

Psalm 83 ends the Asaph sequence of psalms with the international perspective of the prophets and God's judgment of the nations. Worship leaders in the Asaph tradition have acknowledged Israel's apostasy. They have not been blind to Israel's disobedience and unbelief. But now the focus is on the world. The psalmist prays for God's name to be upheld and revered. Psalm 83's global vision calls for judgment against all the nations that threaten to annihilate the people of God. But this judgment is not for the sake of vengeance. Its purpose is redemptive, "that they will seek your name" (Ps 83:16).

Psalm 83 is an imprecatory psalm that begins by laying out an international conspiracy of intimidation, bullying, and plotting aimed at destroying the people of God.¹ This is followed by naming the nations who are involved and united in their shared hatred for Israel. The psalmist invokes the past and draws on history to establish a precedent for divine action against Israel's enemies. The psalms "ruling thought is of God's vindication rather than man's conversion."² Nevertheless, the psalmist does not lose sight of the possibility of transformation and prays that God's judgment will cause hardened enemies to "seek your name" and "know that you, whose name is the Lord – that you alone are the Most High over all the earth" (Ps 83:16, 18).

Naming the Enemy

O God, do not remain silent;
do not turn a deaf ear,
do not stand aloof, O God.
See how your enemies growl,
how your foes rear their heads.
With cunning they conspire against your people;
they plot against those you cherish.
"Come," they say, "let us destroy them as a nation,
so that Israel's name is remembered no more."

With one mind they plot together;
they form an alliance against you –
the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites,
of Moab and the Hagrites,
Byblos, Ammon and Amalek,
Philistia, with the people of Tyre.
Even Assyria has joined them
to reinforce Lot's descendants.

Psalm 83:1-8

The psalmist inspires believers in every age and especially today to turn to God when "enemies

¹ Other imprecatory Psalms include Pss 35, 58, 69, 109, 137.

² Kidner, Psalms, 302.

growl” and “foes rear their heads.” God has promised to be with us always, even “to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). God invites us to bring our lament and our inward groans, knowing that “the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans” (Rom 8:26). The Spirit who helps us in our weakness uses the Psalms as an instrument to guide our understanding and shape our perspectives. Praying the Psalms is one way “the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God” (Rom 8:27). The saints who have gone before are pictured in The Revelation calling out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Rev 6:10).

The antidote to fear is prayer. When we call on God to pay attention to our plight we enter into the spiritual struggle with fresh awareness and deeper insight. Christ’s followers know that their hope is not found in the approval of the surrounding cultural elite and power brokers. We cannot afford to think and talk as if our identity is wrapped up in “Canaanite” politics or “Philistine” strategies. Psalm 83 reminds us that our hope is in God and the work of the gospel exclusively. The Christian before the world is like Jesus before Pilate and we need to hear his words over and over again to stay on mission: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36).

Praying Psalm 83 helps to disentangle the believer from the pervasive ideologies that threaten to dominate the “big picture” of our lives. Sociologist James Davison Hunter challenges believers “to disentangle the life and identity of the church from the life and identity of American society.” He argues that the church has “uncritically assimilated to the dominant ways of life in a manner” that threatens to “compromise the fundamental integrity of its witness to the world.”³ Psalm 83 reinforces the apostolic conviction that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a counter-cultural movement that will remain a voice crying in the wilderness of an evil and broken culture. The people of God should not expect to be a controlling voice of culture, but they should aim to impress the world with Christ’s goodness.

The psalmist is not naive as to the cunning strategies and the behind-the-scenes plots that aim to destroy the people of God. Nor is he unaware of the members of this conspiracy. He names them, all ten of them. Ten being a symbolic number for completeness. In The Revelation the number ten and its multiples signify a complete quota of tribulation or power, such as “ten days” of persecution or an army numbering “twice ten thousand times ten thousand,” or a beast with “ten horns.”⁴ At the top of the enemies’ list is long-time adversary Edom, Esau’s ancestors (Gen 36; Ps 137:7; Jer 49:7-22), followed by the descendants of Ishmael, the Ishmaelites (Gen 16:15, 16; 25:12-18). Moab and Ammon trace their family roots to Lot (Gen 19:36-38; Num 22-24). The Hagarites are thought to come from Hagar (1 Chron 5:10, 19, 20). Five more enemies are listed: Byblos (Gebal), Amalek, Philistia, Tyre and Assyria. “All of these people attacked Israel off and on through the centuries; and they all had the same intention – the annihilation of Israel.”⁵ This psalm does not suggest that these ten nations were good friends. They were enemies of each other

³ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 184-185.

⁴ Rev 2:10; 9:16; 12:3; 13:1; 17:7, 12, 16.

