

Summer in the Psalms: Psalm 81
ABC 8/1/21

We're all familiar with what Jesus calls the foremost commandment: We're called to love God fully & completely, right (Dt 6:4-5; Mk 12:28-30)? But we also know how hard that can be. Thankfully God, in His wisdom, has planned for us to come together each week so we can be reminded of who He is & what He's done & praise Him together. Throughout Scripture we see times that God appointed for His people to come together. One such time for the nation of Israel was the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. It was an annual feast lasting 7 days when the people would praise God & remember His faithfulness & care for them during their wanderings in the wilderness. Num 10:10 speaks of their feasts like this: **in the day of your gladness & in your appointed feasts, & on the first days of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings, & over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; & they shall be as a reminder of you before your God. I am the LORD your God.** At the Feast of Tabernacles Israel was to live for a week in tents, huts, or booths to remember their wanderings in the wilderness & to remember that the Lord had given them the promised land & its yearly harvests (Lev 23:23-43). They were to remember their redemption from Egypt & God's protection & provision in the wilderness when they were on a 40 year camping trip. This was the most joyous of the Jewish feasts. The rabbis said that if you hadn't witnessed the celebration of this feast you didn't know what joy was.¹ Ps 81 was read at this feast. It begins with a call to worship, a call for the people to gather & praise God. But what becomes clear as it continues is that God isn't pleased with many of His people. They'd forgotten His faithfulness & disobeyed His commands. This psalm is a call for the people to remember their God, to listen to Him, & to repent of their unfaithfulness.

Before we get into it, notice that Ps 81 is the central psalm of the book. Not that it's at the numerical center of 150 psalms. But it's the central psalm in the central book, Book 3, of the Psalter. & at the center of Ps 81 are these words: **O Israel, if you would listen to Me!** (8). Israel's failure to listen was a failure of faith & of obedience. At the heart of the Mosaic covenant, God had commanded His

¹ JJ Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, II:96

people, **Hear, O Israel!** (Dt 6:4), & that's echoed here. In this psalm God laments over what might have been. He mourns over what He would have done for them & through them, if only they'd listened & obeyed Him.

1.Call to Reverence Vss 1-5 are a call to worship used at the Feast of Tabernacles (3). God had watched over His chosen people in Egypt & while they were nomads, wanderers in the wilderness (6-7). This is what was celebrated at this feast. The Jews would come together around Jerusalem & make temporary shelters & live in them to remind themselves of their days of being travelers in the desert. It was a reminder of how God had provided for them every step of their journey. This call to worship was to be responded to with exuberance & joy. Listen to the language of Asaph, the author: **1-3**.

The people of God are told to gather together joyfully in worship. They're told to revere their God which is a reflection of the rejoicing of their hearts. Their worship is to be with gladness of heart from all that they are, with all that they are, to their God for all that He is. Stop there & think for a moment: Was your singing this morning done joyfully? It's easy to get into a repetitive habit in which we regularly come to church, sing some songs we're not paying much attention to, listen to a Scripture reading we're not paying much attention to, hear a sermon we're not paying much attention to, sing another song without paying much attention, & go home without ever joyfully engaging God with our hearts & without ever listening to Him or giving Him the glory He deserves. The psalmist is calling on us all to worship God with all that we have for all that He is, & so we see these words: **sing for joy, shout joyfully, raise a song**. These verbs are all plural. These are activities God's people are to do together. Is that what you do, is that your attitude, when you come into the house of the Lord? Is it a real delight? Do you savor every single part of the service? Look at **vss 4-5ab**.

