

Oh God, The Nations...

Psalm 79:1 *A Psalm of Asaph.*

O God, the nations have come into your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins.

² They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the heavens for food, the flesh of your faithful to the beasts of the earth.

³ They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them.

⁴ We have become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those around us.

⁵ How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealousy burn like fire?

⁶ Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call upon your name!

⁷ For they have devoured Jacob and laid waste his habitation.

⁸ Do not remember against us our former iniquities; let your compassion come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low.

⁹ Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name's sake!

¹⁰ Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?" Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants be known among the nations before our eyes!

¹¹ Let the groans of the prisoners come before you; according to your great power, preserve those doomed to die!

¹² Return sevenfold into the lap of our neighbors the taunts with which they have taunted you, O Lord!

¹³ But we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise.

Psalm 80:1 *To the choirmaster: according to Lilies. A Testimony. Of Asaph, a Psalm.*

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, stir up your might and come to save us!

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

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!**

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 81:1 To the choirmaster: according to The Gittith. Of Asaph.

Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob!

² Raise a song; sound the tambourine, the sweet lyre with the harp.

³ Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our feast day.

⁴ For it is a statute for Israel, a rule of the God of Jacob.

⁵ He made it a decree in Joseph when he went out over the land of Egypt. I hear a language I had not known:

⁶ "I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the basket.

⁷ In distress you called, and I delivered you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder; I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Selah

⁸ Hear, O my people, while I admonish you! O Israel, if you would but listen to me!

⁹ There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god.

¹⁰ I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.

¹¹ "But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me.

¹² So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels.

¹³ Oh, that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!

¹⁴ I would soon subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes.

¹⁵ Those who hate the LORD would cringe toward him, and their fate would last forever.

¹⁶ But he would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.

American Israel?

AMERICA. UNIQUE IS A WORD one could use to describe her. Richest of all nations. The most powerful country in history. Grounded in an ethic described by in **Emma Lazarus**' sonnet *New Colossus*, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," later inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. She has been the envy of the world. A City On a Hill. Why?

Lyndon B. Johnson said in his inaugural address, "They came here--the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened--to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind. And it binds us still. If we keep its terms we shall flourish." A liberal revision of a very old idea.

Four-time governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony **John Winthrop** said in his famous sermon *Modell of Christian Charity* delivered in 1630 while crossing the Atlantic Ocean,

“Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into Covenant with Him [God] for this work [of establishing a new colony].” A covenant with *Him*, not “the land,” he said.

He continues, “If the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then has He ratified this covenant and sealed our commission ... but if we shall neglect the observation of these articles ... and dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, and be revenged of such a people, and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant.”¹

Then, using words Jesus gave his disciples (**Matt 5:1-2**) at the Sermon on the Mount he added a line that once-upon-a-time every school boy and girl in our country could probably quote, “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill [see **Matt 5:14**]. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-

¹ **John Winthrop**, *A Modell of Christian Charity*.

word through the world.” Thus begins what may be the most unique thing of all about America—its self-identification as God’s covenant people from many within her borders.

Each Sunday across the land—especially when anything that could even remotely be taken as “God’s judgment upon America” appears in the headlines—American churches hear contemporary applications of this kind of hermeneutic. How often has the following verse been preached with pleas for *America* to return to its Christians roots? “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land” (2Ch 7:14 KJV).

These applications go from the eye-brow raising to the outlandish, such as one pop-Christian author (Jonathan Cahn, *The Harbinger*) figuring out the Bible-code through *The One-Year Bible* published in 1985. It just so happens that Isaiah 9:10 (and of course 9:11) is scheduled to be read on Sept. 11. And what is that text? Why, it is a “prophecy” about 9-11 and America, of course, systematically read on the very date of those attacks by millions of people for some

16 years ahead of the event. “The bricks have fallen, but we will build with dressed stones; the sycamores have been cut down, but we will put cedars in their place” (Isa 9:10). Obviously, this is about the Twin Towers, because God loves to prophecy about America, his chosen nation.² You can bet your bottom dollar that thousands of pulpits this very morning will figure out some creative way of showing how the three hurricanes bearing down this week on North America and the one last week that hit Houston are all part of this too, especially since tomorrow marks the 16th anniversary of 9-11.

