

Surrounded

Psalm 83

A Song. A Psalm of Asaph.

- ¹ O God, do not keep silence;
do not hold your peace or be still, O God!
- ² For behold, your enemies make an uproar;
those who hate you have raised their heads.
- ³ They lay crafty plans against your people;
they consult together against your treasured ones.
- ⁴ They say, "Come, let us wipe them out as a nation;
let the name of Israel be remembered no more!"
- ⁵ For they conspire with one accord;
against you they make a covenant—
- ⁶ the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites,
Moab and the Hagrites,
- ⁷ Gebal and Ammon and Amalek,
Philistia with the inhabitants of Tyre;
- ⁸ Asshur also has joined them;
they are the strong arm of the children of Lot. Selah
- ⁹ Do to them as you did to Midian,
as to Sisera and Jabin at the river Kishon,
¹⁰ who were destroyed at En-dor,
who became dung for the ground.
- ¹¹ Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb,
all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna,
¹² who said, "Let us take possession for ourselves
of the pastures of God."
- ¹³ O my God, make them like whirling dust,
like chaff before the wind.
- ¹⁴ As fire consumes the forest,
as the flame sets the mountains ablaze,
¹⁵ so may you pursue them with your tempest
and terrify them with your hurricane!
- ¹⁶ Fill their faces with shame,
that they may seek your name, O LORD.
- ¹⁷ Let them be put to shame and dismayed forever;
let them perish in disgrace,
- ¹⁸ that they may know that you alone,
whose name is the LORD,
are the Most High over all the earth. — Psalm 83, ESV

When God's People Are Under Assault

In the year 303, the Emperor Diocletian had had enough of Christianity in his empire. Christianity had never been legal in the Roman Empire, but social pressure and several sporadic bouts of persecution against the church had failed to crush the faith. In fact, Christianity had grown to the point where some historians believe that nearly one in six people in the Roman Empire was a Christian. Christians had even grown so bold as to build some church

buildings.

After initial smaller persecutions, Emperor Diocletian sent word to a famous Oracle of Apollo in 302, and the oracle told him that if he wanted to restore Rome to its former glories, he would need to wipe out the Christians. And so, he intensified the persecution, leading to The Great Persecution, which lasted until 311. During the 8 years, churches and homes of Christians were burned, many Christians were executed, many more were forced to offer sacrifice to the pagan Roman gods, all in an attempt to eliminate Christianity from the Roman Empire. The attempt failed. Two years after the end of the Great Persecution, the Edict of Milan made Christianity legal throughout the Roman Empire for the first time.

God's people have often faced violent opposition and intense persecution throughout our history. Huguenots in France were slaughtered by the thousands under the Roman Catholic King of France, Francis I, and his successors, from 1545 until 1598. The Communist government of China under Mao Tse Tung killed some 250,000 Christians and sent another 250,000 to labor camps, in an attempt to wipe out Christianity from China in the 1950's.

What all of these persecutions have in common was a goal to eliminate the faithful people of God from an area, and they all failed.

Today, in Psalm 83, we are reading of another, earlier attempt by the wicked God-haters in the world to eliminate God's people. The people of Judah were surrounded by a number of hostile nations who all formed an alliance against them, dedicated to the purpose of eliminating Israel, as verse 4 says,

*They say, "Come, let us wipe them out as a nation;
let the name of Israel be remembered no more!"*

Now, I have to say something about Psalm 83 that I wasn't planning on saying before I began my research this past week. Apparently, many within the dispensational school of interpreting the Bible see Psalm 83 as a prophesy of a future 10-nation alliance that will make war against the Nation of Israel. So, if you look up Psalm 83 on YouTube, the majority of the top results are videos about end-times prophesies about the Rapture, the Great Tribulation, and the Second Coming of Jesus. So, I need to clarify that Psalm 83 is not an end-times prophesy. There's nothing in the Psalm to indicate that it is a prophesy of future events at all, but it is a communal lament of God's people arising from a time when they were surrounded by enemies intent on wiping them out.

