

IN CHRIST PRAYER IS NOT IN VAIN

(SUNDAY, AUGUST 26, 2018)

Scripture reading – Matthew 15:21-28; Psalm 80

INTRODUCTION

I have mentioned several times in our brief series on the Psalms, that there is an order in the book of Psalms.

This is not to say we can give precise reason for the exact placement of every psalm, but we should try to appreciate the bigger picture as much as possible.

Consider an overview of the first three books of the Psalms.

Books 1 and 2 are similar in celebrating God's goodness in the reign of David. All of the Psalms in Book 1 are attributed to David except for Psalms 1,2, and 33.

In the NT, David is revealed to be the author of Psalm 2. I would make a case that David is also the author of Psalm 1.

Book 2 introduces some of the Psalms by the Sons of Korah. The first 8 Psalms in Book 2 are all attributed to the Sons of Korah.

In total 11 Psalms are attributed to the Sons of Korah, who were the faithful descendants of the Korah who was killed by God in the great rebellion against the leadership of Moses.

Book 3 in contrast is much darker than the first two books.

The first Psalm (73) is one of the great psalms of lament and attributed to another great author, Asaph.

Asaph was one of the leading musicians and leaders of David's choir as well as being a man of known for his great wisdom. Psalm 50 and Psalms 73-83 are all attributed to Asaph.

It is very likely, given the details described in the Psalms written by Asaph, that some were written **by those who were part of his choir.**

The last Psalm in Book 3, Psalm 89, is a complaint that the glories of the Davidic kingdom were gone. It was written by Ethan the Ezrahite, who was considered one of the wisest men in Israel next to King Solomon.

So in Books 1-3, we move from the glory of David to a time of great darkness with the loss of the glories of the Davidic kingdom.

Books 4 and 5 show that even in the darkness, God was still working.

None of the Psalms are trivial or simply light hearted. In the 12 Psalms of Asaph, there is a **deep reflection and lamentation for all that was taking place in Israel.**

There are Psalms calling for God's justice as well as for Israel's repentance.

In the Psalms of Asaph, we wrestle with what we might call the **problem of evil**. If God is all powerful and all good, why do His people suffer so greatly?

Part of the answer is sin.

Psalm 81 is a Psalm of deep repentance.

But sin is not just the simple answer why God's people suffer.

Pastor William Harrell in an excellent sermon stressed the point that the Bible is not simply a message of how to avoid suffering, and if you just followed all of the instructions in Scripture, your life would be much better.

Certainly, we want to turn from sin and foolishness, but who can do this to the point of saying I am so wise that I will no longer suffer because of my sin and foolishness?

The focus of Scripture is not just how to avoid bad things from happening.

In a few weeks we will start a study of 1 John. Listen to 1 John 1:3-4.

1 John 1:3 that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. **4** And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.

Obviously, we don't pray for suffering.

However, God's purpose for us is not simply to remove all of our trials and suffering.

He has done something much greater.

In His sovereign love and grace, a holy, righteous and just God has made a way to satisfy His justice and bring His people into true communion with Him.

And in this true communion and fellowship we find joy, even in the midst of great suffering.

Now, we know that it is not always so simple.

God's truth is clear, but His ways are often very unclear to us.

And this is why we are called to live a life of faith. Because there will often be seasons of struggle and challenge.

And these seasons may last for years.

In Psalm 80, Asaph guides you in terms of persevering and wrestling in prayer.

Why can you wrestle and persevere in prayer?

Only if you are in Christ and your focus continues to be on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Last week from Psalm 90, I emphasized the theme:

In Christ, life is not in vain and we can fall into the hands of the Living God.

From Psalm 80 we can say, In Christ, prayer and wrestling with God in prayer is not in vain.

One of the features of Psalm 80 is that it has a refrain.

Verses 3, 7, and 19 are almost identical, save for the specific name used in pleading with God.

This refrain is a good way of dividing this Psalm into three main parts: verses 1-3, 4-7, and 8-19.

In Christ, prayer and wrestling with God in prayer is not in vain.

(1) GOD OUR SHEPHERD, SAVE US! VERSES 1-3

This Psalm may not have been written by the original Asaph who lived during the time of David.

