

Lament

*You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me;
my companions have become darkness. (Psalm 88:18 ESV)*

*O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses;
you have been angry; oh, restore us. (Psalm 60:1 ESV)*

Let Your Face Shine

March 13th, 2022

Psalm 80

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Introduction:

Good morning. As we prepare to consider God's Word, I want to invite you to imagine a scene with me.

Somewhere in the Ukraine, there was a church not unlike Redeemer. Three weeks ago, they were worshipping together in a service just like this with their brothers and sisters in Christ. Now they've been scattered and forced to flee to foreign lands.

Today, as we gather in this comfortable gymnasium, some families in the Ukraine are gathering to worship in subway tunnels. They worship with the fear that they no longer have a house to return to. Some of them worship with the fear that they no longer have a husband, or a father to return to.

What song will they sing this morning?

Our Psalm last week – Psalm 88 – was a song that gave voice to *private* grief. Our Psalm this morning – Psalm 80 – is a song that gives voice to *corporate* grief.

It was a Psalm for the church in Israel when Assyria was laying waste to the northern tribes. It's a Psalm for the church in the Ukraine who feel as if God's favor has left them. It's a Psalm for the church in Ontario whose pastor just resigned after a scandal. This Psalm exists because, when

everything seems to be going wrong, it feels for all the world like God has forgotten His people. Charles Spurgeon captures the heart of this Psalm:

Our greatest dread is the withdrawal of the Lord's presence, and our brightest hope is the prospect of His return.¹

This Psalm is built around a recurring refrain – you can think of it in modern terms like a chorus. Three times, the congregation cries out:

³ Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Psalm 80:3 ESV)

These believers have more troubles than they can manage. They have circumstances that feel unbearable. But, worst of all, they feel as if God's face is no longer shining on them! And NOTHING is worse than that feeling. As William Plumer notes:

If he withdraws, it matters little who else is present.²

This morning, we are going to worship our way through Psalm 80 and, in doing so, we are going to learn how to sing when it feels like God has looked away.

How Do We Sing When It Feels Like God Has Looked Away?

I mentioned that this song has a common refrain or “chorus.” That chorus divides the song into three sections. We find the first section in verses 1-3. Look there with me now:

Restore Us, O God

To the choirmaster: according to Lilies. A Testimony. Of Asaph, a Psalm.

80 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.

² Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh,

¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Treasury of David - Third Ed. Vol. 1 of 2*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), 346.

² W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 771.

stir up your might
and come to save us!
³ Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Psalm 80:1-3 ESV)

When it feels like God has looked away, we can begin our worship by asking the question:

1. Why aren't You doing what You said You would do?

That's a fair and appropriate question. When everything seems to be going wrong – when the whole congregation feels as if God has looked away – it is not wrong to ask: Why? That's what the Psalmist models for us here.

In his questioning, he appeals to the nature of God. God has revealed Himself to us. He does what He does because He is who He is. And we don't have to guess who He is. He has told us!

He wants us to know His tenderness, so He has revealed Himself with the imagery of a shepherd. He wants us to know His holiness, so He has given us a glimpse of His throne surrounded by angels. God hasn't left us to guess about His nature. He wants us to know exactly who He is.

Think about this: If my son Luke wants me to drop what I'm doing and to go teach him how to skate, there are some methods that are more likely to work than others. Shouting won't work. Pouting won't work. But, if he looks me in the eyes and says, "But you're my DAD... Who else is going to teach me?" Well... That will work every time, won't it?

That's what the Psalmist is doing here. He is appealing to who God has revealed Himself to be. He's saying: "You taught us that You are the shepherd! Who else is going to tend to us? You taught us that You are the Holy One enthroned upon the cherubim. Who else can shine on us? Who else can restore us? Who else can save us? If THAT is who You are, then *why aren't you helping us? Why aren't You doing what You said You would do?*"

Once again, I want to remind you this morning that *we are allowed to pray this way*. God wrote this song for us, because He wants us to use it! He knows that we will need it.