1st he says to worship God joyfully. That requires our delighting in God & freely & willingly giving to Him our reverence & worship. But now Asaph reminds us that worship is also a duty, something that's commanded of us. God commands us to worship. It's a **statute, an ordinance**, & God **established it**. This stresses the importance of gathering together as God's people to worship. But

He also asks us to worship willingly & joyfully. As creatures made by the living God, we owe Him our reverence & our worship. It's our duty but should be done willingly & joyfully. The Psalmist goes on & says, **I heard a language that I did not know** (5c). This has caused endless discussion, theories, & guesses throughout the centuries. What we do know is that they're being reminded of their time in Egypt & how God was there for them & how He brought them out of Egypt. In other words, he's reminding them they need to worship God & remember His great deliverances. The psalmist will elaborate on this in vss 6-7 & remind them how God provided for them. They needed this because Israel frequently failed to worship God as they should. Listen to Isaiah 1:

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah. "What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?" says the Lord. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams, & the fat of fed cattle. & I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts? Bring your worthless offerings no longer; your incense is an abomination to Me. New moon & Sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity & the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon festivals & your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me. I am weary of bearing them. So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; yes, even though you multiply your prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood" (10-15).

There is a disconnect between the commitment to their rituals but not to living it out daily. They worshiped God with their lips, but their lives said they didn't really worship God. & even though God commanded those new moons, Sabbaths, & festivals, He says, *I detest them*. Why? Because His people weren't coming & rejoicing worshipfully from their hearts. They were worshipping with their lips, but their lives said they didn't love Him. They weren't really revering God & it was seen in their lifestyles & priorities.

2. Call to Remember In vss 6-10 it tells us what they were to remember. God is speaking & says, **6-10.**

God's rebuke begins with a reminder of what He'd done in delivering the Jews from Egypt (6-7). The people called to Him in their distress & He'd heard & answered them. He lifted the burden from their shoulders & freed their hands from the baskets they carried bricks in for Pharaoh's building projects. Notice what God says, **I relieved, I rescued, & I answered**. God had seen them, cared, & answered. This is an echo of what God told Moses when He appeared to him at the burning bush:

I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, & have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, & to bring them up from that land to a good & spacious land, to a land flowing with milk & honey... (Ex 3:7-8).

The point here is that God's past love & care for Israel in the wilderness is a current reason for them to trust & worship Him now. God reminds them that He rescued them & answered their prayers. In Ex 2 we read that **God heard their groaning; & God remembered His covenant with Abraham, ... He took notice of them** & came to their rescue (24-25). But He also tests them in the wilderness to see if they'll trust Him. Everything that happened in their wanderings was a test of their faith. Everything in life is a test of our faith. God proves us, tests us, by prosperity & adversity, by joy & sorrow, by hunger & thirst, by sickness & health. Israel learned some things about herself even in the wilderness. She was impatient, untrusting, unbelieving, & not desiring God as their treasure above all else. But this is also for us. In 1 Cor 10 Paul takes us back to the wilderness & says, *Don't act like the children of Israel did in the wilderness* (1-11). What Israel went through wasn't just a test for them, not only something they should remember, it's something we should remember as well. We need to remember God's care of them in the wilderness & remember Israel's unfaithfulness & learn from it. Even though Israel was God's chosen people & He'd miraculously delivered them from Egypt, they continually sinned against Him (Ps 81:11). On 2 occasions, one early & one late in their wanderings, the Jews quarreled with Moses because there was no water (Ex 17:7; Num 20:13). Those places were named *Meribah*, which means *quarrel* or *strife*. Their quarrel wasn't with Moses but with God who'd led them into these places. After He'd done the greater miracle of delivering them from slavery in Egypt, couldn't they trust Him to do the lesser miracle of providing for their current needs? Before we condemn them, we must realize we do exactly the same thing. God has done the greatest thing for us in saving us from our slavery to sin. Can't we trust that He'll provide for our other needs as He's promised as well? All our grumbling & complaining about life & its struggles is really against our sovereign & saving God. **8**

