

For several years we have sung Psalm 81 to Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy.”

The tune works very well for the beginning of the Psalm,  
but as the Psalm continues,  
the mood of the Psalm turns darker.

And so I have yielded to those who would like to use a more flexible tune.

Since we are planning on replacing Ode to Joy in the near future,  
this will likely be one of the last times that we are singing it with this tune.

We will keep Ode to Joy with Psalm 104 –  
so we won’t replace it entirely!

But there is a sense in which Ode to Joy fits well with Psalm 81.  
After all, Ode to Joy was designed to celebrate joy.  
And it speaks of how joy comes to humanity.  
And Psalm 81 also speaks of how joy comes to humanity.

Of course, Schiller’s poem (and Beethoven’s music)  
tended to ignore themes of judgment,  
while Psalm 81 says that joy comes to Israel only *through* judgment.

And like many of the Psalms in Book III,  
the Psalm begins with the conclusion!

**1. Sing for Joy at the Feast! (v1-3)**

*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.*

Pronouns play an important role in Psalm 81 –  
so I will start by saying that the imperatives in verses 1-3 address Israel as “you” plural.

You, as the people of God, are to sing and shout and raise a song to God of Jacob.

God had told Israel what to do with trumpets in Numbers 10:

*The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 2 “Make two silver trumpets. Of hammered work you shall*

*make them, and you shall use them for summoning the congregation and for breaking camp. 3 And when both are blown, all the congregation shall gather themselves to you at the entrance of the tent of meeting. 4 But if they blow only one, then the chiefs, the heads of the tribes of Israel, shall gather themselves to you. 5 When you blow an alarm, the camps that are on the east side shall set out. 6 And when you blow an alarm the second time, the camps that are on the south side shall set out. An alarm is to be blown whenever they are to set out. 7 But when the assembly is to be gathered together, you shall blow a long blast, but you shall not sound an alarm. 8 And the sons of Aaron, the priests, shall blow the trumpets. The trumpets shall be to you for a perpetual statute throughout your generations. 9 And when you go to war in your land against the adversary who oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, that you may be remembered before the Lord your God, and you shall be saved from your enemies. 10 On the day of your gladness also, and at your appointed feasts and at the beginnings of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings. They shall be a reminder of you before your God: I am the Lord your God.”*

So the trumpets were to summon the people to battle,  
to summon the chiefs to council,  
or to gather Israel to worship.

But don't forget verse 9.

They are also intended for *God* to hear!  
“that you may be remembered before the LORD your God,  
and you shall be saved from your enemies.”

The trumpets were to be blown by the priests,  
both for God to hear – and for the people to hear.

If you want to understand what Psalm 81 is doing, turn back to Leviticus 23.

Because Leviticus 23 says that the first day of the seventh month is the special  
“Feast of Trumpets.”

The seventh month has three distinct feasts:

Trumpets (on the first day)

The Day of Atonement (on the tenth day)

And the Feast of Booths (tabernacles – on the 15<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> day)

*23 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 24 “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a day of solemn rest, a memorial proclaimed with blast of trumpets, a holy convocation. 25 You shall not do any ordinary work, and you shall present a food offering to the Lord.”*

So the first day of the Seventh month was the feast of trumpets –  
referred to in Psalm 81:3.

Verses 26-32 then describe the Day of Atonement –  
to be celebrated on the tenth day of the month –  
the day when the high priest made atonement  
for all of the unintentional sins of the people.

It was the one day of the year on which all Israelites were commanded to fast –  
to abstain from food.

But then in verse 33 it goes on to speak of the Feast of Booths:

*33 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 34 “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, On the fifteenth day of this seventh month and for seven days is the Feast of Booths to the Lord. 35 On the first day shall be a holy convocation; you shall not do any ordinary work. 36 For seven days you shall present food offerings to the Lord. On the eighth day you shall hold a holy convocation and present a food offering to the Lord. It is a solemn assembly; you shall not do any ordinary work.*

*37 “These are the appointed feasts of the Lord, which you shall proclaim as times of holy convocation, for presenting to the Lord food offerings, burnt offerings and grain offerings, sacrifices and drink offerings, each on its proper day, 38 besides the Lord's Sabbaths and besides your gifts and besides all your vow offerings and besides all your freewill offerings, which you give to the Lord.*

*39 “On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the Lord seven days. On the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. 40 And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. 41 You shall celebrate it as a feast to the Lord for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. 42 You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, 43 that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”*

So Israel was supposed to dwell in booths for seven days  
as a reminder of how God provided for them in the wilderness,  
and out of gratitude for God's provision for them in the land.

Psalm 81 plainly refers to this feast of the seventh month.

