



Psalm 80 - Prayer for Israel's Restoration

To the leader: on Lilies, a Covenant. Of Asaph. A Psalm.

Introduction

This is a community lament geared to a situation in which the people, or at least a part of them, have received hard treatment from the Gentiles; it poignantly asks God to <<**Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved**>> (v.3). The specific tribes mentioned are Joseph with his sons Ephraim and Manasseh and Benjamin (vv.1-2), namely, the two sons of Jacob's wife Rachel. Some have taken this to indicate that the psalm came from the northern kingdom but Benjamin remained with Judah at the breakup of the kingdom: <<**When Rehoboam came to Jerusalem, he assembled all the house of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin, one hundred and eighty thousand chosen troops to fight against the house of Israel, to restore the kingdom to Rehoboam son of Solomon**>> (1 Kings 12:21). Further, when v.1 speaks of the Lord as 'enthroned upon the cherubim' it is describing his place at the ark, in the Jerusalem temple. Thus it is more likely that these tribes are mentioned as a part of the whole people, and the whole congregation owns the distress of the part exercised on a corporate level: <<**Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep**>> (Romans 12:15).

As with several of the Asaph psalms, this one is often attributed to a later Asaph.

Psalm 80:1-3 - Stir Up Your Might to Save Us.

The psalm opens by setting out the basic request: a portion of the people need God to stir up his might and come to save them. The second stanza spells out the specifics of the situation.

- 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.

Psalm 80:1-3

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel. The image of a king or ruler over a people being regarded as the shepherd was common in the ancient world. Asaph rightly understood that in a special and wonderful way, Yahweh was the Shepherd of Israel. It was he who had and would lead Joseph like a flock. For references to God as the Shepherd and Israel as his flock refer to the comments made on Psalms 23:1 and 74:1-3.

You who are enthroned upon the cherubim. Cherubim is the plural of cherub. This has in mind two aspects. The lesser aspect is the presence of God as connected with the Ark of the Covenant and the institution of the tabernacle/temple because of the golden representations of two cherubim at either end of the mercy seat on top of the ark; refer to Exodus 25:17-22 and the image below. God is especially present through the ark, for the sake of his worshipping people: <<**Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel**>> (Psalm 22:3). The greater aspect is the recognition that in heaven and its reality, God does dwell between the cherubim.

Asaph asked that the God of this majesty and glory would shine forth on behalf of his people. When God does shine forth, darkness and gloom vanish and he is magnified.

The Ark of the Covenant is described in Exodus 25:10-22 and 37:1-9 and it was the only piece of furniture in the Most Holy Place; the ark and its contents were kept hidden from view at all times. The ark itself was a wooden chest, overlaid with pure gold, measuring 3.75 feet long, 2.25 feet wide, and 2.25 feet high or 1.1 m x 0.7 m x 0.7 m. It contained within it the two stone tablets of the Testimony, i.e. the Ten Commandments. The author of Hebrews adds that it also contained <<**a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded**>> (Hebrews 9:4b). The ark was not to be touched by human hands. Two wooden poles, overlaid with gold, were used to transport it and were not

to be removed from the ark. The mercy seat, or atonement cover, was a solid golden slab that fitted perfectly on top of the ark. The golden cherubim, which were hammered out of the same piece of gold, had wings outstretched over the mercy seat and faces that looked downward in reverent awe. It was here, from between the cherubim, that God spoke to Moses as the representative of the people of Israel. Ancient iconography often depicts cherubim as having a lion-like body, wings, and a human face.



The Ark of the Covenant

Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. In the order of arrangement around the tabernacle and in the order of march, these three tribes were grouped together on the east side of the tabernacle; refer to Numbers Chapters 2 and 10.

Since Ephraim and Manasseh were the sons of Joseph then these represent the descendants of Joseph and his beloved wife Sarah.

Stir up your might, and come to save us. The God mighty enough to shepherd Israel and bring them from Egypt to Canaan was strong enough to deliver them in their present crisis - if his strength was stirred. This was a prayer of faith, understanding, and dependence; refer to the comments made on Psalm 20:1-5 and 20:9.

Restore us, O God. This begins a refrain that is repeated three times in this psalm (v.3, v.7 and v.19). It expressed the trust and dependence upon God, and confidence that his favour, as shown by his shining face, was all that was needed for Israel's restoration and blessing.