The Israelites certainly needed it.

The earliest church believed that this Psalm was written when Assyria was mercilessly annihilating the Northern Tribes of Israel. In fact, in the LXX – the Greek translation of the Old Testament – the early translators added “A Psalm concerning the Assyrian” to the title.³ This song was written at a time when 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel were being terrorized and murdered by a nation that was marked by more cruelty than the Nazis.

That is almost certainly the historical setting for this song, but it’s interesting that the Psalmist chose to leave the particular details out. Why is that? I think one commentator gets it exactly right when he says:

The psalms are purposefully vague in reference to historical events so that they can be used in a variety of situations.⁴

For that reason, as we worship our way through this song, we’re going to consider what it meant for the Israelites who first sang it, but then we’re going to consider the scenarios in which we might need it today. This song was useful when Israel was burning to the ground. But this song is *also* useful while the Ukraine is under fire. And this song *will continue to be* useful whenever the church finds herself in a season of darkness.

Because, while our circumstances will inevitably change, the God that we cry out to remains constant.

So, let’s think about application: When we feel abandoned by God, we can appeal to *everything* that He has revealed about His nature. He has revealed Himself as the Father to the fatherless. He has revealed Himself as the God of all comfort. He has revealed Himself as the Lord, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Therefore, we can and SHOULD pray, “God, *this* is who You have revealed Yourself to be! So we are calling upon You! ACT according to who You are! Deliverer, please deliver! Redeemer,

³ As noted by Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150 (TOTC)*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 289.

⁴ Tremper Longman III, *How To Read The Psalms*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 27.

please redeem! Good Shepherd, please lead us! Healer, please heal us! God of glory, please shine on us!”

When it feels like God has looked away, we are allowed to ask Him why He isn’t doing what He said He would do. Then, we can ask:

2. How long will You be angry?

This is what we find in verses 4-7:

- ⁴ O Lord God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
⁶ You make us an object of contention for our neighbors,
and our enemies laugh among themselves.
⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Psalm 80:4-7 ESV)

Last week, in Psalm 88, the individual Psalmist cried out, “God, it hurts... And God, it was You!” Similarly, our passage this morning expresses that same anguish, but at the corporate level. This isn’t the song of *one* despairing worshiper. This is the song of an *entire nation* who feel as if God has utterly rejected them!

They feel as if God is angry at their prayers! It’s one thing to fear that God is absent. It’s another thing to fear that God is present and angry! The congregation is coming to God for help, but the more they call out to Him, the worse their circumstances become!

With each passing day, they would hear another report about another fallen tribe in the North. “The Assyrians have wiped out the tribe of Manassah! The tribe of Ephraim has been ransacked! The enemy is heading this way and they are laughing at our weakness!” These people were in constant distress. They ate through tears. They drank through tears. And they wondered how long God’s anger would last.

Here's a question: Were they right in their assessment? Was God angry at their prayers? Our inclination is to immediately say, "NO! Of course not!" But the answer isn't as cut and dry as that.

According to the Bible, sometimes God *is* angry with our prayers. In fact, in Amos chapter 5, God told the northern tribes of Israel – the very same people who were annihilated by the Assyrians – that He HATED their worship because it was all a big, hypocritical show. They were neglecting the poor and ignoring injustices and God couldn't stand their worship any longer. He warned them. And they didn't listen. If those are the people that this Psalm is written for, then they were *right* in believing that God was angry with their prayers!

We find a similar principle in the New Testament. Peter commands the husbands to deal gently with their wives and warns that, if they don't, their prayers will be *hindered*. So, sometimes God IS angry with the prayers of His people.