Now, without a doubt, the religious, political and geographical circumstances of the founding of the early America colonies that led to the founding of the United States of America were unique. European nations were identified as much for their official Christian denomination as they were for particular ethnic groups. Britain: Anglican; Scotland: Presbyterian, Germany and Sweden: Lutheran;

² See “The Isaiah 9:10 Effect” in Jonathan Cahn, *The Harbinger* (Lake Mary, FL: Front Line, 2011). To see how this is taken by the America is God’s People crowd, see “Isaiah 9:10 Linked to 9/11-Again!” *WND*, 11/22/2012, <http://www.wnd.com/2012/11/isaiah-910-linked-to-911-again/>, last accessed Sept 7, 2017. For a reasonable refutation of this see Jason A. Van Bommel, “Misunderstanding Israel and America: A Critique of The Harbinger and Dispensational Theology,” *The Aquila Report*, Jan 30, 2013, <http://theaquilareport.com/misunderstanding-israel-and-america/>, last accessed Sept 7, 2017.

Italy: Roman Catholic; and so on. Combine this with a vast unconquered “new world” ripe for the European powers to control, and a population of people—saved or not—that all shared a common religious Christian vocabulary, and you have the perfect recipe for Winthrop’s Sermon to become one of the famous *American* sermons in history. Remember, he preached it on a boat full of colonialists, not in a church filled with professing Christians. But you’d never know it from the things he said.

Surely it is an interesting idea that a nation can enter into a covenant with God of their own initiation and that he might ratify such a covenant. And I am of the opinion that America’s fascinating religious history and subsequent unmeasurable blessings are not as easy to figure out as some on the other side of this who say that there is absolutely nothing whatsoever to this, just bad application of the Bible.

But I will say as we move to our text today, when reading things about the nation of Israel, we must not confuse them with our country, either in our exegesis or our application. If we do this, we destroy the original meaning and the truly prophetic message that it has in Christ.

This message is for the NT’s “**holy nation**” (1Pe 2:9)—the church, not America. But understand, the church is no more the physical nation of Israel than is America. However, the church is **the spiritual inheritor** of that OT church of justified true believers. That *is* the same entity. God gave a covenant to the nation of Israel, and he has never come to another national people in covenant like this. Including America. But he did enter into a new covenant with Christ’s church. **And through it, all peoples on the earth, be they Americans, Jews, or anyone else can be blessed.**

Psalms of the Nations

Many passages in the Bible might cause me to think about these things. So what is it about our text today that reminds me of them? Just this. The first two Psalms are in one way or another about “**the nations.**” Psalm 79 begins, “**O God, the nations...**” (Ps 79:1). The nations are mentioned four times in this psalm (vs. 1, 6, 10x2). They show up again in Psalm 80 (vs. 8). In fact, in this set of psalms of Asaph (73-83), the last five are in one way or another prayers directed at the nations.

These nations are *the goyim*, who first show up in **Genesis 10**. Throughout these songs they are **God's "enemies."** In Psalm 83 they include the Edomites, the Ishmaelites, the Moabites, Ammon, Amalek, Philistia, Tyre, Assyria, and others. These are also the enemies of Israel throughout their long history in the OT.

Psalm 79-81 are related to one another in a way similar to 76-78. We saw there that the first two songs raise a question and Psalm 78 answers it. So also with Psalms 79-80. They pose a serious problem, and Psalm 81 answers it. It is God's response to the psalmist's pleas of the first two songs. Their arrangement is deliberate.

Psalm 79

Psalm 79, "a Psalm of Asaph," begins with a great lament that lasts five verses. The first four lay out **the physical problem**: "O God, the nations have come into your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins. They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the heavens for food, the flesh of your faithful to the beasts of the earth. They have poured

out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them. We have become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those around us” (Psalm 79:1-4).

