



Psalm 81 - God's Appeal to Stubborn Israel

To the leader: according to The Gittith. Of Asaph.

Introduction

It is not easy to put this psalm in a category; it actually resembles the oracles of the OT prophets; perhaps it is therefore best to think of it as a prophetic hymn. Prediction is not the primary function of the OT prophets, any more than it is of this psalm: rather, their goal is to challenge God's people to covenant faithfulness, speaking to them of covenant blessings or punishments that will come, depending on their response.

This psalm reviews the basic history of the covenant using the Pentateuch, charges Israel with unfaithfulness, and urges them to embrace the covenant – then God would subdue Israel's enemies. Verse 2 refers to the trumpet at the new moon and at the full moon. This may well indicate that the psalm was suited to the Festival of Trumpets that was held on the first day of the seventh month and at the new moon; and the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles held on the 15th day of the same month, when the moon was full, with the solemnity of the Day of Atonement in between them; refer to Leviticus 23:23-36. Certainly the overall theme of the psalm fits this setting.

Psalm 81:1-3 - Sing Aloud to God.

The call to worship is a jubilant one; the people should shout for joy as well as play the various musical instruments, tambourine, lyre, harp, and trumpet. The new moon and full moon are the beginning and middle of months in ancient Israel; as the introduction above suggests, this may show that the psalm was intended for the festival day of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:23-25) and then Booths or Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-36), the beginning and middle of the seventh month. The rest of the psalm is quite sombre in tone and the exuberance of these verses reminds worshippers that even hearing some hard words from the Lord is a privilege, worthy of song and celebration.

- 1 Sing aloud to God our strength;
shout for joy to the God of Jacob.
- 2 Raise a song, sound the tambourine,
the sweet lyre with the harp.
- 3 Blow the trumpet at the new moon,
at the full moon, on our festal day.

Psalm 81:1-3

Sing aloud to God our strength. Asaph knew it was good for God's people to hear the exhortation to sing aloud. Praise songs to God honour him and they should be sung aloud. Charles Spurgeon commented, "It is to be regretted that the niceties of modern singing frighten our congregations from joining lustily in the hymns. For our part we delight in full bursts of praise, and would rather discover the ruggedness of a want of musical training than miss the heartiness of universal congregational song. The gentility which lisps the tune in well-bred whispers, or leaves the singing altogether to the choir, is very like a mockery of worship." There is a place for songs rich with awe, reverence, or contrition, but never to the exclusion of songs that shout for joy to the God of Jacob: <<*Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth*>> (Psalm 66:1).

Raise a song, sound the tambourine. As the song unto God is raised, so should skilful music from instruments. Asaph listed three: the tambourine, the pleasant harp, and sweet lyre: <<*They sing to the tambourine and the lyre, and rejoice to the sound of the pipe*>> (Job 21:12).

Blow the trumpet. The previous verse mentioned musical instruments, but the trumpet is not mentioned as an instrument to accompany praise. This trumpet is to call God's people together for their solemn festival day at the new moon and again at the full moon.

The trumpet refers to a ram's horn known as a Shofar. See the image.



Psalm 81:4-7 - God's Work to Care for Israel in the Past.

The second section recounts the way in which the God of Jacob worked on behalf of his people to deliver them from slavery in Egypt, where their shoulder bore a burden and their hands carried the basket in which they hauled bricks and clay; refer to Exodus 6:6. Israel called and God delivered: <<*After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out*

of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them>> (Exodus 2:23-25), bringing them through the desert. The psalm probably mentions Meribah, where the people tested the Lord because it is on the journey to Sinai and because it is also an example of the way Israel kept putting God to the test with their lack of trust: <<*He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'*>> (Exodus 17:7). Massah means test and Meribah means quarrel.

- 4 For it is a statute for Israel,
an ordinance of the God of Jacob.
- 5 He made it a decree in Joseph,
when he went out over the land of Egypt.
- I hear a voice I had not known:

Psalm 81:4-5

For it is a statute for Israel. This stresses the importance of gathering God's people together. It was a statute, a law, and established as a testimony among God's people.

When he went out over the land of Egypt. This is a reference to the final plague when the angel of death swept over the land, killing all the firstborn children and animals of the Egyptians: <<*Moses said, 'Thus says the Lord: About midnight I will go out through Egypt'*>> (Exodus 11:4). Asaph thought of the great assembly of God's people as they came together to leave their slavery in Egypt. They gathered together for that initial deliverance, and it became the basis for their future assemblies and festivals.

- 6 'I relieved your shoulder of the burden;
your hands were freed from the basket.
- 7 In distress you called, and I rescued you;
I answered you in the secret place of thunder;
I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Selah

Psalm 81:6-7

I relieved your shoulder of the burden. In the first part of the psalm a call went to God's people to gather, suggested by their first gathering as a people as slaves

in Egypt. Now God speaks to his gathered people and begins with reminding them of the great deliverance he gave them in setting them free from their slavery.

In distress you called, and I rescued you. As shown above, Exodus 2:23-24 says that God heard the groaning of Israel under their burden of slavery in Egypt. He brought deliverance to them through wonders and leaders like Moses.

I tested you at the waters of Meribah. God not only delivered Israel, but he also trained them, and the testing at Meribah was an example of this. At Meribah God miraculously provided water for a complaining and unbelieving Israel; refer to Exodus 17:1-7. Charles Spurgeon commented, “The story of Israel is only our own history in another shape. God has heard us, delivered us, liberated us, and too often our unbelief makes the wretched return of mistrust, murmuring, and rebellion.”