Now, I want to clarify here that God's silence is not always evidence of God's anger. For example, God was silent for an extended season in the face of Job's suffering, but we know that God was not angry with Job – not even a little bit. In that instance, God's silence was a test. God was teaching Job and God was glorifying Himself. As we study God's Word, we learn that sometimes God's silence *is* an indication of His anger, but not always. When we face seasons of silence, we need to have both categories open in our minds.

But we are reminded by this Psalm that God's silence always *feels* like His anger.

And that is terribly frightening, isn't it? Think about this for a moment: How many Christians in the Ukraine are wondering if this tragedy is a reflection of the spiritual state of their nation? Or, to turn our attention locally, how many heartbroken, shrinking churches are wondering whether their lack of growth is a sign of God's displeasure with their ministry? On a personal front, I've found myself wrestling with this question. We haven't had a baptism in this church in over two years. What do we make of that?

When God is silent – when it feels as if He has turned His face away from the church – we are allowed to ask Him: "How long will you be angry?"

And then, we can go on to ask Him:

3. Why did You let this happen?

The final section of this song is the longest. Look with me now to verses 8-19:

- ⁸ You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
⁹ You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.
¹⁰ The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches.
¹¹ It sent out its branches to the sea
and its shoots to the River.
¹² Why then have you broken down its walls,
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.
¹⁴ Turn again, O God of hosts!
Look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine,
¹⁵ the stock that your right hand planted,
and for the son whom you made strong for yourself.
¹⁶ They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down;
may they perish at the rebuke of your face!
¹⁷ But let your hand be on the man of your right hand,
the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!
¹⁸ Then we shall not turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call upon your name!
¹⁹ Restore us, O Lord God of hosts!
Let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Psalm 80:8-19 ESV)

From the very beginning, this Psalm has focused in on Joseph as a representative of Israel. For example, look back at verse 1:

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock. (Psalm 80:1a ESV)

The Psalmist refers to God as the God who leads Joseph. But why is that? It would make far more sense for the Psalmist to continue to use the name of Israel – the father of the 12 tribes. Yet, he zooms in on Joseph. He then goes on to use this analogy of a vine or a bough that grows and

spreads. That language is a clear allusion to the blessing that was given to Joseph in Genesis 49.

There, we read:

**Joseph is a fruitful bough,
a fruitful bough by a spring;
his branches run over the wall.**

²³ The archers bitterly attacked him,
shot at him, and harassed him severely,

²⁴ yet his bow remained unmoved;
his arms were made agile

by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob

(from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel) (Genesis 49:22-24 ESV)

Joseph was supposed to be a fruitful bough – a fruitful vine – that was to stretch out and grow as he was tended to by the Shepherd of Israel! And, as we saw in verses 8-11, he *was* that vine for a season! God cleared out the nations and planted His people. He allowed them to prosper and they grew in size and in number.

But then God seemingly abandoned the vine. The tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh – the sons of Joseph – were located in the north and they were among those who were violently uprooted by the Assyrians!

The remaining Israelites were left asking the question: “God, why did you let this happen?”

The Psalmist uses vivid imagery to pull us in. Try to envision the picture that he is painting. God had tilled the ground and planted this vine with a promise to bless it. He stood like a wall and protected it from all threats as it grew and spread out across the land. But then, God removed the wall. The nations came and began to rip all of the fruit off of the vine until it was barren. A wild boar – the Assyrian army – broke into the garden and ripped the vine to shreds! All of the work that God had done – all of the health and growth – was undone in an instant!

The Psalmist is perplexed. William Plumer asks:

How comes it that God, who is wise and just, should have taken such pains with a vine for long years, and then leave it exposed to utter destruction?⁵

⁵ W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 770.

In a similar way, we may find ourselves in seasons when we are left asking the same question. God, why did You let this happen? Why did You build this up only to tear it down?

Some of you have been part of declining churches. Some of you have lived through the sadness of church splits. You've watched helplessly as the once-healthy vine was trampled and ripped to shreds by the wild boar.

