

Bible commentary Week 1

Psalms 80

Why a psalm?

In this quarter, which focuses chiefly on the Gospel of Matthew, there are two texts from the Hebrew Scriptures. The first of these, Psalm 80, is read in many Christian churches during Advent. Anticipating the Nativity, we attempt to see events through the eyes of the earliest followers of Jesus. Like him, they were Jews. Drawing on their religious tradition, they looked in their scriptures for clues about God's plan of salvation.

Psalm 80 is a prayer on behalf of the community. Its members find themselves deeply troubled by dire circumstances, and they appeal to God for relief. Likely, such psalms were recited by the people gathered for worship. In this psalm we find sentences that, because of their repetition, may well have been spoken in unison by the gathered community. Note verses 3, 7, and 19, all of which are slight variations of "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved."

In session 4, an angel comes to Joseph in a dream and tells him that Mary's soon-to-be-born son "will save his people from their sins." By implication, we can see how Matthew is telling his readers that the cry of Psalm 80:2—"come to save us!"—has been answered at last with the coming of a Savior, Jesus the Messiah.

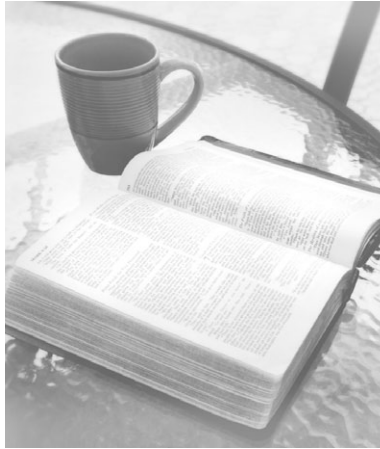
The people complain

Psalm 80 is what Biblical scholars call a psalm of lament. Following the pattern for such psalms, it begins with a plea for God to listen. In verse 1, God is addressed as "the Shepherd of Israel." God is acknowledged as protector, one who can be trusted to lead the flock to green pastures and beside still waters, as the more familiar Psalm 23 expresses it.

In verse 2 another image is used to address God. Here the Holy One sits on a throne. Such a powerful king can provide what the psalm fervently pleads for: salvation. "Come to save us!" is the desperate cry.

Verses 4 through 6 include a question and an accusation. The question is one that suffering people in all times and places have asked: Why? In this case, the "why" question is expressed in terms of time. God is asked how long divine anger will be the response to the prayers of God's own people (verse 4). Then comes the indictment: God is accused of giving them tears to eat and drink and of making them suffer the contempt of their enemies. What appeared in verse 3 as a prayer to be restored, to be saved, is echoed in verse 7.

Verses 8 through 11 are reminders of all the mighty things God did for Israel—bringing the people as a vine out of Egypt, a vine that grew, spreading out its branches. The



"why" question is again raised in verses 12 and 13. Why, God, have you made the vine and its fruit vulnerable to everyone? Poetic images abound in this psalm, one of which is the identification of Israel's enemies as a ravaging boar (verse 13).

Petition and promise

The image of Israel as a vine is continued in verses 14 through 17. Now God is asked to become once again the caretaker of the vine that God's own hand had planted. This petition is a desperate one, because Israel's enemies have cut down the vine and burned it.

In most psalms of lament, a desire for revenge on the enemy appears, sometimes expressed at great length (see, for example, Psalm 109). In Psalm 80, there is only a brief appeal for God to punish those who have burned the vine. God's "face" had earlier been asked to shine on the people in order to save them. But now that same face is called on to destroy the enemy: "May they perish at the rebuke of your countenance."

The psalm concludes with a promise. If God will restore God's people and will give them life, they will never turn back from calling on God's name.

—Ken Gible, writer, teacher, and retired Church of the Brethren pastor, Greencastle, Pennsylvania.

Reflect

1. How does the lament of the psalmist about a punishing God speak to us today?
2. Have you ever felt abandoned by God?
3. What image do you find particularly evocative in this psalm?
4. How do you react to the psalmist's promise that if God will save the people, the people will never turn back from God?