

1st Sunday of Advent (Year B)

“Help!”¹

Prepare for the Lesson: Have a response prayer sheet for each student. The prayer sheet is at the end of this lesson plan. You might email it to class members or share it on your screen for the Transformational Exercise.

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

Today, our psalmist wants to strike a bargain with God.

- Have a class member read Psalm 80:1-7; 17-19.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamont says there are really only two prayers: “Help me! Help me! Help me!” and “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”² Last week, we as a nation had a Thanksgiving holiday. Today, our prayer is the other kind of prayer – “Help me!” or as a community prayer, “Help us! Help us! Help us!”

We do not know the exact historical context of this Psalm. We do understand that the Psalms were collected during the Babylonian exile.

“It seems wisest to think of the Psalms, in their present form, being collected and shaped in the time of the exile in Babylon (beginning in the sixth century BC), when paradoxically the people who found it unthinkable to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land may have found that actually singing those songs (and writing some new ones) was one of the few things that kept them sane and gave them hope.”³

During the pandemic, we felt exiled from our “old normal.” The psalms speak to us – and can speak for us – when we are in such a time of crisis and loss.

¹ This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2025. More lessons may be found at greatbibleteachers.com.

² Anne Lamont, *Traveling Mercies*, <https://amzn.to/2V2gQkV>

³ N.T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 9.

Did you notice the “chorus” of this song? Where do we find it? (verses 3,7,19)
How does it change with each singing? (God’s name changes; the cry to God grows with each chorus, etc.)

With each chorus, the psalm intensifies. We move from simply “God” to “God of hosts” to “O LORD, God of hosts.”

“In a time of dire trouble, the very calling on God’s name can be a cry for help; this is what gives it intensity.... Invoking God and addressing God are not the same, for the former gives expression to an awareness of separation – ‘why art thou so far?’ Invocation necessarily belongs to the psalm of lament, in which the speaker calls in his distress on God as Saviour. Invocation thus understood is what is expressed by the two imperatives, ‘give ear!’ and ‘come to save us!’, v2b.... The suppliant, when he calls on God in his distress, experiences that distress as God’s turning away or distancing of himself. The possibility of deliverance depends on God turning back to him.”⁴

The psalmist uses a variety of images to reach out to God. In verse 1, God is the Shepherd of Israel. God is a king “enthroned upon the cherubim.” In verses 4, 7, 14, and 19, God is “Lord of hosts (angels)” and a vineyard farmer.

“The invocation is amplified in order to tell what the One invoked in this crisis has meant to His people in the past, both before the settlement in Palestine (the shepherd is the one who leads ‘Joseph-Israel’ on his journey) and after it (the God of the settled population is the enthroned God, represented here by the cherub throne).”⁵

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."⁶

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, and 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?

The first words of the chorus are “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?

⁴ Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, Translated by J. R. Porter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1984), 26-27.

⁵ Westermann, 28.

⁶ J.B. Phillips, *Your God is Too Small*, <https://amzn.to/3nWSwNG>

How does a “backspace this situation” prayer differ from a “make things right between us” prayer?

The last verb of the chorus is translated “saved.” Our hope is to be restored and saved.

“The whole psalm is determined by one basic motif ‘save, O God!’ a cry for help in distress uttered directly to God, which was preserved in the shout ‘Hosannah’ in New Testament times.... The two verbs which expand the cry for help again display the twofold structure; God turns the light of his countenance towards men as at Numbers 6:24-26, and God intervenes to deliver them.”⁷

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; Fire in the bush that led to Moses’ call; Moses’ face as he came from visiting God on Mt. Sinai, etc.)

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?

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

- Have a student read verses Psalm 80:14-18.

“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

⁷ Westermann, 28f.

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, one commentary writer asserts, “There is at least one thing right about this prayer: it acknowledges that in some matters, only God can help. When it comes to a redemptive and eternal relationship with God, only God can help us with that.”⁸

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

Transformational exercise

(Share the responsive prayer.)

Let’s join in a responsive prayer. Between stanzas, I will pause for a few seconds of reflection time.

⁸ Tony Cartledge, “Call 911!,” *Baptists Today*, November 27, 2011.

A Prayer of Response to Psalm 80

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

Class Members: Restore us, O God.

Leader: *(pause)* You are the light of the world, but we wander 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, when we really don't have much to offer you.

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 LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved. Amen.