

Psalm 80 is a gospel parable that sees Israel's tragic history as a type that points forward to God's redemptive fulfillment of his covenant promises. Israel is God's flock, "the sheep of his pasture" and the Lord is their Shepherd – the Shepherd unlike any other. He sits "enthroned between the cherubim." The light of his glory emanates from a transcendent, cosmic throne that rules over all. 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.

The Advent Context

The trajectory of salvation history leads downward to a humble manger in Bethlehem. Israel's early history is familiar. God called Abraham out of nowhere to make of him a great nation and "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Under the patriarchs, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, the family grew. Then, famine led the Israelites into four hundred years of Egyptian bondage. We remember the first Exodus when the Israelites escaped from Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and were led by Moses through the wilderness and then by Joshua into the Promised Land. The stories of Deborah, Gideon, and Ruth, lead us to the Kings, Saul and David. With David's son Solomon Israel reaches her political peak and then begins her descent.

Israel's history becomes less familiar to most of us after the kingdom is divided. Jeroboam's Israel in the north and Rehoboam's Judah in the south. Elijah and Elisha keep Israel's relationship with God alive through a litany of bad kings. From there the narrative belongs to the prophets. Their ministry, from Joel to Malachi, spans 400 long years. The prophets Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah and Jeremiah worked to turn the hearts of the people to God. Embedded in their message is the story of the coming Messiah. But few people grasped the promised hope and few honored God's faithfulness with obedience and devotion. God judged his people and sent them into exile. The Babylonian captivity ran for 70 years. Habakkuk, Ezekiel, Daniel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, cover this period. Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah played key roles in the survival and renewal movement.

The first Exodus was powerful. God's ten plagues, the Passover meal, and the solidarity of the people of Israel as they fled Egypt in mass, crossing the Red Sea on dry ground, feeding on manna in the wilderness, and receiving the Law on Mount Sinai. But the second exodus from Babylon and the return journey to Israel amounts to nothing by comparison. Israel trekked back to their homeland as forlorn refugees. Nehemiah and Ezra describe a beleaguered people, barely hanging on. When the temple was rebuilt, those who remembered the glory days under Solomon and the first temple, cried with disappointment. Malachi's plea for faithfulness is the last word in salvation history's downward trajectory followed by 400 years of silence. The people of God, through whom God designed to bless all the nations, was taken down to rock bottom. The descent of the Messiah was preceded first by the descent of the people of God.

In the post-exilic period, God builds a manger in Bethlehem for his ultimate revelation. God restored the Jewish people, the Jerusalem temple, the Mosaic law, the Passover, the sacrificial

system, the priesthood, and the walls of Jerusalem, in order to cradle the Incarnate One. And even though everything seems to be on a smaller scale than the first Exodus and there is more struggle and less excitement, expectation grows. There is little room for pride of country and race, among a humbled people who looked to God for mercy and justice. The Promised Land was less promising than in the days of Moses, but the Promised One is coming and God is at work.

Save Us! (80:1-3) – The Need for Saving

Imagine a symposium of prophets and apostles gathered to discuss whether truth can be simplified to the point of untruth. “Jesus saves” is a true statement – the truest of true statements. But what happens if it is simplified to the point of cliché or reduced to something trite? Does it become untrue? Would the prophets argue that if you strip the Law and the Prophets from the crucified and risen Messiah you empty the phrase of meaning? Would the apostle Paul insist that the theology of Ephesians or the theology of Romans inform the meaning of “Jesus saves”? The phrase “Jesus is Lord” may not be as easily subject to reduction.

Psalms 80 emphasizes our need for salvation. The psalmist pleads, “Come and save us,” and ends each stanza with “Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us that we may be saved.” A refrain with variations on the Lord’s title concludes each stanza (Psalm 80:3, 7, 19). The psalmist draws on Aaron’s blessing: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:24-26). The psalmist repeats three times for emphasis his earnest longing for God’s friendship.

Recently, I was with a group of six Birmingham pastors discussing the condition of our churches during the pandemic. It was a windy, chilly morning on my front porch as we compared notes for an hour and a half. We all agreed that we did not want to waste this pandemic. Nor did we want to go back to normal, if normal meant acting like the pandemic never happened. We have all been confronted by the seriousness and vulnerability of the human condition. In the providence of God we have been given a collective time out. When our grandsons misbehave they’re not spanked they’re sent to their room for time out. They’re supposed to think about what they have done. They’re in “time out.” This global pandemic has been our collective time-out.

