

Psalm 81 is a Psalm written by Asaph for the choir director. What this means is that a worship leader for Israel, Asaph, wrote this Psalm for the choir director so not only could it be taught, but actually sung. This particular Psalm was to be accompanied “on the Gittith.” It is unclear just exactly what this instrument was. It was apparently some kind of musical stringed instrument that was originally made in Gath, which was a Philistine city. It is possible it was some stringed instrument like an acoustic guitar. There were no pianos or organs but this accompaniment would have been some very quiet and reverent background music. It was to be softly played in the background of the communication of these lyrics.

What is interesting about this being an instrument of Gath is that it certainly is not an invention that comes from a godly background. The Philistines were anything but godly. But this is what we must always remember: **all good inventions and all good things come from God even if they were made by heathens.** God is sovereign over everything and everything may be used to glorify Him or not glorify Him.

In fact, the piano was invented in 1709 by Francesco Cristofori in Italy and there is no indication that his reason for inventing it was due to the fact he wanted some instrument in the church. In fact, it wasn't even used in the church until the late 1800's. But this instrument has been used by God just like the instrument from Gath.

Now this Psalm is a Psalm designed to show that there are some great blessings and benefits from corporate worship. In the O.T. economy, God expected His people to go to the tabernacle and later the Temple to worship Him. In the N.T. economy, God expects His people to go to church and worship Him. God deserves worship and he demands worship and that is the key point of this Psalm.

Every now and then in our day you will run into someone who will try to convince you that they are right with God, but they don't need church. Let me say that this Psalm and several N.T. texts will tell you that you cannot be right with God unless you are going to corporate worship services. In the O.T. that meant the tabernacle or temple and in the N.T. that means the church. The point of the Psalm is this:

GOD'S PEOPLE NEED TO OBEY GOD BY BEING INVOLVED IN CORPORATE WORSHIP AND IF GOD'S PEOPLE CONTINUE TO CORPORATELY WORSHIP GOD, THEY WILL EXPERIENCE MANY POSITIVE THINGS; BUT IF THEY DON'T THEY WILL EXPERIENCE MANY NEGATIVE THINGS.

Now this Psalm is written to believers in the O.T.. It is a challenge for them to go to their place of worship, which for Israel is the tabernacle. For us the challenge would be go to church to worship God.

Now for Israel there were normal Sabbath days and then there were additional Feast days. God expected every adult male to travel to Jerusalem three special times a year to participate in corporate worship.

This was not a simple jump in the car and drive to church mandate. It was imperative that God's people travel to Jerusalem for different feast days: 1) Feast of Unleavened Bread/Passover; 2) Feast of Weeks; 3) Feast of Tabernacles; 4) Feast of First Fruits.

There are five main worship topics discussed in this Psalm:

WORSHIP TOPIC #1 – The charge to worship God. 81:1-3

In the opening verses the emphasis is on music in worship. It is interesting that later the emphasis will be on listening to the Word of God, but the Psalm opens with challenging Israel to worship God through music.

She is to sing songs and offer joyful praise to God, which features songs that remember His attributes “strength” and His connection to “Israel” “the God of Jacob.” What this tells us is one of the purposes of the hymns is to reflect on truth about God and about what He has revealed in His Word—specifically here that He is the God of Jacob. **So the lyrics became critical to the worship music. The music is not about the instruments, it is about the lyrics.**

Now we may observe that certain instruments are named that were to be used in calling the nation to public worship. There is mention of the timbrel, the lyre with the harp and the trumpet. Now the timbrel was a percussion instrument used in Israel that would be similar to our modern tambourine. A lyre was a stringed instrument that looks something like a cross between a harp and small guitar. Now notice this was to be used with the harp. I actually heard a woman play a lyre, she played “O Holy Night” and it was beautiful. Now here is what we need to know; there was absolutely no similarity between these instruments and their use in worship and the modern day bands that are on church stages. This was beautiful, reverent worship that was designed to enhance the lyrics that were singing about the truth of God. The trumpet would announce to the nation that it was time to go to worship service and as the people were gathering, there was this beautiful prelude music that was being played.

So as the nation was gathering, these instruments were like a prelude that signaled that it was time to worship God. Again we point out that the purpose of music is not entertainment; but worship.

Now it is obvious that there was to be singing at this worship service. It was to be loud, joyful singing about the power of God and about the fact that God is Israel's God. God does not want half-hearted singing. God does not want half-hearted worship. God loves it when His people gather together and they lift their voices loudly to Him in praise. Singing should never be sad and gloomy; but uplifting and joyful. In fact, the Apostle Paul, in presenting church truth, said that singing Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs is an indication we are filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18-19). We are to make melody in our hearts to the Lord.

WORSHIP TOPIC #2 – The reasons to worship God. **81:4-7**

There are three main reasons why God’s people need to worship God:

Reason #1 - God’s people should worship God because it is a Biblical ordinance. **81:4**

Worship is a statute, which means it is part of the O.T. Law. What this means is that the people were to go to worship whether they felt like it or not. This was their God-given duty and responsibility.