This is very serious. But it is even more so when you have just read the ending of Psalm 78. For as one scholar notices, “This represents a complete reversal of the victory over the nations in the conclusion of ... 78.”³ Listen to some of what it said. “He drove out the nations before them; he apportioned them for a possession and settled the tribes of Israel in their tents ... he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves. He built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth, which has founded forever” (78:55; 68-69).

You will recall that Psalm 78 was a theological parable that used the history of Israel to teach something mysterious. Their long saga was one of responding to God’s persistent **grace and kindness** with nothing but **rebellion** against him. It ended on a positive note of God establishing them anyway. But now, Psalm 79 returns to lamentation. Everything God had done for them has been taken away.

³ Robert Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III*, 80.

Psalm 78	Psalm 79
Nations subdued	Nations have returned
Temple built	Temple defied
Jerusalem chosen	Jerusalem in ruins
“Possession” (tribes) settled	“Inheritance” (tribes) massacred.

Just here I think about how easy it could be to take these four verses and start applying them to anything you don't like about what is happening in America. “**God, look at what they have done to _____.**” When we do this, we create to huge problems. **First**, in confusing America with Israel, we **minimize the historical reality** of the things that were experienced by God's old covenant people. These things really happened to them and they have not happened to us.

Second, we **mock the actual horrors** that Israel experienced. I get it that “taking God out of school” has implications. But does it really compare to having Assyrian storm-troopers breaking into your small village, butchering the men, raping the women, and taking the children into slavery? I understand that the thought of the government taxing churches is an affront to our constitutional rights (and so far this hasn't happened). But is that on par with having

the very place where God put his very Holy Spirit burnt to the ground so that your entire religion is now incapable of being carried out?

From the beginning of this song, we must beware of seeing our nation as the one lamenting. We aren't. If anything, we are among "the nations." Sadly, while sometimes on the right side of history, our country has also done its fair share of causing the very kinds of suffering depicted in these verses, maybe not to the modern state of Israel, but to many others around the world and within our own borders.

The last verse in this section states **the theological problem**. "How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealousy burn like fire?" (Ps 79:5). Angry at who? At Israel! This hinges on theology as old as Moses. In the Pentateuch, it was made very clear that when disaster like this comes upon Israel, it is because she was breaking covenant with God. Here, two things come up.

The first is **God's anger**, his wrath. This was seen time and again in previous psalms. Psalm 78 concluded that it was brought about because of Israel's deliberate sinning against God. The second is like it. It is **God's jealousy**. God was

jealous for Israel because he had taken that nation out of all the other nations to be his “inheritance” and “possession” (language that will return in Ps 82). In turning to the gods (also in Ps 82), they provoked his jealousy like a loose wife constantly cheating on her husband. No other nation was even capable of doing this in the OT, because only Israel had been taken and chosen by God like this.

Because it is rooted in Torah, when you read a verse like this, you are not to think that this is mere feeling of the Psalmist, but that it has no correspondence to reality. No. Amos said, “Does evil befall a city, unless the LORD has done it?” (Amos 3:6). Isaiah heard God say, “I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make peace and create woe, I am the LORD, who do all these things” (Isa 45:7). And Jeremiah lamented, “Who has commanded and it came to pass, unless the Lord has ordained it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and evil come?” (Lam 3:37-38).

This is a difficult doctrine to accept. These verses are not saying that God approves of the sin that men commit in those times. Plenty of verses teach otherwise (cf. Isa 10:5-7; Acts 2:23; etc.). But they do teach that when men do these

things in a city, God is the one who has decreed it. And the verse here in the psalm teaches that God has done it because he is angry and jealous over his people's sins.

As we are thinking about these things, I'm not saying that it is wrong to somehow call Americans to repentance. Of course, that is not only *not* wrong, it is positively good. Nor am I saying that God only punished Israel for its sins. No, the prophets make it clear that God punishes all nations for their sins sooner or later. What we are saying here is that this is a psalm of *Israel*, rooted in its covenant with God, lamenting over what God has brought upon *them* as his chosen people.

