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Psalm 80

**To the choirmaster: according to Lilies.
A Testimony of Asaph. A Psalm.**

(RSV)

Introduction to Psalm 80

Asaph wrote a number of psalms (see, e.g., Psalms.73-83). We know almost nothing about this person, except that perhaps he was from the Northern Kingdom. Nor is there any firm consensus about when he wrote. The general background of distress in Israel can fit almost any time in the history of the Northern Kingdom of Israel or of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Certainly in the subsequent use of this Psalm it has shown itself to be eminently appropriate as a prayer also for New Testament Christians.

The last Psalm study I sent was Psalm 25, which was a personal prayer of David, in which he, and we with him, prayed for our individual selves. This Psalm, by way of contrast, is a prayer of lament of the corporate assembly, of the whole nation of Israel, or in our case, of the whole Church. We pray here as members of a church in distress, of a people who implore God to resume the favor He had once bestowed upon them, of an assembly of believers who pray God to restore all that had been lost because of His anger (verses 4 and 12).

Vv. 1-2

**¹ Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
thou who leadest Joseph like a flock!
Thou who art enthroned upon the cherubim shine forth
² before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh!**

God is addressed as the Shepherd-king of Israel. As Shepherd He is the one who leads and protects and provides for His flock, His people. The Lord as *my* Shepherd is the theme of Psalm 23, a Psalm of David; here God is the Shepherd of corporate Israel, the Shepherd of the entire flock.

Parallel to "Israel" is "Joseph." Joseph and Benjamin were the sons of Jacob's beloved Rachel. Joseph was remembered as that son of Jacob/Israel who, as the Egyptian Pharaoh's minister, was instrumental in saving his people from famine (Genesis 50:20-21). When he died, his remains were preserved (Genesis 50:25-26), and carried back in the Exodus to be buried in the Promised Land (Exodus 13:19), in Shechem (Joshua 24:32). Neither Joseph's nor Levi's name is used in the distribution of the Promised Land among the twelve tribes. Instead the names of Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, are used to designate the two most important tribes of the North. Just why this particular selection of names is used is hard to tell. What is evidently intended is that God is the Shepherd of all of Israel.

God, the Shepherd of Israel, sits on His throne upon the cherubim. This most likely refers to the Ark (Chest) of the Covenant, the most important piece of furniture in the wilderness tabernacle (tent-sanctuary) that the LORD instructed Moses to build (Exodus 25:10-22). The ark

had a lid, which not only closed the top of the chest, but also supported a cherub at each end. The cherub was a winged creature, kneeling, whose wings when he bent forward in a posture of adoration would almost touch the wings of the cherub at the other end of the lid. These two cherubim (the Hebrew plural of cherub) were thought to form the base of the invisible throne of the invisible God.

**^{2b} Stir up thy might,
and come to save us!**

This is the theme of the Psalm. You will notice that this plea forms the basis of the Advent Collects 1 and 4 (here given in the older Cranmerian translation):

1. Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come, that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Thy mighty deliverance;
4. Stir up, O Lord, we beseech Thee, Thy power and come and with great might succor us...

Undoubtedly this verse is the reason that Psalm 80 is chosen also as the Psalm for Advent 1.

Vv. 3

**³ Restore us, O God;
let thy face shine, that we may be saved!**

The theme of Psalm 80 is reinforced by this refrain, which recurs at verse 7 and verse 19. I think there is some artistry in the intensification of the name by which God is addressed:

- V. 3: restore us, O God
V. 7: restore us, O God of hosts (armies, whether heavenly or earthly)
V. 19: restore us, O LORD God of hosts

Verse 3 employs the generic name for the Deity; verse 7 augments the name of God to emphasize His attribute of strength and power; and verse 19 addresses God by the covenant name under which Yahweh reveals himself as Savior, thus emphasizing His mercy.

When God's face shines, there is blessing and salvation. The phrase occurs elsewhere in the Psalms, notably in Psalm 67:1b. Our most frequent contact with that expression is in the second member of the Aaronic blessing (Numbers 6:24-26):

- The LORD bless you and keep you.
The LORD make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you.
The LORD lift up His countenance upon you (look upon you with favor), and give you peace.

Vv. 4-6

**⁴ O LORD God of hosts,
how long wilt thou be angry with thy people's prayers?
(NAB: how long will you burn with anger while your people pray?)**

The alternate translation from the New American Bible makes it clear that the LORD is not directing His anger at the prayers of His people. There is nothing wrong with the prayers; they just do not seem to be doing any good. But it is clear from the question, "How long?" that the LORD has been angry with His People for a long time. It is not possible to arrive conclusively at any particular theory as to when this bleak period in the history of Israel occurred, in part because there are several candidates. That leads to the conclusion that it will be useful also for us in a variety of circumstances.