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect.

Psalm 81:8-10 - God Calls His People to Worship Only Him.

This section follows closely on the previous one, especially evoking the covenant-making at Sinai. <<***I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt***>> (v.10) is very close to the preface to the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2), and the basic admonition, <<***there shall be no strange god among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god***>> (v.9), is an effective summary of the first two commandments given in Exodus 20:3-6. The Lord wants his people to listen to him (v.8): to receive the covenant as an expression of his grace, believe in him, and live as he directs. The expression <<***if you would***>> (v.8) indicates that it is God’s desire; the song moves to <<***my people did not listen***>> (v.11), and back again to <<***Oh, that my people would listen***>> (v.13).

⁸ Hear, O my people, while I admonish you;

O Israel, if you would but listen to me!

⁹ There shall be no strange god among you;

you shall not bow down to a foreign god.

¹⁰ I am the Lord your God,

who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.

Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.

Psalm 81:8-10

Hear, O my people. Before God instructed his assembled people, he first called for their attention, telling them to listen: <<*Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God*>> (Psalm 50:7).

There shall be no strange god among you. Some 400 years of slavery in Egypt exposed Israel to the many pagan gods of Egypt. God took the command given to Israel when they came out of Egypt and applied it to them in the days of Asaph. Coming from Egypt Israel was commanded to not bow down to a foreign god, and the same command was for Israel in the land under their kings.

I am the Lord your God. God's command to put away every foreign god was entirely reasonable. He was Yahweh the Lord, the covenant God of Israel. He was the one who brought them out of the land of Egypt. No foreign god had done such things for Israel or, indeed, for anyone else.

Again, Spurgeon commented, "No other god had done anything for the Jews, and therefore they had no reason for paying homage to any other. To us the same argument will apply, We owe all to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: the world, the flesh, the devil, none of these have been of any service to us; they are aliens, foreigners, enemies, and it is not for us to bow down before them."

Open your mouth wide and I will fill it. God made a promise to his faithful people. If they would in faith anticipate God's provision, God would provide: <<*But you, mortal, hear what I say to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you*>> (Ezekiel 2:8). The reverse is also implied: that God would not fill the closed mouth, the one with no anticipation of faith.

Psalm 81:11-16 - If Only His People Would Listen to him.

The final section starts from the sad fact that God's people did not listen to his voice (v.11), which led to sad consequences (v.12). However, God has not given up, and he addresses his people afresh with the opportunity to listen, to embrace the covenant and thus to walk in God's good ways (v.13). The consequences of this genuine covenant participation would be victory over their enemies (v.14), while those who hate the Lord, i.e. the same Gentile enemies, would cringe before God in submission, which would be to their benefit: <<*Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling kiss his feet, or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled. Happy are all who take refuge in him*>> (Psalm 2:10-12). The land of Israel would also then enjoy fruitfulness, yielding the finest of the wheat and honey from the rock, apparently an image of abundant wild honey: <<*He set him upon the heights of the land, and fed him with produce of*

the field; he nursed him with honey from the crags, with oil from flinty rock; curds from the herd, and milk from the flock, with fat of lambs and rams; Bashan bulls and goats, together with the choicest wheat – you drank fine wine from the blood of grapes>> (Deuteronomy 32:13-14).

11 'But my people did not listen to my voice;

Israel would not submit to me.

12 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts,

to follow their own counsels.

Psalm 81:11-12

But my people did not listen to my voice. This was the great tragedy. God was ready to fill the faith-filled open mouths of his people, but they would not obey him. God said in sorrow, Israel would not submit to me. Rebellious Israel rejected God who had done so much for them and would have done much more.

So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts. This was God's judgement against his unbelieving people - to give them over to their own stubborn heart, to follow their own counsels. One of the greatest judgements God can bring is to simply leave people alone to their own stubbornness and foolishness: <<*In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes*>> (Judges 17:6).

13 O that my people would listen to me,

that Israel would walk in my ways!

14 Then I would quickly subdue their enemies,

and turn my hand against their foes.

15 Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him,

and their doom would last for ever.

16 I would feed you with the finest of the wheat,

and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.'

Psalm 81:13-16

O that my people would listen to me. The tragedy is ironic. God could say of Israel, 'my people'. They belonged to him and he had claimed them. Yet they would not listen to him, they would not walk in his ways: <<*If only they had such a mind as this, to fear me and to keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and with their children for ever!*>>

(Deuteronomy 5:29). There is a sense of longing in these words, God's desire for good and blessing to his people.

Then I would quickly subdue their enemies. This was an unclaimed blessing God wanted to give to a believing, obedient people. If God's people would only listen and obey, God would subdue their enemies and he would fight for them **against their foes**: <<*I will cut off the inhabitants from Ashdod, and the one who holds the sceptre from Ashkelon; I will turn my hand against Ekron, and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish, says the Lord God*>> (Amos 1:8). Spurgeon adds, "Our enemies find the sharpest weapons against us in the armoury of our transgressions. They could never overthrow us if we did not first overthrow ourselves. Sin strips a man of his armour, and leaves him naked to his enemies."

I would satisfy you. Psalm 81 ends on this sad note, filled with the tragedy of missed opportunity and unfulfilled potential. God would have richly provided for them and satisfied them - if his people would only listen and obey.