

Advent 2019

*“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! “May they be secure who love you!””
(Psalm 122:6 ESV)*

*“May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice!”
(Psalm 72:2 ESV)*

*“Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.”
(Psalm 146:3 ESV)*

*“Restore us, O LORD God of hosts! Let your face shine, that we may be saved!”
(Psalm 80:19 ESV)*

Restore Us O God! (Or A Prayer For People In Darkness)

December 22nd, 2019

Psalm 80

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning church! So good to see you. Open your Bibles please to Psalm 80; that’s on page 491 in your pew Bibles. This is now the fourth Sunday in Advent and we have been looking at the Advent Psalms. As you know very well by now, the word “advent” means “coming” – and so these Psalms have all had to do – in some way – with the coming of the King.

Now I’ll let you in on a little secret. Generally speaking, in the first two weeks of Advent all the readings more obviously refer to the Second Coming and in the last two weeks of Advent all the readings more obviously refer to the First Coming – which makes sense because Advent leads up to our celebration of Christmas. So this Psalm is supposed to make you think about Christmas. But I’m going to warn you off the top that you might need some help getting there. This is a pretty dark Psalm. It is a Song of Corporate Lament. It is a song for people in darkness but as I’m sure you know – that is exactly the song that people are singing just before the miracle of Christmas.

So hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning with the ascription and moving on to verse 1.

TO THE CHOIRMASTER: ACCORDING TO LILIES. A TESTIMONY. OF
ASAPH, A PSALM.

¹ Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.

² Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up your might and come to save us!

³ Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!

⁴ O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure.

⁶ You make us an object of contention for our neighbors, and our enemies laugh among themselves.

⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved!

⁸ You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.

⁹ You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.

¹⁰ The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches.

¹¹ It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River.

¹² Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?

¹³ The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.

¹⁴ Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine,

¹⁵ the stock that your right hand planted, and for the son whom you made strong for yourself.

¹⁶ They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your face!

¹⁷ But let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!

¹⁸ Then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name!

¹⁹ Restore us, O LORD God of hosts! Let your face shine, that we may be saved!
(Psalm 80:0–19 ESV)

Well – Merry Christmas! There you have it. You will be forgiven if you need a little help figuring out how and why this is an Advent Psalm.

But rest assured – it is.

In fact I think you could argue that this is the PERFECT Psalm for us to be reading in the days immediately prior to Christmas. Let me see if I can help you get there.

The first question we need to ask is a very obvious one:

1. What occasioned this prayer?

What in the world was going on in Israel that would cause a prayer like this to be written?

We get our first clue in the Ascription. If you have your Bible open look at the words that introduce the Psalm – now to be clear these are not titles added by an English editor – these words are in the Hebrew text so we are right to take them seriously. The Hebrew text of Psalm 80 begins with the words To The Choirmaster, according to lilies, a testimony of Asaph. So that means something – that’s important.

Now if you are a Bible reader you know that there were many Asaphs in the Bible – the original Asaph was appointed by David to oversee the worship of the temple but then it appears that “Asaph” became a title meaning something like “Chief Singer In The House of Lord”. So Asaph IS the Choirmaster and it appears that he wrote this Psalm during a time of national disaster. He talks about how the walls have been broken down and the people have been ravaged by enemies and their riches despoiled and their blood spilled – this is a full on CATASTROPHE and this Psalm is a prayer for God to SEE THAT and for God to come and SAVE THEM.

Most scholars associate this catastrophe was the invasion of the Empire of Assyria in the 8th century. In fact in the Greek translation of the Old Testament – the LXX actually adds that right into the ascription. It comes right out and says: “Concerning the Assyrians”. So this Psalm was likely written by the Chief Worship Leader in Jerusalem as he heard report after report from the refugees of the northern tribes fleeing southward before the onslaught of Assyria.

Assyria cut through northern Israel like a hot knife through butter. They destroyed town after town, city after city and they butchered everyone who stood in their way. Once they had pacified an area they would send the remaining people into slavery and exile to the four corners of their extensive domain.

That was the story being carried down into Jerusalem by these traumatized refugees streaming southward from all across the devastated north.

And so the Psalmist is trying to stir God to action. You can hear that in verses 1-2:

¹ Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.

² Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up your might and come to save us! (Psalm 80:1–2 ESV)

Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh – now why those three?

Two of them are northern tribes but one of them – Benjamin was a southern tribe – right next door to Jerusalem actually and thus an area not likely yet by the Assyrian invasion. Most scholars assume that the Psalmist is speaking poetically here. He is referring to the VANGUARD of the people of Israel: the front of the line.

Back in Numbers 2 the Bible outlined how the people of Israel should break camp when it was time for them to TRAVEL. It dictated which three tribes would go first. Numbers 2:17-24 says:

“Then the tent of meeting shall set out, with the camp of the Levites in the midst of the camps; as they camp, so shall they set out, each in position, standard by standard. ¹⁸ “On the west side shall be the standard of the camp of **Ephraim** by their companies, ²⁰ And next to him shall be the tribe of **Manasseh**, ²² Then the tribe of **Benjamin**, ... They shall set out third on the march.” (Numbers 2:17–24 ESV)

So those three tribes WENT FIRST. They were the sheep at the front of the herd – but now they have been DEVASTED and DECIMATED by an enemy.

