

If Only... (Psalms 81)

INTRODUCTION:

- 1. Today I would like to focus on **Psalm 81**—a psalm written by a man named Asaph.
 - A. I want to talk about this psalm because it is part of a context that presents a pattern commonly played out in mankind’s relationship with God—one beginning with our pathetic state in sin/slavery, followed by God’s salvation, but then our eventual loss of appreciation for that salvation which we express by sin, followed by God’s rebuke and punishment, then God’s promise of restoration...**but only if repentance is forthcoming.**
 - B. I say a “context” because Psalms 79 and 80 are also written by Asaph and concern this same idea.
 - i. For, **Psalm 79** laments the destruction of Jerusalem and Israel, once God’s people saved from Egypt and established by Him, while also presenting a cry to God seeking His:
 - a. Wrath to be turned against Israel’s enemies that had destroyed them.
 - b. Grace for salvation to be known again by His people for His glory and name’s sake.
 - ii. **Psalm 80** continues this plea for salvation and restoration now that God’s wrath had fully come upon Israel despite once being God’s “choice vine” and the focus of His love/care.
- 2. With these thoughts in mind, we come to **Psa. 81**, which is a call to worship the God of Jacob who
 - saved Israel in the past and can save them again, **if only** they would **repent, listen, and obey.**
 - A. And yet, as is often the case, that is the problem...Israel’s failure to repent, listen, and obey.
 - B. So, I have titled this lesson “**If Only...**” because that is the focus of the psalm concerning Israel, and because those word challenge all of us to look at our life and see if there is something that **if only** we might **do** or **change** we could be closer to God and strengthen our salvation.

BODY:

- **I. The call to worship (81:1-7):**
 - A. Israel/Jerusalem, who has been punished by destruction, is called to worship the God of Jacob (81:1-5 – “Sing for joy to God our strength; shout joyfully to the God of Jacob. ² Raise a song, strike the timbrel, the sweet sounding lyre with the harp. ³ Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our feast day. ⁴ For it is a statute for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob. 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”).
 - 1. Israel, the priests, musicians, etc., are called upon to praise God at the new moon (81:1-3).
 - a. It is believed this speaks of the festival days observed in the Jewish 7th month, with the first day having the sound of a trumpet, then the Day of Atonement on the 10th day, with the Feast of Tabernacles beginning on the day of the full moon, or the 15th day.
 - b. If so, these were days focused on God’s deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery and from sin, which truly needed to be recalled by Israel right now.
 - 2. This seems to fit because the psalm now reminds Israel of their need to **worship God** because He **commanded it be so** at the time of **Israel’s deliverance** from their Egyptian bondage/slavery as a **testimony/reminder of their salvation** (81:4-5).
 - a. God’s command to **worship** Him and **remember** is significant because one of the biggest obstacles to faithfulness is our tendency to forget and lose appreciation for Him and His salvation and stop praising Him for it!
 - b. So, restoration begins, as it must always begin, with the realization of the evil of our sin and the value of God’s great salvation, just as the parable of the prodigal son teaches us (Lk. 15:14-19 – “Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶ And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. ¹⁷ **But when he came to his senses,** he said, ‘How many of my

father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.")

- B. So, what follows is Israel being **reminded** of God's saving response to their oppression (81:6-7 – "I **relieved** his [Israel's] shoulder of the burden, His hands were **freed** from the basket. ⁷ "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.")
- • • 1. Israel is reminded of the three-fold nature of God's response to their oppression: 1) He relieved/freed/rescued them; 2) He answered them; and 3) He proved them.
- 2. The relief, freedom, and rescue part of God's work was, or should have been, welcomed, but the last two may have been more than they had bargained for.
 - a. God's revelation of Himself and His power to them in Egypt had brought them freedom from the merciless bondage of Egypt.
 - b. Yet, that freedom also exposed them to:
 - i. The **fearful nature of God's power** at Mt. Sinai—the thunder, lightning, smoke—that showed they needed to **fear Him** and obey His will, which **most failed to do**.
 - ii. The harsh, unforgiving desert, that both early and late in their journey brought thirst and what seemed like a lack of provision by God which caused them to **lose faith** and **question His intentions**, causing the name **Meribah** (strife, dispute) to be left on two places in the desert (Ex. 17:7; Num. 20:13).
- 3. We may easily pass judgment on the Israelites for their failures, but these same types of issues come with our salvation in Christ and are often much more than people bargain for.
 - a. It is easy to want relief, freedom, and rescue from the burdens, the guilt, of our sins.
 - b. Problems arise, however, when our salvation/freedom also expose us to **the fearful nature of God** and the **testing of our faith** through trials and tribulation!
 - c. We live in a world that wants to claim a faith in and love for Jesus/God, while at the same time wanting to live like we please and enjoy the good life as we see it!
 - i. But it has never been that way for God's people. For there has always been, and always will be, a connection between salvation, fear of God, and trials.
 - ii. Salvation and fear of God:
 - 1) Luke 12:4-5 – "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. ⁵ But I will **warn you** whom to **fear**: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, **fear him!**"
 - 2) Phil. 2:12-13 – "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."
 - iii. Justification and tribulations and trials:
 - 1) Rom. 5:1-5 – "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. ³ And **not only this**, but **we also exult in our tribulations**, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; ⁴ and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, **hope**; ⁵ and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."
 - 2) Jas. 1:2-4 – "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴ And let endurance

have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

d. So, like Israel, with salvation comes the need to **fear God**, to **be afraid to disobey him**, and the reality of **trials/tribulations** that test our faith that we must endure to be saved!

