



Psalm 83 - Prayer for Judgement on Israel's Foes

A Song. A Psalm of Asaph.

Introduction

This is a community lament, geared to a situation in which God's people are threatened by Gentile enemies who aim to destroy them. The psalm prays that God will make such enemies fail miserably, being put to shame and perishing – so that they might come to know the Lord. It is possible that the psalm assumes that Israel must defend themselves and the prayer is for military victory. Christians would use this psalm not against 'national enemies' since the Christian faith transcends national boundaries but in cases where their persecutors would destroy them and all traces of their faith. They use this prayer rightly when they ask God to thwart these plans in such a way that even the persecutors might come to seek God's name.

Some commentators connect this Psalm with 2 Chronicles 20:1-37 and the victory won in Jehoshaphat's time. Others see the collection of 10 enemies set against Israel as not referring to one specific occasion, but to the constant danger of extermination Israel lived under - relevant in both the ancient and modern world.

Psalm 83:1-8 - O God, Your Enemies Conspire against Israel.

The first section describes the Gentile coalition and their evil, crafty plans: for they say 'let us wipe them out as a nation; let the name of Israel be remembered no more!' The Gentiles, as to character, are God's enemies and those who hate him; then they are specific peoples from around, with Assyria, far off to the east, but possibly the tribe mentioned in Numbers 24:22-24, from the northern Sinai joining them. The psalm is not limited to threats from these peoples alone, of

course; prayer in this specific case is a guide to prayer in other cases like it. In such danger, the people urge God, do not keep silence.

- 1 O God, do not keep silence;
do not hold your peace or be still, O God!
- 2 Even now your enemies are in tumult;
those who hate you have raised their heads.
- 3 They lay crafty plans against your people;
they consult together against those you protect.
- 4 They say, ‘Come, let us wipe them out as a nation;
let the name of Israel be remembered no more.’

Psalm 83:1-4

O God, do not keep silence. Asaph sang this prayer in a time of national crisis. Enemies had come against Israel, set on their national destruction. If God were to keep silent or hold his peace or be still on behalf of Israel, they would be destroyed.

Even now your enemies are in tumult. Asaph asked God to behold this crisis and to regard the enemies of Israel as his own enemies, as those who hated him. Asaph was confident that if God did this, he would act on behalf of Israel.

Come, let us wipe them out as a nation. This was the crafty counsel of the nations united against Israel. This desire of a confederation of nations to destroy Israel did not end in the days of Asaph. His prayer could be sung today as both neighbouring nations and the world community continue to threaten Israel.

Israel has its battles, ancient and modern. Some have also opposed Christianity and sought to completely cut them off. An example is one of the worst persecutors among the Roman Emperors, who even claimed to have destroyed Christianity - Emperor Diocletian (AD 245-313). He liked to think that he had defeated Christianity. He struck a medal with this inscription: “The name of Christianity being extinguished.” Diocletian also set up two monuments on the frontier of his empire with these inscriptions:

- Diocletian Jovian Maximian Herculeus Cæsares Augusti for having extended the Roman Empire in the east and the west and for having extinguished the name of Christians who brought the Republic to ruin.
- Diocletian Jovian Maximian Herculeus Cæsares Augusti for having everywhere abolished the superstition of Christ for having extended the worship of the gods.

Diocletian is dead and gone, comparatively a footnote on the pages of history. The fame and glory of Jesus Christ is spread over all the earth. God still takes care of his sheltered ones.

⁵ They conspire with one accord;
against you they make a covenant –
⁶ the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites,
Moab and the Hagrites,
⁷ Gebal and Ammon and Amalek,
Philistia with the inhabitants of Tyre;
⁸ Assyria also has joined them;
they are the strong arm of the children of Lot. Selah

Psalm 83:5-8

They conspire with one accord; against you they make a covenant. Asaph again emphasised that these enemies were not only against Israel, but against Yahweh, Israel's God. Enemies often come together to attack God and his people: <<***That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies***>> (Luke 23:12).

The tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites. The psalmist listed ten nations or peoples that were part of this confederacy against Israel and their God. It seems the children of Lot (specifically, Moab and Ammon) led this attack and the other eight nations helped them.