The front of our column has just been swallowed by a dragon God! How in the world did this happen? You are the Shepherd of Israel!! It's your job to go before us! It's your job to lead us through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. It's your job to fight off the beasts who would maul us! Where are you God! Wake up! Rouse yourself and come to our defense.

That's what this Psalm is saying. This is a prayer of lament. It is part complaint and part plea for rescue.

So how was this prayer answered? That's the second thing we need to know.

2. How was this prayer answered?

Did God come and save his sheep from the beasts who were mauling them?

And the answer is YES and NO – but mostly no.

If you are doing the RMM Bible Reading journey then you already know that. The northern tribes were largely wiped out by the Assyrian invasion. A great many refugees did stream southward into Jerusalem and were eventually absorbed into the southern tribes.

The Assyrian army followed them right up to the Gates of Jerusalem.

But then of course the Assyrians made the huge mistake of mocking God. They didn't realize that God had actually permitted them to make it this far – the Psalmist understood that. He was confused by it – he was hurt by it, he was angered by it – but he understood it. He asked God in his prayer:

Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? (Psalm 80:12 ESV)

God you opened the door! You broke down our defenses! You let the Assyrians in! And now they have ruined and despoiled your people!

The Psalmist understood that – but the Assyrians didn't. They blasphemed the God of Israel at the Gates of Jerusalem and so God sent an Angel who devastated their army during the night. The Assyrians limped home – their king was assassinated and their empire shattered and the pieces consumed by their enemies.

So much for the Assyrians – but by that point the damage was done. The vineyard was destroyed – the northern half of it anyway. And the southern half was marching steadily towards a similar fate.

About a 100 years later another beast attacked the column.

This time it was the Empire of Babylon.

And once again God did not come to their rescue.

That's how this story ends:

“All the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations. And they polluted the house of the LORD that he had made holy in Jerusalem.

¹⁵ The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. ¹⁶ But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy.

¹⁷ Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged. He gave them all into his hand. ¹⁸ And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his princes, all these he brought to Babylon. ¹⁹ And they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels.

²⁰ He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia” (2 Chronicles 36:14–20 ESV)

That's how this story ends!

The column is attacked a second time and this defeat was even worse than the first. Many are killed, many are sent into exile. At the very end of the Old Testament a few – a remnant - have come back. There are a few pathetic refugees living in Jerusalem and they have built a new little temple – but it paled in comparison to the size and grandeur of the former. And the glory of the Lord – the cloud and the Presence of God – never did descend upon it.

They were alone.

They were vulnerable.

And they knew it.

So that's how this prayer was answered – at least in the short term.

With silence.

A long.

Revealing.

Silence.

So – how in the world does this Psalm relate to Christmas?

3. How does this prayer relate to Christmas?

Because so far – this has been the least Christmasy Psalm EVER.

But if you are a Bible reader you know exactly how this Psalm leads to Christmas – because in Matthew's Gospel the story of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ begins with these marvelous words:

“the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.” (Matthew 4:16 ESV)

Do you see that?

The Christmas story begins in the dark!

That is where we see the STAR.

And that is where we first hear of the coming of the King.

You see, the Gospel doesn't make any sense to people who don't know the truth of their situation. If you don't know the DARK – if you don't fear the enemy – if you haven't learned the cost and effect of sin – then you are not ready to celebrate Christmas.

You will twist it and diminish it and turn it into a sappy and sentimental Hallmark journey.

You will turn it into a punchline.

It will be nothing more to you than a reason to spend money you don't have on things you don't need.

“the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.” (Matthew 4:16 ESV)

That's why this Psalm is an Advent Psalm. Because it puts you in the place you need to be to see and celebrate the STAR of Christmas.

4. What's the point?

So what's the point?

How does this help us?

What is this Psalm saying to us?

We've read it – we've explained it – now how does it apply to us? That's the last question I want to wrestle with this morning.

I think the first take away for us ought to be this:

i. We often don't realize the sort of rescue that we really need

It's very clear that the Psalmist who wrote this prayer was looking for a particular type of rescue. He was worried about the Assyrians! He was worried about these hostile Empires that seemed to want to eat and destroy the people of Israel. He wanted a military Savior!

He wanted Messiah – you can see that in verse 17:

“But let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!” (Psalm 80:17 ESV)

The people were always looking for the Great Hero that God had promised. The Son of Man whom you have made strong for yourself! Send us that hero God! If ever we needed him – we need him now.

Matthew Henry expands upon this part of the prayer saying:

“Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand,” that king (whoever it was) of the house of David that was now to go in and out before them; “let thy hand be upon him, not only to protect and cover him, but to own him, and strengthen him, and give him success.”¹

Send us a warrior King like David – for there are giants on the side of the road!

¹Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 15772.