The tragedy is ironic in that God calls Israel, **My people**. They belonged to Him & He claimed them as His own. Yet they wouldn't listen to Him nor walk in His ways. There's a sense of longing in God's desire to bless His people & do good for them. What does God say next? He quotes the 1st

of the 10 Commandments (9). This is at the heart of this psalm. How does God put it in Ex 20? **I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me** (2–3). This is the law above all laws, which Jesus called the 1st & greatest commandment: **Love the Lord your God with all your heart, & with all your soul, & with all your mind** (Mt 22:37–38). From this all the other commandments naturally follow. The importance of this for us is that this is also the greatest issue of our time & therefore also a critical command & warning that we need to hear. The great issue of life, isn't whether or not we worship a god, that is, whether or not we're religious rather than being atheists. The issue is whether we know the true God who's revealed Himself to us in history & in His Word, Old & NTs, & in the person of Jesus Christ, the living Word, & whether we listen to & obey Him. In other words, the great issue today, as always, is the veracity or falsity of the statement, **I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery** (Ex 20:2–3).² Is He your God? He hasn't brought us out of Egypt but He has delivered us out of **the house of slavery**. Is He your God?

Every 7 years at the Feast of Tabernacles the whole of the Law of God was read out loud. So what we're seeing here is just a snippet of what would've happened every 7th year. The people of God camped & the Law of God was read to them so they'd remember not only His providence over them in the wilderness but His Law given to them at Sinai, where He thundered (7). God commands Israel & us to love Him 1st & foremost. You may be thinking, *I've never carved a statue out of wood & worshiped it. I've never worshiped any god but the one true God.* But is that true? You always put Him 1st? I don't think so. Idolatry is a constant challenge for all of us. Can we truly say we have no other gods & worship only Jehovah? We don't emphasize the catechisms, but maybe we should. *The Westminster Larger Catechism's* discussion of the 1st Commandment answers the question, *What are the sins forbidden in the 1st Commandment?* The answer goes like this:
The sins forbidden in the 1st commandment, are, atheism, in denying or not having a God; idolatry, in having or worshiping more gods than one, or any with or instead of the true God; the not having & avouching Him for God, & our God;

² James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 42–106: An Expository Commentary*, p 669

the omission or neglect of anything due to Him, required in this commandment;

ignorance, forgetfulness, misapprehensions, false opinions, unworthy & wicked thoughts of Him; bold & curious searching into His secrets;

all profaneness, hatred of God;

self-love, self-seeking, & all other inordinate & immoderate setting of our mind, will, or affections upon other things, & taking them off from Him in whole or in part;

vain credulity, unbelief, heresy, misbelief, distrust, despair, incorrigibleness, & insensibleness under judgments, hardness of heart, pride, presumption, carnal security, tempting of God;

using unlawful means, & trusting in lawful means;

carnal delights & joys;

corrupt, blind, & indiscreet zeal;

lukewarmness, & deadness in the things of God;

estranging ourselves, & apostatizing from God;

praying, or giving any religious worship, to saints, angels, or any other creatures; all compacts & consulting with the devil, & hearkening to his suggestions;

making men the lords of our faith & conscience; slighting & despising God & His commands;

resisting & grieving of His Spirit, discontent & impatience at His dispensations, charging Him foolishly for the evils He inflicts on us;

& ascribing the praise of any good we either are, have, or can do, to fortune, idols, ourselves, or any other creature.³³

That's a summary of the countless ways we can break the 1st & greatest commandment. Where our attention goes, where our love is, where our desires are, where our money is spent, where our time goes, where our energy is expended, all point to what we really worship. Idolatry is just as much a reality in the 21st century as it was then. We can't be saying God is 1st with our lips if He's not 1st in our lives. That kind of worship isn't acceptable & the psalmist is reminding us of that. God calls upon us to love Him, hear Him, trust Him, & worship Him & Him alone. That's why His care in the wilderness is recounted here & His command is recited. The problem is that often the people of God don't really know Him, or at least they don't act like they do. Instead of worshiping

³³ Question 105, <https://opc.org/lc.html>

the Lord & Him only, we often seem to be worshiping the gods of our culture, gods of wealth, pleasure, fame, status, & self-centeredness. William Cowper wrote this in the 5th vs of his hymn, *O for a Closer Walk with God: The dearest idol I have known, whate'er that idol be; Help me to tear it from Thy throne & worship only Thee*. Is that your prayer?

