

Psalm 80

Written by K B Napier
Sunday, 05 March 2017 11:55

My immediate response to this Psalm is to see the vine as Jesus Christ. Is this what you see? Leading the flock, giving water to drink and food to eat, followed by the promise of sunshine in the soul. Yes, it must be the Christ! Of course, the primary meaning is of Israel, but the allusion to Christ is unmistakable.

Some wonder why God does not immediately relieve them of their woes and problems. If He gave respite immediately, where is the motive to pray and to keep praying? How could the recipient understand that everything good comes from God and not from quick requests? Would not his soul see it all as 'easy'?

The petitioner would not have his character built by instant answers, and there would be easy-believism all round. Prayer would then be routine and rubber-stamped (as it is in nearly all churches). No, suffering is required, because out of suffering comes solid faith and a genuine understanding of the Lord we communicate with. The Hebrews knew all this very well indeed. Nothing came easy to them... except for sin. Asaph's psalm was written with both heavy heart and a sense of expectancy. These deep things are missing today. Our heaviness is in our emotions, not in our spirits.

Verse 1

1.

[the chief Musician upon Shoshannimeduth, A Psalm of Asaph.] Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; thou that dwellest between the cherubims, shine forth.

Some KJAV texts omit the opening explanation in brackets, but to me they are important, because they fix the text to a real time and place. The chief musician was the director of the choir and musicians and played an important role in interpreting songs for Temple worship. He was himself a singer and/or musician, *natsach*. It was David who instituted the choir and musicians, to be a part of formal praise.

Generally, what follows each attribution is usually reference to the musical instrument to be used to lead that particular Psalm or song (hence the word 'upon'), often chosen in advance by

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the psalm writer. Here it is called a ***Shoshannimeduth*** (two words – ***Shuwshan*** ***'Eduwth***. The first word speaks of a lily-like flower (as mentioned at the start of Psalm 45). An ***'Eduwth*** was a testimony. Thus, the instrument played a musical testimony to the Lord.

The instrument itself, the Shoshannim, was a long single-tube trumpet with a flared end, like a lily. On this occasion the Psalm was written by Asaph ('gatherer'), a son of David's chief Levite musician, Berechiah. Refreshingly, David did not try to 'hog the limelight' by writing all the songs himself – the emphasis was on praising God rather than on self-adulation!

Asaph calls upon the Lord to listen to his song, which is a prayer of yearning, because the Lord is the *"Shepherd of Israel"*, Who controls, sustains and guides His flock according to His Almighty, holy will. (In the previous Psalm Israel is called the "sheep of His pasture"). For me this is a direct allusion to Christ, the Chief Shepherd, Who leads Israel (named here as being under Joseph) like sheep needing a true carer. And this same Shepherd is God Himself, for it is He Who *"dwelleth between the cherubims"*.

Asaph calls upon God (as the chief priest does when in the Holy of Holies, directing his pleas to the centre space above the ark cover, between the two angels) and gives just a few of His holy attributes, asking Him to *"shine forth"*. This is a direct request for God to show Himself to Israel with approval. As a bright light shines through the darkest gloom, so Asaph pleads for God to shine forth as the Lord of all things.

When God was present He shone so brightly no man may dare look upon Him; hence His warning to Moses not to look at Him as He passed by the cleft in the rock. Even so, we are expected to call upon God to reveal Himself as the Lord, so we can live properly and within His will. Our response is proof that God has indeed shone forth. It is more than that – it also includes a call for God to prove His existence to the pagan nations around Israel, probably in His wrath, to stop their plague upon God's people. Thus, this prayer contains an element of imprecation.

The song is a prayer, and Asaph expected God to reply in a positive way. Later, with the many wicked kings, this kind of reliance on the God of Israel waned and stopped, bringing spiritual and physical darkness to the people, culminating in the destruction of the Temple and people in 70AD.

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Verses 2-7

1.

Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh stir up thy strength, and come and save us.

