

Restore Us, O God

Psalm 80:1-19

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Please be seated. If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Psalm 80 as we continue to make our way through the Third Book of the Psalms.

Last week as we studied Psalm 79 together, we saw the lament of the Psalmist for the fall of Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom with it. Tonight we move from that concern in Psalm 79 with the fall of Jerusalem back a couple of centuries in time, to the fall of Samaria in the late eighth century.

And the theme of this Psalm is this repeated prayer that you see in verses 3 and 7 and 19 that the Lord would 'restore us.' And in light of the benediction that you heard bestowed on the parents and the children who received the sign of covenant baptism today (the benediction of Aaron this morning), notice the language of verses 3 and 7 and 19 in this Psalm: "Restore us and cause Thy face to shine upon us." It's a recollection of that great blessing that God pronounces upon His people, and even in the midst of the loss of that blessing there is this prayer that they would be restored to the experience of God's favor.

Well, this prayer, this plea, this petition on the behalf of the faithful in Jerusalem for those in the Northern Kingdom who had fallen to the hands of their enemies, reveals how deep was the shock in Jerusalem at the sweeping away of almost the whole of Israel. The ten tribes of the twelve were now gone. Between 734 and 722 B.C., this great wave of aggression swept through the Northern Kingdom, leaving now only little Judah. Once upon a time, they had had their northern neighbors as their cousins, the ten tribes of Israel; and now, on the north is only this new Assyrian province instead of their sister kingdom of Israel.

It's a very interesting thing. You well know that since the time of the division of the kingdom there had been great tension between these two groups, the North and the South; and yet, now that the Northern Kingdom is wiped out there are no thoughts of those old rivalries — only distress at the wreck of so much promise in the breakup of this old family.

Tonight I want to look at the Psalm in four parts, and I've given you the outline. If you look at verses 1-3, you'll see a plea which is based on the person and the

promises of God. It's a plea for help, for God to come to the aid of His people in this crisis of Israel, of Samaria's fall.

Then, if you look at verses 4-7, you'll see this plea seeking God's pity on Israel, beleaguered by her enemies.

Then, in verses 8-13, again this plea is lifted up based upon God's purposes for His people, who are typified under the image of a vine.

And then, finally, in verses 14-19 you see a plea again based upon the faithfulness and compassion of God.

Before we read God's word and hear it proclaimed, let's look to Him in prayer and ask for His help and blessing.

O Lord, this is Your word. This is Your word for our hearts. As we look out upon our people and we see them swept away by temptation, by trials, by persecution, as we see the judgments of God fall, You have given us the words to pray in the words of Your word. And so, O God, we pray that we would listen, and listen closely. Lord God, touch our hearts. Convict us and comfort us with this word, and make us to be bold and faithful in prayer, even as the saints who first sang and prayed this prayer in the public worship of God 2600 or 2700 years ago prayed this prayer, we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear the word of God.

For the choir director; set to El Shoshannim; Eduth. A Psalm of Asaph.

Oh give ear, Shepherd of Israel,
Thou who dost lead Joseph like a flock;
Thou who are enthroned above the cherubim, shine forth!
Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up Thy power,
and come to save us!
O God, restore us,
And cause Thy face to shine upon us, and we will be saved.

O Lord God of hosts,
How long wilt Thou be angry with the prayer of Thy people?
Thou hast fed them with the bread of tears,
And Thou hast made them to drink tears in large measure.
Thou dost make us an object of contention to our neighbors;
And our enemies laugh among themselves.
O God of hosts, restore us,
And cause Thy face to shine upon us, and we will be saved.

Thou didst remove a vine from Egypt;

Thou didst drive out the nations, and didst plant it.
Thou didst clear the ground before it,
And it took deep root and filled the land.
The mountains were covered with its shadow;
And the cedars of God with its boughs.
It was sending out its branches to the sea,
And its shoots to the River.
Why hast Thou broken down its hedges,
So that all who pass that way pick its fruit?
A boar from the forest eats it away,
And whatever moves in the field feeds on it.