It is into this context that [the last section of this psalm](#) arises. It is directing God's attention (if you will) to remembering his people and take his wrath elsewhere. "Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call upon your Name" ([Ps 79:6](#)). *They* are the pagans. *They* are the people who have never heard of you, who do not know your name. Not us.

"For they have devoured Jacob and laid waste his habitation" (7). So rather than let them prosper, remember what the prophet Isaiah said about perhaps this very

situation, “Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger ... Against a godless nation [Israel] I send him ... but he does not so intend, and his heart does not so think; but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few ... he says: ‘By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding’ ... Therefore the Lord GOD of hosts will send wasting sickness among his stout warriors, and under his glory a burning will be kindled” (Isa 10:5, 6, 7, 13).

The Psalmist knows his own people are not innocent. He prays, “Do not remember against us our former iniquities.” But he calls upon God to let his other attributes be known now. “Let your compassion come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low” (Ps 79:8). We can’t take your anger any longer. Forgive us!

He then calls upon God to **help them**. “Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your Name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your Name’s sake!” (9). We’ve seen recent psalms focusing on the Name. Here we want to think about “**the Glory**” (a theme often, as here, tied to the name). God’s Glory is at stake because he is the one who covenanted with them; it was not the other way around. They did not

choose God; God chose them. Thus, his reputation is at stake, even if this was part of the covenant curses. “Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’” (10).

He wants God to avenge them for *God’s* sake. “Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants be known among the nations before our eyes!” (10). For, who is this people now, those he has chosen and given over to doom? They are now just like they were when he found Him in Egypt. “Let the groans of the prisoners come before you; according to your great power, preserve those doomed to die!” (11). They are helpless, destitute of hope, captives far from home, living again in exile.

Therefore, “Return sevenfold into the lap of our neighbors the taunts with which they have taunted you, O Lord!” (12). This is about God, and what his forsaking his chosen people for their sins has been the occasion of bearing forth in their hearts. Mocking. Taunting. Defying the Living God.

Will God listen? We don’t know. The Psalm does not answer. It does however remind God that they are his people, the sheep that he took for his pasture (13). And it teaches the children of Israel they must give thanks to the

LORD no matter what. “We will give thanks to you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise” (13). It is a fascinating way to end a song so full of trouble which has thus far gone unanswered. Praising God is not optional, something done in good times.

Psalm 80

Psalm 80 is the compliment to Psalm 79. Someone has called it an “intensification of Psalm 79.”⁴ Whereas the first focuses on Jerusalem, the second expands it to [the Northern Kingdom](#). This fits the historical focus of Psalm 78. Both psalms have the nations taunting Israel (79:3; 80:6). In the first song, it is the nations who taunt them. In Psalm 80, it is [God who taunts them](#) by making them the object of ridicule. If Psalm 79 hints that God is responsible for the ills of Israel, Psalm 80 magnifies it. 80 begins where 79 left off. In 79, Israel was God’s sheep (79:13). In 80:1, God is “[Israel’s Shepherd](#)” who “[leads Joseph like a flock](#)” (Joseph is

⁴ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 317.

shorthand, like Ephraim in Ps 78, for the northern kingdom).

Finally, we must talk about how Psalm 80 is “**To the Choirmaster [For The End]: according to the Lilies. A Testimony. Of Asaph, a Psalm**” (80:1). Ps 69 and 45 are the only other songs **to the lilies**, and this seems to point (as the flower’s use in Christian history shows us) along with “The End,” **to the Messiah**. In fact the non-Christian Psalm Targum translates **vs. 16** [15 in our Bibles], “[Remember with compassion this vine] and the shoot that your right hand planted, and **the Messiah King** whom you strengthened for yourself.” Further, two verses later, the Hebrew text talks about “**the man of your right hand**” who is “**the son of man** whom you have made strong for yourself” (**vs. 18**, 17 in our Bibles) a passage that has much in common with Daniel 7’s “son of man,” which Jewish expectation saw as a coming Messiah-figure.⁵ Finally, there is the “**vine**” theme, which in the Psalm calls Israel, but

⁵ See **Andrew Streebt**, *The Vine and the Son of Man: Eschatological Interpretation of Psalm 80 in Early Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014). A review that summarizes this book is **David Charney**, in *CBQ* 77 (2015): 748-50. http://www.augsburgfortress.org/media/downloads/9781451472066_Review_Catholic%20Biblical%20Quarterly_November%202015.pdf

which Christ—who is True Israel—takes as a title for himself saying, “I am the True Vine” (John 15:1).

