

PSALM 81

This psalm was penned, as is supposed, not upon occasion of any particular providence, but for the solemnity of a particular ordinance, either that of the new-moon in general or that of the feast of trumpets on the new moon of the seventh month, ~~<829>~~ Leviticus 23:24; ~~<821>~~ Numbers 29:1. When David, by the Spirit, introduced the singing of psalms into the temple-service this psalm was intended for that day, to excite and assist the proper devotions of it. All the psalms are profitable; but, if one psalm be more suitable than another to the day and observances of it, we should choose that. The two great intentions of our religious assemblies, and which we ought to have in our eye in our attendance on them, are answered in this psalm, which are, to give glory to God and to receive instruction from God, to “behold the beauty of the Lord and to enquire in his temple;” accordingly by this psalm we are assisted on our solemn feast days,

I. In praising God for what he is to his people (v. 1-3), and has done for them (v. 4-7).

II. In teaching and admonishing one another concerning the obligations we lie under to God (v. 8-10), the danger of revolting from him (v. 11, 12), and the happiness we should have if we would but keep close to him (v. 13-16). This, though spoken primarily of Israel of old, is written for our learning, and is therefore to be sung with application.

~~<881>~~ PSALM 81:1-7

AN INVITATION TO PRAISE

To the chief musician upon Gittith. A psalm of Asaph.

When the people of God were gathered together in *the solemn day, the day of the feast of the Lord*, they must be told that they had business to do, for we do not go to church to sleep nor to be idle; no, there is that which the duty of every day requires, work of the day, which is to be done in its day. And here,

I. The worshippers of God are excited to their work, and are taught, by singing this psalm, to stir up both themselves and one another to it, v. 1-3. Our errand is, to give unto God the glory due unto his name, and in all our religious assemblies we must mind this as our business.

1. In doing this we must eye God as *our strength*, and as *the God of Jacob*, v. 1. He is the strength of Israel, as a people; for he is a God in covenant with them, who will powerfully protect, support, and deliver them, who fights their battles and makes them do valiantly and victoriously. He is the strength of every Israelite; by his grace we are enabled to go through all our services, sufferings, and conflicts; and to him, as our strength, we must pray, and we must sing praise to him as the God of all the wrestling seed of Jacob, with whom we have a spiritual communion.

2. We must do this by all the expressions of holy joy and triumph. It was then to be done by musical instruments, the *timbrel, harp, and psaltery*; and by blowing *the trumpet*, some think in remembrance of the sound of the trumpet on Mount Sinai, which waxed louder and louder. It was then and is now to be done by singing psalms, singing *aloud*, and making a *joyful noise*. The pleasantness of the harp and the awfulness of the trumpet intimate to us that God is to be worshipped with cheerfulness and joy with reverence and godly fear. Singing aloud and making a noise intimate that we must be warm and affectionate in praising God, that we must with a hearty good-will show forth his praise, as those that are not ashamed to own our dependence on him and obligations to him, and that we should join many together in this work; the more the better; it is the more like heaven.

3. This must be done in the time appointed. No time is amiss for praising God (*Seven times a day will I praise thee; nay, at midnight will I rise and give thanks unto thee*); but some are times appointed, not for God to meet us (he is always ready), but for us to meet one another, that we may join together in praising Do. The solemn feast-day must be a day of praise; when we are receiving the gifts of God's bounty, and rejoicing in them, then it is proper to sing his praises.

II. They are here directed in their work.

1. They must look up to the divine institution which it is the observation of. In all religious worship we must have an eye to the command (v. 4): *This was a statute for Israel*, for the keeping up of a face of religion

among them; it was *a law of the God of Jacob*, which all the seed of Jacob are bound by, and must be subject to. Note, Praising God is not only a good thing, which we do well to do, but it is our indispensable duty, which we are obliged to do; it is at our peril if we neglect it; and in all religious exercises we must have an eye to the institution as our warrant and rule: “This I do because God has commanded me; and therefore I hope he will accept me;” then it is done in faith.

2. They must look back upon those operations of divine Providence which it is the memorial of. This solemn service was *ordained for a testimony* (v. 5), a standing traditional evidence, for the attesting of the matters of fact. It was a testimony to Israel, that they might know and remember what God had done for their fathers, and would be a testimony against them if they should be ignorant of them and forget them.