O God of hosts, turn again now, we beseech Thee;
Look down from heaven and see, and take care of this vine,
Even the shoot which Thy right hand has planted
And on the son whom Thou hast strengthened for Thyself.
It is burned with fire, it is cut down;
They perish at the rebuke of Thy countenance.
Let Thy hand be upon the man of Thy right hand,
Upon the son of man whom Thou didst make strong for Thyself.
Then we shall not turn back from Thee;
Revive us, and we will call upon Thy name.
O Lord God of hosts, restore us;
Cause Thy face to shine upon us, and we will be saved.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

Well, here is yet another lament. In these songs sung in the public worship of God, how often have we seen God's people gather to lift up their broken hearts to God about the judgments that they see around them for sin, about the consequences of unfaithfulness in the lives of the people, about the trials and the tribulations of this life. It reminds us again of the utter realism of the word of God. No candy-coated view of reality, no view that if you're just a good person and you love God and you have enough faith, that everything will be fine — it will only be health, it will only be prosperity.

No, the word of God is filled with the reminder that we live in a fallen world where the people of God experience many a trial and tribulation. And even more than that, we live in a world where sometimes the judgment of God rightly comes down upon those who call upon His name, because they have turned their backs on Him. And when that happens, what do we sing? We sing God's word. When that happens, what do we pray? We pray God's word back to Him. In that sense, this Psalm once again is a manual for our prayer. When we look upon our own people crippled by sin, under the weighty judgment of its consequences and of

God's visitation of discipline, how do we pray for them? How do we pray for ourselves? This Psalm gives us the words.

I. God would have us come boldly to Him in prayer, with arguments based on His person and promises.

Let's work through these four pleas in Psalm 80, first beginning with verses 1-3. This again is a plea for God to help in the crisis of Israel and Samaria's fall.

Now you may be asking me, "Where do you get the idea that this is about Israel and Samaria?" Well, let me just point you to one of the many clues in this Psalm — perhaps the most obvious one. It's in verse 2. In verse 2, notice how the Psalmist says that he prays for God to stir up His power and come to save...whom?...Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.

Now, Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh (especially Ephraim and Manasseh) were part of that Northern squadron of tribes. Benjamin, of course, had land in the South and ultimately aligned itself with Judah and so survived even after the Northern Kingdom fell, but Ephraim and Manasseh...their land was all a part of the Northern Kingdom.

So why does he mention these three? They serve as the summary, as the shorthand description for all the tribes of the Northern Kingdom. We're going to see why a little bit later. You'll notice how they are identified as "Rachel's tribes" here. We'll see that in just a few moments, but this tips us off that this prayer is on behalf of those ten Northern tribes who had fallen under the judgment of God, and we see here in verses 1-3 that God would have us come boldly to Him in prayer with arguments based on His person and promises. He says,

O give ear, Shepherd of Israel,
You who lead Joseph like a flock;
You who are enthroned above the cherubim, shine forth!
Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up
Your power, and come to save us!
O God, restore us, and cause
Your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved.

I want you to note throughout, the boldness of this prayer. Just as prayer itself adds nothing to God's knowledge and yet plays a large part in His work in this world and among His people, so the impassioned plea of this Psalmist for His attention, that He will rouse Himself up to act for the people of God, have a proper place within our prayers, though those pleas and our passion add not one ounce to God's willingness to help His people. When we come to Him in prayer and plead with Him passionately, we are not making Him to be more compassionate. He is already all compassion, but as we plead for Him to be

compassionate, we are brought into a realization of the fullness of His compassion for His people.

The Psalms abound in language like this. God, it seems, prefers an excess of boldness in prayer as opposed to an excess of caution, as long as that boldness isn't just babble. Why?

Because we come to Him as sons, not as applicants! We haven't been told to stand in a line at Sam's. We're the sons and daughters of Almighty God, and He bids us to burst in His door with our hearts breaking and pour out our passionate pleas to Him in prayer, and we see that overflowing here. And I want to say that that's all the more striking in light of the fact that the judgment that has fallen upon the people of God in the Northern Kingdom is deserved! You know, we could have stood back and said, "What in the world are you praying for those idiots for? They went after other gods! Of course they were judged by the Assyrians!" And yet the Psalmist is pouring out his heart almost like some great wrong has been done!