2.

Turn us again, O God, and cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved.

3.

O LORD God of hosts, how long wilt thou be angry against the prayer of thy people?

4.

Thou feedest them with the bread of tears; and givest them tears to drink in great measure.

5.

Thou makest us a strife unto our neighbours: and our enemies laugh among themselves.

6.

Turn us again, O God of hosts, and cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved.

The psalmist knows spiritual reality – only God can help (whether directly or through others). He asks God to act before the tribes (with particular mention of Joseph's family line) as a witness to His power and loving relationship with the Hebrews: *"stir up thy strength"*! Or, awaken and show us your power; deliver us with victory. No-one really knows why this psalm was written, but it is evidently a publicly-known reason based on some kind of national trouble. (The interesting Hebrew word for "save us" is **yěshuw`ah**, as in 'saviour' and avenger).

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*“Turn us again (**shuwb**), O God”*. This is a request to return the nation to holiness and power and to give it back what it has lost. Obviously, then, the Hebrews have not been loyal to the Lord, hence their woes. In our own day, Christians demand God’s presence, yet they do not live as they ought, shunning holiness and purity and obedience. Why should God honour us with His presence and help when we dishonour Him before men, our families and our churches?

This returning to the Lord was vital, because without it His face would not shine. His blazing power would not be shown to a nation (or person) that did not repent. But, if that nation did repent and return to faith, *they “would be saved”*. The pattern is the same today – but who listens? Western nations deserve the trouble they have accrued by rejecting God! The vile and wicked are drowning us in their evils, and violence has covered the earth. The last days will not pass too fast and many of us will look upon what is happening with fear and anxiety until Satan is bound.

Note that God does not always listen to prayer. If prayer is not genuine, He will ignore it. This is the sense of the text. True prayer is a prayer given BY God to the individual to pray. That is, we merely return to God what He has placed into our heart and head. All other prayers are false and useless, as are all scheduled prayer meetings (see my article on Prayer Meetings).

So, Asaph pleads with God from a repentant heart... O Jehovah ‘elohiym (mighty Lord) of the **tsaba**’ (host)! Asaph appeals to God as the general of a vast heavenly army, to come to their aid and destroy the enemy. The very phrase tells us this is so.

Asaph recognises that the people had made God angry with their false prayers (see above). God was made wrathful (‘**ashan**’) by their lack of genuine faith; their **tēphillah** or supplications were nothing but trash, based on meagre human desires and not as a true response to God’s prompting. We see much of this kind of ‘prayer’ today in our churches. Few understand what real prayer is!

Yet, those same useless prayers that scorned God were made by a people who were owned and led by God. They were sinning, but He still led them as His own, just as He leads weak and sinning Christians today. Along the way He will need to rebuke and chastise us, but we still belong to Him.

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This is why He continues to feed with bread (any food), though they will suffer as He does so; and they will drink tears brought on by their own sin and punished by their loving Father, so they will repent. And do not think repentance will bring instant healing... no, God may extend the time of woes so that we might continually look to Him for help and with praise. He gives us this in "*gr eat measure*", as our due.

Part of this penalty for lack of faith and obedience is to be troubled on all sides by our enemies, who will laugh as we suffer. They laugh by saying 'Where, then, is your God? Look, He is dead!' By acting sinfully, we invite enemies to treat us with contempt, and look upon God as an illusion. So, Asaph repeats verse 3 in verse 7, doubling his urgent plea for God to step in and save them.

Verses 8-13

1.

Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: thou hast cast out the heathen, and planted it.

2.

Thou preparedst room before it, and didst cause it to take deep root, and it filled the land.

3.

The hills were covered with the shadow of it, and the boughs thereof were like the goodly cedars.

4.

She sent out her boughs unto the sea, and her branches unto the river.

5.

Why hast thou then broken down her hedges, so that all they which pass by the way do pluck her?

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6.

The boar out of the wood doth waste it, and the wild beast of the field doth devour it.

