

The psalmist's theme is once again "the Exodus from Egyptian servitude" and the wilderness sojourn.¹ Only this time, the psalm begins and ends on a note of festive joy. The intensity of the previous psalms gives way here to a respite of joy, a sober reminder, and a promise of God's protection and provision. The Asaph tradition grasps the life-transforming impact of the worship liturgy. We are not formed by information alone, but by the rhythms of grace and habits of the soul that shape daily life and the seasons of our lives. The command to obey the voice of God is embedded in resounding worship and in the preached remembrance of God's merciful deliverance.

Psalm 81 has been associated with the fall festival, the Feast of Tabernacles, coming five days after the Day of Atonement. The people of God were instructed "to take branches from luxuriant trees – from palms, willows and other leafy trees – and rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. Celebrate this as a festival to the Lord for seven days each year." The Lord commanded the Israelites to "live in temporary shelters for seven days. . .so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Lev 23:40-43). The festival was designed to celebrate three great blessings: the "ingathering" of the firstfruits of the wheat harvest (Exod 34:22), the Lord's saving redemption signified in an elaborate sacrificial liturgy for each of the seven days (Num 29:12-40), and the prophetic expectation that God will fulfill all of his promises. Through Moses the Lord commanded the people: "Be joyful at your festival – you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless, and the widows who live in your towns" (Deut 16:14). This inclusive family celebration of the people of God included daily sacrifices and a special emphasis on the public reading of the law of God in the hearing of everyone (Deut 31:9-13). The prophet Zechariah envisioned a climactic eschatological Festival of Tabernacles that gathered the peoples of the earth to worship the King, the Lord Almighty (Zech 14:16-17).

Call to Worship

*Sing for joy to God our strength;
shout aloud to the God of Jacob!
Begin the music, strike the timbrel,
play the melodious harp and lyre.
Sound the ram's horn at the New Moon,
and when the moon is full, on the day of our festival;
this is a decree for Israel,
an ordinance of God of Jacob.
When God went out against Egypt,
he established it a statute for Joseph.*

Psalm 81:1-5

¹Reardon, Christ in the Psalms, 159.

The sound of the shofar (ram's horn) gathers the great assemble of the people of God for worship (Lev 23:23). Exuberant, jubilant praise is the first order of worship. The procession begins with a dance. "Strike the timbrel" signals lively music set to a rhythmic beat. The shaking and striking of the tambourine is joined by stringed instruments, which are more like a guitar than a modern day harp. Music and dance set a celebratory tone for this command performance instituted by God himself when the Israelites were redeemed from Egyptian bondage. This expression of bold, bodily, expressive worship is not left to human discretion but is done in earnest, in love, by divine command. Loving God takes practice, much like a musical instrument, and the more we do it the better we get at it and the more we love it.

Worshippers are embodied image bearers of God and when they sing, dance, and play musical instruments, they use more than their minds; they engage their whole being – from their adrenaline pumping hearts to their toe-tapping feet. Jamie Smith reminds us that we are more than thinking beings and even more than believing beings. We are loving beings. We are defined by who or what we love.² We are embodied agents of desire or love, and when we enter into worship – body, mind, and soul, we show that love takes practice in worship practices.

Psalms 81 begins with a "just-do-it" imperative, "Sing for joy to God our strength." This command was not meant to force us against our will or to violate our emotions by dictating how we should feel. The decree, "Shout aloud to the God of Jacob!" is a revelatory blessing countering the idolatry of everything else. The New Testament "makes no statute about feasts or fasts" because there is no need to.³ The apostle Paul called these cultural liturgies and special days "a shadow of the things to come; the reality, however is found in Christ" (Col 2:16; Rom 14:5). The will of God and human desire converge in the new creation. "The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Cor 5:17). The Lord puts his will in our minds and writes it on our hearts (Jer 31:33) and we bind ourselves to the Lord and his everlasting promise (Jer 50:5).

The worship liturgies of the people of God in the Old Testament are transposed in fresh and freeing ways in the New Testament. The author of Hebrews exhorted brothers and sisters in Christ to draw near to God in the full assurance that faith brings in order to hold unswervingly to the hope they professed in Christ and to consider how to spur one another on to love and good deeds. He challenged them not to give up meeting together (Heb 10:19-25). The inspiration for worship is found in the filling of the Holy Spirit and the indwelling of the Word of Christ with no separation between the Spirit and the Word. We are challenged to embrace liturgies that let the peace of Christ rule and let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly. Liturgies that involve teaching and admonishing one another "with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit" in gratitude to the Lord (Col 3:15-16).

Call to Remember

I heard an unknown voice say:

"I removed the burden from their shoulders;

² Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 37-52.

³ Kidner, *Psalms*, 293.

*their hands were set free from the basket.
In your distress you called and I rescued you,
I answered you out of a thundercloud;
I tested you at the waters of Meribah.
Hear me, my people, and I will warn you –
if you would only listen to me, Israel!
You shall have no foreign god among you;
you shall not worship any god other than me.
I am the Lord your God,
who brought you up out of Egypt.
Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.*
Psalm 81:5c-10

The psalmist turns preacher, a prophetic preacher, who faithfully declares the Word of God. He does not control the voice of God. Like the apostle John who turned around to see the voice that was speaking to him and saw someone like a son of man, the psalmist is neither vague nor generic, but rather humble and submissive (Rev 1:12-13). Neither the psalmist nor the apostle can exhaust the mystery. They cannot contain, control, package, or manipulate the voice. All they can do is humbly convey the message.