I'm sure that our reaction from our vantage point, had we been there close up...from our vantage point almost 3,000 years later, our reaction would have been "Of course they've been judged! They're sinners! They worshiped other gods! They spurned God's love! They rejected his commandments! They followed false prophets! They killed the true prophets of God, they squelched the true religion — of course they're judged!" - but this Psalmist is pouring out his heart for the people of God.

And notice the content of his appeal. The first thing that he says is 'O give hear, Shepherd of Israel...' "The Lord is my Shepherd." And so he comes to God with this plea based on Who God is, and that is an especially poignant plea because it reminds us that the Psalmist here knows that God is not only a Shepherd to His people, that He's a Shepherd with a long memory. And let me tell you why. Take your Bibles and turn back to Psalm 49.

These tribes that are mentioned (we'll see this in just a moment) all have a special connection to Joseph, and in Genesis 49 when aged Israel is giving his blessing to Joseph, in verse 24, do you see what he calls God there? God is a Shepherd to Joseph, and it's almost as if the Psalmist coming to God not only wants to acknowledge that that's what He is, He's a Shepherd that cares for His straying and wayward flock, but He's a Shepherd with a long memory, and long, long ago God made this beautiful promise through the mouth of Israel to Joseph that He would be his Shepherd. And so he lifts up this prayer to God, mentioning His leading of Joseph and the Northern tribes in fulfillment of Israel's blessing on Joseph in Genesis 49:24. He remembers that God is Shepherd, and so he says 'Lord God, hear my prayer because You're a Shepherd of Your people. You care about that straying sheep. You care about Your flock.'

But He's not just a Shepherd with a long memory, He also is a sovereign Shepherd. You see that in the very next phrase: "You who are enthroned above the cherubim, shine forth!" The cherubim, you remember, are the guardians of holiness, and they are God's agents of judgment, and reminding Him that God is enthroned above the cherubim is a reminder of God's sovereign judgment and rule, and he calls upon God to shine forth, to manifest Himself. This is a virtual plea for theophany, for a man of visible manifestation of God. You remember that above the winged mercy seat, God had manifested Himself in Israel, and this is a plea for God to manifest Himself again on behalf of His people.

He doesn't stop there, though. He goes on to say a third thing. Notice, "Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up Your power and come to save us." This God who is a sovereign Shepherd with a long memory also has a long memory for His promises.

Now let's think again: Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, what do they all have in common? Those are respectively the children (or the son and the grandsons) of Rachel. Rachel, who longed to give children to her husband; Rachel, who was losing the fertility contest to Leah; Rachel, who bore Joseph, and then died bearing Benjamin. These are Rachel's children. These are Rachel's tribes, those children that were exceedingly precious to Israel, and the Psalmist knew that God would remember the exceeding preciousness of those children to Israel.

And even more than that, the Psalmist knew that Israel's exceeding great love for Joseph and for Benjamin was just a pale reflection of the exceeding preciousness to God of His children, and so he asks that God would manifest His strength, His sovereignty, His power, in order to save Rachel's tribe.

Ephraim and Manasseh...you remember Joseph was blessed with the blessing of these two sons by Israel in Genesis 48 and 49, so that there were actually thirteen tribes, even though twelve sons of Jacob.

But finally, notice how this Psalmist goes on to pray in verse 3: "O God, restore us, and cause Your face to shine upon us, and we will be saved." Here he's going back to Aaron's benediction in Numbers:

"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."

And here he reminds us that our prayer is not only to a sovereign Shepherd with a long memory, and Who remembers His promises, but He also remembers His blessings. This is a petition for God to manifest His love and His faith and His bestowal of total well-being on His people, and the Psalmist knows that if God will do that, they will be saved.