Vs 10 ends with the words, **open your mouth wide & I will feed it**. It's been said, *This promise has sometimes been wrongly used by lazy preachers to justify any lack of preparation; all they have to do is open their mouth & the Lord will give them a message. But that is not the meaning at all!*⁴

Charles R. Swindoll shares,

*I read of a young minister whose besetting sin was not laziness but conceit. He frequently boasted in public that all the time he needed to prepare his Sunday sermon was the few moments it took to walk to the church from the parsonage next door. You could probably guess what the congregation voted to do: They bought a new parsonage 8 miles away.*⁵

OK, that's not what it means. So what does it mean? If His people would in faith & obedience anticipate His provision, God would provide. The reverse is also implied: God wouldn't fill the closed mouth, the one with no faithful anticipation. We need to be reminded of what God has done in the past. His past mercies are the foundation of our present prayers & our present prayers are the channel towards future blessings. He says, **Open wide your mouth & I will fill it**. Picture baby birds in the nest anticipating the return of a parent to feed them. Jesus put it this way: **Ask, & it will be given to you; seek, & you will find; knock, & it will be opened to you** (Mt 7:7). We've seen a call to worship God, a call to remember what He has done, & now, in vss 11-16, we see the...

3. Call to Repent (11-16) God is ready to forgive, in spite of our reluctance to hear & follow Him. God laments that His people didn't listen with a view to obedience (8, 11, 13). God told them how to live, but they ignored Him & lived as they wanted (12). In our day, God has spoken clearly to us through His Word & through His Son. He tells us how to live in this world so as to please God & avoid the things which defile us. & yet God's readiness to forgive is on display in spite of His people's reluctance to hear & to follow. **11**

⁴ William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, pp 673-674

⁵ Swindoll's *Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes*, pp 457-458

God had called upon them to listen to His voice. He's spoken to them in the commandments & He is seen in His provisions, in His Word, & in His works. But here's the verdict: *You wouldn't listen nor obey!* Israel decided to follow the way of disobedience. In vs 12 we read God's terrifying verdict:

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What does that remind you of? Remember Rom 1? **God gave them over... God gave them over... God gave them over** (24, 26, 28). Sometimes God gave the Jews into the hands of neighboring nations for their correction. But to be delivered up to sinful **stubbornness of their heart** is even worse. There's no greater judgment than to be abandoned by God & left to your own devices. In other words, when they chose the way of disobedience, God's judgment was, *OK, fine. Do it your way.* That's the most terrifying judgment possible. God says, *Have it your way!* To be given over to the desires of our own hearts is the deepest of God's judgments. Yet, in this passage, the Lord tells us that He longs to forgive & bless His people. Listen to the heartbreaking tone: **O that My people would listen to Me!** (13). What does that remind you of? Remember Jesus looking over the city & saying, **O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, & you would not have it!** (Lk 13:34). In other words, *Fine, do it your way.* But this longing to forgive, this desire to bless is always there. Listen to what He says, **13-14.**

The grace of God is so great that He can't abandon His people completely. He passionately calls them to listen to Him again & again. God is able to deliver His people, but He requires them to be committed to Him. He promises to protect them from attacks & to defeat hostile forces. His deliverance is quick & lasting because His **hand** will be against the enemies of His people.⁶ God is saying to the sinner who's wondering, *If I repent, can I really expect the Lord to forgive me, given what I've done?* Before the thought can fully form, God is assuring them, *It's My deepest desire to show mercy. It's My greatest longing to bless. It's My greatest delight to receive sinners who've turned from their way, but if you don't turn....'* see what He says in **vs 15.**

⁶ Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms (Revised Edition)*, ed. Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, vol 5, 621-622.