• II. God’s call to restoration (81:8-12)

- A. Restoration always begins with a willingness to listen to God (81:8-10 – “Hear, O My people, and I will admonish you; O Israel, if you would listen to Me! ⁹ “Let there be no strange god among you; nor shall you worship any foreign god. ¹⁰ “I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt; open your mouth wide and I will fill it.”).
 - 1. Israel’s restoration could only happen **IF** they would **listen to God**, **IF** they would **hear His admonition** (81:8).
 - a. For, mankind’s relationship with God has **always been established on His terms**, seeing He is the One who provides everything that is needed to have that relationship!
 - b. Yet, I am amazed at how few, sometimes including myself, understand this, believing that they have some say concerning the conditions of their relationship with God!
 - c. What we, like Israel, must come to grasp is that we are the **offenders** in need of forgiveness and restoration and have no power to set the terms!
 - 2. So, what follows are God’s conditions for restoration and blessings—that Israel give complete devotion to Him as their God and Savior (81:9-10)!
 - a. For, these had always been God’s conditions for relationship (Ex. 20:3-6 – “You shall have no other gods before Me. ⁴ “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶ but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”).
 - b. So, if only Israel would again trust God and devote themselves to Him, He would fill their lives with blessings (81:10b).
 - 3. God demands the same today.
 - a. There must be trust (Phil. 4:5-7 – “**Rejoice in the Lord always**; again I will say, rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. ⁶ **Be anxious for nothing**, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving **let your requests be made known to God**. ⁷ **And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**”).
 - b. We must also be devoted and obey (Phil. 4:8-9 – “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, **if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things**. ⁹ The things you have **learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things**, and **the God of peace will be with you.**”).
 - c. So, as was true of Israel, our relationship with God begins with trust, followed by devotion and obedience, upon which God’s blessings flow into our lives.
 - B. Why trust, devotion, and obedience? Because Israel’s obstinance was their downfall (81:11-12 – “But My people did not listen to My voice, and Israel did not obey Me. ¹² “So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, to walk in their own devices.”).
 - 1. Despite all that God did for them, they lost the value of their salvation and refused to listen and rebelled (81:11).
 - 2. When God’s people refuse to listen to and obey Him, He removes His protection and gives them over to their stubborn ways and devices (81:12).
 - a. God does not force His people to trust Him.
 - b. If they choose to turn from Him, He will allow them to go and to also *suffer the consequences of their actions*, which in this case meant Israel’s destruction!

- 3. What a tragically sad story...that continues to be written even today!
 - a. People come to know Jesus, salvation, and light, only to turn from these great blessings and rebel.
 - b. So, God through Peter warns us about how the world seeks to draw us away from God by the false promises (2 Pet. 2:19-22 – “promising them [Christians] freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. ²⁰ For if, **after they have escaped the defilements of the world** by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, **they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.** ²¹ For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. ²² It has happened to them according to the true proverb, “A dog returns to its own vomit,” and, “A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.”)!

- **III. Israel’s “if only...” (81:13-16).**

- A. I call this “Israel’s if only” because God said His salvation was Israel’s *if only Israel* they would take it by **listening to** and **obeying Him** (81:13-16 – “Oh that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! ¹⁴ “I would quickly subdue their enemies and turn My hand against their adversaries. ¹⁵ “Those who hate the LORD would pretend obedience to Him, and their time of punishment would be forever. ¹⁶ “But I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, And with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.”).
 - 1. So, again and again we are directed by the Holy Spirit back to the reality that salvation and restoration are ours for the taking, **but only on God’s terms!**
 - 2. Deliverance from their foes, God’s willingness to punish the wicked, and abundant life and satisfaction were no farther away than Israel’s willingness to humble themselves in faith and submit to God’s will!
- B. God in Christ offers the same great blessing to you! He offers...
 - 1. **He offers salvation from sin** *if only* you will respond to the gospel in **faith, repentance**, and **baptism** (Acts 2:36-39 Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” ³⁷ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸ And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”).
 - 2. **He offers rest for your soul** *if only* you will come to Him and take on His yoke (Matt. 11:28-30 – “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”).
 - 3. **He offers love and care** *if only* you will trust Him and seek Him first (Matt. 6:31-33 – “Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”).
 - 4. **He offers victory over the world** *if only* you will love and obey Him (1 John 5:2-4 – “ By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³ For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. ⁴ For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”)
 - 5. **He offers eternal life** *if only* you will be faithful till the end (Rev. 2:10 – “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you

may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”).

CONCLUSION:

1. So, my friends, if your relationship with God is not what it should, I hope you will respond to God’s invitation right now, seeking salvation and/or restoration in Christ’s wonderful grace.
 - A. For, as it has always been, God wants you to be saved, God wants you as His child.
 - B. But, as it has also always been, you must seek salvation and restoration on God’s terms!
2. So, will you listen to God?
 - A. If you have left the Lord, will you change your mind about sin and return to Jesus, seeking His forgiveness in confession of sin and prayer petition?
 - B. If you are lost in sin, will you open your heart to the gospel, submit to Jesus in faith as your Lord and Christ, repent/change your mind about your sins, and died to self, enter Christ, and be washed clean of sin by His blood through baptism?
3. Will you come to Jesus today!