

For the director of music. To the tune of “The Lilies of the Covenant.” Of Asaph. A psalm.

¹ Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,
shine forth ² before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.
Awaken your might;
come and save us.
³ Restore us, O God;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.
⁴ How long, LORD God Almighty,
will your anger smolder
against the prayers of your people?
⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.
⁶ You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors,
and our enemies mock us.
⁷ Restore us, God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.
⁸ You transplanted a vine from Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
⁹ You cleared the ground for it,
and it took root and filled the land.
¹⁰ The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches.
¹¹ Its branches reached as far as the Sea,
its shoots as far as the River.
¹² Why have you broken down its walls
so that all who pass by pick its grapes?
¹³ Boars from the forest ravage it
and wild animals feed on it.
¹⁴ Return to us, God Almighty!
Look down from heaven and see!
Watch over this vine,
¹⁵ the root your right hand has planted,
the son you have raised up for yourself.
¹⁶ Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire;
at your rebuke your people perish.
¹⁷ Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.
¹⁸ Then we will not turn away from you;
revive us, and we will call on your name.
¹⁹ Restore us, LORD God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

■ Psalm 80

Sometimes when preparing a sermon the most difficult thing to do is figure out how to communicate what you discover in an engaging way. Most preachers start out with a story or a joke—something designed to lower your defenses against the Word of God. But after doing a hasty Web search on quotes or stories of lament, it probably comes as no surprise to you that there isn't much out there that will go with what I have for you today.

This is because the vast majority of what's been written from Shakespeare to the Bhagavad Gita about lamenting like Psalm 80 seems to teach us to do is that it's something to be avoided at all costs. And, for the most part, the world in which we live goes along with it. Most people don't like to talk about lament, much less do it, and grieving is seen as something you need to get through as quickly as possible with no redeemable aspects in the grieving process itself. Or on the other hand, the rising incidence of clinical depression around the world seems to show that another common response to grief can be one of obsession. We simply cannot stop grieving for the way things are and so get "stuck" in mourning. So we often find that people go between the extremes of lamentation: to either deny it and crank up the happy music or to be so bogged down in it that we start rotting from the inside out. Yet neither extreme is real biblical lament, which is to say that grieving well is not only necessary, it's a reflection of the heart of God for the world as it is. Even more, today I want to show you a promise from Scripture that gives us something to look forward to when we lament.

By now, you might be used to hearing sermons from me that sound as though they're being polished for publication. But today, I hope to show you something from Psalm 80 that is very unlike anything you might have heard about lament before. In order to show you this, I need to go through this Psalm with you in a verse-by-verse way, adding up perspectives and

arguments that each verse on its own only hints at. However, when we look at the text as a unified sum of its parts, we might come to a very different conclusion about the benefits of grieving well. And there *are* benefits.

The first thing to say about Psalm 80 is that it follows a typical 5-step pattern of psalms of lament. First is the invocation or calling on God's name in verses 1-3. Second is the lament or complaint from verses 4-13. Third is the petition or supplication from verse 14-17. Fourth is the vow to praise God in verse 18, and fifth is the statement of confidence in God in verse 19. But I want you to pay particular attention to verses 3, 7, and 19—where the Psalmist repeats a phrase: "*Restore us O God, make your face shine on us that we may be saved.*" Mark these three verses down, because as in all study of Scripture, something that gets repeated is something that's important for constructing meaning.

It's very likely that Psalm 80 was a communal or group lament over the way the northern kingdom of Israel had been raided and plundered by the Assyrians, and so when we read this Psalm and enter into its journey, we need to keep in mind that this isn't just one person feeling bad about the weather. This is all Israel lamenting the ruin of their country and crying out for the restoration of their nation. It's in this spirit that the Psalm begins with "*Hear us O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.*"

Notice that the Psalmist does not say "you who lead Israel like a flock". But for some reason, he chooses Joseph as representative of Israel as whole. Why? Because the story of Joseph is the story of one who is exiled and sent into slavery—just like Israel was at the time of this Psalm. Yet more importantly, when he quotes the name of Joseph, the author also anticipates how almost all psalms of lament end: happily. The story of Joseph in Genesis

ends with a sort of “happily ever after” feel, and it’s with this hopeful note that the psalmist begins his lament. It’s telling that Joseph’s Hebrew name, “Yosef”, means “God will add”—meaning that God will bless. The beginning of biblical lament does not just start in misery, but also in hope that God will answer.

