

## You Wouldn't Listen

Psalm 81:1-16

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If you have Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Psalm 81. This is a Psalm, as you have already noted perhaps from your own study or perhaps from a quick glance at the outline tonight, that is sung or based around the Feast of Booths, or Feast of Tabernacles. It's very appropriate with this season of year. It's a harvest Psalm of praise and worship to the living God.

The people were called at harvest time to come to remember God's deliverance of them from Egypt and His protection of them in the wilderness, the way that He provided everything that they needed, the way that He Himself was their greatest blessing, and it was to be an occasion of worship. It became the time of year that marked the ending of one year in Israel and the beginning of a new year in Israel, and was perhaps the most enjoyed of the great festivals in the days after the captivity.

Before we read God's word together, let's look to Him in prayer and ask for His help and blessing.

*Our Lord and our God, we bow before You at the end of this Your day — a day of rest and gladness, a day of refreshment in Your word, a day of giving to You the glory due Your name. We are about to study a Psalm that calls upon us to praise You, to worship You, to adore You, to give you thanks, to pay heed to Your commandments, and to learn from the mistakes and the sins, the errors, of Your people in times past. We pray, Lord God, that by Your Spirit we would indeed worship You and that we would indeed learn from the mistakes of Your people in days past, when their hearts went astray and they sinned against Your Law and they loved other things before You. Lord God, we know our liability to these same sins, so speak to us in the solemnity of this hour by Your holy word, for our everlasting good and for Your glory. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Hear the word of God.

For the choir director; on the Gittith. A Psalm of Asaph.

Sing for joy to God our strength;

Shout joyfully to the God of Jacob.  
Raise a song, strike the timbrel,  
The sweet sounding lyre with the harp.  
Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our feast day.  
For it is a statute for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob.  
He established it for a testimony in Joseph,  
When he went throughout the land of Egypt.  
I heard a language that I did not know:

I relieved his shoulder of the burden,  
His hands were freed from the basket.  
You called in trouble, and I rescued you;  
I answered you in the hiding place of thunder;  
I proved you at the waters of Meribah. [Selah.

Hear, O My people, and I will admonish you;  
O Israel, if you would listen to Me!  
Let there be no strange god among you;  
Nor shall you worship any foreign god.  
I, the Lord, am your God,  
Who brought you up from the land of Egypt;  
Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.

But My people did not listen to My voice;  
And Israel did not obey Me.  
So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart,  
To walk in their own devices.  
Oh, that My people would listen to Me,  
That Israel would walk in My ways!  
I would quickly subdue their enemies  
And turn My hand against their adversaries.  
Those who hate the Lord would pretend obedience to Him;  
And their time of punishment would be forever.  
But I would feed you with the finest of the wheat;  
And with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

In this great Psalm, so clearly a psalm of worship, where the people of God are gathered at harvest time to remember His provision for them in the wilderness and give to Him the glory due His name as they praise Him with music and with songs, we find three calls or summons. The first call or summons is in verses 1-5. It's a summons to rejoice. It's literally a call to worship.

Then in verses 6-10 we find another call. This call is a call to remember. Indeed,

this call is to remember the deliverance that God had given to Israel in Egypt and in the wilderness, and so that deliverance is a deliverance to remember.

And then in verses 11-16 there's a third call, and this call is a call to repent.

I want to work through these parts of the Psalm together, because it is a Psalm which speaks directly to us today.

## **I. The Call to Worship, at the Feast of Tabernacles.**

First, in verses 1-5 we find this call to worship, but it's a specific call to worship. It's the call to worship used at the Feast of Tabernacles. You can see this because of what is said in verse 3: "Blow the trumpet at the new moon [this is when the Feast of Tabernacles began] at the full moon, on our feast day. For it is a statute for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob."

The Psalm indicates especially in verses 6 and 7 how God watched over the children of Israel while they were nomads, sojourners in the wilderness.

This is what was celebrated at the Feast of Tabernacles. You remember the people of God would come together for seven days, and during those seven days in and around Jerusalem they would dwell in something like grass huts. They would make temporary shelters and dwellings, and they would live in those temporary shelters and dwellings to remind themselves of the days of their own sojourn in the wilderness on their way into the land, before the Lord had given them the land of Canaan. It was a reminder of the way that God provided for them every step on their journey.

And so this call to worship is for the worship which was being lifted up by the people of God at the Feast of Tabernacles. And notice in verses 1 and 2 how this worship is called as a worship with gladness of heart, with all that we are, to the Lord. Listen to the language of the Psalmist:

"Sing for joy to God our strength; shout joyfully to the God of Jacob. Raise a song, strike the timbrel, the sweet sounding lyre with the harp. Blow the trumpet at the new moon...."