And so this Psalm begins with this passionate plea for God to help in the crisis of Israel and Samaria's fall, and it teaches us that God would have us to come boldly to Him in prayer with arguments based on His person and His promises.

II. Since God is the source of judgment, He alone is our hope for mercy.

Look at verses 4-7. Here's the second thing. This plea goes on on behalf of beleaguered Israel, and notice this: Since God is the source of judgment, He alone is our hope for mercy. You see, it's not ultimately Assyria that has brought judgment on the Northern Kingdom. It's God who has brought judgment on the Northern Kingdom through Assyria, and since God is the source of judgment, He's the One you go to for mercy!

"O Lord God of hosts, how long will You be angry with the prayers of Your people?" It's pretty bad when God's even angry with your prayers. It's a picture of how He's turning away the pleas, the cries of the Northern Kingdom, because they've been unfaithful. They've turned their back on Him. That's how bad things are.

"You have fed them with the bread of tears, You have made them to drink tears in large measure." (Literally this means 'You've been making them drink tears by the quart!')

"You make us an object of contention to our neighbors; and our enemies laugh among themselves. O God of hosts, restore us, and cause Your face to shine upon us...."

You see what he's saying. Look at it again. "You make us an object of contention to our neighbors, and our enemies laugh among themselves." Who is behind the aggression of their enemies? God. He is sovereign, and His judgment has manifested itself in the aggression of these enemies, and so He is the only solution and hope for relief. Only God's blessing can answer our deepest need, because it is His judgment that is visited to us in this earth. All of the horizontal earthly battlefields of life are simply the outworking of that vertical heavenly warfare in which we are engaged.

I want to draw your attention to one thing especially, in verses 5 and 6. Notice, "You have fed them with the bread of tears, You have made them to drink tears in large measure. You make us an object of contention to our neighbors." Do you see the community of sympathy that these Jews in the Southern Kingdom have for their Northern neighbors under the judgment of God? They can speak of them as "them" eating and drinking their tears, and at the same time "You make us an object of contention to our neighbors." In other words, they are joining in with the experience of their Northern neighbors under judgment. And I want to say to you

that that speaks volumes to us about how we ought to pray when we see brothers and sisters under judgment.

You know, it may well be that you have worked very hard to walk faithfully in this world, to love and trust the living God, to walk in His ways. And you may see professing brothers and sisters falling by the wayside and finding judgment and punishment, and your temptation may be to be censorious and judgmental, to stand over them in superiority and say 'Aha! You're finally getting what you deserve.' And the Jews of the Southern Kingdom could have done that about the Jews of the Northern Kingdom, but you know what they do: 'Lord God, that's me under Your judgment up there. That's my people under the judgment up there. But for the grace of God, that's me, O Lord.' And there's a sharing, there's a joining in sympathy with those who are under judgment and a plea to God to be merciful to them, not because they deserve it — they don't; not because they've been faithful — they haven't; not because they followed after the true God — they didn't; but there's a community of sympathy as these sinners are under the judgment of God.

Think of the great prophet Isaiah. If ever there was a man who was walking in integrity in a wayward generation, it would be Isaiah, and yet when he stands before the Lord he's conscious not simply that he dwells among a people of unclean lips, but that he himself is a man of unclean lips. He can fall rightly under the judgment of God just as well as his people.

And so there is a community of sympathy with them. Let us pray with burden and with sympathy for those who have fallen under the judgment of sin.

III. When we lift up the question “why” in prayer, we must realize that sometimes the answer is God's secret will.

In verses 8-13, we see this prayer turn to God based on God's purposes for Israel, which is spoken of as a vine:

You removed a vine from Egypt; You drove out the nations, and planted it. You cleared the ground before it, and it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shadow; the cedars of God with its boughs. It was sending out branches to the sea, shoots to the River. Why have You broken down its hedges, so that all who pass that way pick its fruit?

The picture is of Israel as a vine that God Himself has taken out of Egypt and planted in Canaan, and driven out its enemies. And at one time it had grown to great proportions under Solomon and David, but now it's been whittled away and now it's been burned, now it's being attacked. And the prayer comes up, doesn't it, in verse 12: “Why have You broken down its hedges....?”