Almost immediately, we feel the weight of the problem. “Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up your might and come to save us!” (Ps 80:2). You can hear the cry of the faithful remnant left in the Northern Kingdom as she fell to the Assyrian. “God, you are powerful. We need you desperately!”

“Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved” (3). The “face” (*panim*) is another Messianic theme. It is found in four verses (3, 7, 16, 19). In the OT, it is associated with the visible comings of Yahweh—especially as the Angel of the LORD (Gen 32:30; Ex 33:9-15; Ex 23:20-21; etc.).⁶ Throughout the psalm—three times in fact, it is associated with the “shining,” which is known popularly from the Aaronic Blessing, “May the LORD make His face shine upon you” (Num 6:25), which in the context is his grace and favor, I would argue through Christ.⁷

⁶ Matt Foreman and I will be releasing a book on the Angel of the LORD in the future, and one of those chapters deals specifically with this.

⁷ It is certainly possible to see the three-fold blessing as a cryptic kind of implicit trinitarianism: the Father blessing (Matt 25:34) and keeping (John 17:11), the Son making his Face shine (2Co 4:6) and being gracious (Gal 6:18), the Spirit lifting up our countenance (2Co 3:18) and giving

Next we learn that “salvation” is related to the same thing as the previous song. “O LORD God of hosts” (a title always on the lips of the Jews when they needed God the Warrior), “How long will you be angry with your people’s prayers” (4). There came a time in Israel’s history when God told the prophet, “Do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them ... for I will not hear you” (Jer 7:16).

Again, imagine if we applied this to America with whom God himself never initiated a covenant relationship. Suddenly, the reason God won’t hear Israel’s prayers becomes completely obscured. *They had broken his special covenant made with no other people.* His giving them over was his “divorcing” them (Isa 50:1; Jer 3:8), something he couldn’t even do to the other nations. He did not hear them *because of this.* He was angry with their prayers *because of this.* In the OT, no other nation even offered up prayers to Yahweh, and frankly, when people in America pray “to God,” that just isn’t good enough for me. As we will see clearly next week (Ps 82), there are lots of gods. Who are Americans even praying to? Some to our God. Many, not.

us peace (Gal 5:22; Eph 4:3). If so, this would be an argument in favor of this blessing being directed towards God giving the Son to the OT people in grace.

But these are “his people’s prayers,” not pagan’s prayers. He is angry with their very opening of mouths to him in worship, a theme the prophets talk about *all* the time. Isaiah opens his book with it.

From here, his realization of the sometimes **dark hand of God’s sovereignty** begins to eclipse everything else. “You have fled them with bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure” (5). God did this. God brought this about. God is making them cry.

“You make us an object of contention for our neighbors, and our enemies laugh among themselves” (6). As we said earlier, previously the nations taunted. Now we see that it is God who is instigating their taunts by abandoning his people! The psalmist at no time *blames* God for these things. He knows that God is always holy and good. He knows that men sin freely against the LORD. But he also knows that God is completely sovereign over such things at the same time. He will not give up divine sovereignty even in the face of such evil things as these as if God was too weak or too ignorant to see it coming. He does not ask, “Why do bad things happen to good people,” because that question is wrong.

What does he do instead? He pleads for God’s mercy again. If God did it, God can stop it. “Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved” (7). He repeats vs. 3. This becomes the refrain, the chorus of the song. You have hurt us. Please restore us. We don’t deserve it. But because of your covenant, and your Glory, and your Name, give us the mercy we do not deserve.