Yet it’s not just the first half of verse one that’s hopeful, but the second half as well: God enthroned between the cherubim. You may realize this imagery has to do with the Ark of the Covenant—the top of which had two angels (cherubim) facing each other and kneeling with their wings touching. However, what you may not know is that this particular kind of angelic messenger, a cherub, is symbolic of all of Creation. In Ezekiel 10:13-15, the prophet has a vision of the throne of God on wheels, and at each of the four wheels stands a cherub, a being with four wings and possessing four faces: one of an angel, one of a human, one of a lion, and one of an eagle. A cherub, then, is symbolic of all Creation because it is made up of all the elements in Creation: spiritual angels, humans in the likeness of God, lions as the “monarchs” of the earth, and eagles as the “monarchs” of the sky. So when this little clause says that “God is enthroned between the cherubim”, what’s being implied is that God is enthroned in the midst of all Creation. In other words, the psalmist isn’t starting out saying “God is so far far away”, but that he’s saying that God is near, very near, enthroned in the midst of all Creation even though things aren’t going God’s way. The psalmist starts his lament not with just a complaint, but with a recognition of God’s character. Yosef: God will bless. Enthroned between the cherubim, God is with us, Immanuel.

Verse 2 continues with the Joseph theme by invoking the names of Joseph’s children—Ephraim and Manasseh—and Benjamin. What they have in common is that they were all the

result of Jacob's union with his second wife, Rachel, the one that Scripture tells us that he loved more than his first wife, Leah. In fact, during the story of Joseph, Jacob shows his preferential love for Rachel so much that when Benjamin is held behind, he says "*My son will not go down [to Egypt] with you; his brother is dead and he is the only one left.*" Maybe this doesn't sound so bad, but Jacob says this to Reuben, his true eldest son by his first wife Leah. All this is to say that when the Psalmist invokes the names of Joseph and Benjamin, he's invoking the memory of that preferential love, that chosenness.

It's in love that we come to verse 3, the first of the three repetitions in verses 3, 7, and 19—though you could make a case for verse 14 as well. Yet even though the key verb of "return" or "restore"¹ in verse 14 is the same as in 3, 7, and 19, the grammatical case is different. Verses 3, 7, and 19 are repeated cries for God to restore Israel by allowing his face to shine on them as in the Aaronic or Priestly Blessing of Numbers 6:25; but verse 14 is a request for God *himself* to return to Israel. In any case, the cry of the psalmist for God to let his "face shine on us" is one of asking God to turn back toward his people with his favour and the physical blessing of the restoration of Israel.

Israel, you see, had at this time lost its national security and identity; and now stood bereft of its former glory. Verses 4-6 draw on many other Old Testament themes. In particular, the idea that Israel is "on stage" in front of the other nations, showing who this god "Yahweh" is, which is a common theme throughout the First Testament narrative. Moses² and Joshua, two of the greatest leaders Israel had ever known, both reminded Yahweh of the

¹ Hb: "shub" → "turn, restore, go back, come back, revert, return, carry back, transport, give back, withdraw one's own hand from a threat" (KJV = "turn us again")

² Ex 32:9-14, Jos 7:8-9

potential international besmirching of his own name as cause enough to show mercy. They asked that God not allow ruin to come to Israel because they were the people who bore his name—and a failure for the people would be a failure for the name of God.

Verse 7 is the second repetition of the refrain—except with a key difference. In verse 3, the psalmist simply calls on “elohim”—“God.” However, here in verse 7, he calls on “elohim sabaoth”—“God of Hosts”, or “God Almighty.” Keep that in mind—we’ll come back to that later.

Verses 8-11 recount the way God had set up Israel in Canaan and established its borders in the good ol’ days of David and Solomon. In this we see that the hope of restoration for Israel wasn’t just for some sense of inner well-being and psychological peace, but for God to make Israel a strong nation once more. These verses show us that the Psalmist—and all of Israel—aren’t just expecting some kind of purely spiritual salvation like how many modern-day Christians think what it means to be saved. True Christianity, founded as it is in Judaism, isn’t only a “pie in the sky” faith, but also a faith of concrete, physical deliverance from sin and its effects in *this* world.