There's so much we could say about this passage, but this is what I want to say most of all. When we lift up that question of "Why?" in prayer, we must realize that sometimes the answer is God's secret will, and He does not tell us what His "why" is.

At one level, of course, the answer to "Why, O Lord, why have You broken down its hedges?" is 'Because I'm judging their sin! I'm punishing them for disobedience.' You can find that answer all through the prophets. You'll find it in Amos, you'll find it in Isaiah, you'll find it in Jeremiah...you'll find that answer all over. At one level, the answer is 'I'm judging them for their sin,' but, my friends, the thing that is really striking about this is that ultimately the answer is because God has determined that Israel, His vine, would foreshadow the true Vine, and that Israel is not the reality but the foreshadowing, and the reality is Jesus.

There would be a night, the night of the death of Jesus, and He would stand before His disciples and He would say, "I am the vine, you are the branches." And this Psalmist could not have possibly understood the fullness of that, and so when he cries out with every fiber of his being 'Why are you doing what You're doing?' God has a very good answer, and God does not tell him.

We have the privilege of looking back and seeing the glory of God's design: that though Israel (the carcass of Israel, the foreshadowing of this great work of God in the world) would be cast aside, yet there would be a true Vine that would never ever fail.

And that cry 'Why?' — at one level, yes, it can be answered by 'Because of God's judgment for sin.' But at one level that cry is not answered, and it reminds us, my friends, that there will be many a 'why?' that we lift up to the Lord, and we may not see to the bottom of God's answer by crying 'Why?' but that does not mean that there is not an answer. It just means that we don't know what it is.

IV. God answers our prayers not as we pray them, but as we would pray them if we were wiser.

One last thing. In verses 14-19, this plea based on God's faithfulness and compassion — it's quite glorious, because don't you love Calvin's phrase that "God answers our prayers not as we pray them, but as we would pray them if we were wiser"? And has there ever been a better example of this than verse 17? Here's the Psalmist pouring out his heart to God, asking God to hear his prayer because of God's faithfulness and compassion, and here's how he prays for Israel...and he uses language that you'll find back in Israel's blessing of Joseph in Genesis 49. He says, "Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand...." You remember, that's what the name "Benjamin" means: "son of my right hand." You remember when Rachel in her last breath named her son, she named him "Ben-

oni, son of my sorrow, son of my suffering,” as she died. And Israel said, ‘No, no, no. His name will not be Ben-oni; it will be Ben-jamin, son of my right hand.’

He says, “Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand, Upon the son of man whom You made strong for Yourself.” And he's praying for God's hand of blessing and favor to be upon those Northern tribes, typified in Rachel's tribes, and he didn't realize that he was praying far more than he knew, because the suffering of the tribes of Israel would just be a foreshadowing of the suffering of the Son of Man. And he didn't understand it, but he, at that very moment, was lifting up a prayer that God's hand would be on the Son of His right hand, Jesus; and he didn't realize that the sufferings of Israel were but a foreshadowing of the Messiah on our behalf; and he didn't realize that all the sufferings that Israel was going to endure from the eighth century and through the exile was to prepare the people of God to understand that the way of glory was the way of the Cross, and the way of victory was the way of suffering, and it was going to be typified in one Man, the Son of God's right hand: the Messiah, Jesus the Christ.

The Lord answers our prayers not as we pray them, but as we would pray them if we were wiser; and so, when we do not get an answer to our heartfelt pleas of ‘Why?’ let us then rejoice that our God so answers our prayer. My friends, there is no truth in all of God's word that cannot bring comfort and consolation to a trembling believer, and this Psalm displays that reality from beginning to end.

Let us look to God in prayer.

O Lord, thank You for Your word, and thank You for this Psalm of lament. Grant that we would pray it with faith when the time comes that we must pray it. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Would you stand for God's blessing.

Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord, until the day break and the shadows flee away. Amen.

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