Here the people of God are being exhorted to gather up everything they have and give it to the Lord joyfully in worship. They are being called upon to give a worship which is a reflection of the rejoicing of the depths of their heart, and so they're to rejoice not only with their own voices singing for joy to God their strength, but they're also to play the instruments — the timbrel. They're to play a song, they're to use a sweet sounding lyre, and the trumpets are to be blown. They're to gather up what they have and to praise God. Their worship is to be with gladness of heart from all that they are; with all that they are, they are to

worship God.

This is something that we should remember, because it's very easy, isn't it, Lord's Day after Lord's Day, to get into a routine in which we in a *pro forma* way simply come to the Lord's house, sing through some songs that we're not paying much attention to, listen to a Scripture reading that we're not paying much attention to, hear a sermon that we're not paying much attention to, sing one more song, and go home without ever engaging God with our hearts — without ever giving to Him the glory due His name, without ever really rejoicing in Who He is and what He has done. And the Psalmist is calling on us to worship God with all that we have for all that He is, and so we see these words: “Sing for joy...shout joyfully...play a song [or raise a song]...blow the trumpet...”

Is that your attitude when you come into the house of the Lord? Is it a real delight? Do you savor every single part of the service? One of the things that we strive to do is to make sure that every part of the worship service is suffused with Scripture, so that there is something there to evoke praise from your heart. Just a couple of Sundays ago a man met me at the door. I'd never spoken to this man before. And he said to me, “That Scripture reading that the minister read today was exactly what my heart needed. That Scripture reading was for me.”

There ought to be some evocation like that in the worship of God for you as you gather in the house of the Lord to praise Him, and what it ought to evoke is thanksgiving and joy and adoration for the living God, and the Psalmist is reminding us of that even in this call to worship.

But notice also what he says in verse 4 and 5: “It is a statute for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob. He established it for a testimony in Joseph....” Now notice what he's saying there. He's first asked you to worship God joyfully. That entails your delighting in God, and your freely and willingly giving to God worship. But now he reminds you that worship is in fact a duty; it is something that is commanded.

Now those things might not seem to go together, but we know that they do. God commands us to worship, but He also asks us to worship willingly and joyfully, and those things don't contradict one another. The Psalmist is just reminding us that worship is a duty. As creatures made by the one true and living God, we owe Him worship. It is a responsibility that we have, to ascribe to Him the glory due His name, and that is not in contradiction in any way with the importance of our willingly and freely rejoicing in Him, delighting in Him, and giving Him unfeigned praise.

But then the Psalmist, you'll notice, does a third thing. Notice what he says in verse 5:

“He established it for a testimony in Joseph, when he went throughout the land of

Egypt. I heard a language that I did not know....” He's reminding you of Israel's sojourn in Egypt. They get down in Egypt, and people are talking funny! They don't talk Hebrew down there — they talk some other funny language. And so they got there and they were hearing voices that were using languages that were not their own, and God is reminding the children of Israel how He was there for them in Egypt, and how He brought them out of Egypt. In other words, he's reminding them that they need to worship with the remembrance of God's great deliverances, and he's going to elaborate on this in verses 6 and 7. He's going to remind them how God provided for them.

But, you see, all of this is conspiring to remind us that God is worship of praise, and that we're to give God adoration with all that we are for all that He is and does. This is a call to worship at the Feast of Tabernacles, and oh, how timely those reminders are!

Do you remember? The children of Israel had learned how to do *pro forma* worship, as well. Turn with me to the first chapter of Isaiah. In Isaiah 1, what could be a theme verse for the whole of the Book of Isaiah, we read this [verse 10]:

“Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah. “What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?” says the Lord. “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed cattle. And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts? Bring your worthless offerings no longer; your incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and Sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me. I am weary of bearing them. So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you, yes, even though you multiply your prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood.”

And in this passage, of course, Isaiah is noting the discontinuity between the very strong commitment to the ritual aspects of Old Testament religious worship, whereas their moral lives...there was a disconnect with the living God. They worshiped God with their lips, but their lives said that they did not worship God. And even though God commanded those new moons and those Sabbaths and those festivals, He says ‘I detest them.’ Why? ‘Because you are not coming and rejoicing from the heart.’ Why? ‘Because you are not coming with the whole of yourself in worshiping God. You’re worshiping me when you’re in the assembly with your lips, but your lives say you really don't love Me, you really don't worship Me, because of the way you live and act, the things that are your priorities.’

And so this call to worship at the Feast of Tabernacles reminds us of that very challenge.