The poem shifts gears now. His reflections turn back to Egypt, a theme found earlier in this set of Asaph songs. “You brought a vine out of Egypt” (8). Israel is likened to a vine. The dictionary definition of a vine is vivid, “A climbing or trailing woody-stemmed plant of the grape family.” Go to Wrigley Field and watch how the ivy-vine has completely taken over the outfield wall. So also, as one Bible dictionary explains of Psalm 80: “Israel, the vine, was transplanted from Egypt to the Promised Land, where it spread quickly and over a vast space.”⁸

God is the one who did everything to make this possible. The nations return in vs. 8, but more like we see in Psalm 78. “You drove out the nations and planted it” (Ps 80:8).

⁸ Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 915.

“You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land” (9). “The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches.” (10). “It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River” (11).

In recalling how God did things for Israel with no hint that it deserved or even asked for it, he turns around and raises the bold question, “Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?” (12). Who does he see as the first cause of all this woe? Assyria? Babylon? Egypt? **No, but God.** God did this. Few today have such theology. The Psalmist does. Do you? Or does talk like this make you angry? Know that if so, you are kicking against God’s Word.

He does it all again. “The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field (all the living rodents and creatures) feed on it” (13). “Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted, and for the son whom you made strong for yourself” (14-15).

He does it yet again. “They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your face!” (16). “But let your hand be on the man of your right

hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!” (17). “Then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your Name!” (18). Then the refrain closes the song, “Restore us, O LORD God of hosts! Let your face shine, that we may be saved!” (19).

Before moving to Psalm 81’s answer as it comes canonically after Psalm 80, know the answer Psalm 80 itself gives. Again, and especially here, if we confuse America with Israel, we are completely undone. Why? Because the Face of God, the Right Hand Man, the Son of Man, the Name he calls upon is Christ Jesus. But—and this is the key—the Psalm is begging God to remember Israel by remembering *these* things. Not *our* problems. *Their* problems.

In sending Christ Jesus, **God the Father is remembering Israel**. He is hearing the cry of this Psalm. For, to the vine, he is sending The Vine. He is having regard for his son by having regard for his Son. Christ came to the Jews as a Jew—the True Jew. And all who call upon the Name of the Lord shall be saved (**Rom 10:13**).

Psalm 81

But, just here, like we saw last time, we need Psalm 81's answer to help us more. Psalm 81 is also to the Choirmaster (For the End). It is one of three psalms "to the Gittith" (8, 84) or, "the winepresses" (LXX).⁹ First a vine, now the winepress.

"Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob! Raise a song; sound the tambourine, the sweet lyre with the harp. Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our feast day" (Ps 81:1-3). The song begins on a triumphal note of corporate praise, making it a fitting first line based on the Messianic ending to Psalm 80. The whole community begins to sing aloud.

The song moves into its reason why next. First, it is a decree and a statute for the people to do this. "For it is a statute for Israel, a rule of the God of Jacob. He made it a decree in Joseph when he went out over the land of Egypt" (4-5). Again, the northern kingdom is primarily in view, but this remembers events of the Exodus and the laws that were

⁹ As with Psalm 8, The Targum has "the lute from Gath," perhaps remembering something about Goliath.

put in place for feast days, particularly at the new and full moons (**Num 10:10; 28:14**).

As with Psalm 78, **God now speaks**. The time for lamentation is over. God has heard and he will answer. He remembers helping them. “**I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the basket**” (6). He saved them out of Egypt. “**In distress you called, and I delivered you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder; I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Selah**” (7). That’s where they quarreled and grumbled.¹⁰

What was the test? Who will you worship! “**Hear, O my people, while I admonish you! O Israel, if you would but listen to me! There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god**” (8-9). This prepares us for Psalm 82, but in the immediate context it is against the backdrop of his deliverance. “**I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it**” (10). God does hear, even when they are in great trials given to them by his own Hand.

¹⁰ This interesting verse flips **Exodus 17:7** around. There, “**They tested the LORD.**” Here, the LORD tested them.

But look. Are they still as they were back then? “But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels” (11-12). This is what the songs throughout the Asaph collection have been hinting at. These things are happening because of their sin. What does God require of them instead?