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. Spurgeon commented, "There was good reason for a pause when the nation was in such jeopardy and yet it needs faith to make a pause, for unbelief is always in a hurry."

Psalm 83:9-18 - Defeat Them, that They Might Know that You Rule.

The basic request in this section is fairly simple: that these enemies would utterly fail in their scheme. This request begins with historical examples from Judges: Midian, Oreb, Zeeb, Zebah and Zalmunna all come from the story of Gideon (Judges 7:1-8:28), while Sisera and Jabin come from the story of Deborah and Barak (Judges Chapter 4). These were deadly enemies, and from a merely human perspective their forces were superior to Israel's. Yet, with God's help, they were soundly defeated, which probably explains why the psalm uses them as examples.

Verses 13-15 are colourful depictions of these enemies being thwarted and defeated. Verses 16-18 make explicit an element that is often only implicit in psalms asking for such victories: the goal in asking for their defeat is that they may seek God's name (their conversion to the true God), or at least that they may know that he alone is the Most High over all the earth (this may be conversion, or it may simply be the recognition that the God of Israel is the highest power there is, a recognition that may fall short of true conversion). The ultimate reason for Israel's existence is to serve God's purpose of restoring true worship and authentic human life among all mankind; therefore it is really for the good of these hostile Gentiles that they fail in their plan to wipe out Israel. The genuine dependence on God expressed in this prayer is thus both devotion to God and goodwill to all mankind, an expression noted at the birth of Jesus: <<**Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!**>> (Luke 2:14 KJ21).

- ⁹ Do to them as you did to Midian,
as to Sisera and Jabin at the Wadi Kishon,
¹⁰ who were destroyed at En-dor,
who became dung for the ground.
¹¹ Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb,
all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna,
¹² who said, 'Let us take the pastures of God
for our own possession.'

Psalm 83:9-12

Do to them as you did to Midian. God's victory over Midian through Gideon is described in Judges Chapters 6 and 7. Spurgeon commented further, "Faith delights to light upon precedents, and quote them before the Lord; in the present instance, Asaph found a very appropriate one, for the nations in both cases were very much the same, and the plight of the Israelites very similar."

Let us take the pastures of God for our own possession. Israel faced threats to her existence in the days of the Judges and God delivered them. Asaph's prayer reminded God and Israel of his previous rescue of Israel, using it as a reason to trust him in the present crisis. The phrase 'the pastures of God' is a further reminder of just how important the land of Israel was and is to God.

- ¹³ O my God, make them like whirling dust,
like chaff before the wind.
¹⁴ As fire consumes the forest,

as the flame sets the mountains ablaze,
15 so pursue them with your tempest
and terrify them with your hurricane.

Psalm 83:13-15

Asaph prayed that God would take these many enemies, determined to destroy Israel, and scatter them like chaff before the wind and the whirling dust. He prayed they would be consumed in the way that fire consumes the forest.

Pursue them with your tempest. To the ancient Hebrew, there was nothing more powerful than even the most powerful storm. The psalmist prayed that God would not only defeat Israel's enemies, but also pursue and frighten them with his mighty power.

16 Fill their faces with shame,
so that they may seek your name, O Lord.
17 Let them be put to shame and dismayed for ever;
let them perish in disgrace.
18 Let them know that you alone,
whose name is the Lord,
are the Most High over all the earth.

Psalm 83:16-18

Fill their faces with shame, so that they may seek your name, O Lord. Asaph ended this psalm with an unexpected turn. After praying for the destruction of Israel's enemies, he prayed that they would be thoroughly humbled so they would be led to seek Yahweh. Asaph understood what the Lord's people often forget: that people will often only seek the Lord if they are first laid low before his power. There is a sense in which God must defeat people before he will save them.

Let them know that you alone, whose name is the Lord, are the Most High over all the earth. This great humbling (let them be put to shame and dismayed for ever; let them perish in disgrace) would lead to their surrender and submission to the God who is Most High over all the earth. This psalm began with a plea that God would not remain silent and ends with the idea of his fame and glory going out to all the earth.