

“O God, Cause Your Face to Shine”

Psalm 80:1 For the director of music. To *the tune of* "The Lilies of the Covenant." Of Asaph. A psalm. Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock; you who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth ² before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us. ³ Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved. ⁴ O LORD God Almighty, how long will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people? ⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful. ⁶ You have made us a source of contention to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us. ⁷ Restore us, O God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved. ⁸ You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. ⁹ You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land. ¹⁰ The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. ¹¹ It sent out its boughs to the Sea, {11 Probably the Mediterranean} its shoots as far as the River. {11 That is, the Euphrates} ¹² Why have you broken down its walls so that all who pass by pick its grapes? ¹³ Boars from the forest ravage it and the creatures of the field feed on it. ¹⁴ Return to us, O God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine, ¹⁵ the root your right hand has planted, the son {15 Or branch} you have raised up for yourself. ¹⁶ Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish. ¹⁷ Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself. ¹⁸ Then we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call on your name. ¹⁹ Restore us, O LORD God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.

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The empty chair is something everybody at one time or another faces. Nothing says “gone” more acutely than the chair where someone used to sit. Whether it is by death, divorce, or the tides of life, when you see the empty chair it hurts. You sit in it asking God how long is the pain going to go on and why did it have to happen in the first place. The empty chair is very painful to endure.

If you would, imagine that the writer of Psalm 80 was standing before an empty chair; only its God’s chair. It’s empty because God has left his people. In the heart of the Jerusalem temple, tucked away in a small room behind some thick curtains sat the Ark of the Covenant. Standing upon the lid of the Ark were two great big winged angels and between them was an empty spot where God sat, a spot known as the mercy seat. Had it been any other religion in the ancient world there would have been an idol sitting there. But the God of Hosts, the Shepherd of Israel, commanded them not to make any images of him because his own Glory, his own Presence, would fill his temple and shine forth.

So, there’s the Psalmist standing before God’s empty chair crying out: “Hear us, Shepherd of Israel! Listen to the bleating of your sheep! Shine forth like you used to. Come back and save us! We can’t go on without you. We are broken enough. Bring back what we had, LORD. Make us well. It’s your decision LORD God. If you want, you can make yourself smile at us. Then we will be well. How long are you going to let this go on? How long are you going to be angry with our prayers? We’ve learned our lesson. We’ve been eating and

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drinking our tears long enough. You've been gone so long that it's beginning to get embarrassing. Our suffering since you left has gone on so long that our neighbours and not just our enemies are making fun of us. They say there's something crazy about us that we don't just pick up and go on and find a new god. Bring back what we had, LORD. Make us well. It's your decision, LORD God of Hosts. If you want, you can make yourself smile at us. Then we will be well. Why LORD God are you destroying this relationship you've worked so hard to build? This relationship that you started knowing full well what we're like; why have you let it come to our utter ruin? *You* brought us from being nothing and dressed us up real nice, but since you left we've lost everything. Come home to us, God Almighty. Just come have a look at us. Remember who it is that you love. Remember why you loved us in the first place.”

Well, I hope I haven't turned this song of lament into something tacky. But, if you've ever been rejected and left by the one you love then you know full well what this Psalmist is praying from the heart on behalf of the people of Israel. “How long are you going to let this go on God? Why are you doing this? We've suffered the double portion for what we've done. Now it's just looking bad on you. How can we tell others that you are kind, loving, faithful, and forgiving when you are letting this pain go on?” We all know full well what it is like to really need God, but it's like God's not there and it's like he's angry that we're even praying.

The thing about the Psalms of Lament in the Bible is that nearly all of them rise forth from the faithful remnant. The faithful are the ones who feel God's absence so brutally. This Psalm probably originated at a time after the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and then was formalized after the Babylonians defeated the southern kingdom of Judah and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. God had let it be known through the prophets that he was visiting these disasters upon his people because they had grown wicked. Yet, not everybody in Israel and Judah was wicked and unfaithful. There was still a remnant of faithful people who had to suffer the wrath that the wicked in Israel and Judah had brought upon themselves. This lament isn't the blues singing lament of a heartbroken lover who had gotten what he deserved for his unfaithfulness. This is the lament of the faithful in Israel who have had to suffer God's wrath upon the unfaithful in Israel. God's wrath was that he removed himself from Israel. He left; vacated his house, left an empty chair behind and allowed the consequence of Israel's sins to run its course.

The Psalmist knows that there is nothing this faithful remnant can do to make things right with God, to get God to come back. Their salvation could only come about if and when God decided to come back to his people, only his presence in their midst could restore them. Only God's simple decision to make his countenance shine upon them (or simply smile over them is the image the Hebrew text portrays) can save them.

The Psalmist is onto something here about faith in the midst of suffering. He realizes that all things are in God's hand. Therefore, God does the restoring when God is ready to. Things will happen when God wants them to happen. The role of the faithful is to pray and remind God of a few things just as the Psalmist does here. Actually, the force of his lament is that God's absence and

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its consequence, the suffering of the faithful, is only making God look bad before the nations. He's making himself look like he is something other than the God who delights in showing loving-kindness to his people. There is nothing wrong with reminding God of who he is and who we are as his beloved children. If there is one lesson we learn from this Psalm is that there is nothing wrong with shouting at God, particularly shouting “how long” and “why?” The prayers of this faithful remnant in the midst of suffering are more concerned about God's honour than about their own suffering.

This Psalm ends on an interesting note of sheer hope. It prays that God's blessing and favour be upon the one at his right hand, the son of man whom God has established for himself. This originally could have been a prayer for the king who embodied the people. It also could have referred to the nation as a whole. Oddly, neither the king nor the nation were ever called son of man. They were always called son of God. God refers to the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel by the title, son of man, but neither of them could be said to be at God's right hand. Daniel had a vision begins to point us in the right direction. He writes: ^{7:13} “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” The son of man in this Psalm can only be the Messiah, the one who would deliver not only the people of Israel but indeed all people. Restoration, salvation can only be brought about by the coming of the Son of Man who sits at God's right hand.

This is the first Sunday of Advent, the Sunday we talk about hope. Today it would be appropriate to proclaim that Christ will come again and the salvation that he began by his life, death, resurrection, and ascension and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit will come to its completion. The world needs him. This past week speaks this loudly. People in Mumbai have been killed by terrorists who seemed to enjoy the killing while not caring if they themselves die. Thailand is locked down by protestors unhappy with their government. Here in Canada, we may be looking at another election in the midst of this economic crisis, a time when another election seems dangerous. The whole creation is screaming out how long? and why? and all the while God seems to have vacated the premises. Today we pray come Lord Jesus, there is nothing going to heal this world other than you coming in the fullness of the authority the Father has vested you. Come Lord Jesus.

That's not where I want to end this sermon. I started out talking about our own personal experiences of empty chairs, of suffering grief where with broken hearts we cry out how long and why to a God who seems so far away and whom we imagine must be angry with us. Rest your hope in this: Our Son of Man who sits now at the Father's right hand is praying those prayers with us. Our prayers particularly our prayers of brokenness aren't being blown forth to an empty seat vacated by God. They are going through our heavenly high priest who's praying his own life on our behalf. Rest your hope in that. Amen.