That's what they prayed for – and that's what they were still looking for in the time of Jesus. Do you remember in John 6 when people started to figure out who Jesus was? John 6:15 says:

“Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” (John 6:15 ESV)

There were still people in Israel in Jesus' day who didn't get it! They still thought that all they needed was a Warrior King.

They didn't understand what the real problem was. They didn't understand who the real enemy was.

So they prayed for the wrong things.

And they couldn't figure out why God wasn't answering their prayers. You can see that in the Psalm – verse 4:

O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
(Psalm 80:4 ESV)

Do you see that? The Psalmist addresses God as the LORD God of Hosts – Yahweh Sabaoth – God of Armies. He is saying – God! You have all the power of heaven at your disposal – why are you not helping us? I am praying to you and you are despising my prayer.

That's a pretty useful verse right there.

He understands that his prayer is not being well received in heaven.

He just doesn't know why.

It isn't that God CAN'T HELP – he's the God of armies!

And it isn't that he is unwilling to help – he recounts in his prayer the many times that God had helped them in the past. So why will you not help us now?

That's a good question.

Brothers and sisters – we are supposed to ask that question when our prayers do not receive the answer that we expect.

Surely the issue is not that the Lord's arm has been shortened. Surely the issue is not that he doesn't love you – so what in the world is going on?

This Psalm is saying that maybe you misidentified the problem and therefore maybe you have been praying for the wrong thing!

We do this all the time.

We pray: “O God help our young people not to leave the church!”

Well brothers and sisters, let's be honest, that's really is not a very good prayer. That is a prayer that reveals a very superficial understanding of our problem as God's people.

Maybe a better prayer would be: O God reveal to us our sin, our selfishness and our hypocrisy as a people!

Maybe that's a prayer that God will answer.

You see sometimes we have not because we ask not – but sometimes we have not because we ask wrongly.

And I think this Psalm is saying that more often than not, we ask wrongly because we underestimate the seriousness of sin.

ii. We often underestimate the devastating impact of sin

I think that's the second take away.

I love what the old Bible Commentator W.S. Plumer says here. He says:

“One of the great troubles of the Christian life is that we are naturally so much more affected and oppressed with natural than with moral evil, with our sufferings than with our sinfulness.”²

Did you catch that?

That's the trouble in the Christian life, he says. The fact that we are OBSESSED with our SUFFERING and indifferent to our SINFULNESS!

And that changes the way we pray – it RUINS the way we pray.

And of course, that is exactly what's going on in this Psalm – did it not feel odd to you to hear the Psalmist almost ACCUSING GOD of neglecting his duties? Did it not feel odd to you that there was absolutely NO MENTION OF THEIR SIN?

How exactly does a worship Leader in Israel ask the question:

“O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?”
(Psalm 80:4 ESV)

“Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?” (Psalm 80:12 ESV)

Are you kidding me? How can he not know the answer? Moses SAID – way back in Deuteronomy 30:15-18:

“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and

² W.S. Plumer, *Psalms*, (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 2016), 772.

his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess.”
(Deuteronomy 30:15–18 ESV)

If you obey me I will go before you God says!

But if you rebel – if you disobey – if you turn and worship the gods of the nations then I will leave you on your own. And you will face your demons in the dark.

The Psalmist did not yet understand that SIN was their ultimate problem.

And so he and his people had to learn that the hard way.

People often pray for the wrong things – because people often misidentify the real problem – which is why people so often misunderstand the true miracle and meaning of Christmas.

iii. Therefore we often misunderstand the true miracle and meaning of Christmas

You see – the first coming of Jesus occurred because we weren’t ready for the ultimate coming of Jesus!

Everybody wants the King! Everybody wants the Kingdom!

But nobody understands how COVERED THEY ARE -how SATURATED THEY ARE in the filth of apostasy and sin.

We just want to waltz into the Kingdom – AS WE ARE!

But the message of Christmas is that we’re not ready.

Do you see that?

The message of Christmas is actually a bit of a kick in the teeth. It is God saying: You are covered in sin and you look nothing like Jesus! You are not ready for the Kingdom of God!

Ho! Ho! Ho! Right? Stick that on a Christmas card.

That's a hard word – that's the bad news that prepares us for the Good News of Christmas. The Good News is that God isn't finished with us. The Good News is that God is committed to our restoration. The Good News is that God has moved – FINALLY and DECISIVELY - to answer the prayer of Psalm 80.

You see, delay is not denial.

God waited until we understood the true darkness and depravity of our defection. God waited until we discovered the true source of our suffering and affliction. God waited until we felt the true weight of our sin.

And then – he came.

The people in DARKNESS have seen a great light!

That's what JESUS IS!

Jesus is God in the flesh come to rescue you, restore you, scrub you down and dress you up so that you can receive the Kingdom.

That is the miracle of Christmas.

That is the answer to the prayer you never even thought to offer.

And if you know the truth about yourself – if you see the scum and the sin that you are wearing – then you know that you need that.

You know that Jesus is THE MUST HAVE GIFT this Christmas – just like the first Christmas – just like every Christmas; thanks be to God!

Let's pray together.