⁵ Ross, *Psalms*, 736.

and in the eighth and seventh centuries Assyria dominated the region. But what it does suggest is that when the Assyrians conquered these nations they “reinforced Lot’s descendants,” in their historic quest for the annihilation of Israel.

Calling Down Judgment

*Do to them as you did to Midian,
as you did to Sisera and Jabin at the river Kishon,
who perished at Endor
and became like dung on the ground.
Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb,
all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna,
who said, “Let us take possession
of the pasture lands of God.”
Make them like tumbleweed, my God,
like chaff before the wind.
As fire consumes the forest
or a flame sets the mountains ablaze,
so pursue them with the tempest
and terrify them with your storm.*

*Cover their faces with shame, Lord,
so that they will seek your name.*

*May they ever be ashamed and dismayed;
may they perish in disgrace.
Let them know that you, whose name is the Lord –
that you alone are the Most High over all the earth.*

Psalm 83:9-18

The psalmist establishes an historical precedent for God’s just judgment by recalling the victory of Gideon over Midian (Judges 6-8), and Deborah and Barak’s defeat of the Canaanite commander Sisera and king Jabin at the brook Kishon (Judges 4-5). He wants all Israel’s enemies to be defeated the way the Midianite leaders, Oreb and Zeeb, were defeated (Judges 7:25). All those who plot to take possession of “the pasture lands of God” deserve to come to the same end as the kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, who were killed by Gideon himself (Judges 8:21). The psalmist uses a litany of wasteland images to vividly describe the judgment of God. He prays to God to reduce his enemies to tumbleweed and windblown chaff, the remains of a ravaging forest fire and refuse bobbing in a tempest tossed sea.

Prayer is the psalmist’s defense against cunning enemies who seek to annihilate the people of God. God is the ultimate just judge who will right the wrongs and punish those who have hated Israel. But how does this psalm work today for believers who have been told by the Lord Jesus to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors (Matthew 5:44). First, prayer is the place where

believers can bring their anger and bitterness against evil to God. Prayer gives vent to the raw emotions of pain and suffering received at the hands of the wicked.

Second, Jesus spoke of hell often. He repeatedly promised that on the day of judgment those who rejected the gospel would suffer a worse fate than Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 10:15; 11:21-24; Luke 10:12-15). Jesus stated it plainly, “There is a judge for those who reject me and do not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day” (John 12:48). Repent or perish was a refrain that ran through his ministry (Luke 13:2-5). Any generation that rejects the gospel is guilty of the blood of all the prophets (Luke 11:50-51). Jesus lashed out, “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matthew 23:33). To be ashamed of Jesus and his gospel was to identify with an “adulterous and sinful generation” and to invite a reciprocal response: “the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels” (Mark 8:36-38; Luke 9:23-26). Jesus warned, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both the soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).

Third, like the psalmist, Jesus described judgment in graphic and violent language. Hell is outer darkness, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28). Jesus warned, “Anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell” (Matthew 5:22). And again, “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands and two feet and be thrown into eternal fire” (Matthew 18:8-9). Jesus offers these words of condemnation at the final judgment: “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41).

Fourth, the psalmist alludes briefly to an emphasis that deserves to dominate the praying imagination of believers today. He prays, “Cover their faces with shame, Lord, *so that they will seek your name. . . . Let them know that you, whose name is the Lord – that you alone are the Most High over all the earth*” (Ps 83:16). Nearly buried in the language of vindication and judgment is the hope of conversion.⁶ The psalmist prays for the enemy “that when they see the power of God and realize the folly of their endeavor they will seek [desire] the name of the Lord, meaning believe in him and pray to him for mercy.”⁷ Beyond the desire for deliverance and judgment, is “the ultimate desire of the psalmist” that others – even the enemies of the people of God – “might come to know and obey the true God.”⁸

Augustine believed that the psalmist never would have prayed, “so that they will seek your name” (Ps 83:16), if he was not convinced that there were members of the “company of the enemies of God’s people” who would be granted to turn to God “before the last judgment.” For

⁶ Kidner, Psalms, 302. Calvin, Psalms, 349. Calvin disagrees with this hopeful prospect. He believes that the ungodly are “inflated with intolerable pride” and that it is impossible “to abate their pride until they are laid prostrate, confounded and shamefully disappointed. When he declares (v.16) that, as the result of this, ‘they will seek the name of God,’ he is not to be understood as speaking of their being brought to true repentance, or of their genuine conversion. . . . What is here meant is nothing more than a forced and slavish submission like that of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.”

⁷ Ross, Psalms, 740.

⁸ Boice, Psalms, vol.2. 686.

now everyone is mixed together, but some will repent and believe. They will “seek the name of the Lord.”⁹

If the psalmist hinted at this redemptive hope, how much more should we, knowing that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Rom 5:8-10).

⁹ Augustine, Psalms, 84:399.