## **II. God's providence in the wilderness recounted and his commands recited.**

But there's a second thing I want you to see here in verses 6-10, and here's this deliverance which we are to remember. Here now God is speaking, and the Lord speaks from verse 6 to 10:

"I relieved his shoulder of the burden..." [it's the Lord who took the yoke of slavery off the back of Joseph, off the back of Israel, off the back of the people of God], "...his hands were freed from the basket. You called in trouble, and I rescued you; I answered you in the hiding place of thunder; I proved you at the waters of Meribah."

Perhaps those latter references are to Sinai on the one hand, when God speaks with thunder to His people; and, of course, we know the great test of the people's trust in the Lord and patience at Meribah. The point is this. God's providence over Israel in the wilderness is a reason for them to trust and worship the Lord, and so here God's providence in the wilderness is recounted, and His commands are recited.

Now let's look at these two parts of this passage. The first part we've already seen. In verses 6 and 7, God reminds His people that He rescued them. He brought them out of the land of Egypt, He answered their prayers. You remember their cries going up to the Lord in Exodus 2? And we read that "The Lord heard their cries, and He remembered the promises that He had made to Abraham, and He came to their rescue." And so He answers their prayers.

But He also tests them in the wilderness, tests them to see if they will trust Him, test them to see if they will believe in His providence, test them to see if He is the thing who is first and foremost in their hearts. Everything that happens in the wilderness is a test of character. Indeed, everything in life is a test of character. God proves us, He tests us, by prosperity and by adversity; by joy and by sorrow; by hunger and by thirst; by sickness and by health. By all His word and by all His providences, God tests us.

And Israel learns some things about herself even in the wilderness: she was impatient; she was untrusting; she didn't believe in the Lord; she didn't wait for His provision; she didn't desire Him above all else. And so it was important for Israel to remember not only God's deliverance, but it was important for Israel to remember how Israel had acted in the wilderness, because the lessons of the wilderness are lessons for all of Israel's life; in fact, the lessons for Israel are lessons for all Christian life in every generation.

Remember the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 10. What does he do? He takes you right back to the wilderness, and what does he say? 'Don't act like the children of

Israel did in the wilderness.’ So what happens to Israel in the wilderness is not only a test for them, it’s not only something that they should remember, it’s something that we ourselves should remember. And we should remember His providence in the wilderness, and we should remember the unfaithfulness of Israel in the wilderness.

But again it doesn’t stop. God goes on to recount something that happened in the wilderness, beginning in verse 8: “Hear, O My people, and I will admonish you; O Israel, if you would listen to Me!” And then what does He do? He quotes the First Commandment. Now, some of you will know that every seven years at the Feast of Tabernacles what was read out loud. The whole of the Law of God was read out loud at the Feast of Tabernacles. So what we’re seeing here in verses 8, 9, and 10 is just a little snippet of that which would have happened every seven years at the Feast of Tabernacles. The people of God assembled in Jerusalem...at the end of this great feast, the Law of God is read to them so that they remember what? Not only His providence over them in the wilderness, but they remember His Law pronounced to them at Sinai. He encapsulates it in the First Commandment:

“Let there be no strange god among you; nor shall you worship any foreign god. I, the Lord, and your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt....”

Here God commands Israel and us to love Him first and only. Now you may be saying ‘I have never ever carved a statue out of wood and worshiped it. I have never ever worshiped any other god but the one true God, the triune God; and yet, idolatry is a perennial challenge for the people of God.’

I wonder how long it’s been since you have looked at *The Larger Catechism* discussion of the First Commandment. Do you remember how *The Larger Catechism* answers to the question “What are the sins forbidden in the First Commandment?” I doubt that there’s anyone here who could give that answer by heart. It’s about two pages long, and of course it’s just a reference to Scripture passage after Scripture passage about how we can break the First Commandment. Let me just share it with you:

“The sins forbidden in the First Commandment are atheism, in denying or not having a God; idolatry, in having or worshiping more gods than one, or any with or instead of the true God; the not having or avouching Him for God and our God; the omission or neglect of anything due to Him required in this commandment; ignorance; forgetfulness; misapprehensions; false opinions; unworthy and wicked thoughts of Him; bold and curious searchings into His secrets; all profaneness; hatred of God; self-love; self-seeking; and all other inordinate and immoderate setting of our mind and will or affections upon other things, and taking off from Him in whole or in part vain credulity; unbelief; heresy; misbelief; distrust; despair; incorrigibleness, or insensibleness under judgments; hardness of heart; pride; presumption; carnal security; tempting God; using unlawful means; trusting

in lawful means; carnal delights and joys; corrupt, blind, and indiscreet zeal; lukewarmness and deadness in the things of God; estranging ourselves and apostatizing from God; praying or giving any religious worship to saints, angels, or any other creatures; all compact and consulting with the devil, and harkening to his suggestions; making men the lords of our faith and conscience; slighting and despising God and His commandments; resisting and grieving of His Spirit; discontent and impatience at His dispensations; charging Him foolishly for the evils that He inflicts on us; and ascribing the praise of any good we either are, have, or can do, to fortune, idols, ourselves, or any other creature.”

