

“IF YOU WOULD BUT LISTEN TO ME”

I. Introduction

- A. The opening verses of Psalm 81 indicate that it was written for use on Israel’s religious feast days.
1. There were two main things that were in view during these celebrations.
 2. First, these were times of remembering the great deliverance at the time of the exodus, the deliverance by which the Lord brought Israel into existence as his holy nation.
 3. Second, these were times when God’s people gave thanks to him for his ongoing provision at key points during the agricultural year.
- B. Psalm 81 helps us to see the important connection between these two things.
1. God liberated his people from their bondage in Egypt in order that they might live under his blessing in a land flowing with milk and honey.
 2. But under the Mosaic covenant, that blessing was conditioned upon their faithfulness.
 3. We see this in this psalm by the repeated variations on the phrase, “O Israel, if you would but listen to me!”, and by the promises of blessing that are attached to that phrase.
 4. If Israel will keep God’s commandments, it will be as though they are opening their mouths wide so that God can fill them with good things.

5. If they will submit to God, he will feed them with the finest of the wheat and satisfy them with honey from the rock.
- C. Robert Godfrey has made the interesting observation that the phrase, “O Israel, if you would but listen to me!”, is in the central verse in the central psalm of the central Book of the psalter (Book 3).
1. In other words, this phrase stands at the very center of the book of Psalms.
 2. As we study this psalm today, we will consider why this is the case.

II. A Call to Holy Convocation (1-5a)

- A. The first section of Psalm 81 is a summons for God’s people to assemble in holy convocation.
1. Verse 1 is addressed to the people as a whole.
 2. Notice that they are exhorted to sing “aloud” to God.
 3. This makes it clear that this is a call to public worship.
 4. As important as private devotions and family worship are, they are not a substitute for gathering with the saints in public worship.
 5. Verse 1 also encourages God’s people to “shout for joy” in their worship.
 6. This reminds us that we are to be fully engaged in worship, offering sincere and fervent praise to our God.
- B. In the second verse, it is the Levites who are being addressed.
1. This verse is not saying that every individual worshipper should bring their tambourines, lyres, and harps to the temple.

2. The Levites were the ones who were responsible for providing musical accompaniment in Israel's public worship.
3. And verse 3 is addressed to Israel's priests, who were instructed to sound trumpets to summon the people to assembly on festal days. (see Num. 10)
4. The mention of the new moon and the full moon indicate that the feasts that are especially in view in this psalm are the ones that were held in the seventh month.
5. The new moon on the first day of the seventh month marked the beginning of the new year on Israel's ecclesiastical calendar.
6. This was celebrated as the Feast of Trumpets. (see Lev. 23:24)
7. The full moon on the fifteenth day of the seventh month marked the beginning of the Feast of Booths.
8. And in between those two celebrations, on the tenth day of the seventh month, was the Day of Atonement.
9. As verses 4 and 5 remind us, it was the Lord who commanded his people to gather for worship on these festal days.
10. While we do not have an elaborate ecclesiastical calendar under the new covenant, there is one God-given statute relating to public worship that remains in effect: the fourth commandment.
11. Our God calls us to covenant assembly each and every Lord's Day.

III. A Call to Covenant Faithfulness (5b-10)

- A. We turn now to the middle section of the psalm, which begins with the last line of verse 5.
 1. In these verses we see the Lord calling his people to covenant faithfulness.

2. He begins by reminding them of how he heard their cry for help when they were being oppressed in Egypt.
3. He set them free from that slavery.
4. And notice the detailed way in which this deliverance is described here.
5. God says that he relieved their shoulder of the burdensome yoke of their slavery.
6. He says that he set their hands free from the baskets that they were forced to carry in their state of bondage.
7. They were in sore distress when they called out to him to rescue them, and he answered.
8. The reason why God reminds them of this so vividly is because he wants to stir up gratitude in their hearts, knowing that gratitude fuels obedience.
9. If you want to be more thankful to the Lord, one of the best things that you can do is to think often about the things from which he has delivered you.
10. As a Christian, you have been set free from the miserable bondage of sin.
11. You have been transferred from the domain of darkness and brought into the kingdom of God's beloved Son.
12. You have been saved from the dreadful judgment that lies in store for the wicked on the last day.
13. Even death itself has been swallowed up in victory for you.
14. In light of these rich mercies, you ought to present your body to God as a living sacrifice, with thankfulness in your heart to God.