(1.) The psalmist, in the people's name, puts himself in mind of the general work of God on Israel's behalf, which was kept in remembrance by this and other solemnities, v. 5. When God went out against the land of Egypt, to lay it waste, that he might force Pharaoh to let Israel go, then he ordained solemn feast-days to be observed by a statute for ever in their generations, as a memorial of it, particularly the passover, which perhaps is meant by the *solemn feast-day* (v. 3); that was appointed just then when God went out through the land of Egypt to destroy the first-born, and passed over the houses of the Israelites, ¹²³Exodus 12:23, 24. By it that work of wonder was to be kept in perpetual remembrance, that all ages might in it behold the goodness and severity of God. The psalmist, speaking for his people, takes notice of this aggravating circumstance of their slavery in Egypt that there they heard a language that they understood not; there they were strangers in a strange land. The Egyptians and the Hebrews understood not one another's language; for Joseph spoke to his brethren by an interpreter (¹²³Genesis 42:23), and the Egyptians are said to be to the house of Jacob *a people of a strange language*, ¹¹⁴Psalm 114:1. To make a deliverance appear the more gracious, the more glorious, it is good to observe every thing that makes the trouble we are delivered from appear the more grievous.

(2.) The psalmist, in God's name, puts the people in mind of some of the particulars of their deliverance. Here he changes the person, v. 6. God speaks by him, saying, *I removed the shoulder from the burden*. Let him remember this on the feast-day,

[1.] That God had brought them out of the house of bondage, had removed their shoulder from the burden of oppression under which they were ready to sink, *had delivered their hands from the pots*, or panniers, or baskets, in which they carried clay or bricks. Deliverance out of slavery is a very sensible mercy and one which ought to be had in everlasting remembrance. But this was not all.

[2.] God had delivered them at the Red Sea; then they called in trouble, and he rescued them and disappointed the designs of their enemies against them, ⁽²¹⁴⁰⁾Exodus 14:10. Then he answered them with a real answer, out of *the secret place of thunder*; that is, out of the pillar of fire, through which God looked upon the host of the Egyptians and troubled it, ⁽²¹⁴¹⁾Exodus 14:24, 25. Or it may be meant of the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, which was the secret place, for it was death to gaze (⁽²¹⁴²⁾Exodus 19:21), and it was in thunder that God then spoke. Even the terrors of Sinai were favours to Israel, ⁽²¹⁴³⁾Deuteronomy 4:33.

[3.] God had borne their manners in the wilderness: “*I proved thee at the waters of Meribah*; thou didst there show thy temper, what an unbelieving murmuring people thou wast, and yet I continued my favour to thee.” *Selah* — *Mark that*; compare God's goodness and man's badness, and they will serve as foils to each other. Now if they, on their solemn feast-days, were thus to call to mind their redemption out of Egypt, much more ought we, on the Christian sabbath, to call to mind a more glorious redemption wrought out for us by Jesus Christ from worse than Egyptian bondage, and the many gracious answers he has given to us, notwithstanding our manifold provocations.

⁽²¹⁴⁴⁾PSALM 81:8-16

EXPOSTULATION WITH ISRAEL

God, by the psalmist, here speaks to Israel, and in them to us, on whom the ends of the world are come.

I. He demands their diligent and serious attention to what he was about to say (v. 8): “*Hear, O my people!* and who should hear me if my people will not? I have heard and answered thee; now wilt thou hear me? Hear what is said with the greatest solemnity and the most unquestionable certainty, for

it is what *I will testify unto thee*. Do not only give me the hearing, but *hearken unto me*, that is, be advised by me, be ruled by me.” Nothing could be more reasonably nor more justly expected, and yet God puts an *if* upon it: “*If thou wilt hearken unto me*. It is thy interest to do so, and yet it is questionable whether thou wilt or no; for thy neck is an iron sinew.”

II. He puts them in mind of their obligation to him as the Lord their God and Redeemer (v. 10): *I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt*; this is the preface to the ten commandments, and a powerful reason for the keeping of them, showing that we are bound to it in duty, interest, and gratitude, all which bonds we break asunder if we be disobedient.

