

## Psalm 80 - HELP!<sup>1</sup>

**Before the Lesson:** Prepare a response prayer sheet for each student for the Transformational Exercise.)

**Fellowship question:** (Use *one* of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

When it comes to shopping for big ticket items, do you prefer to negotiate or to pay the sticker price?

What is the latest benefit you have bargained for from an authority? (a pay raise from your boss, a warning ticket from a police officer, etc.)

### Information

Our psalmist wants to strike a bargain with God. Bargaining is one of the “stages of grief.” Although we are not given the specific context, this psalm seems to have been written at a time of national crisis. As such, it is categorized by many scholars as a “community lament” (as opposed to an “individual lament.”) In their sorrow, they look back on times when God has come to their rescue - particularly the Exodus from Egypt and the exile of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians.

“The Israelite psalms of lament express the conviction that Yahweh is trustworthy and faithful... Nevertheless, the People of God always finds itself in the interim between God’s promise and the fulfillment of the promise. That interim is the time that faith is put to the test; for there are no unambiguous proofs that God has spoken and that he is in control of the human situation.”<sup>2</sup>

- Have class members read Psalm 80:1-6; 7-16; 17-19.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamont says, “Here are the two best prayers I know: ‘Help me, help me, help me,’ and ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you.’”<sup>3</sup> Today, our prayer is the prayer – “Help me!” or as a community prayer, “Help us! Help us! Help us!”

---

<sup>1</sup> This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2023. More lessons may be found at [greatbibleteachers.com](http://greatbibleteachers.com).

<sup>2</sup> Bernard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 50.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Lamont, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 82.

We do not know the exact historical context of this Psalm. Still, the psalm speaks to us – and can speak *for* us – when we are in a time of crisis and loss.

Did you notice the “chorus” of this song? Where do we find it? [Verses 3, 7, 19]

“The communal nature of the lament and the recurring refrain immediately suggest a cultic [worship] setting for Ps. 80. We may think of it as a prayer offered in time of national disaster, perhaps as a litany with the people repeating the refrain after the priest offered each portion of the prayer.”<sup>4</sup>

How does the chorus change with each singing? (The words used for God.)

We also have several images of God in this psalm - the shepherd, the farmer of the vineyard. And we have several characterizations of God’s concern - from great care to disinterest (even sleeping!) to active destruction.

“The psalm begins with one of the great titles for Yahweh: Shepherd - though it appears directly in the Psalter only in Ps 23:1 and here. The designation ‘Shepherd of Israel’ appears here only in the OT, but the idea is a common one.”<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes, our image of God changes after we have faced a crisis. Our childhood images do not satisfy our adult needs. Years ago, J.B. Phillips wrote a book called *Your God Is Too Small*. He gave examples of “too small” images, such as God as “Resident Policeman,” “Grand Old Man,” “Meek-and-Mild,” and “Managing Director.”

Has your image of God changed since childhood?

Who can tell us a story of how a crisis re-formed your image of God?

In a time of crisis, we go through a range of emotions – fear, hope, despair, anger. These are strong emotions, but when the crisis lasts long enough and we have completely run out of options, we are emotionally depleted. What emotions do you hear in Psalm 80?

In verse 1, we have an invocation - a cry out to God by a community in dire need.

“The whole psalm is determined by one basic motif ‘save, O God!’ (compare Psalm 118:25). Hence, we should think of this cry...for help uttered directly to God, which was preserved in the shout ‘Hosanna’ into New Testament times.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1990), 309.

<sup>5</sup> Tate, 313.

<sup>6</sup> Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, Translated by J. R. Porter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 29.

The first words of the chorus are “restore us.”

What differences are there between the prayer to “save us” and the prayer to “restore us”?

In the midst of some crises, we realize, “there’s no going back.” I used to say, “there’s no re-wind,” but in today’s word processing lingo, “there’s no backspace.” We can’t go back to the way things were, no matter how hard we wish for it.

The psalmist prays, “restore us, O God.” Is this possible? How does a “backspace this situation” prayer differ from a “make things right between us” prayer?