We don't know precisely the historical background of the Psalm. There is some evidence to suggest that it was written during the time that Assyria was threatening both Israel and Judah.

The Greek translation of the OT makes a direct connection with Assyria in the superscription of the Psalm.¹

We also observe that this Psalm was addressed to the Chief Musician. This Psalm is not just the private thoughts of the writer.

This Psalm, inspired and directed by the Holy Spirit, is given to God's people for teaching, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness.²

This Psalm is beautiful in its writing and the descriptions that it uses for our great God.

I will do my best to highlight this beauty and I would encourage you to continue to think through this Psalm.

Though I have studied and prayed, I can assure you that there is much more treasure to mine than we will bring to the surface in our brief time today.

In this Psalm you are directed in terms of crying out to God.

It is a great mistake for the believer to turn prayer into something like a conversation with our insurance agent – a conversation that only takes place when something bad has happened and we need to make a claim.

This Psalm is characterized by imperatives, what we can call strong requests for God to act.

There are 14 imperatives in this Psalm.³

We can say that there is a boldness in this prayer.

And remember from Hebrews 10, you also have boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus Christ.⁴

The opening request is that God, the Shepherd of Israel, would **give ear**, that is **hear us**.

There are two great images presented in this Psalm – God our Shepherd and Israel as God's vine.

Indeed, we see Jesus using these same word pictures in the book of John so beautifully and powerfully.

¹ Alter, 284.

² 2 Tim. 3:16.

³ Results of searching for all the imperatives in Psalm 80.

⁴ Hebrews 10:19-22.

The term shepherd does not imply a person with a job on the low end of the social scale. Kings also were called Shepherds.

The word, especially when used for God, can speak both of **God's power and His care**.

What comfort knowing that God is the one who watches over you and directs you.

And it is this knowledge that leads us to cry out to God our Shepherd, for not only does He lead us into pleasant pastures but also He leads us through the valley of the shadow of death.

The other beautiful picture is that God is the one who dwells between the cherubim.

Remember that the ark of the covenant had on its top, two cherubim with their outspread wings, and that this top portion of the ark was **called the mercy seat**.⁵

The great tension, if we can call that, in this Psalm is the great power, love, and mercy of God that we know is true, but we don't always seem to know this in our own experience.

We may call this a time of chastisement or testing.

It may be personal, family, our local church, or the larger aspects of Christ's church and kingdom.

We must always seek the truth of Scripture. There are no contradictions.

The challenge is living in terms of God's truth, living in faith and obedience, for at our best, we are all very weak.

We are not as strong as we think we are.⁶

And so this Psalm directs you to cry out to our faithful God.

Spurgeon wrote:

Let us ever plead the name of Jesus, who is our true mercyseat, to whom we may come boldly, and through whom we may look for a display of the glory of the Lord on our behalf. Our greatest dread is the withdrawal of the Lord's presence, and our brightest hope is the prospect of his return. In the darkest times of Israel, the light of her Shepherd's countenance is all she needs.

Notice in verse 2 the reference to the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh.

When the ark of the covenant moved, these three tribes followed the ark of the covenant.⁷

I mentioned that there are 14 imperatives in this Psalm that are strong requests.

What do they have in common?

They call for God to show His power and His presence and for His work of grace in our lives.

We call for God to work as He has promised and to work in the lives of His people so that we will know God's presence and enjoy true fellowship with Him.

The key verb of this Psalm is the verb **restore**.

⁵ Exodus 37.

⁶ The words of a son by Rich Mullins.

⁷ Numbers 10:22-24 shows this. Rev. William Harrell also pointed this out in his sermon.

We saw this same verb in Psalm 90 where it was translated as **turn** or **return**.

In Psalm 80, this verb is used four times: **3, 7, 19, and also verse 14**.

Here the translation of restore is a good one. It could also be translated as **turn us back to you**.

We want to live and walk in God's presence. We want to enjoy true fellowship with God. Before the time of Martin Luther, the Lord used a fiery Italian preacher named Girolamo Savonarola.⁸

Charles Spurgeon quoted from him his words on verse 3.