As a toddler, Jesus was taken to Egypt to escape the maniacal fury of Herod. When He came back He later began His ministry, being the vine into Whom all who believe are grafted. The term also applies to the 'vine of Israel' (the Messiah). In scripture a 'noble vine' denotes men of superb, superior quality, whereas a 'wild vine' denotes someone godless and wicked, such as the degenerate people of Sodom, of whom we see plenty in our own day. They do not know they are marked men because Christians refuse to tell them and rebuke them!

The vine came out of Egypt, but did not possess Egyptian qualities. Thus, being noble and illustrious this vine, the true vine, displaced the heathen and took their place, being superior. (The Hebrews are, again, the prime reference, but Christ is also referred to). The 'heathen', **goy**, referred to godless nations, and came to be associated with Gentiles. The heathen were driven away, **garash**, expelled. This is what *should* happen to false believers today, especially those of Islam, whose beliefs are violent, wicked and pagan. It will not happen, however, because few Christians understand the divine holiness of God and His commands.

God caused the vine to be planted deep, so its roots could take hold, and the cover of the vine spread throughout Israel. Its leaves and branches gave shelter and shade to the nation, and were as strong as the mighty cedars of Lebanon. Nothing was left unaffected by the vine of God, which even covered the water and rivers.

Yet, Asaph asks God why He has allowed the vine to be attacked and broken down by wicked men. The wild boars rubbed against its main stem, and others wasted its bark with gnawing and scratching. This is nothing but the neglect of truth and holiness by the people! Instead of nurturing the vine they let strangers, sinners, damage it. And this, in turn, caused damage to their own holy nation. Today, we see what happens when believers no longer stand firm and speak out for their Saviour. They are reaping what they have sown... or not bothered to sow.

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Verses 14-17

1.

Return, we beseech thee, O God of hosts: look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine;

2.

And the vineyard which thy right hand hath planted, and the branch that thou madest strong for thyself.

3.

It is burned with fire, it is cut down: they perish at the rebuke of thy countenance.

4.

Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, upon the son of man whom thou madest strong for thyself.

Asaph pleads with God to return from His deliberate withdrawal (**shuwb**), to deliver the nation. God has withdrawn Himself from the West for its many acts of unholiness. But, He will return if we repent. He is the God of hosts, watching from His abode, Heaven. God is not part of His creation, yet He looks on with compassion and, when required, with wrath. The call goes out, look upon us and *“visit this vine”*

! The word ‘visit’ can sometimes mean to judge, but this is not the meaning in this text. Rather, it asks God to look upon Israel with compassion, in spite of its wrongdoing.

Asaph reminds God that Israel (the vineyard) was planted or brought into being by His ‘right hand’... the Son’s position at the throne. The ‘branch’ was made strong by God. In this text ‘branch’ is **ben** – a definite reference to the Son of God, Christ (‘ben’ meaning in this text, ‘son’).

The next two sentences are prophetic, for Who else can they refer to but the Son of God as

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Messiah, sacrificing Himself for the elect? Was He not cut down; are not the people rebuked and destroyed by His mere look of judgment? Asaph calls upon the Father to protect and maintain the “man of thy right hand”... the Son Who was made strong for His own purposes. It is truth to say that at His weakest the Saviour was at His strongest, for He did not give in or cast aside God’s plan.

Verses 17-19

1.

So will not we go back from thee: quicken us, and we will call upon thy name.

2.

Turn us again, O LORD God of hosts, cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved.

Just as Christ did not turn away from the Father and His will, so Asaph says the people of Israel will not “*go back from thee*”. He asks God to “*quicken*” Israel, **chayah** – revive their spirits that they may again live for God. Once they are revived they can again look up to the heavens to praise God.

For the third time, Asaph repeats the same thing – “turn us”. Once they turned back to their God, He would shine upon them in favour, and they would be saved. Only when God smiles can we say with confidence that we will be raised out of our troubles.

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