The pandemic has put a crack in our habit of being seriously unserious. It is hard to avoid the reality of life and death during the pandemic. The pastors discussed which was a more powerful influence in the lives of believers, God’s word or social media, the gospel or the news media. One pastor lamented, “My people filter the Bible through cable news rather than filter cable news through the Bible.” Pastors, who have preached for years to the same people, were surprised at how little impact God’s word had in calming fears, affirming truth, and reducing anger and resentment.

We thank the Lord for the vaccines that appear on the horizon – the work of dedicated scientists and bio-medical specialists. Vaccines may spare us but they will not save us. COVID is a symptom of a much larger issue, the fundamental need of the human condition and a fallen

world.

If I were preaching on Psalm 80 before the pandemic I would say that many people in our secular age no longer see their need for saving in the biblical sense. The quest for significance is greater than the need for salvation. But in the middle of a pandemic we are focused on a physical life and death struggle.

Practically speaking we are thinking of *saving* in three ways: sparing our lives physically through a vaccine that protects the body from the virus; giving our lives significance existentially (through some form of self-achievement that promotes meaning and purpose in our lives); saving our lives spiritually and eternally (through the gospel of grace provided by the crucified and risen Messiah who reconciles us to God and gives us everlasting life). I'm curious as to how you see the relationship between these three types of saving.

In a few months, Lord willing, the vaccine will have taken hold and COVID will be in decline. For awhile we will remain mindful of our frailty and vulnerability. We will feel the tentativeness of life. We will not take for granted dinner out, congregational worship, in-person classes, or getting on a plane. The simple things like hugging and a handshake will seem more precious. But the quest for significance, which has always been there, will come roaring back. We'll be asking ourselves, "Does my life really matter?"

In our secular age we are taught that we have to face the fact that the universe is without transcendent meaning, without eternal purpose, without supernatural significance. Exclusive humanism and expressive individualism are heralded as the only real options in an age that renegotiates the meaning of the person, society, human flourishing, time, and authenticity. Since many are convinced that life has no overarching purpose, the burden falls on the self to invent meaning and significance. The quest for meaning has eclipsed the quest for salvation. The fear facing people today is not the wrath of God so much as a terrifying emptiness.

We are in a global health crisis, but we have been in a metaphysical crisis for sometime. The psalmist believes, and I agree, that unless the Lord saves us we are physically, existentially, and spiritually dead.

The promise of salvation is comprehensive.

We are saved from sin and death; guilt and estrangement; ignorance of truth; bondage to habit and vice; fear of demons, of death, of life, of God, of hell; despair of self; alienation from others; pressures of the world; a meaningless life.

We are saved for a purpose, to love God, others, and ourselves. We are saved for freedom, mission, and community.

Salvation changes our relationship with God giving us acceptance with God, forgiveness, reconciliation, sonship, reception of the Spirit, and everlasting life.

Salvation changes us emotionally giving us confidence, peace, courage, hopefulness, and joy.

Salvation changes us spiritually giving us prayer, guidance, discipline, dedication and service.

Salvation changes us personally giving us new thoughts, convictions, horizons, motives, satisfactions, self-fulfillment.

Salvation changes us socially giving us a new community in Christ, a compassion for others and an “overriding impulse to love as Jesus has loved.”

Living into this new reality, makes anger and resentment, no matter how bad the culture is, impossible.

How Long? (80:4-7) – Alien Alienation

The psalmist laments. Their prayers provoke God’s anger. Their sins mark the people 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 years of cultural rebellion, disobedience, idolatry, and apostasy, that the psalmist cries out, “How long, Lord God Almighty, will your anger smolder?” Evil impacts our lives. Without the remedy of God’s grace and the work of the Holy Spirit we are typically self-centered. 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 long. The psalmist refers to a diet of tears. We are drinking from a “bucket of salty tears” because we are eating, working, and indulging ourselves to death.

“You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us.” What is surprising about the psalmist’s description is that the people of God have managed to anger God and their neighbors and their enemies. They suffer from alien alienation.

One form of Christianity celebrates conformity to the spirit of the times. This “liberal” version of Christendom identifies with “progressive” causes such as gay rights, abortion on demand, and radical pluralism. It prides itself on being open minded and tolerant. It freely diminishes biblical authority on virtually all matters that run counter to the prevailing cultural ethos.

Another form of Christianity is a grassroots civil religion. This version identifies more with the American good life than with Jesus and his Sermon on the Mount. It believes in American exceptionalism and feels threatened by “secular” culture. They vent their anger against liberals who they believe are destroying America. They cherish the American dream as their one great hope, a hope worth fighting for with the weapons of the world.

We feel considerable anger and resentment against the culture, but we are the product of the culture we resent. We are tempted to equate the American Dream and the Kingdom of God.