Often in our grief, we cry out for a reason - “why?” It is a legitimate question. Unfortunately, it is most often a question that goes unanswered, at least unanswered to our full satisfaction. But in this psalm, there is no “why?”

“The ‘How Long?’ in v 5 is a fairly common feature in laments...God’s neglect is being deliberately contrasted with his care in the wilderness where the people dined on manna and quail and had fresh water provided from rocks. The ‘How long?’ is not a rejection of punishment itself. Rather, it implies that the punishment is deserved. ‘Why?’ is not asked. The thing at issue is the claim that the punishment has gone on ‘long enough!’”<sup>7</sup>

Apparently, God’s people had wandered far from God’s will. Now, God seems hidden. So, the chorus continues, “let your face shine.”

Can you think of stories in the Bible when a “divine shine” was a central feature of the story? (The pillar of fire that guided the Hebrew children in the wilderness; Moses’ face as he came from visiting God on Mt. Sinai; Jesus at the Mount of Transfiguration.) How would these Old Testament stories have informed the singers’ imaginations as they sang this chorus?

- Have a class member read Numbers 6:24-26.

Many ministers use this blessing as a closing benediction at the end of a worship service. How do its words and sentiment compare with Psalm 80’s chorus?

Look at Psalm 80:4-6. How is God portrayed here? Is God ignoring the situation or is God an active participant?

Although the image of God in this psalm is often of an angry destroyer of what God originally established, this is the “One God” that Israel has. They have no other God to turn to.

- Have a class member read Psalm 73:25.

---

<sup>7</sup> Tate, 314.

“And again [in the repeated chorus], those concerned can only cry to the One from whom all things come, can only cling to the wrathful God, whose doings they no longer comprehend.”<sup>8</sup>

As in many cases of crisis or grief, we sometimes turn to bargaining.

- Have a student read verses 17-18.

“The one at the right hand” is the favored one, the chosen one. As the “chosen people,” the Hebrew people are praying, “put your hand back on us and we will never turn back again.”

Are bargaining prayers legitimate prayers? Why or why not?

[You may share this story if you think it appropriate and have time...]

I once visited a cancer patient. His diagnosis caused him to reflect on his life, which had been very rough and definitely un-Christlike. His son was a member of the church I pastored, so he asked his son if I would visit him in the hospital. During our visit, we talked about his situation and his search for faith. He prayed to become a Christian. But he asked me not to tell anyone yet. He had seen “foxhole conversions” before and had enjoyed scorning them in his younger years. He wanted to make sure this was going to “take” before he got better and went back to a previous way of life. The good news is, his faith was true in his time of treatment and renewed health. I appreciated his integrity in his conversion and, later, his committed service for the Lord. He did not want to make a “bargain with God” that he did not intend to keep.

Although there are reasons to doubt the sincerity and motivations of many bargaining prayers, another psalm insists that God will hear sincere prayers.

- Have a class member read Psalm 51:17.

God gives grace; it is given freely, and not because we’ve earned it or stuck up a good enough bargain to change God’s position.

### **Transformational Exercise**

(Hand out the responsive prayer.)

I am going to hand out a responsive prayer. Between stanzas, I will pause for a few seconds of reflection time.

[This prayer will conclude the lesson.]

---

<sup>8</sup> Westermann, 32.

## A Prayer of Response to Psalm 80

**Leader:** You are the good shepherd, but we are prone to wander.

***Class Members:*** *Save us and restore us, O God.*

**Leader:** *(pause)* You are the light of the world, but we dabble in darkness.

***Class members:*** *Let your face shine on us, O God.*

**Leader:** *(pause)* We get lost in our little worlds and we think it is all up to us to find our way.

***Class members:*** *Give us the faith to look to you as our guide and savior.*

**Leader:** *(pause)* We are tempted to bargain with you though we don't have much to offer.

***Class members:*** *Give us the faith to know that you are a loving God in whom we can trust.*

**Leader:** *(pause)* So, hear us as we pray:

***All:*** *Restore us, O God; let your face shine on us again, that we may be saved. Amen.*