I. Surrounded by Strong Enemies, vv. 1-8

- ¹ *O God, do not keep silence;
do not hold your peace or be still, O God!*
- ² *For behold, your enemies make an uproar;
those who hate you have raised their heads.*
- ³ *They lay crafty plans against your people;
they consult together against your treasured ones.*
- ⁴ *They say, "Come, let us wipe them out as a nation;
let the name of Israel be remembered no more!"*
- ⁵ *For they conspire with one accord;
against you they make a covenant—*
- ⁶ *the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites,*

*Moab and the Hagrites,
 7 Gebal and Ammon and Amalek,
 Philistia with the inhabitants of Tyre;
 8 Asshur also has joined them;
 they are the strong arm of the children of Lot. Selah*

The lament opens with “O God,” a plea of desperation and longing for God to act. This is the last of the Asaph psalms in the Bible and the final set of them has been addressing God primarily as God, “Elohim,” emphasizing His strength and power and His universal rule as the God of the nations, the God of the whole earth. Asaph is crying out to God to be strong and to defend His people and defeat their enemies.

Notice that when Asaph is talking to God about the enemies which have surrounded the people of God, he refers to them as God’s enemies and connects their hatred of God’s people with their deeper hatred of God Himself. They are “*your enemies*” and “*those who hate you*” –

*your enemies make an uproar;
 those who hate you have raised their heads.
 They lay crafty plans against your people;
 they consult together against your treasured ones.*

Those who conspire together to attack God’s people and try to wipe them out do so because they hate God, and they want to be rid of the constant reminder of God that His people are to them. Sometimes, Christians can be jerks and invite opposition by their obnoxious behavior, but we should not entertain the fantasy that if we were just more Christ-like, the world would love us. That’s the exact opposite of what Jesus said we should expect –

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” – John 15:18-19, ESV

The Bible does tell us that, as much as it depends on us, we are to live at peace with all people (Romans 12:18). We are not to be the instigators of any animosity. In fact, we are not to return evil for evil or insult for insult, but we are called to bless those who curse us and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44; Romans 12:14), which Psalm 83 actually does, as we will see later.

However, we should be Christ-like peacemakers not because we think that doing so will win us the world’s approval, but because we are called to be imitators of Christ and to walk in His ways. We are His ambassadors. No one was more gentle, kind, loving, and truth-telling than Jesus, and they conspired together to crucify Him. We should not be shocked by the world’s rejection.

Who are these people who have conspired together against the people of God? Asaph names 10 nations, and if you were to look at a map, you would see that these nations surround Judah.

*6 the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites,
 Moab and the Hagrites,
 7 Gebal and Ammon and Amalek,*

Philistia with the inhabitants of Tyre;
⁸ *Asshur also has joined them;*
they are the strong arm of the children of Lot.

Now, we don't have an exact account in the Bible of this full collection of nations gathering together in a conspiracy against God's people, but the closest match we do have is recorded in 2 Chronicles 20 as happening in the days of King Jehoshaphat of Judah. And there's an interesting line in that story that convinces me, as well as other Bible scholars, that this is the most likely setting for Psalm 83 –

After this the Moabites and Ammonites, and with them some of the Meunites, came against Jehoshaphat for battle. ² Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, "A great multitude is coming against you from Edom, from beyond the sea; and, behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar" (that is, Engedi). ³ Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. ⁴ And Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD.

This is a powerful alliance of at least four different nations – the Moabites, Ammonites, the Meunites, and the Edomites. Now, Psalm 83 mentions several more nations, but it says of some of these other nations "they are the strong arm of the children of Lot," which means they are mercenaries hired by the Moabites and the Ammonites, because these are the children of Lot, descendants of Moab and Ammon, Lot's sons. The Edomites are descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother. So, this is an assembly of nations led by relatives of the people of God – descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew, and Esau, Jacob's brother. And they have enlisted the help of other nations as hired mercenaries.

