

Christians may be tempted to skip over this psalm and conclude that it is a national lament over the collapse of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. The psalm pleads to the Lord for the restoration of Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. It may have been written when Shalmaneser king of Assyria was either about to or had already conquered the northern kingdom in Samaria and deported the Israelites. The Book of Kings spells out in blunt detail Israel's history of apostasy and idolatry and gives ultimate responsibility to the Lord for Israel's defeat and exile. "Therefore the Lord rejected all the people of Israel; he afflicted them and gave them into the hands of plunderers, until he thrust them from his presence" (2 Kings 17:20).

Psalm 80 is a gospel parable that sees Israel's tragic history as type that points forward to God's redemptive fulfillment of his covenant promises. When interpreted within the sequence of Asaph psalms it inspires the believer to see the full spectrum of salvation history. Psalm 78 introduces the importance of parable and offers an interpretative rationale for how the psalms should be used: "I will open my mouth with a parable; I will utter hidden things, things from of old – things we have heard and known, things our ancestors have told us" (Ps 78:2-3). What was said in the past, in the Spirit, has importance for us today, because it points to Christ.

The psalmist pleads with God to reverse the disaster that has come upon the northern kingdom. As we have seen, Ephraim stands as a type representing willful unbelief and hardened resistance against God (Ps 78:9,67). In geopolitical terms, God never did reverse the judgment of Ephraim, at least not in the way the psalmist hoped. There was no restoration of the northern kingdom and there never will be, apart from a global gospel and a new definition of the true Jew. Only in Christ is the plea of the psalmist answered and the promise of the one new man fulfilled.

To pray this psalm with Jesus is to open up the meaning of the psalm for the church today. The psalm is filled with gospel allusions, including Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-26), his description of the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18), his parable of the vineyard owner who sent his son (Matthew 21:33-46), and his upper room discourse on the vine and the branches (John 15:1-17). These gospel allusions are embedded in Psalm 80 and inspire the believer's praying imagination.

Save Us!

Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,
 you who lead Joseph like a flock.
 You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,
 shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.
 Awaken your might;
 come and save us.
 Restore us, O God;
 make your face shine on us,
 that we may be saved.

Psalm 80:1-3

Psalm 80 opens with the same shepherding theme that concludes Psalms 77, 78, and 79. This theme not only links the psalms together but builds expectancy. Israel is God's flock, "the sheep of his pasture" and the Lord is their Shepherd (Ps 23:1). But this Shepherd is unlike any other. He sits "enthroned between the cherubim" (Ps 80:1). He is superior in rank and more powerful than the most powerful angels. The light of his glory emanates from a transcendent, cosmic throne that rules over all (Ezekiel 1:19-24). Human and divine images merge into one as the psalmist calls for the Lord to "pay attention" and bring his power to bear on a desperate situation. "Stir up your power," the psalmist pleads, and "come to our salvation."¹

If the apostles were asked how this appeal was answered, they would not hesitate to say the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. The work of redemption took much longer than expected and the promise was not fulfilled as some imagined, nationalistically and geographically. But it was fulfilled cosmically, in a way that befit the one "enthroned between the cherubim." The author of Hebrews makes a strong case for the superiority of the Son over the angels when he writes, "So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs" (Heb 1:4) and "It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come. . ." (Heb 2:5). Hebrews describes Jesus as "that great Shepherd of the sheep" (Heb 13:20) and First Peter as "the Chief Shepherd" (1 Pet 5:4).

The refrain with variations on the Lord's title concludes each stanza (Ps 80:3, 7, 19). The psalmist draws on Aaron's blessing (Numbers 6:24-26) and repeats three times for emphasis an earnest longing for the friendship and kindness of God. We hear this blessing today and acknowledge that "in Christ the blessing of God is made personal in the shining face: 'And his face was like the sun shining in full strength.' God in Christ is warmth and sunlight."²

How Long?

How long, Lord God Almighty,
will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?
You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.
You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors,
and our enemies mock us.
Restore us, God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

Psalm 80:4-7

Instead of responding to the warmth of God's smile, the tear streaked, ash smudged faces of God's people reflect deep sorrow and hopelessness. The prayers of the people provoke God's

¹ Ross, Psalms, 691.

² Peterson, Reversed Thunder, 38.

burning wrath rather than his glorious blessing. The solidarity of sin marks all the people of Israel for judgment. They suffer the consequences of past sins so that even the faithful who pray earnestly cannot escape the divine necessity of corporate judgment. It is in the midst of this kind of tragedy, the result of years of cultural rebellion, disobedience, idolatry, and apostasy, that the psalmist cries out, “How long, Lord God Almighty, will your anger smolder?” We don’t like this kind of solidarity, but on this side of eternity the faithful remnant often suffer right along with idolaters and abusers.