**⁵ Thou hast fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.**

These images are easily understood, but perhaps hard to accept. It is God who gives Israel her daily bread, but it is the bread and drink of tears. The Psalmist teaches us that misfortunes and reverses are not to be received as simply one of those things, as though they were morally neutral. God either gives them, or allows them to happen to us. And God does not act arbitrarily. There is no complaint *that* we are receiving these reverses, nor any suggestion that God is being unfair. But the agony is that it goes on so long. How much longer, God?

**⁶ Thou dost make us the scorn of our neighbors;
and our enemies laugh among themselves.**

The ultimate indignity is to suffer the taunts and scorn of others who love to ridicule our faith in the LORD as being vain. You trust in God, but it seems there is no point to it. Look how you are suffering; your God is helpless. Unless God soon intervenes, we have no way of refuting those arguments or defending ourselves from their sting. And the worst of it is that we may be overwhelmed and defect from our faith in the LORD. Recall that Jesus suffered this temptation on the cross.

V. 7

**⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts;
let thy face shine, that we may be saved!**

Again, we have the refrain. Only this time God is the powerful God, the God of armies. He is able to overcome those who afflict us. In verses 8-18 the running metaphor for the People of God is the vine. The image of the vine makes these verses a suitable choice as the Psalm for Proper 22 (Revised Common Lectionary). The Gospel is Matthew 21:33-46, and the Old Testament lesson is Isaiah 5:1-7. Under the figure of the vine the Psalmist recalls the history of Israel from the Exodus out of Egypt, through to the greatest territorial expansion of Old Testament Israel's borders, and then to an unnamed disaster after that. I would like to think of the disaster which ends the Psalmist's historical recollection as the split of the United Kingdom of David and Solomon into the Divided Kingdoms of the North and the South. This deeply grieved the Psalmist, and in his grief he writes Psalm 80. In this way he gives voice and expression to the grief which so many others in the nation also experience at the tragic split of Israel. But that is only my preference, one which also cannot be established conclusively.

Vv. 8-13

- 8 Thou didst bring a vine** (Israel) **out of Egypt;**
thou didst drive out the nations (the original inhabitants in the
land of Canaan) **and plant it.**
- 9 Thou didst clear the ground for it;**
it took deep root and filled the land.
- 10 The mountains** (of the south?) **were covered with its shade,**
the mighty cedars (of the north in Lebanon?) **with its branches;**
- 11 it sent out its branches to the sea** (westward to the Mediterranean),
and its shoots to the River (eastward to the Euphrates).

The People of God were a great and glorious nation under David and Solomon (ca. 1000-922 B.C.). But when that nation split, the People did not only lose their unity but the division also resulted in a weakening of their military might and political power. This soon opened the divided kingdoms of the People of God to the assaults and insults of their neighbors, principally the Assyrians. That vulnerability is also recalled under the figure of a vineyard whose protecting walls have been broken down.

- 12 Why then hast thou broken down its walls** (the walls that were built
around a vineyard to protect it from marauders),
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.

There is anguish and bewilderment in the “Why?” of verse 12. God began to do such a great work in building and tending the vineyard that is Israel; why would He now allow it to be so devastated?

Vv. 14-18

- 14 Turn again, O God of hosts!**
Look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine,
- 15a the stock which thy right hand planted.**
- 15b (and upon the son whom thou hast reared for thyself.)**

Several translations including the RSV, NRSV, REB and other versions unaccountably omit verse 15b. Other translations including the NAB and NIV include it.

The parallelism of verse 15 makes clear that “the stock” and “the son” are two names for same reality, the People of Israel. The son of God is a designation for the corporate People of God.

These verses are an earnest plea to God to reverse the fortunes of Israel. And why should God do that? Simply because we are your Vine, your Stock, your Son.

**16 They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;
may they perish at the rebuke of thy countenance!**

When God makes His face to shine upon us, we receive His blessing. But when God turns an angry face toward his enemies, they perish. The prayer of the Psalmist is that God punish them for a kind of *lese majesty* against His vineyard.