Besides the fact that these nations are led by the relatives of God's people who should have been at peace with them, we can also see that this conspiracy of nations brought together those who were otherwise enemies. These nations all fought with each other, but they were united in their hatred of God's people. It reminds me of how the Herodians and the Pharisees and the Sadducees, sworn enemies of each other, conspired together to have Jesus killed. Today, we sometimes see strange alliances – like pro-abortion feminist groups and atheists coming together with Muslims – to oppose God's people.

How does Jehoshaphat respond to this massive threat? He doesn't seek to make his own alliance, but He prays a wonderful prayer –

⁵ And Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court, ⁶ and said, "O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you. ⁷ Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? ⁸ And they have lived in it and have built for you in it a sanctuary for your name, saying, ⁹ 'If disaster comes upon us, the sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house and before you—for your name is in this house—and cry out to you in our affliction, and you will hear and save.' ¹⁰ And now behold, the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom you would not let Israel invade when they came from the land of Egypt, and whom they avoided and did not destroy— ¹¹ behold, they reward us by coming to drive us out of your possession, which you have given us to inherit. ¹² O our God, will you not execute judgment on them? For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."

– 2 Chronicles 20:5-12, ESV

That is a beautiful and powerful prayer. I love the last line: “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” Now, listen to what happens next:

13 Meanwhile all Judah stood before the LORD, with their little ones, their wives, and their children. 14 And the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel the son of Zechariah, son of Benaiah, son of Jeiel, son of Mattaniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, in the midst of the assembly. 15 And he said, “Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the LORD to you, ‘Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God’s. 16 Tomorrow go down against them. Behold, they will come up by the ascent of Ziz. You will find them at the end of the valley, east of the wilderness of Jeruel. 17 You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the LORD on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.’ Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed. Tomorrow go out against them, and the LORD will be with you.” – vv. 13-17, ESV

The Spirit of the Lord came upon a Levite of the Sons of Asaph! Could this be the Asaphite who wrote Psalm 83? We have seen that the role of Asaph was a family occupation and that others in the line had the same name. Could Jahaziel have written Psalm 83 under the name Asaph? We don’t know that, but all of the circumstances fit this situation in 2 Chronicles 20 the best of any event in the history of God’s people recorded in Scripture.

II. Seeking Deliverance & Comfort from History, vv. 9-12

So, what does this Asaph ask the Lord to do about this alliance of evil nations? Well, he looks back on the history of God’s people and finds other times when God’s people were oppressed and outnumbered, and he prays –

*9 Do to them as you did to Midian,
as to Sisera and Jabin at the river Kishon,
10 who were destroyed at En-dor,
who became dung for the ground.
11 Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb,
all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna,
12 who said, “Let us take possession for ourselves
of the pastures of God.”*

That’s a lot of strange names and places that are unfamiliar to us, but they were not unfamiliar to the people of God in Asaph’s day. These were the national moments of great deliverance from overwhelming enemies. (As an aside, one of the benefits of committing to systematically reading through the Bible is that we become familiar with these stories ourselves over time, and we know the history of God’s people just like they would have known it in Asaph’s day, which helps us connect more deeply with the text.)

Basically, Asaph is combining two stories of great national deliverances from the Book of Judges, the story of God’s deliverance of His people from oppression from the Canaanites under the leadership of Deborah and Barak, recorded in Judges 4-5, and the deliverance of God’s people from the oppression of the Midianites under the leadership of Gideon, recorded in Judges 6-8. All of these names are the names of the leaders of the oppressors of God’s people. In both of these cases, God brought dramatic deliverance from an overwhelming foe by unusual means. Sisera was the military commander of 900 chariots, and he was killed by Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, who welcomed him into her tent and then drove a tent peg through his temple into the ground. Oreb and Zeeb and Zebah and Zalmunna were leaders of a Midianite army of 135,000 soldiers that were routed by Gideon’s army

of 300 men.