To thyself convert us, from the earthly to the heavenly; convert our rebellious wills to thee, and when we are converted, show thy countenance that we may know thee; show thy power that we may fear thee; show thy wisdom that we may reverence thee; show thy goodness that we may love thee; show them once, show them a second time, show them always, that through tribulation we may pass with a happy face, and be saved. When thou dost save, we shall be saved; when thou withdrawest thy hand, we cannot be saved.

(2) THE LAMENT. YOU ARE ANGRY. VERSES 4-7

In these verses we see why this Psalm uses such strong words for crying out to God.

Not only does this Psalm use strong words of request but also it raises vexing questions.

O Lord God of hosts, the one who commands an innumerable angelic army, how long will you be angry against the prayer of your people?

It is possible also to translate as how long will you remain angry at your people while they pray to you?

There is a powerful picture in this verse.

In the OT, incense was a picture of prayer as was the smoke of the sacrifice.

The word for anger used here means the smoke of God's wrath.

Perhaps we are to see the picture this way – the smoke of God's people in prayer going up and even more powerfully the smoke of God's wrath coming down from heaven.⁹

Now, when prayer is offered in sin or without right relationship with God, we can understand.

But I think this is not what this Psalm has as its focus. It is dealing with the times when we sincerely come before God, but it seems that our prayers are not heard, indeed they are overwhelmed by what we perceive as God's anger.

The picture is not any happier in verses 5 and 6.

⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Girolamo-Savonarola>

⁹ Based on C. F. Keil and Delitzsch F., *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), paragraph 16726. I just noted that Spurgeon thought this same way.

What a picture is presented in verse 5. Perhaps there are believers, for example, in Venezuela who could identify with being fed tears and having tears in great measure to drink.

It was estimated last year in Venezuela that 75% of the population has lost on average 19 pounds as a result of wicked government policies.¹⁰

God's people in verse 6 also are described as being objects of hatred and cruel mocking.

The description of verse 6 is similar to that which Jesus faced on the cross, when His enemies came up to him and mocked him directly.

Increasingly in our own nation, this is the reality of God's people and even more in other countries.

We pray and seek to be a witness, but nothing seems to really change for the good.

How long, O Lord?

And so the refrain of verse 7 is again offered to God. **Notice the slight change from verse 3.**

Now God is addressed as O God of hosts, O God, the invincible warrior, as one translation reads.¹¹

"The more we approach the Lord in prayer and contemplation the higher will our ideas of him become." Spurgeon.¹²

In all situations, we pray that God will restore us and that His face will shine upon us.

(3) HISTORICAL REFLECTION AND CALL AGAIN FOR SALVATION, VV. 8-19

Here in the longest portion of this Psalm we have the second main image – **Israel as God's vine.**

There are four sections in verses 8-19. Let's take a look at them.

In the first section, verses 8-11, we are directed in considering again the incredible story of Israel brought out of Egypt and allowed to fill the Promised Land.

Here the image of a vine reflects we might say the delicacy of Israel. She triumphed not because of her mighty power, but because the LORD allowed her to prosper and flourish.

Verse 8 speaks of the Exodus. Verse 9 the books of Joshua and Judges.

Verses 10 and 11 poetically describe the borders of Israel in the time when Israel was strongest during the days of David and Solomon.

And here this Psalm reminds us that not only do we encounter challenges that test our faith, but you **must never forget the mighty power of God**, whether in the days of Israel or other times in the history of the church.

¹⁰ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2017/02/22/congratulations-to-bolivarian-socialism-venezuela-discovers-the-perfect-weight-loss-diet/#230b0641b4e6>

¹¹ NET Bible.

¹² Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 12660.

We serve a God that does incredible wonders!

This power of God and incredible history becomes the basis for the second section here, verses 12-13.

God did an incredible work in establishing Israel as a nation.

So why did God do all of this great work only to then break down the walls of protection so that enemies could come and steal the fruit of the vine?

Why did God do such a great work throughout England and large parts of Europe only to see it become a place where in some countries as many Muslims attend Friday services as Christians do on Sundays?

We believe, of course, that God is sovereign in salvation.

He delivered us from His wrath and judgment according to His sovereign power, but why is it that we still struggle with sin, doubts, and fears so often?