The wild boar comes in many forms. The wild boar of legalism has burst through the gate of countless congregations. The wild boar of heresy has left entire denominations in shambles. The wild boar of scandal has uprooted entire movements. The list goes on and on – sickness, tragedy, famine, war, politics – ultimately the devil himself animates the boar, and he loves to steal, to kill, and to destroy.

And when the wild boar has done his damage, it is not wrong for us to ask, “God, why did You let this happen?”

That's what the Psalmist models for us here.

Conclusion

But as he comes to the conclusion of this last, probing question, he makes a final request that we would do well to pray when we feel like God has looked away. Look again at verses 17-19:

- ¹⁷ But let your hand be on the man of your right hand,
the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!
¹⁸ Then we shall not turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call upon your name!
¹⁹ Restore us, O Lord God of hosts!
Let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Psalm 80:17-19 ESV)

The Psalmist is saying, “You planted us! You caused us to grow! And now, for some reason you have allowed us to be chopped down and thrown into the fire. But Lord, if you will restore us again – if you will raise up another son like Joseph and plant him again – then we will never turn

back from you! We will call upon your name and we will glorify you! Just allow your face to shine upon us once more and we will be saved!”

That’s what the Israelite was longing for when he prayed this prayer – another son like Joseph who could be replanted in the land. But living as we do on this side of the cross, we know that God answered this prayer in a way that the Psalmist never could have anticipated!

God didn’t simply restore His people to a plot of land. Instead, he restored His people to inherit the new Heavens and the New Earth! God didn’t simply send another son of man – He sent THE son of man – the God man! He planted a new vine that stretches beyond the terrain of the Mediterranean world and that reaches across the globe and across the centuries! We can’t read Psalm 80 without hearing Jesus declare:

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5 ESV)

Psalm 80 expresses a lament, but it also points forward to a glorious hope! Jesus adopted the imagery of this Psalm and showed himself to be the answer to the Psalmist’s prayer! And WHAT AN ANSWER!

The Psalmist pleaded with God to shine His face upon His people and in Jesus, the face of God is shining brighter than the sun! John opened up his gospel with the declaration:

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. (John 1:9 ESV)

In 2 Corinthians 4, we read:

For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” **has shone in our hearts** to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God **in the face of Jesus Christ.** (2 Corinthians 4:6 ESV)

Do you see that? God has shone His light into hearts – and that light comes to us in face of Jesus Christ! We may find ourselves asking “Why aren’t You doing what You said what You said You would do?” But, in Christ, God’s plan is on full display! He has entered into our suffering – even into our *death* – in order to bring us home! In Christ, the face of God has shone upon His people!

We may find ourselves asking “How long will you be angry?” But, in Christ, God’s righteous anger against our sin has been satisfied at the cross. So, while we may endure periods of discipline, we know that if we are in Christ, God’s disposition towards us is always and only that of a loving Father.

And we may find ourselves asking “Why did you let this happen?” But, in Christ, we are reminded that our suffering will never have the final word. Every trial is temporary. Every apparent defeat will give way to glory. Every wrong will be righted. Even when we feel like lambs that are being led to the slaughter, we can declare with the Apostle Paul:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:37-39 ESV)

The vine has been replanted. The wild boar has been wounded, and his defeat will surely come!
Amen? Amen!

And yet... We don’t always feel that triumph. Even though all of that is true – even though we KNOW that the light of God’s face shines on us through Christ – there will still be seasons when we will feel like we are in the dark. Sometimes, Psalm 80 feels more like home than Romans 8. And that’s okay. God wrote them both. And when we wonder why God’s not helping, and why He seems angry, and why He ever allowed the enemy to operate on such a long leash – should we ever find ourselves worshiping in a subway tunnel like our brothers and sisters in the Ukraine or trying to put the pieces back together after a nasty church split – God has given us a song to sing.

I pray that we never need it, but it’s important that we know where to find it.

³ Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Psalm 80:3 ESV)

Let’s pray together.