Well, you can count up your own violations of the First Commandment in accordance with that list—but you know, I suspect, if we were to sit down and have a long congregational conversation tonight, that the overwhelming manifestation of the breaking of the First Commandment that we would see in the course of that discussion would be our hearts being attached to this world and to loving this world more than God. And that, my friends, is a violation of the First Commandment. It is idolatry. It’s why Jesus will say, “You cannot serve God and mammon.” Where our attention is, where our love is, where our ultimate desires are, where our money goes, where our time goes, where our energy goes—when we follow down that trail, we see what we really care about. And that kind of worldliness, that kind of idolatry, that kind of violation of the First Commandment is just as much a reality in the twenty-first century as it was in the fourteenth century before Christ, more than three thousand years ago. Idolatry still is a great challenge.

You see, we cannot say God is first with our lips and not with our lives and that worship be acceptable, and the Psalmist is reminding us of that even as he recounts the words of God to us. God calls upon us to love Him, to trust Him, to worship Him only; and, therefore, His providence in the wilderness is recounted here, and His commands are recited.

One last thing: In verses 11-16, we see the call to repent.

### **III. God's readiness to forgive, in spite of his peoples' reluctance to hear and follow.**

In this passage we see two things in bold relief: First of all, the ungratefulness of Israel; but, secondly, God's readiness to forgive. God's readiness to forgive is on bold display in spite of His people's reluctance to hear and to follow. We see the result of this call in verses 6-10 listed for us in verse 11: “But My people did not listen to My voice....” God had called upon them to listen to His voice, spoken to them in the Commandments, and also seen in His providences, seen in His word and His works, and here's the verdict: You wouldn't listen! “My people did not listen to My voice; Israel did not obey Me.” And so Israel had decided to follow the way of disobedience.

And then in verse 12 we read God's terrifying verdict: "So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their hearts, to walk in their own devices." What does that remind you of? It reminds me of Romans, chapter one. "God gave them over...God gave them over." In other words, when they chose the way of disobedience, God's judgment was simply this: 'OK. Fine. You do it your way.'" And that is the most terrifying judgment that I can imagine. I long for my God to come after me hammer and tong when I stray, and to hear that pronouncement, 'Fine. Do it your way,' is a terrifying judgment.

To be given over to the desires of our own hearts is the deepest of God's judgments, and yet in this passage the Lord tells us in no uncertain terms that He longs to forgive and bless His people.

Listen to the poignant language: "O that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways!" Now what does that remind you of? Do you remember your Savior looking over Israel and saying, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How often have I wanted to gather you under My wings like a hen gathers her chicks, but you would not have it." (Notice again, 'Fine. Do it your way.')

But this longing to forgive, this desire to bless....and so listen to what the Lord says, "Oh, that My people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in My ways! I would quickly subdue their enemies, and turn My hand against their adversaries. [Verse 16-] I would feed you the finest of wheat; and honey from the rock I would satisfy you."

There is the Lord saying to the sinner who is wondering 'If I repent, can I really expect the Lord to forgive me, given what I have done?' and before the thought can enter into the sinner's mind, the Lord is assuring the sinner 'It is My deepest desire to show mercy. It is My greatest longing to bless. It is My delight to receive sinners who have turned from their way, but if you don't turn....' well, you can see what He says in verse 15. If you don't turn, there will be punishment forever, but if you do turn, I assure you I will forgive and bless.'

Those messages are for us tonight, not just for Israel. We need to truly worship God. We need to remember God's words and His works, His commandments and His providences; and we need to remember that the greatest judgment we could ever be under would be for God to say, 'Fine. You go ahead and live the way you want to live. I've had enough.'

Oh, that God would turn our hearts to repent, that we might find Him waiting and ready to bless. Let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, we thank You for the way that You have turned our hearts in days past. We thank You that though we have been prone to wander, that You have turned our hearts and You have taken us and sealed us for Your courts above. And yet, O God, our struggle with sin is not over. Our love for this world often drowns out our joyful praise of You. Our desires for the passing things of*

*this age often outstrip our devotion to the one true God whom we ought love and serve. So by Your Spirit convict us and change us. Forgive us and receive us, we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Would you stand for God's blessing.

*Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith through Jesus Christ our Lord, until the day break and the shadows flee away. Amen.*

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