then he uses the second major metaphor: "*You (LORD) removed a vine from Egypt. You saved us from centuries of slavery. You brought up to the Land of Promise and cleared the Land – drove out the people squatting on our Promised Land... and THEN you cultivated the Vine and You grew us until we filled the Land; we were WILDLY fruitful and multiplied!* (Remember Solomon!)"

But NOW, because we turned from You and we COULD NO LONGER represent You – we were spiritual cheaters, unfaithful to our Husband, our Shepherd, our Gardener – You broke down our walls and invited the Gentile Nations – like wild boars in a vineyard – to trample and devastate us.

The only One who can fix and restore us is YOU. We now see what we need is actually a WHO – we need YOU to shine, to give us Your presence, Your FACE. We need You to come to us and give us another king but better than the rest... "*Take care of this Vine, this shoot of Your right hand, this son (15) whom You have strengthened for Yourself, our Champion. Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand, Upon the son of man whom You made strong for Yourself.*"

And looking back on this prayer for the restoration – NOT simply of our wellbeing and comfort but our entire life's mission, the *Miseo Dei* – the Mission of God to save the world, looking back we see that God did indeed shine forth. There was a Light that shined in the darkness: "*The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.* (Jn. 1.5)... *the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.* (Jn. 1.9-10) "*Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, 'I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.'*" (Jn. 8.12)

Later, St Paul would write, *"For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."* (2 Cor. 4.6) The prayer of Psalm 80 was only answered when God Himself shined His presence, His face (panim = פָּנִים) in the Person of a Human Baby. That Baby is the incarnation of God.

He is the True Benjamin, the Son of the Right Hand – Hebrews 1.3 *"When He had made purification of sins, He sat down AT THE RIGHT HAND of the Majesty on high..."* (Heb. 1.3) He is (v. 17) *"the Son of Man whom (God the Father) made strong for Himself."* He's the Last Adam, the One who defeated the serpent instead of believing his lies.

He is the True Vine who says to the TWELVE New Tribes in the New Israel, *"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing"* (Jn. 15.5). Jesus Christ IS the Face of God.

So ... why... if we have God's attention, if we have His presence and His face, *the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."* Why IS the American Church continuing to decline? Has the salt lost its savor? Has the Light been hidden under a basket? Have we so lost our position in this society that we are become unable to represent God to a culture that (like ancient Nineveh) *"doesn't know its right hand from its left"* (Jonah 4.11)?

What would restoration LOOK like for the Modern Christian Church in the US and the Western World? Could God *"revive us again"*? Well, the answer is YES.

We too must become reasonable, to get aligned with God's mission. It's NOT about the economy or the bad people all around who want to take away our rights and our sanity... It's about God. He's calling us to know Him in the face of Christ, to see in Jesus, the Son of Man, all we need for life and godliness.

God is calling us to see ourselves as *"US"* – not just me and me and you and you but *"US"* – the Body and the Flock whom God leads.

When we abide in the True Vine, (v. 18) *"Then we shall not turn back from You..."* It's NOT about our willpower to obey – it's about the freedom to obey that comes by faith in Jesus Christ (*"the obedience of faith"* – Romans 1.5, 16.26) We will find IN Jesus Christ and IN the present work of the Spirit the will to live by grace and truth and love. We'll live in ongoing repentance and trust (Isa CH 30) *"For thus the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, has said, "In repentance and rest you will be saved, in quietness and trust is your strength."* (15)

It's MORE than a desire to hold on to our way of life; it's a desire that flows through the Vine like sap. It's the will of God and His Kingdom that puts God's Mission before us daily, that engages our prayers and

that expresses the yearning of God’s Spirit for us so that we daily live, daily pray on behalf of the whole Church in all the world, “O LORD God of hosts, restore us; cause Your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved.”

Q U O T E S

Oh, God, I beg you please. If you make this water go down, I will sit at your feet, and I will serve you for all eternity... I’ll adopt a Somalian kid, or I’ll work in Calcutta, or I’ll... Please just make the water go down...

– Ben Stiller (“Reuben Feffer”) from the 2014 movie,
Along Came Polly, directed by John Hamburg

The data they do have, from 50 years of research by the General Social Survey and Pew’s own survey of 15,000 adults in 2019, indicates the current trend is inexorable. People are giving up on Christianity. They will continue to do so. And if you’re trying to predict the future religious landscape in America, according to Pew, the question is not whether Christianity will decline. It’s how fast and how far.

In a new study out today, Pew projects that in 2070, Christians will likely make up less than half the US population... If the rate of switching continues to accelerate, as it has since the 1990s, the percent calling themselves Christians will drop to 35.

“It is possible,” the report says, “that events outside the model—such as war, economic depression, climate crisis, changing immigration patterns or religious innovation—could reverse the reverse current religious switching trends.”

Revival could happen. There’s just nothing in the current data that indicates it will.

– Daniel Silliman, “Decline of Christianity Shows No Signs of Stopping”, *Christianity Today*, (September 13, 2022)

The most wise, righteous, and gracious God often leaves, for a season, His own children to various temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to correct them for their former sins, or to reveal to them the hidden strength of evil and deceitfulness in their hearts, that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a closer and more constant dependence for their sustenance upon Himself, and to make them more vigilant against all future opportunities of sin, and for a number other just and holy purposes.

– *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (CH 5; Article 5; 1647)