The psalmist deftly sketches the history of redemption by painting a picture of slave labor set free. The burden has been lifted from their shoulders and the endless, mindless, back-breaking labor of lifting heavy baskets has ceased. Yahweh is their savior: “I removed the burden. . . I rescued you. . . I answered you. . . I tested you.” The substance of the redemptive message is straightforward, the Lord heard their distress cry and saved them. But now the Lord insists, “Hear me, my people, and I will warn you – if you would only listen to me, Israel!” (Ps 81:8; see Deut 6:4). Salvation is not a point in time but a whole new way of living.

Only the first command needs to be preached, “I am the Lord your God. . . You shall have no other gods before me” (Deut 5:6-7) to include all the commands. Yet the force of the message is not the costly demand of obedience as much as God’s gracious bounty freely given to those who hear and obey.⁴ The climax of the preached word is all grace, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it” (Ps 81:10). The analogy to eating and being satisfied covers a range of meaning from daily manna to daily dependence on the will and word of God. The psalmist alludes to Moses’ warning: “When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God. . . Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day” (Deut 8:10-11).

The analogy of opening our mouth and consuming the physical and spiritual bread of life runs through Scripture. As a biblical object lesson, manna symbolizes God’s complete provision. God meets our physical needs and our spiritual needs. From the temporal to the eternal, God’s provision is complete. It covers the range of God’s blessing from the Israelites’ daily bread in the

⁴ Kidner, Psalms, 295.

wilderness to the gift of salvation through our crucified and risen Lord. Every time we break bread together we remember that it is God who strengthens our bodies and souls. There is an inseparable connection between the manna in the wilderness, our daily bread, and the bread of the Eucharist. When the Lord gave the Israelites manna and insisted that they keep a portion of it in the Ark of the Covenant as a testimony (Ex 16:33; Heb 9:4), he created a biblical image that pointed forward to the Bread of Life. Jesus summed it up this way: “Our forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever” (Jn 6:58). Therefore whenever we “eat this bread and drink this cup, [we] proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). We remember Christ’s broken body, his sacrifice for our sin and his provision for our eternal salvation. God’s provision is complete in Christ and meets all of our needs body, mind and soul. “For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (Jn 6:33).

Call to Obey

*“But my people would not listen to me;
Israel would not submit to me.
So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts
to follow their own devices.
If my people would only listen to me,
if Israel would only follow my ways,
how quickly I would subdue their enemies
and turn my hand against their foes!
Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him,
and their punishment would last forever.
But you would be fed with the finest of wheat;
with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.”*

Psalm 81:11-16

The negative example of the rebellious Israelites in the wilderness was not only used by the psalmist in his generation, but by the apostles in the early church. Patrick Reardon observes, “Israel’s infidelity . . . remains the Bible’s perpetual admonition to the Church.”⁵ The author of Hebrews sums it up, “For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who believed” (Heb 4:2). The apostle makes a similar case when he writes to the believers at Corinth, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Cor 10:11-12).

Jesus’ repeated emphasis on love made real in obedience may surprise some believers who believe that the emphasis should be more on grace than works.⁶ Doctrinaire Christians have a habit of pitting works righteousness against the work of righteousness. They misunderstand the meaning of grace. They think that since Christ paid it all nothing much is expected of them. Life goes along merrily with all of its worldly distractions and pursuits until death happens or Christ

⁵ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 160.

⁶ Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 51-52.

comes again. Grace is their spiritual life insurance policy. From Sunday to Sunday preachers assuage the guilty consciences of their worldly believers by quoting Romans as their signature benediction, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). They send believers into the world armed with grace as an excuse to pursue their selfish dreams without the dire warning that “if your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away” or the clear prohibition, “You cannot serve both God and Money” (Matthew 5:29; 6:24).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer exposed this cheap grace mentality as the deadly enemy of the church.⁷ He insisted that the New Testament marries the call to obedience and the gift of grace. To believe is to obey and to obey is to believe. Belief without obedience is cheap grace and obedience without belief is works righteousness.⁸ “Grace is costly,” wrote Bonhoeffer, “because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a person his life, and it is grace because it gives a person the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: ‘you were bought at a price,’ and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”⁹ “Costly grace and sacrificial obedience are woven into the tapestry of God’s love for us. One cannot be separated from the other without destroying the whole tapestry.”¹⁰

Psalms 81 concludes hopefully “with a strong reminder of God’s grace and resource.”¹¹ Renewal is a very real possibility. All the people of God must do is hear and obey. The prerequisite for God’s gracious protection and provision is simple and straightforward: “If my people would *only* listen to me, if Israel would *only* follow my ways . . .” (Ps 81:13). Goodness is not nearly as complicated as we make it out to be. Simple obedience invites God’s quick response and enduring salvation. Enemies will cringe and judgment will be final and lasting. The psalmist draws on the Song of Moses (Deut 32:13) to emphasize the miracle of God’s grace. God can bring sweet honey from rocks and even raise up the children of Abraham from stones (Matthew 3:9).

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 47.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 69, 74.

⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 47-48.

¹⁰ Jim Eschenbrenner, personal correspondence, used with permission.

¹¹ Kidner, *Psalms*, 296.