**17 But let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand,
the son of man whom thou hast made strong for thyself!**

Whereas God is invoked to punish the destroyer, He is asked to let His hand of blessing be upon “the man of Thy right hand,” that is, the man of God’s own choosing. “Man” stands in parallel with “son of man,” and both refer to the human Israel. I stress this because, if “the son of man” is a designation for Israel, then when Jesus comes referring to himself as “The Son of Man” he is telling us something about himself. He is saying, among other things, that he is the People of Israel reduced to one, and moreover he is the genuine Israelite. Israel as the Chosen People of God are fulfilled and culminate in Jesus as the Chosen One of God, the Son in whom God is well-pleased. What Israel is called to be, that Jesus becomes. In this way the prayer of the Psalmist is ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

**18a Then we will never turn back from thee;
18b give us life, and we will call on thy name!**

Verse 18a is as close as the Psalm comes to repentance. It has the form of a vow, a kind of bargain we want to strike with God: deliver us, and we will never (again?) turn away from Thee. Perhaps repentance is assumed; verses 4-6 acknowledge that we are suffering under the wrath of God, and there is never a complaint that such anger of the LORD is unjust. Verse 18b promises the positive: give us life and we will worship you. Again, that could be read as a bargaining vow: give us life and we will in return give you worship. Alternatively, it can be the acknowledgement that, if there is to be a true fear and love of God, we can offer that only when God supplies us with His life.

V. 19

**19 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts!
Let thy face shine, that we may be saved!**

The Psalm ends with the third repetition of the refrain also found in verse 3 and verse 7, this time expanded to identify the God of hosts as Yahweh, the Covenant God of Israel.

The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 80:

Lord God, you so tend the vine you planted that now it extends its branches even to the farthest shore. Keep us in your Son as branches on the vine, that, rooted firmly in your love, we may testify before the whole world to your great power working everywhere; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This prayer captures very nicely the thought that the vine is the People of God, only now Jesus is that vine. When we are grafted as branches into that Vine, we are now the chosen People of God, the vine on whose behalf the Psalmist leads us in prayer. And as branches in that vine, we need to be about the tasks to which God calls His chosen ones.

When could we pray this Psalm of lament? To answer that question I would look for reverses not in my personal life (Psalm 25 would be better for that), but rather for disaster for the Church. And I would look especially to two places:

1) I would look first to those places where Christians are suffering for their faith, as for example in East Timor, and who are asking God the anguished “Why?” question. In the Body of Christ, when one member suffers the whole body suffers. And we cannot excuse ourselves from compassion (literally, a feeling or suffering along with another) simply because they are on the other side of the world.

2) I look secondly at the sad state of the Church in our day and in our place. In the days when Israel in the North successfully seceded from Judah in the South, they were able to adduce good reasons why it was a justifiable separation; the crown, especially Solomon, had inflicted an oppressive burden of taxation of men and money upon the richer North. They revolted, and initially they felt good about what they had done. But Asaph saw more deeply into the matter. However justified such secession might have been from an economic and political point of view, there was a great and mournful tragedy that there unfolded. The obvious consequence was the North’s inability to resist the superior political might of the Assyrians. The more hidden dimension was that brother was now separated from brother, and that with the schism each was the weaker in the struggle against idolatry. And in our day, there may be historically necessary reasons why our churches have to split into competing denominations, which can be invoked to justify our dividedness. But the deeper sorrow is that in such fragmentation we have become an ecclesiastical Babel; and because of the confusion of our tongues we are weaker in our struggle against the idolatries of our day. To feel the anguish of our separation is to pray this Psalm, in faith and hope that He who has begun a good work among us will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Nugget

(The Psalm) concentrates with a single focus on one thing and one thing alone – the divine Thou. It addresses the God identified in the invocations as the actor in the congregation’s experience of salvation and suffering and seeks God’s resumption of his earlier work as the means of restoration. The Psalm (teaches) that the congregation must in the long run and in its extremity look away from its own repentance to a kind of repentance in God – His turning away from wrath and returning to grace. The trust that God will in the end do so is based on nothing in the congregation. It is based on the self-understanding that the congregation is the work of God, there in existence wholly and only as the act of God. Believing that, the congregation can hope that God will not abandon what he has begun. Paul spoke of that confidence to the infant church when he wrote, “I am sure that he who began a good work in you (plural!) will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ,” (Philippians 1:6).

James Luther Mayes

Nugget

We must offer ourselves to God...like a piece of stone. Each blow from the sculptor’s chisel makes it feel -- if it could – as if it were being destroyed. As blow upon blow descends, the stone knows nothing of how the sculptor is shaping it. All it feels is a chisel chopping away at it, cutting it, and mutilating it. ...It might say, “...I have no idea what he is doing, nor do I know what he will make of me. But I know his work is the best possible. It is perfect and so I welcome each blow of his chisel as the best thing that could happen to me. Although, if I’m to be truthful, I feel that every one of those blows is ruining me, destroying me, and disfiguring me.”

Jean Pierre de Caussada, quoted in *The Inner Treasure*, as it appeared in *Christianity Today*

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