Reason #2 - God’s people should worship God because it is an established testimony by God. **81:5**

God is the One who has ordained corporate worship. God is the One who demanded that Israel worship Him on certain days. Many times you will hear someone say they worship God their own way and don’t need church. When I hear someone use that argument, I typically say, well we aren’t the ones who invented the church, God did.

Reason #3 - God’s people should worship God because of what God has done for His people. **81:6-7**

God has done some amazing things for His people that demand worship. Asaph lists four amazing realities all of which focus on what God did for His people:

(Amazing Reality #1) - God relieved His people from their burdens. **81:6a**

(Amazing Reality #2) - God freed His people from their enslavement. **81:6b**

(Amazing Reality #3) - God rescued His people when they called out to Him. **81:7a**

(Amazing Reality #4) - God answered and proved His people through His provisions. **81:7b**

At this point Asaph says, “selah” which means stop and think about this. Think about all God has done because when you do you cannot help but want to worship God. God takes away our burdens, He sets us free from enslavement to sin, He listens to us and He provides for us. The least we can do is worship Him.

Don’t these wonderful realities teach us that the least we could do would be to regularly go to worship God? “Selah”–Stop and think about that.

WORSHIP TOPIC #3 – The elements involved in the worship of God. **81:8-10**

There are five key elements of worship that are brought out here:

Element #1 - True worship means God's people will hear and listen to God's Word. **81:8a**

God expects His people to gather together with an expectancy to hear the Word of God. In fact, let me be so bold as to say if you go to church and are not interested in carefully listening to the Word of God, you are not really involved in true worship.

Element #2 - True worship means God's people will be admonished by God's Word. **81:8b**

The actual Hebrew word used here means that God's people need to listen to the Word of God with the idea that they will obey it and give heed to it (William Gesenius, *Hebrew Lexicon*, p. 836). God wants His people going to worship with the idea of hearing God's Word and making adjustments in their own lives.

Element #3 - True worship demands that only God be worshipped. **81:9**

God demands that people worship the God of the Bible. No other worship is acceptable to God. Religion is not good in the mind of God; it is idolatry.

Element #4 - True worship demands remembering that God saved His people. **81:10a**

God wants us remembering that He is the One who saved us. I actually do not believe that those who emphasize what they call "free will" or those who are Arminian in their theology can actually worship God in an acceptable way. Free will is nothing more than self-will or sin-will. We don't choose God; we choose to sin. So if we go to some worship service that is emphasizing our will, not God's will, that is not true worship. Many churches honor man in salvation, not the God who actually saved the sinner. But true worship understands the sovereignty of God in salvation and it worships God for it.

Element #5 - True worship demands that God's people gather to be fed God's Word. **81:10b**

God's people who are truly gathering to worship God gather together with an expectation they will be fed.

WORSHIP TOPIC #4 – The problems and hindrances of worship with the people of God.
81:11-12

When God's people gather to worship, there can be hindrances to a pure worship that is acceptable to God. There was with Israel and there also can be in the church:

Hindrance #1 - God's people did not gather to listen to God's Word. **81:11a**

God is aware of who actually goes to worship because they want to hear from Him through His precious Word. Many of God's people who go to worship services do not go for those reasons.

Hindrance #2 - God's people did not gather to obey God's Word. **81:11b**

Do you grasp this point? The vast majority of people going to church are not interested in hearing and obeying the Word of God.

Hindrance #3 - God's people gathered with stubborn hearts. **81:12a**

It is very clear from this verse that when people gather to worship, He examines hearts. If people are stubborn and not sensitive to Him or His Word, He will just let them go. They will never know Him and they will never worship Him and they will never be honored by Him.

Hindrance #4 - God's people gathered to walk their own way. **81:12b**

If you want to walk your own way, God will let you. You will flounder through life and never know God and you will walk right into misery. In fact, you will lose out on some wonderful things God would have done.

WORSHIP TOPIC #5 – The blessings that come from true worship of God. **81:13-16**

If one will go to worship the true God with the goal of hearing and applying His Word, there are some wonderful blessings God promises:

Blessing #1 - God will quickly subdue enemies. **81:14a**

If you are continually dominated by enemies such as your flesh, the world or the Devil, then it is time for a reality check of your relationship with God.

Blessing #2 - God will quickly turn against our adversaries. **81:14b**

God says to His people, if you love Me and worship Me in accordance with My Word, I will take care of all who oppose you. You can leave them to me because I will quickly turn against them.

Blessing #3 - God-haters who are pretenders would be punished. **81:15**

People who hate God pretend to be right with God. They pretend like they are interested in obeying God's Word. God says I will eventually punish forever the religious pretenders.

Blessing #4 - God's people will be filled and blessed by God. **81:16**

If God's people will purpose to hear the Word and obey the Word, they will be blessed morally, militarily and materially.

When we gather to worship, let us gather to sing unto the Lord and to listen to and apply His precious Word. If we keep that focus, all will be well.