The point is that Asaph is drawing confidence from the history of God's deliverances of His people and is asking God to be consistent with His character and deliver again. Studying history, especially church history, gives us perspective and allows us to stay anchored in God's character and keep perspective when things seem really upside down, like they are right now in our culture.

III. Seeking God's Glory, vv. 13-18

After he asks God to do to their enemies something similar to what He did in the past, Asaph sharpens his request with a clearer focus on the glory of God among the nations –

*¹³ O my God, make them like whirling dust,
like chaff before the wind.
¹⁴ As fire consumes the forest,
as the flame sets the mountains ablaze,
¹⁵ so may you pursue them with your tempest
and terrify them with your hurricane!
¹⁶ Fill their faces with shame,
that they may seek your name, O LORD.
¹⁷ Let them be put to shame and dismayed forever;
let them perish in disgrace,
¹⁸ that they may know that you alone,
whose name is the LORD,
are the Most High over all the earth.*

Asaph basically asks God to dry up the enemies and blow them away, to burn them up, terrifying them and filling them with shame. And why? “*that they may seek your name O LORD*” and then “*that they may know that You alone, whose name is the LORD, are Most High over all the earth.*” Asaph’s concern is for the name of the LORD, for God to be worshiped and praised for who He is by these violent pagan nations.

It seems to me that he’s asking for their salvation in verse 16 “*that they may seek your name, O LORD,*” but not really in verse 18. It’s as if, if they don’t seek the LORD, Asaph prays they will know anyway that the LORD is the Most High God over all the earth. It reminds me of the language of Philippians 2, that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Some people respond to the Gospel in this life and bow the knee and confess Jesus in faith. But when Jesus comes again, everyone will bow and confess, but it won’t be by faith and in love, but in a shameful recognition of the truth they have denied, as they are judged.

Many people have a problem with psalms like Psalm 83. They say these “imprecatory” psalms, which pray against the enemies of God’s people are not fitting for the children of God in the New Testament age. But when Jesus sent out the Twelve and the Seventy-Two disciples two-by-two to take the Gospel throughout Israel, he told them that if a town would not accept them and their message, they were to shake off the dust of their feet as a witness against that town. And as much as we love to quote John 3:16, we sometimes forget what comes right after it –

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not

believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. – John 3:16-18, ESV

Jesus came to bring salvation, but those who reject Him are condemned already, and if they attack the people of God, they do so to their own hurt.

What is clear from the end of Psalm 83 is that Asaph was not seeking vengeance against his enemies for vengeance's sake. He is asking God to glorify His name, just like the opening plea of the Lord's Prayer, "*Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name.*" Make your name hallowed, regarded as holy, honored in all the earth.

You may be wondering how things turned out for Judah and King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20. I recommend you read the chapter after you get home. It's another surprising deliverance.

Surrounded by God's Power & Glory

Well, you and I don't live in Judah in the days of King Jehoshaphat, so how is Psalm 83 relevant to us? We are surrounded by enemies, and we need to remember that. The fallen world we live in conspires together with Satan and our own flesh to attack and ensnare us. Sometimes God's people come under assault, verbally or violently. We need to pray for protection and deliverance.

When we feel surrounded and outnumbered, we need to pray remembering three key things:

1. Our experiences are nothing new for the people of God. God has been faithful to deliver His people in the past, and He will be faithful to deliver us. We don't need to be afraid, and we don't need to seek to make alliances in the world with the enemies of God for protection. God will guard us.
2. We also need to remember that just as surely as we are often surrounded by enemies, our enemies are surrounded by God's glory and power. In 2 Kings 6, the army of the King of Assyria came against the prophet Elisha. Elisha's servant was terrified:

"Alas, my master! What shall we do?" ¹⁶ He said, *"Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."* ¹⁷ Then Elisha prayed and said, *"O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see."* So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. – 2 Kings 6:15-17, ESV
3. Finally, we need to make sure our focus is where Asaph puts his focus, on the honor and glory of the name of the Lord in the world. "*That the world may know*" should be the driving force of all we do, no matter our circumstances.