And Calvin rightly says that the Psalmist summons the faithful to come together at the temple  
so that “the free and gracious covenant which God has made with them  
may be brought anew to their remembrance,  
for increasing their faith and piety,  
that thus the benefits which they have received from him may be celebrated,

and their hearts thereby moved to thanksgiving.” (312)

It is a call to rejoice – a call to be glad – a call to celebrate before the LORD.

Verse 4 then turns to the historical remembrance:

## **2. The Exodus – The Statute of Deliverance (4-7)**

*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:*

We saw last week that Psalms 77, 78, 80, and 81 are four of the five Psalms that mention Joseph. Asaph deliberately sets aside Judah in order to emphasize the unity of Israel.

Joseph’s sons – Ephraim and Manasseh – were the predominate powers of the northern kingdom of Israel. By the time you get to the Exile, it has been 150 years since there was a northern kingdom. Joseph has been in exile for 150 years.

But now Judah is no better. And Asaph seems to use Joseph as a way of re-integrating the northern kingdom back into the purposes of God.

Some have suggested that the unknown language of verse 5 is the language of Egypt – but that would be a strange statement with no purpose in the Psalm. I think the unknown language is the gracious language that God speaks in verse 6.

In verse 6 the “you” is actually a third person “him”

*6 “I relieved his shoulder of the burden;  
his hands were freed from the basket.*

This is what Joseph heard in Egypt. This was the unknown language – the language of grace, mercy, and salvation.

Verse 6 speaks of the miserable condition of the Israelites, and how God delivered them from slavery.

At the feast of booths, Israel was supposed to remember the Exodus,  
and how God provided for them in the wilderness.  
Psalm 81 is admirably designed to accomplish that purpose!

Then in verse 7 the pronoun shifts to “you” *singular*  
as God speaks directly to Israel:

*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*

The singular is important here.

God is not speaking to the worshipers.

God is speaking to Israel – his son, his firstborn.

The “you” here is a historical “you”

very clearly distinguished from the present “you” plural  
who is addressed in the Psalm as a whole.

This distinction of “you” plural (the worshipers)

and “you” singular (Israel in the wilderness)

is designed to create a certain distance between you and your fathers –

between “you” – Israel as you are today –

and “you” – Israel as he should have been.

Verse 7 reminds Israel of the Exodus.

Psalm 77 had referred to the “thunder” that God sent forth at the Red Sea.

Israel was in distress at the Red Sea,

he called to God, and God answered from the secret place of thunder.

But then God tested him at Meribah.

Would Israel believe God’s promises?

Would Israel trust in the LORD?

This brings us to the third point of the Psalm:

### **3. What You Should Have Learned: Idolatry Doesn’t Work (8-10)**

*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.*

All of these “you’s” are singular –  
all referring to the Israel of the past.

Verses 8-10 remind Israel of Mt. Sinai.

During the Feast of Booths, Israel was supposed to remember how God provided for them  
throughout their wilderness wanderings.  
As they remembered the Red Sea and the testing at Meribah,  
they should also remember Mt. Sinai.

Verse 9 reminds us of the 10 Commandments.

The first two commandments suffice.  
After all, if you worship the LORD *only*,  
then you will love the LORD your God with all your heart,  
and you will love your neighbor as yourself!

And verse 10 reminds us of the preface to the 10 Commandments.

I am the LORD your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.

God’s law is prefaced by God’s grace.  
Because you have been redeemed by God,  
therefore you obey him.

As Martin Luther said,

“You are my people, I have preserved, nourished, and redeemed you;  
therefore, listen to me!”

#### **4. Listen, and I Would Feed You (11-16)**

But here’s the problem:

*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.*

Keep your eye on the pronouns.

So I gave *him* (masculine singular – Israel) over to *their* (m. plural) stubborn hearts,  
to follow *their* own counsels (m. plural).

It is important to distinguish between the “him” and the “them” in this passage.

Throughout this passage Israel has been “him” or “you” (singular).

Psalms 81 tells us how Israel (singular) because Israel (plural).

As long as Israel listened to the voice of the LORD,  
he was singular  
(it would not be a stretch to say that he was “single-minded”)  
but when Israel stopped listening –  
when “he” would not submit,  
God gave “him” over to “their” stubborn hearts.

And Israel became double-minded,  
pluralistic,  
syncretistic.

And what is more,  
when we do not listen to God,  
we become divided –

we are separated from God – alienated from him;  
we are divided from each other – we experience alienation in our human relationships;  
we are divided even internally – we are torn between what we want to do and what we do;  
and we are divided from the created order – we are alienated from the creation.

In one sense, Israel just replayed what happened in the Garden of Eden.

In the Garden,  
God spoke.  
But Eve listened to the voice of the serpent.  
And Adam listened to the voice of his wife.  
When you listen to the wrong voice,  
then you do not submit to God.

We listen to the voice of the serpent.  
We listen to the voices of our neighbors and friends.  
We listen to our own stubborn hearts.