Charles Spurgeon commented, "It is not so much said, 'turn our captivity' but turn 'us.' All will come right if we are right. The best turn is not that of circumstances but of character. When the Lord turns his people he will soon turn their condition." Spurgeon saw in this line and the following a description of the factors in revival. First there is the restoration or turning of the people of God, then there is the radiant face of God, shining in all the goodness of his presence. In those things combined can be seen the work of true revival happening. Spurgeon also stated, "I want to see those times again, when first the refreshing showers came down from heaven. Have you never heard that under one of Whitfield's sermons there have been as many as two thousand saved? He was a great man; but God can use the little, as well as the great to produce the same effect; and why should there not be souls saved here, beyond all our dreams?"

Let your face shine recalls the words of Aaron's blessing for the people: <<*The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace*>> (Numbers 6:24-26). It has the idea of God's presence, pleasure and favour.

Psalm 80:4-7 - How Long Will You Be Angry with Us?

Now the psalm takes up the reason for the cry of distress, namely, God is angry with his people's prayers, which implies that they have been unfaithful: <<*O God, why do you cast us off for ever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?*>> (Psalm 74:1), and thus has brought sorrows upon them, especially that they have become an object of contention for their Gentile neighbours: <<*We have become a taunt to our neighbours, mocked and derided by those around us*>> (Psalm 79:4). As the next stanza will make clear, this is because these Gentiles have ravaged the land and people of Israel. Underlying this is the idea that faithful Israel ought to be the envy of the Gentiles, drawing them to the light by moral purity, social justice, and political stability as in Psalm 79. Thus the current situation is a reversal of how things should be.

- 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 the scorn of our neighbours;
our enemies laugh among themselves.
- 7 Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Psalm 80:4-7

O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry? Asaph's heart poured out in sorrow before God. It is a terrible thing to sense that God is angry and that he is against the prayers of his people. The sorrow is deeper when it is recognised that it is the God of heavenly armies, the Lord God of hosts, who has in some way set himself against his people. "That God should be angry with us when sinning seems natural enough, but that he should be angry even with our prayers is a bitter grief" (Spurgeon).

You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. Asaph used the metaphor of eating and drinking tears to express the great sorrow of God's people. Psalm 42:3a uses a similar image: <<*My tears have been my food day and night*>>.

Our enemies laugh among themselves. The mocking and taunting of Israel's enemies was painful for Asaph and the people of God in their low condition. It stung to be taunted by their neighbours and to hear their mocking laughter.

Restore us, O God of hosts. Asaph repeats and strengthens the refrain from v.3, adding O God of hosts, emphasising his power and authority. Fresh expression of their misery made for a fresh prayer for restoration and rescue from the shining, approving face of God.

Psalm 80:8-15 - We Are Your Vine, Which They Have Ruined.

This is the longest stanza, with its image of God's people as a vine for which God has cared and provided. The branches of this vine were to give shade to the mighty cedars, which are much taller trees especially associated with Lebanon, and were to extend from the Mediterranean Sea to the Euphrates River, the ideal borders of the Promised Land, which always included Gentile nations. The branches and shoots are therefore an image of the benefits that come to all who are under the rule of this people.

It is God who has broken down the walls that had protected the 'vine' from all who pass by and from the boar from the forest, i.e. had removed from his people his own protection against marauding and empire-building Gentiles. In such a case, 'why?' is a question that invites the singers to ponder: if God has shown such care for his vine, would he lightly allow such violence against it? Verse 4 has already

admitted that the people's unfaithfulness is the likely reason. Verse 14 appeals to God to look down from heaven and have regard for this vine again, i.e. to restore it to its proper role in the world.

- 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.

Psalm 80:8-11

You brought a vine out of Egypt. The vine is a familiar picture of Israel in the OT. This vine was transplanted from Egypt and brought into the Promised Land. In Canaan God planted it, making room by casting out the Canaanite nations. Although they could have been true to God, the Israelites turned away from their Lord and Saviour: *<<Yet I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?>>* (Jeremiah 2:21). Jesus teaches how the people can return to the state God intended for his people: *<<I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing>>* (John 15:1-5).

You cleared the ground for it. This is reminiscent of The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree as told by Jesus: *<<Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down"'">>* (Luke 13:6-9). In summary, God is the man who owns the fig tree, Jesus is the dresser and the fig tree is Israel. The Father has seen no fruit from calling his people to repentance for an extended period of time

and has decided to cast them aside but the intercession of Christ who prepares the ground for repentance offers the extension of a further period of time. If they were to repent they would inherit eternal salvation.

It took deep root and filled the land. The vine of Israel was blessed in the Promised Land. Under God's blessing they took deep root and filled the land in a way that the variety of Canaanite tribes had not. It grew so strong and secure in the land that it did what was botanically impossible in a literal sense: the vine grew big as the mighty cedars and cast its shadow upon the hills.

It sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River. At its height under King David and King Solomon, Israel domination stretched from the Mediterranean Sea to the Euphrates River. This broad dominion of Israel was promised in Exodus 23:31 and Deuteronomy 11:24. First Kings 4:21 shows it to be fulfilled in Solomon's day, who inherited David's dominion.

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.

Psalm 80:12-13

Why then have you broken down its walls? In ancient Israel a vineyard and its vine was often surrounded by a thick thorn hedge that kept out thieves and wild animals. Asaph looked at Israel's troubled state and could see that the symbolic walls or hedges were broken down by the hand of God: *<<And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down>>* (Isaiah 5:5).

So that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit. Without protection of God's hedges, the land of Israel was ready to be plundered and devoured by her enemies.

The boar from the forest ravages it. Wild boars are noted for their destruction, and can quickly lay waste to a vineyard. The enemies of God are pictured as such wild, destructive beasts.

In 1520, as Martin Luther rose in prominence as a reformer, Pope Leo X published a condemnation of Luther and his work known as *Exsurge domini*. In the opening paragraph he used this image from Psalm 80: "At thy ascension into heaven thou hast commanded the care, rule and administration of this vineyard to Peter as head and to thy representatives, his successors, as the

Church triumphant. A roaring boar of the woods has undertaken to destroy this vineyard, a wild beast wants to devour 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.

Psalm 80:14-15

Turn again, O God of hosts. With an earnest plea Asaph prayed on behalf of the nation, begging God to return to them and to look upon the greatness of their need and to visit this vine that he himself had planted.

Psalm 80:16-19 - Make Us Faithful!

The final stanza continues the vine imagery from the previous section, describing the monstrous deeds of these Gentile marauders: they have burned the vine with fire; they have cut it down. For such an outrage against God’s own plant, Asaph calls upon them to be severely judged. The terms in v.17 probably refer to the people of Israel for several reasons. First, ‘the one at your right hand’ is probably a play on the name Benjamin (v.2), which means ‘son of the right hand’. Here Israel is at God’s right hand, called to carry out his purpose in the world. Second, the words <<***the one whom you made strong for yourself***>> were applied to Israel in v.15; translations that have ‘son of man’ for ‘the one’ emphasises Israel’s frailty and dependence on God. One reason NT writers call Jesus God’s Son, and the Son of Man, is to show that he embodies all that Israel was called to be, which makes him the ideal heir of David. Israel as a whole pledges itself to God: if he will let his hand be on Israel, that is, put forth his power on their behalf, especially in protecting them from the ravaging Gentiles, then Israel will not turn back again from God and will call upon his name, i.e. they will exercise true faithfulness.

- 16 They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;
may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.
17 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.
18 Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.
19 Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Psalm 80:16-19

They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down. The great desolation of this vine came from the rebuke of God himself, the rebuke of your countenance.

But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand. In Israel's low place, Asaph knew that the nation needed leadership. He asked God to be with and to bless a particular man - the man of God's right hand. Perhaps Asaph had first in mind the present king of Israel; but ultimately the One of God's right hand is Jesus Christ: <<*God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come*>> (Ephesians 1:20-21), and: <<*Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up*>> (Hebrews 8:1-2).

Charles Spurgeon commented, "Nations rise or fall largely through the instrumentality of individuals: by a Napoleon the kingdoms are scourged, and by a Wellington nations are saved from the tyrant. It is by the man Christ Jesus that fallen Israel is yet to rise, and indeed through him, who deigns to call himself the Son of Man, the world is delivered from the dominion of Satan and the curse of sin."

The one whom you made strong for yourself. As noted above, 'the one' is also translated as 'the son of man'. Again, this was likely prayed with first thought of the present king of Israel. Yet the ultimate Son of Man was Jesus Christ, who received God's strength as a submitted Son to his Father in heaven.

Then we will never turn back from you. In the strength of this 'Son of Man' made strong, this man of God's right hand, God's people would be restored to faithfulness. They would be revived and once again call upon his name.

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts. The refrain is repeated a third and final time, yet this time adding Yahweh, the covenant name of God and translated as Lord God of hosts. Under the leadership of God's great Messiah, God's people would be restored and once again know the shining radiance of God's face. They would be rescued.

Let your face shine, that we may be saved. Both for Israel and the church this prayer has been answered in Christ. In him humankind may be restored to God. In him, the face of God is shining upon all people in grace.