The Lord Jesus intended us to be resident aliens, chosen outsiders in a world that does not belong to us. We should not expect this world - our culture - to reflect our values and our priorities. America is not the new Israel. America is more like Rome or Babylon. It is back to the future. We are becoming and need to become more like the New Testament church everyday.

In the Holy Spirit, we manifest the Fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, gentleness, and self-control - Gal 5:22-23).

We practice the Sermon on the Mount (love instead of hate, purity instead of lust, fidelity instead of infidelity, honesty instead of dishonesty, reconciliation instead of retaliation, and prayer instead of revenge - Matt 5).

We learn how to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Col 3:12). We put on the full armor of God (the belt of truth, the armor of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God – Eph 6). The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world, we do not wage war the world does (2 Cor 10:4).

Our citizenship is in heaven and we have enemies on two fronts – religious and secular. My citizenship is in heaven, and because of that I want to be the very best American citizen I can be, because by the grace of God I want to bring honor to my Savior and Lord. We have been given new birth into a “living hope,” into “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.” I am eagerly waiting for “the coming salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.” I want to be “filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.”

Jesus is the Lord of the nations. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. There is no sphere of life that does not fall under his command. History is not divided between secular history and redemptive history. There is only one history and at the center of that world history stands Christ’s cross. There is only one Truth and that truth embraces the totality of life. There is only one destiny and that destiny embraces all people. There is only one judgment and everyone comes under this judgment. There is only one hope of salvation and that is found in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The Vine and the Son (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 worshipping other gods (Hosea 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 (Isaiah 2:1-7). Jeremiah accused this “choice vine” of becoming “a corrupt, wild vine” (Jeremiah 2:21). Ezekiel likened Israel to a useless vine and lamented that wood from a vine was good for nothing but to be burned (Ezekiel 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 (Isaiah 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” (Isaiah 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” (Psalm 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 (80:16-19)

The psalmist used the vine to tell the story of Israel from Exodus to judgment: “You transplanted a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. . . . Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish.” But then the psalmist shifts his focus from the depressing story of the vine to the messianic hope of the Son of Man. “Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself” (Psalm 80:8-17). 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.¹ Jesus used these descriptive images drawn from the Old Testament to paint a messianic self-portrait free from nationalistic and political triumphalism. The comparison is straight-forward, Israel persists in being the false vine, Jesus is the true vine.

¹“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).

Jesus told the parable of the tenants a few days before he announced “I am the vine and you are the branches.”

He began, “There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower.” The owner of the land did everything necessary to secure success. The vineyard owner planted, constructed, dug, and built. The farmers only had to work the land and collect the harvest. Therefore, it was only reasonable that the landowner should gain from his investment and collect his fruit. But when he sent his servants to “collect his fruit,” the renters reacted like a gang of criminals. They seized the landowner’s servants: “they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third.”

As Jesus talked we imagine the crowd reacting to the horror of the beatings, killings, and stoning of these defenseless, innocent servants. Who in their right mind would do such a thing? What no one grasped in the moment, including the disciples, was that Jesus was replaying salvation history. Israel’s long history of rejecting the word of the Lord delivered by the prophets he sent is remembered in this parable as an inexplicable and irrational tragedy. Yet even more incomprehensible than the escalating human atrocity is the “patience, longsuffering, risk-taking, compassion, and self-emptying” of the vineyard owner! The center of the story lies in the voice of the vineyard owner, who against all the evidence, continues to believe, “They will respect my son” (Matthew 21:37). Luke tells the story with the vineyard owner asking, “What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him” (Luke 20:12). He’s out of options, so “finally” he sends his son, not another servant, but his very own son (Mark 12:6). Given the fate of the servants what father would do that? But this Father did the unthinkable and sent his one and only Son.

The tenants are as hard hearted as they could be. When they see the son coming, they intentionally devise a premeditated course of action. They entertain the unthinkable – murder. They openly discuss killing the son: “This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.” Then, they deliberately carry out their premeditated plan. “So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him” (Matthew 21:39). Their depraved and perverse attitude and action recalls Israel’s ancient history when Joseph’s brothers deliberately faked his death and sold him into slavery (Genesis 37:3-4). One wonders if any of the disciples picked up on this? With the son of the vineyard owner dead, Jesus asked the crowd, “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” The crowd responded, “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time” (Matthew 21:41).

Jesus develops that theme of hope. Jesus invites us 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. We say with the psalmist, “Restore us, Lord God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.” We want to be spared a COVID death, but we need something more than a vaccine. We need significance, but not the kind of significance we give ourselves. Yes, we need to be spared, we long for significance, and we need to be saved, but that can only come through the One who came at Advent, the one who became the crucified and risen

Messiah, the one who promised I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). Amen.