And God says that when his people do that,  
he will give him over to their stubborn hearts!

We become divided.  
We are supposed to have the mind of Christ – one mind – among us.  
But through sin we are alienated from each other,  
alienated from creation,  
divided in our heart,  
and separated from God.

What is the solution?

Well, when you have been believing a lie –  
when you have been listening to the wrong voice –  
you need to repent!  
Ask yourself, “what lie am I believing?”  
What do I think that I am going to get from believing the lie?

And then ask, “what truth do I need to believe?”  
What has God said that I need to remember?

And the truth will set you free –  
the truth will begin to reconcile you to God, self, others, creation!

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

Notice the close relationship between “listening” and “walking.”  
Asaph believes that “to hear is to obey.”  
If you listen to the voice of the LORD,  
then you will do what he says.

Obviously, for Asaph, listening is no mere outward activity.  
Asaph would plainly endorse James’ call for us to be  
“doers of the word, and not hearers only.”

And when Israel listens and walks in his 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.*

We’re still in the plural!  
As long as Israel remains stubborn,  
it is proper to speak of “their” enemies.

But then, in verse 16 the person shifts back to the third person singular.  
With *their* enemies subdued,  
with reconciliation and redemption accomplished,  
we move back to the third person singular:

*16 But he would feed you [him] with the finest of the wheat,  
and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.”*



And the last word in verse 16 is a 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular!

I sure hope that you can see by now where all this is going!  
Israel singular has become Israel plural because of sin.  
Psalm 81 looks forward to a new Israel – singular.

Whatever Asaph may have understood personally,  
certainly God's purpose in Psalm 81  
is to show us Christ.

Christ is the Israel – singular – the son, the firstborn,  
who listens to the voice of the LORD,  
who walks in all his ways,  
who did not bow to foreign gods,  
but who loved and served the LORD all his days.

And therefore Christ is the Israel who was fed and satisfied with honey from the rock.

And therefore Christ is the fulfillment of the feast of booths.

This song that was sung at the great harvest festival of Israel –  
this song that was sung at the feast where they brought the tithe  
and rejoiced in the provision that God had given in the wilderness –  
and in the Land –  
this song pointed them forward to see the day when Israel would become singular again.

But how do we sing Psalm 81?

And particularly, how do we appropriate its “Feast of Booths” theme?

How do we think about this idea of “holy days” or “holy places”?

Never before in human history have there been no holy days and no holy places.  
The idea that everything is common is a peculiarly modern notion.  
(Some would say that everything is holy –  
but if everything is holy – if everything is set apart –  
then there is no distinction between the holy and the common.  
And so for all practical intents and purposes – everything is common.)

Our holy times and places are *different* than those of OT Israel –  
but we still have holy times and places.

The Reformation argued that Rome had wrongly multiplied holy times and places,  
but all the Reformation churches agreed that Sunday was a holy day –  
and whether you go with the continental approach  
of celebrating Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost –  
or the Scottish approach  
of celebrating occasional feasts and fasts for other reasons –

*all the churches of the Reformation  
continued the practice of holy times and places.*

But today, under the influence of a relentless modernity  
we tend to view everything as *common* – nothing as *holy*,  
*or* everything as *holy* – and nothing as *common*  
(both of which mean essentially the same thing).

So what do we do?

Well, first we rejoice because God has given us a great High Priest  
who has atoned for our sins and delivered us from death.  
But then we also *listen* to him, as he teaches us about the holy and the common,  
the clean and the unclean.  
He teaches us that the earthly temple in Jerusalem is not the holy place.  
The holy place – the place where we gather to worship God  
is the heavenly holy of holies.  
This building – in itself – is not a holy place.  
But as the holy people gather here each Lord's Day  
it becomes a sanctuary – it becomes a holy place –  
because we meet with the Triune God here.

Psalm 81 – the song of the Feast of Booths –  
calls us to remember God's mighty deeds in Jesus Christ,  
to listen to his voice, and put into practice the things that he has said.

Two weeks ago, in Psalm 77, we were told to remember the LORD,  
to remember his mighty deeds.  
Here in Psalm 81 we are told that such remembering cannot simply be intellectual.  
Our listening to God's voice – our meditation – our private and family worship  
must result in walking in his ways.

The way we use our time –  
and the way we think of place –  
will speak volumes about whether we are listening to his voice,  
or whether we are listening to other voices.

We ended this morning with 1 Peter 1.

I would like to end this evening with 1 Peter 2:

*4 As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious,  
5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy  
priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For it stands in  
Scripture:*

*“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious,  
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”*

*7 So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,*

*“The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone,”*

*8 and*

*“A stone of stumbling,  
and a rock of offense.”*

*They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.*

*9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession,  
that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous  
light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received  
mercy, but now you have received mercy.*