- B. God also reminds the Israelites of what took place after the exodus from Egypt, saying, "I answered you in the secret place of thunder; I tested you at the waters of Meribah."
1. The secret place of thunder is Mount Sinai, where the Lord delivered his law to the people through Moses.
 2. As for the name Meribah, this refers to something that took place before the Israelites came to Sinai.
 3. It points to the episode that is related in Exodus 17, when the Israelites quarreled with Moses because there was no water for them to drink in the place where they had set up camp.
 4. The Lord brought them to that place in order to test their faith, but they responded by putting the Lord to the test, demanding that he give them water right then and there.
 5. God brings this up in this psalm for a reason.
 6. He is reminding his people of the failures of their fathers because they are guilty of the same failures themselves.
 7. They have certainly not perfectly kept the law given at Sinai, nor have they passed the various tests of their faith.
- C. This is made clear in the admonishment that begins in verse 8, which begins with the words, "Hear, O my people."
1. This brings to mind the *shema*, the famous confession from Deuteronomy 6:4 that was memorized and recited by generation after generation of Israelites.
 2. Then the Lord says, "O Israel, if you would but listen to me!"
 3. God has spoken to his people in his Word.
 4. He has set forth the terms of the covenant.

5. He reminds them of this by paraphrasing the first of the Ten Commandments: "There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god."
6. Then he cites the preface to the Ten Commandments, which made it clear that the law was not given at Sinai as a means of salvation but as the rule to govern their lives as those whom God had already graciously delivered.
7. God did not give Israel the law in order to oppress them.
8. He gave it to them so that they could continue to live under his blessing in the land of Canaan.
9. This is what he means when he says, "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it."
10. He is telling his people that he is eager to pour out his goodness upon them, if only they will listen to his voice.

IV. The Tragedy of Unfaithfulness (11-16)

- A. This brings us to the final section of the psalm, which begins in verse 11.
 1. Here the focus is upon the tragedy of unfaithfulness.
 2. God says, "But my people did not listen to my voice."
 3. And he responded to this by giving them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels.
 4. This reminds us that it is not always a blessing to get what we want.
 5. Children might enjoy eating nothing but candy and soda every day of the week, but it would be not be good for them.
 6. They don't know what is best for them.

7. In the same way, sin disorders our desires and our thinking.
 8. Because of this, it is a dreadful thing for God to give people over to their stubborn hearts and their own counsels.
 9. Yet this is one of the ways that God punishes sin.
 10. The apostle Paul talks about this in Romans 1.
 11. This 'giving over' can be described as judicial abandonment.
 12. God punishes sin by letting people become more and more immersed in their sin, more and more under the control of their sin.
- B. The reason why this was so tragic for the people of Israel was because of what they were forfeiting by their covenant unfaithfulness.
1. If they had listened to God and walked in his ways, he would have subdued their enemies and turned his hand against their foes.
 2. He would have been an unending terror to all who stood opposed to them.
 3. He would have fed them, not with manna, but with the finest of the wheat.
 4. He would have satisfied them, not with mere water, but with honey from the rock.
- C. These were the things that the Lord wanted his people to remember as they gathered for their annual pilgrim feasts.
1. He wanted them to remember how he had delivered them from their slavery in Egypt.
 2. He wanted them to remember how they had been unfaithful to him by failing to listen to his voice.

3. Now, why do you suppose God stressed these things?
 4. Was it because he wanted the Israelites to do better than than their ancestors?
 5. Well, there certainly is a sense in which that is true.
 6. There is a genuine note of warning here, and we should heed this warning.
 7. However, if that was all that God intended, what hope would his people realistically have that things would go any differently for them than for those who had gone before them?
 8. Perhaps some of the Israelites thought that they would succeed where previous generations had failed, but they were wrong about that, at least at a corporate level.
 9. Eventually, the theocracy was brought to a tragic end because of Israel's failure to listen to God.
- D. The lament, "if you would but listen to me," was intended to call God's people's attention to their weakness.
1. It reminded them that they had to depend on God to be their strength.
 2. They were reminded of this in the opening verse of this psalm, as they were directed to sing to "God our strength."
 3. This was also a key idea in the previous psalm, which entreated the Lord to stir up his might to save his people, and which spoke of the son whom God made strong for himself.
 4. As we noted last week, Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of that son.

5. And in the same manner, Christ is the only one who perfectly listened to God's voice and who perfectly submitted to God's will.
 6. As Jesus said in John 6:38, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."
 7. Jesus succeeded where Israel and the rest of the human race failed.
- E. Because Christ was perfectly faithful, the blessings that are held forth in Psalm 81 are found in him.
1. Through faith in him, we are given victory over all our enemies — sin, the devil, the world, even death itself.
 2. Through faith in him, we are fed with the finest of food and satisfied with the sweetest of drink.
 3. As he says in John 6, "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." (John 6:49–51 ESV)
 4. This is why, when Jesus' divine glory was revealed to some of his disciples on the mount of transfiguration, God spoke these words from heaven: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." (Mt. 17:5)
 5. May God grant us the grace to do so always, for Jesus alone has the words of eternal life.