However, verses 12-13 show us an interesting aspect of the kind of lament shown in this psalm—that blame for Israel’s ruin is placed by the psalmist squarely on God’s lap. It goes without saying that this isn’t the usual biblical model of petition and supplication: you usually don’t blame God for the consequences of your own behaviour and then tell him to “fix it”. In fact, the biblical references to repentance before mercy are so many that it’s a waste of time to list them all out for you. So why would Psalm 80 put forth such a theologically poor point of view? Because lament isn’t about always about being theologically correct.

As if to underscore the “incorrectness” of this psalm’s theology, verses 14-18 present a conditional repentance on the part of Israel. The author seems to say “return to us O, God, restore us—*then* we will turn to you. Revive us, and *then* we will call on your name.” If this sounds backwards, it’s because it is.

Lamentation’s starting point is in pain, and as all of us know, when we’re in pain, the last thing we need is theological correction. So how is something that is so brazenly theologically incorrect a part of Holy Scripture? The answer lies partly in remembering that God is enthroned between the cherubim—that Yahweh is present in all Creation, even if we don’t feel it. Because of our sin, we all have warped perceptions of who God is, but the good news is that despite our fear, anger and bitterness against God, he is *still* Immanuel, God *for* us. The real gospel—the good news we all crave—is that God *is* awake, alive, and active. And even though we don’t get it all the time, he really is redeeming *everything* and *everyone* who asks him to do it.

We come at last to the final verse, where the psalmist repeats for the third and final time: “restore us!” Verses 3, 7, and 19 not only provide a sense of punctuation to Psalm 80, but they also show us that despite the supposed theological incorrectness of the psalmist’s lament, there is really only one place where any of us can turn to for relief: the God of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin. Even in great distress, the psalmist never turns away from the hope that God is strong and that God can save.

What I hinted at before but now am just coming to is how each of these three verses slightly changes the way that God is called upon. In verse 3, the cry is “restore us, O God.” In verse 7, the psalmist says “restore us God Almighty!” And verse 19 is the grandest of all—

“restore us, *adonai elohim sabaoth!*” “Restore us LORD God Almighty!” Maybe this doesn’t mean much to you at the moment, but when you consider the entire journey of this psalm, you start to see that as the Psalmist goes deeper and deeper into lament, the way that he calls on God changes.

In effect, the invitation of this Psalm is not just that it is entirely appropriate to complain to God. It is! But if we take these three verses as milestones and reflect on how the name of God changes from one to the next, there is yet another message to be had. It’s that if we allow ourselves to complain *in hope* (in other words, to lament), the way we call on God will change. In other words, as we willingly enter into the difficulty of grieving well, of counting and then casting our cares on the God who *is* present, somehow our perception of God changes. Like the author of this Psalm it’s in suffering boldly and entering fully into the brokenness of the world that we come to know God more intimately. The promise held out in this Psalm is more than just that God listens and cares. It’s also that even as we pour out our hearts to God for the ruin of the world around us in hope of restoration, we come to truly *know God*. The so-called “theological incorrectness” of forgetting to repent before asking for mercy itself is redeemed in the face of meeting God as he truly is, and knowing him as Master, Saviour, and Friend.

We may at first only call him “God”— a distant-seeming sort of entity in the sky somewhere far away. Then, as we persevere in complaining and hoping, we may experience something of his real power, and maybe call him “God Almighty.” But as we complete our lamentation, we learn to use the name he calls himself. It’s the name he gives to Moses

through the burning bush when Moses asks “*who should I tell the Israelites is calling?*”³ God replies with his personal name, an unpronounceable name because of its missing vowel points: “YHWH”, “The LORD”. While they were still in slavery, Israel longs for freedom and for identity, and God gives them both—but in the process, he also gives them his most intimate and personal name, a full revelation of who he is. The promise of Scripture today is that as we call out to God in hope of deliverance, we too get to call on him in successively deeper ways, each time more familiar, learning to know and maybe even love him—and so call on him as a bride to bridegroom.

You may have heard me say before that God is near to us in our suffering, even if we don’t feel it. And so he is! You may have even heard me say that entering into the darkest despair is not something to be afraid of because God is with us. But what is new for me and probably for you is that as we allow ourselves to grieve and question and lament in the presence of God, we will come to know him in ways we could not have imagined. And that, friends, is the greatest reversal of all—that we should learn to love God and live in him forever.

- 1.) How have you come to know God in the different seasons of your life?
- 2.) How has God been present to you in the midst of difficulty?

³ Ex 3:13