III. He gives them an abstract both of the precepts and of the promises which he gave them, as the Lord and their God, upon their coming out of Egypt.

1. The great command was that they should have no other gods before him (v. 9): *There shall no strange god be in thee*, none besides thy own God. Other gods might well be called strange gods, for it was very strange that ever any people who had the true and living God for their God should hanker after any other. God is jealous in this matter, for he will not suffer his glory to be given to another; and therefore in this matter they must be circumspect, ⁽²²⁸³⁾ Exodus 23:13.

2. The great promise was that God himself, as a God all-sufficient, would be nigh unto them in all that which they called upon him for (⁽²⁸⁴²⁾ Deuteronomy 4:7), that, if they would adhere to him as their powerful protector and ruler, they should always find him their bountiful benefactor: “*Open thy mouth wide and I will fill it*, as the young ravens that cry open their mouths wide and the old ones fill them.” See here,

(1.) What is our duty — to raise our expectations from God and enlarge our desires towards him. We cannot look for too little from the creature nor too much from the Creator. We are not straitened in him; why therefore should we be straitened in our own bosoms?

(2.) What is God's promise. I will fill thy mouth with good things, ⁽²⁴³⁵⁾ Psalm 103:5. There is *enough in God to fill our treasures* (⁽²¹⁸²⁾ Proverbs 8:21), to *replenish every hungry soul* (⁽²⁴²⁵⁾ Jeremiah 31:25), to supply all our wants, to answer all our desires, and to make us completely happy.

The pleasures of sense will surfeit and never satisfy (²⁸⁰Isaiah 55:2); divine pleasures will satisfy and never surfeit. And we may have enough from God if we pray for it in faith. *Ask, and it shall be given you. He gives liberally, and upbraids not.* God assured his people Israel that it would be their own fault if he did not do as great and kind things for them as he had done for their fathers. Nothing should be thought too good, too much, to give them, if they would but keep close to God. He *would moreover have given them such and such things,* ²⁸¹2 Samuel 12:8.

IV. He charges them with a high contempt of his authority as their lawgiver and his grace and favour as their benefactor, v. 11. He had done much for them, and designed to do more; but all in vain: “*My people would not hearken to my voice, but turned a deaf ear to all I said.*” Two things he complains of: —

1. Their disobedience to his commands. They did hear his voice, so as never any people did; but they would not hearken to it, they would not be ruled by it, neither by the law nor by the reason of it.

2. Their dislike of his covenant-relation to them: *They would none of me. They acquiesced not in my word* (so the Chaldee); God was willing to be to them a God, but they were not willing to be to him a people; they did not like his terms. “I would have gathered them, but they would not.” They had none of him; and why had they not? It was not because they might not; they were fairly invited into covenant with God. It was not because they could not; for the word was nigh them, even in their mouth and in their heart. But it was purely because they would not. God calls them his people, for they were bought by him, bound to him, his by a thousand ties, and yet even they had not hearkened, had not obeyed. “Israel, the seed of Jacob my friend, set me at nought, and *would have none of me.*” Note, All the wickedness of the wicked world is owing to the wilfulness of the wicked will. The reason why people are not religious is because they will not be so.

V. He justifies himself with this in the spiritual judgments he had brought upon them (v. 12): *So I gave them up unto their own hearts' lusts,* which would be more dangerous enemies and more mischievous oppressors to them than any of the neighbouring nations ever were. God withdrew his Spirit from them, took off the bridle of restraining grace, left them to themselves, and justly; they will do as they will, and therefore let them do

as they will. *Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone.* It is a righteous thing with God to give those up to their own hearts' lusts that indulge them, and give up themselves to be led by them; for why should his Spirit always strive? His grace is his own, and he is debtor to no man, and yet, as he never gave his grace to any that could say they deserved it, so he never took it away from any but such as had first forfeited it: *They would none of me, so I gave them up;* let them take their course. And see what follows: *They walked in their own counsels,* in the way of their heart and in the sight of their eye, both in their worships and in their conversations. "I left them to do as they would, and then they did all that was ill;" they walked in their own counsels, and not according to the counsels of God and his advice. God therefore was not the author of their sin; he left them to the lusts of their own hearts and the counsels of their own heads; if they do not well, the blame must lie upon their own hearts and the blood upon their own heads.