The third section here, verses 14-16, begin with the key word of this Psalm, **return**. But in this case, we are speaking not of what God does for us but praying directly for His presence and work.

Return, look, see and visit.

The verb **visit** is used in the OT both as a verb of judgment and blessing.

Lev. 18:25 For the land is defiled; therefore I visit the punishment of its iniquity upon it, and the land vomits out its inhabitants.

1Sam. 2:21 And the LORD visited Hannah, so that she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile the child Samuel grew before the LORD.

Naomi returned from Moab back to Bethlehem, because she had heard the LORD had visited His people by giving them bread.

Lord, we pray, do what you have promised. Lord, do according to your plan in building Your kingdom and strengthening Your church.

Lord, call the nations and bring to salvation both Jew and Gentile.

Notice from verse 15 the words right hand and branch.

The word branch literally is the word son.

Earlier the Psalm spoke of the tribe of Benjamin, which means son of my right hand.

Verse 15 speaks of the son you have strengthened, which is likely a play on words.

This language is important for the final verses of this Psalm that we now consider.

Verses 17-19 contain the final and greatest request of this Psalm.

Notice the beauty of the writing here.

We have in verse 15 the idea of a **son/branch** and more clearly in verse 17 to the man of your right hand and the son of man.

Who is this speaking of?

Who is the man or son of man in this passage?

James Boice in his excellent commentary discusses several legitimate possibilities.

There are those who believe this speaks of the king. When the king walks in truth, then the people will also follow. A godly king will help bring true restoration.

That is not a crazy interpretation by any means.

Another view is that the language speaks of Israel.

And this is probably the best understanding in terms of the context of this Psalm and other passages.

In both Exodus 4:22 and Hosea 11:1, Israel is called God's son.

However, these two views can fit together in a prophetic or Christocentric way.

The author of this Psalm uses some of the key words that our Lord would use in His ministry, the Son of Man.

The ministry of Christ is carefully understood in terms of showing that where Israel was a total failure and disaster, our Lord would be the victor.

Jesus took the title of vine – I am the true vine.

He also took the title of Shepherd – I am the good Shepherd.

And so rightfully we say that this Psalm speaks of the great restoration that Israel needed would be found in the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice that in verse 19 the name of God is given in the richest sense this third time – LORD God of Hosts.

This name speaks of God's love, mercy, and power.

And what a beautiful prayer for the believer as we wrestle still with our own sin and struggles.

What an appropriate prayer that we pray for our own church and for the broader church of Christ that we long to see strengthened and used by our Lord.

CONCLUSION:

Let me share a few points of further reflection and application from this passage.

We live in a much different time than did the writer of Psalm 80.

Consider how our nation is probably 100x larger than Israel.

And today, the church is spread across the world.

We have added to our own distractions in a variety of ways – our cell phones, sports, other cultural pursuits.

It is easy to be distracted from what is most important and live a very self-centered life.

At the same time, it is impossible for us to grasp all that is taking place in the church of Jesus Christ around the world. We should seek to be aware, burdened, and in prayer as much as we can.

One of the things we do learn from this Psalm is that we are to be burdened with not just our own needs but the needs of others.

Phil. 2:4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

As sincerely as you can, seek to be concerned and pray for the needs of others – both in this church and others you know and love.

We know that our problems generally speaking are not as bad as what others face.

Subjectively our trials can be very serious.

We learn to cry out to the Lord always!

And so one of the lessons of this Psalm is that an essential part of the Christian life is crying out to the Lord.

Yes, we want to live in victory. We don't want to just go around being victims, feeling all sorry for ourselves, but we do see in this Psalm that not everything is just peachy and happy.

And most of all, I want us to know and live that **In Christ, prayer and wrestling with God in prayer is not in vain.**

Heb. 10:19 Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, **20** by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, **21** and *having* a High Priest over the house of God, **22** let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. **23** Let us hold fast the confession of *our* hope without wavering, for He who promised *is* faithful. **24** And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, **25** not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

Closing Hymn: Psalm 80A

BENEDICTION – NUMBERS 6:24-26

“The LORD bless you and keep you; The LORD make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace.” ’