“Oh, that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!” (13). “My people.” “Israel.” Not America. Israel had been called. Israel had the covenant. Israel had the law. Oh, that they would listen and repent. Oh, that they would obey. Not that God doesn’t want the nations to obey. But he made Israel to be the light that would lead the nations to the LORD. And they failed.

If they hadn’t, “I would soon subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes. Those who hate the LORD would cringe toward him, and their fate would last forever. But he would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you” (14-16). The song ends on the hopeful note that if they obeyed, he would do all the things he promised them in covenant. But that’s how it ends. And did they? No. And this once more points

us to the need for Someone to come who would do these things and usher in the blessings of the covenant. That Someone is the man Christ Jesus, whom we have been speaking of this morning.

Us but not USA Today

But what about interpreting it today? First, we've seen how Christ is the answer to the prayers offered by these people for their problems. But is it right for us to apply their problems to themselves? It is helpful here to return to Psalm 79, for it is used several times in the NT.

Psalm 79 is alluded to in [Luke](#), in [Revelation](#), and in [Thessalonians](#). [Luke 21:24](#) speaks of a time when coming soon when the Gentiles will trample Jerusalem underfoot until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. This echoes Psalm 79:1 and shows a one-to-one application of the nation of Israel (OT era) to the nation of Israel (NT era). It refers to the coming judgment upon Israel by Jesus for their rejection of him in the flesh. They continued in their stubborn rebellion.

But he still saved many of them. Yet, he also began saving the very nations who were his enemies. That's part of all this. The other references are applied differently. Not to America, *except in so far as she is part of the persecution*--but **to the church**, of which many *Americans* and others from other nations are a part. Revelation speaks of the blood of the saints (**Rev 16:6; Ps 79:3**) is now finally being satiated in the punishment of the nations. And the cry of his people of "how long" before you avenge (**Ps 79:10; Rev 6:10; 19:2**) is finally—*finally*—to be fulfilled.

Christ's church is where the application of this Psalm is most needed for us. God gets angry at his churches, as we see in Revelation 2-3 and other places. He can take its lampstand away, removing its witness in the world. If anyone needs to hear these psalms, it is not America, but the churches within her midst, and all over the world. We must be faithful to Christ alone, and many are far from this. When God seems angry with a nation, if the church has been established there, we need to first and foremost realize that judgment begins in the house of God.

Who needs to be listening when God is coming down hard? Everyone, I suppose, in one way. But especially His

people. His church. Never has this been more true than in our day of such mass apostasy of his people against his Word in every area of ethics imaginable. Frankly, reading the very worst of the Israelites, one could make a case that much of Christ's visible church is as bad or worse in every area. Sexual deviancy of every kind. Worshiping the goddess. Confusing the kingdoms of men with that of God. Trampling the poor, not loving one another, wanting to be right more than we want to be good. You name it, it is happening at a church near you today. Will Christ's church see its errors and repent, or will we wait until it's too late?

On the other hand, there is Paul's application of this psalm. Thessalonians confirms that the nations "do not know God" (Ps 79:6; 1Th 4:5; 2Th 1:8). But what if a nation does know God? Well, this does not mean that it is in covenant with God, nor that it is his chosen people. People can know a name, but not be in a relationship. It simply means that the gospel has gone out and God has saved many people, and many others have now heard of him. This happened in the OT too.

God sent a prophet to Nineveh. He didn't want to go, because they were his enemy. But God did a great work in

that city, saving 120,000 people from his wrath because he is kind. Today is the day of the Lord's kindness, even for Americans. If you hear his voice, know that he heard the cries of his people gave them a remedy through which they could be sure of salvation, thereby giving them eternal reasons to sing his praises. His name is Jesus Christ. He is God in human flesh. Kind and compassionate, forgiving all your sins. Yet the same God who judged Israel for hers and is returning again to judge the living and the dead.

Oh God, the nations... what will we do with your Son, whom you sent to provide the only way into your presence? Grant them repentance, and grant that your people might be restored and to see the shining face of Jesus as the disciples did when he was transfigured, that we might know he is God and so be saved.