

In light of God’s past acts of delivering his people, it is right to bitterly lament when his kingdom feels ravaged, to plead for deliverance from our suffering, and to pray he will shine upon us again—reviving souls, restoring favor, and tending the flock. Call upon the LORD God Almighty, that we may be saved!

Introduction – In 2019 my family suffered many trials. So I made a list, but it got too hard to maintain!

Background – Book 3 of the Psalter might be called the Book of Exile. Psalm 80, which is a focal messianic psalm, is basically in the middle of Book 3. Exile is the thematic middle of the “U-shaped curve” of kingdom living. In God’s kingdom, all seems to start out well. Then in the middle, God’s people throughout the ages testify that pain, hardship, heartache, and even agony become a part of kingdom living. Exile is at the bottom of that U-shaped curve.

I. Tearful Laments

A. O where is our Shepherd? (vv. 1-2, 4-6)

Asaph the psalmist (or an Asaphite in his tradition) cries to God who is the Shepherd of Israel. In the Bible’s view God is sitting on his throne in heaven, but his footstool is the ark of the covenant in Jerusalem’s temple. “Enthroned upon the cherubim” is scriptural language that refers to God’s throne on the lid that sat upon the ark. The lid had golden carvings of angels (cherubs) with their wings overshadowing the lid. God in his bright cloud-like glory lived right there between the cherubim—at least in the way he manifested his presence on earth among Israel. But in another sense, God was not there because he wasn’t awake, at least from Israel’s point of view. So it’s time to call on the God of hosts, who fights for his people when he stirs up his strength to save. However, Israel has a serious problem. God is angry with their prayers, implying the people have sinned repeatedly, greatly, and flagrantly in turning away from the LORD. Israel’s cries of “O where is our Shepherd?” all flow into an arresting image of tearful lament. Their prayer turns from “help” to “woe is me” as Israel’s Shepherd feeds them with the bread of tears, and serves them tears to drink in “full measure”—a particular container of measurement that means something like “by the bucketful”. It’s an agonizing cycle: cry and drink tears, cry some more and eat some more tears, then cry and drink your sorrows down to the dregs. Again and again. Horrible!

B. O where is our Vinedresser? (vv. 8-13)

He also cries out, “O where is our Vinedresser?” In verses 8-13 Asaph recounts Israel’s rags to riches history. First came Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers, and years later the rest of his family followed. It was God’s plan to plant the children of Israel in Egypt, and to give them deep roots to flourish in the land like a grapevine. Around four hundred years later, God uprooted his vine, cleared the ground in Canaan as it were, and transplanted his vine Israel where it took deep root and filled the Promised Land. Israel as God’s vine and its shoots spread all the way to the land’s borders—to the Mediterranean Sea and the River Euphrates. Even the highest mountains and mighty cedar trees found shade in the shadow cast by God’s flourishing vine! It’s a vision of what Eden might have been like if Adam and Eve had not eaten the forbidden fruit, but had chosen instead to obey God. Through their ministry of the gospel to the nations, God’s vineyard might finally grow to be a holy Garden-City that fills the whole earth. That’s the destiny of the kingdom of God, but in times of mourning and exile, that kingdom can appear ravaged. Ravaged by God himself! Enemies have broken down Israel’s defenses, plundered her lives, and the wild animals and swarming insects have followed behind to devour what remains. Yet he can see with the eyes of faith that God is ultimately responsible for his kingdom ravaged. He is sovereign over the growth, the pruning, and even the ravaging of his vine. In the midst of his own life being ravaged, Job confessed, “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21).

II. Tortured Prayers

A. Turn again and see what has happened to us! (vv. 14, 16)

When you feel like your life and the church are being ravaged, the best thing to do is turn to God in prayer. Even if your prayers are painful and tortured, God gives you permission to express your raw emotions. Even to be graphic about what has happened to you, to us. “Those who oppose us, who have no regard for us, have burned your vine with fire and cut it down; turn your face against them in a rebuke so they perish!” How might that sound in your own words? “God, it feels like we’ve been burned and our hopes cut short; if you are pruning us it sure feels more like ravaging, so please turn your pruning shears on those who are happy with our suffering and cut them off!”

B. Give us life in your name so we will not turn back from you! (vv. 18)

There is no way you, me, or anyone other fallen person can withstand God ravaging his kingdom unless God makes the first move—to give life, to move the sinful human heart out of self-pity and self-righteousness toward a godly humility and dependence on his mysterious ways. If God makes the first move and gives you a new heart transplant, then what will your tearful, tortured soul do? Without hesitation a new heart will call upon the name of the LORD in repentance and faith. A person with a new heart will repent by owning the reasons why God is angry at faithless, miserable lamentations that merely express a lack of happiness. A person with a new heart will exercise saving faith that believes and trusts in the God who turns back, restores, smiles, and saves.

III. Timely Restorations

A. God’s gradually smiling salvation (vv. 1-3, 7, 19)

So often such restorations from God come just in the nick of time! He responds to our cries that rise to a crescendo in this psalm’s refrain that builds up to a climax: “Restore us, O God” (v. 3), “Restore us, O God of hosts” (v. 7)—the heavenly armies of angels, cherubim, seraphim, and every other created spiritual being that serves the living God, and “Restore, O LORD God of hosts” (v. 19)—the covenant name of God who is the Great I AM. When this God comes to restore his people who cry tearful laments and offer tortured prayers, he lets his face shine brighter than the glory of anything in all creation. The light of his countenance morphs from a stern frown to a warm smile.

B. God’s “right-hand” man and the “J-shaped curve” (vv. 15, 17)

How will God bring about his timely restoration? Through his right-hand man, or more specifically, “the man of your right hand, the son of man” who is strong for God. Let me explain. What we have in Psalm 80 is evidence of a now mostly forgotten but well-attested messianic tradition regarding the northern kingdom of Israel among the tribes associated with Joseph. A Messiah ben Joseph (or Messiah ben Ephraim) would arise from the Rachel tribes as a savior like Israel’s son Joseph. Not until the NT do we see that God meant for both saviors to come in a single man. Jesus reigns forever as the ascended Christ in heaven, the Son of David who is King of kings and Lord of lords. But Jesus is also the “son of man” whose life mirrors the ravaged path the patriarch Joseph took. Jesus as the David-shaped Messiah and the Joseph-shaped Messiah enriches the picture of Jesus as our ravaged Redeemer-King. He triumphs as king, but he also suffered the ravages of living in God’s kingdom so he might be God’s right-hand man to save us through the ravages we endure in the kingdom.

Conclusion – Jesus offers the J-shaped curve to make sense of your life trajectory as a Christian. So you can pray with raw emotion from your tortured soul. So you can take Psalm 80 on your lips and speak it back to God, pleading to feel his smile once again on you. So you can give your tears and fears to Jesus. Give thanks that in Jesus, although your life may be ravaged from time to time as you live as citizens of God’s kingdom, the Jesus-shaped life has a certain trajectory that always leads upward to glory. Amen.