This could be translated, *May those who hate the Lord cringe before Him & may their punishment last forever.*⁷ If you don't turn, there will be punishment forever. But if you do turn, God will forgive & bless. God is waiting to pour out His blessings if we'll submit to & obey Him. We need to feel the longing of God's heart in these vss. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but would rather they turn from their sinful ways & live (Ezek 18:23). Like any loving father, it pains God to chastise His children. But His love won't let those who are truly His children continue in sin without disciplining them (Heb 12:5-11). If God's people return to Him, listen to Him, & follow in His ways, He will bless them with the best of all spiritual things, called **the finest of the wheat & honey from the rock** in vs 16.

Ps 81 is for us so that we might humble ourselves, revere God, remember what He's done, & repent of our unfaithfulness, & turn to Him. Then by His grace God will hear, forgive our sin, & **satisfy** us (16). We need to truly worship God. We need to remember God's words & His works, His commandments & His provisions. We need to remember that the greatest judgment we could ever be under would be for God to say, *Fine, go ahead & live the way you want. I've had enough.* Before that though, God says to us, as He said to Israel, *If you would but listen to Me!* The crisis here is one provoked by the people's not listening. Because they haven't listened, God took away their king, temple, & land. They were carried off into captivity. But God hadn't utterly abandoned them. He still declares that if they'll listen, He'll bless them. But is this promise really encouraging? If they haven't listened in the past, despite all of God's mercy & goodness to them, will they ever listen? Not on their own. Ultimately, the Psalms, & all of Scripture, teach that God must provide a King & Substitute who will do for us what we can't do for ourselves. Jesus is the One who always listened & always did the will of God. Heb 10:5-7 quotes Ps 40 (6-8) & applies it to Jesus saying, **Then I said, 'Behold, I have come ... to do your will, O God.** At the transfiguration of Jesus, the Father declared, **This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased** (Mt 17:5). Then He said, **listen to Him**, that is, listen to the good news that He brings for sinners.⁸ Jesus, the righteous King, keeps

⁷ *ibid*, p 622

⁸ W. Robert Godfrey, *Learning to Love the Psalms*, pp 144-145

the law perfectly & becomes our Substitute & Sacrifice. He fulfills the OT sacrifices by offering Himself as the full & final sacrifice for His people. He is the only solution to the crisis of sin & alienation from God we all face. He is the One who listened, obeyed, died, & now lives forevermore for us.

Notice all the uses of the word **would** in vss 13-16. It's a word of desire & possibility. It shows God's desire to bless, if only His people **would** listen & obey. It shows what might have been. But it also shows what can be. This psalm is here not just to get us to look back with regret. It's here to get us to look ahead with hope. Even though we may grieve over wasted years when we disobeyed the Lord, if we'll turn from our sin & obey Him now, He'll feed us with the **finest of wheat**. He'll satisfy us with **honey from the rock**. He's gracious & compassionate. He forgives us through Christ when we turn to Him. Do you have a reverence for God? Do you have a remembrance of God? Do you have a reliance upon God? Do you need to repent? Oh, that God would turn our hearts to Him, so that we would find Him waiting & ready to bless. Let's pray that the Holy Spirit would open our ears so we might listen & obey our great God. PRAY

Communion

The Feast of Tabernacles was a time for God's people to remember what He'd done for them. Our feast of remembrance is when we celebrate His resurrection & His victory over sin & death at the cross by coming to the bread & cup of communion. We repent of our sin & focus on God's faithfulness & His gracious salvation of us through Christ. Rom 8:32 says, **He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?** If we have Christ, we have the finest of wheat, honey from the rock, & our mouths are filled. The writer of Hebrews tells us,

For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come & not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. 4For it is impossible for the blood of bulls & goats to take away sins. Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, "SACRIFICE & OFFERING YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED, BUT A BODY YOU HAVE PREPARED FOR ME.... By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Heb 10:1-5).

Jesus offered His body once & for all in our place. We eat of the bread remembering His death for us.

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new & living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, & since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience & our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful (Heb 10:19-23).

It is by the blood of Jesus, His bodily death & resurrection, that we can draw near to God who is always faithful. Let's remember Him as we drink of the cup.