VI. He testifies his good-will to them in wishing they had done well for themselves. He saw how sad their case was, and how sure their ruin, when they were delivered up to their own lusts; that is worse than being given up to Satan, which may be in order to reformation (^{<511D>}1 Timothy 1:20) and to salvation (^{<465B>}1 Corinthians 5:5); but to be delivered up to their own hearts' lusts is to be sealed under condemnation. *He that is filthy, let him be filthy still.* What fatal precipices will not these hurry a man to! Now here God looks upon them with pity, and shows that it was with reluctance that he thus abandoned them to their folly and fate. *How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?* ^{<311B>}Hosea 11:8, 9. So here, *O that my people had hearkened!* See ^{<218B>}Isaiah 48:18. Thus Christ lamented the obstinacy of Jerusalem. *If thou hadst known,* ^{<292D>}Luke 19:42. The expressions here are very affecting (v. 13-16), designed to show how unwilling God is that any should perish and desirous that all should come to repentance (he delights not in the ruin of sinful persons or nations), and also what enemies sinners are to themselves and what an aggravation it will be of their misery that they might have been happy upon such easy terms. Observe here,

1. The great mercy God had in store for his people, and which he would have wrought for them if they had been obedient.

(1.) He would have given them victory over their enemies and would soon have completed the reduction of them. They should not only have kept their ground, but have gained their point, against the remaining

Canaanites, and their encroaching vexatious neighbours (v. 14): *I should have subdued their enemies*; and it is God only that is to be depended on for the subduing of our enemies. Not would had have put them to the expense and fatigue of a tedious war: he would *soon* have done it; for he would have *turned his hand against their adversaries*, and then they would not have been able to stand before them. It intimates how easily he would have done it and without any difficulty. With the turn of a hand, nay, *with the breath of his mouth, shall he slay the wicked*, ^{<2314>}Isaiah 11:4. If he but turn his hand, the *haters of the Lord will submit themselves to him* (v. 15); and, though they are not brought to love him, yet they shall be made to fear him and to confess that he is too hard for them and that it is in vain to contend with him. God is honoured, and so is his Israel, by the submission of those that have been in rebellion against them, though it be but a forced and feigned submission.

(2.) He would have confirmed and perpetuated their posterity, and established it upon sure and lasting foundations. In spite of all the attempts of their enemies against them, *their time should have endured for ever*, and they should never have been disturbed in the possession of the good land God had given them, much less evicted and turned out of possession.

(3.) He would have given them great plenty of all good things (v. 16): *He should have fed them with the finest of the wheat*, with the best grain and the best of the kind. Wheat was the staple commodity of Canaan, and they exported a great deal of it, ^{<2571>}Ezekiel 27:17. He would not only have provided for them the best sort of bread, but *with honey out of the rock would he have satisfied them*. Besides the precious products of the fruitful soil, that there might not be a barren spot in all their land, even the clefts of the rock should serve for bee-hives and in them they should find honey in abundance. See ^{<1823>}Deuteronomy 32:13, 14. In short, God designed to make them every way easy and happy.

2. The duty God required from them as the condition of all this mercy. He expected no more than that they should *hearken to him*, as a scholar to his teacher, to receive his instructions — as a servant to his master, to receive his commands; and that they should *walk in his ways*, those ways of the Lord which are right and pleasant, that they should observe the institutions of his ordinances and attend the intimations of his providence. There was nothing unreasonable in this.

3. Observe how the reason of the withholding of the mercy is laid in their neglect of the duty: If they had *hearkened to me, I would soon have subdued their enemies*. National sin or disobedience is the great and only thing that retards and obstructs national deliverance. *When I would have healed Israel, and set every thing to-rights among them, then the iniquity of Ephraim was discovered, and so a stop was put to the cure,* ^{<370>}Hosea 7:1. We are apt to say, “If such a method had been taken, such an instrument employed, we should soon have subdued our enemies:” but we mistake; if we had hearkened to God, and kept to our duty, the thing would have been done, but it is sin that makes our troubles long and salvation slow. And this is that which God himself complains of, and wishes it had been otherwise. Note, *Therefore* God would have us do our duty to him, that we may be qualified to receive favour from him. He delights in our serving him, not because he is the better for it, but because we shall be.