Besides, living as we do in an alien culture, evil is bound to impact our lives. We are fools to think that our Christianity is not shaped by the autonomous, western self, who is typically self-centered, self-indulgent and materialistic. We know how difficult it is to shun the obsessions of our high places: food, sex, sports, entertainment, appearance, adventure, technology, control, money and success. The list of idols in our late modern pantheon is great. And the moment a brave Christian dares to break away from the spirit of the age, she invites derision from her neighbors and colleagues. This stanza is not about other people living at another time, it is about us. It is not an historical artifact subject to a scholar’s analysis and cataloging. It is our life and experience that is addressed in this psalm. And some of us are on a diet of tears because we prioritize work over worship and meaningless entertainment over wisdom. We are drinking from a “bucket of salty tears” because we are eating, working, and indulging ourselves to death, We are constantly giving ourselves grace – permission to do what is antithetical to the gospel, without ever even thinking about the costly grace of Christ. What did Bonhoeffer say? “When Jesus calls a man he bids him come and die.” That sounds like something Asaph might have said if he lived today.

The Vine and the Son

You transplanted a vine from Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
You cleared the ground for it,
and it took root and filled the land.
The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches.
Its branches reached as far as the Sea,
its shoots as far as the River.
Why have you broken down its walls
so that all who pass by pick its grapes?
Boars from the forest ravage it,
and insects from the fields feed on it.
Return to us, God Almighty!
Look down from heaven and see!
Watch over this vine,
the root your right hand has planted,
the son you have raised up for yourself.

Psalm 80:8-15

The psalmist uses the Exodus, the epicenter of salvation history, to introduce an extended allegory comparing Israel to a vine. God “transplanted a vine from Egypt” and “drove out the nations” of Canaan. Miraculously, the vine took root and grew so abundantly that it covered the mountains and the mighty cedars. The vine spread out over the land. It reached from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the river of Euphrates in the east. The allegory traces the tremendous expansion of the kingdom under David and Solomon’s rule. But then, the blessing of God comes to an abrupt end. The psalmist confronts God, the gardener, with an accusatory lament, “Why have you broken down the walls?” The unprotected vine represents a defenseless Israel that is ravaged by humans, wild boars, and insects.

The vine was the iconic symbol of Israel, used by the prophets to indict Israel. Hosea charged that even though God made Israel fruitful she persisted in worshiping other gods (Hos 10:1-2). Isaiah declared, “The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel.” On a fertile hillside, Yahweh planted only the choice vines and did everything possible to care for his crop, but his vine only produced bad fruit (Isa 2:1-7). Jeremiah accused this “choice vine” of becoming “a corrupt, wild vine” (Jer 2:21). Ezekiel likened Israel to a useless vine and lamented that wood from a vine was good for nothing but to be burned (Ezek 15:1-5).

The prophet Isaiah develops the vineyard allegory as a lovesong, “My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside,” but the song quickly turns tragic and the people of Judah are asked to bear witness (Isa 5:1-7). God did everything he could to assure a fruitful vineyard, but instead of good grapes there were only bad grapes. Isaiah uses the psalmist’s allegory as a preface to his message of “woe” (Isa 5:8-30). The decision to take away the protective wall of hedges is God’s and in no time the beautiful vineyard becomes a wasteland of briars and thorns.

In spite of Israel’s willful rebellion, the psalmist cries out, “Return to us, God Almighty!” But on what grounds should God return to a people who have consistently rejected him and gone their own way? Clearly, there is nothing they have done to merit the blessing of God’s merciful return. Knowing this, the psalmist introduces what he hopes is a persuasive reason that lies outside the actions of the people. “Watch over this vine,” he pleads. Why? Because you planted it. The vineyard belongs to you. But then he breaks out of the allegory as only a poet can do and likens Israel to “the son you have raised up for yourself” (Ps 80:15). His appeal rests not on the merit of the people but on the mercy of God. The redemptive meaning of these images belongs to God’s inspired revelation and they point forward to the Incarnate One, the Son of God. Jesus himself makes the messianic connection and encourages us to follow his lead.

The Son of Man

Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire;
at your rebuke your people perish.
Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.
Then we will not turn away from you;
revive us, and we will call on your name.

Restore us, Lord God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

Psalm 80:16-19

When Jesus left the upper room with his disciples they may have passed by the Temple on their way to the Kidron Valley and Gethsemane. Above the temple gate in stone relief were golden vines with grape clusters as big as a man. The evening shadows may have obscured the image, but Jesus' metaphor of vine and the branches (John 15:1-17) invoked deep biblical roots. The indictment of the prophets and the hope of the psalmist is answered in the one who says, "I am the true vine." This is the seventh and final "I am" saying of Jesus in the Gospel of John.³ Jesus used descriptive images like the vine to develop a messianic self-portrait free from nationalistic and political triumph. The comparison is straight-forward, Israel is the false vine, destined for judgment. Jesus is the true vine, Israel's only hope. The prophets used the image of the vine to indict Israel, but the psalmist takes the image further as a sign of hope. Jesus develops that theme of hope in himself. Jesus invites us – his followers – to be rooted and grounded in him, to be at home with him. Only in him, the Lord's right hand man, the Son of Man whom the Lord raised up for himself, will we find redemption. Only in him, will the Abrahamic covenant and the Aaronic blessing be fulfilled. The psalmist cries out, "Restore us, Lord God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved." And the apostle declares, "Salvation is found in one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

³"I am the bread of life" (6:35); "I am the light of the world" (8:12); "I am the gate of the sheep" (10:7); "I am the good shepherd"(10:11); "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25); "I am the way and the truth and the life" (14:6).