

What Could Have Been

(Psalms 81 – A Psalm of Asaph)

INTRODUCTION:

1. Today I would like to focus on Psalm 81 which is a psalm written by a man named Asaph.
 - A. Psalms 79 & 80 are Psalms lamenting the destruction of Israel, God's choice vine He planted, built up and protected, but had allowed heathen nations to destroy because of Israel's sin.
 - B. There God's deliverance was sought first and foremost for God's glory (Psa. 79:9-10 – "Help us, O God of our salvation, For the glory of Your name; And deliver us, and provide atonement for our sins, For Your name's sake! ¹⁰ Why should the nations say, "Where *is* their God?"..."")
2. Psa. 81 turns its attention to Israel where there is a call to *rejoice* in God, to *remember* God's deliverance and its demands, and to repent and return to God that He might bless them again.
 - A. It addresses *what could have been* true if Israel would have listened, and would now listen, to God and worship Him and only Him as He has commanded.
 - B. So, I have chosen to title this lesson "What Could Have Been."
 - C. And, since much of what is said to Israel is timeless in its application, I hope by considering this Psalm it will help us be what God expects of us to be that we might avoid spending eternity bemoaning *what could have been*.

BODY:

I. Rejoice: Praise the God of Israel (81:1-5):

- A. God is to be praised (81:1-3).
 1. The congregation is called upon to sing and shout for joy (81:1).
 2. There is a second call, possibly to the priests/Levites who were the temple singers and musicians, or maybe a general call, of celebration in God (81:2).
 3. The third call is for the blowing the trumpets heralding the 7th month of Israel's calendar, the climax of their festal year (81:3).
 - a. There was the feast of the new moon (1st day), Day of Atonement (10th day), and Festival of Tabernacles (15th day).
 - b. These feasts glorified God for His great deliverance of Israel from bondage.
 4. We are to praise God with thanksgiving for our salvation through Jesus who "suffered outside the gate" (Heb. 13:15 – "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.").
- B. This worship was to be given because God commanded it in the Law (81:4-5).
 1. Many question whether true praise/worship with rejoicing can come by command, but such statements permeate God's word and there are always reasons for rejoicing for the saved.
 2. These times to assemble in worship/praise had been God's desires since Israel's deliverance from Egypt and their establishment as His holy nation (81:5).
 - a. This was a reference to the Passover established when God "went throughout the land of Egypt" judging Egypt through the death of their firstborn, while sparing the Israelites.
 - i. This was the beginning of their deliverance, freedom, and becoming God's nation!
 - ii. So, there was always reason for Israel to rejoice and praise God in worship, even during these appointed, or commanded, feasts!
 - b. God had done His part and Israel needed to keep their end of the bargain, as must we!
 - i. Coming together at God's appointed times (Heb. 10:24-25 – "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, ²⁵ not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.").
 - ii. Putting our hearts into God's praise with thankfulness (Eph. 5:19-20 – "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; ²⁰ always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father")

II. **Remember: God's deliverance and its demands (81:6-12)**

A. Remember God as their *deliverer* (81:6-7):

1. Remember that *God gave them freedom* from slavery, taking the burden off their shoulder and freeing their hands from the baskets to carry clay, bricks, etc. for the Egyptians (81:6).
2. Remember that *they called to God* for deliverance (81:7).
 - a. And, God gave them deliverance while also *answering* them at Mt. Sinai amidst thunder and lightning, letting them learn of Him by hearing his voice and seeing His power.
 - b. God also *tested* them at the waters of Meribah, providing water from the rock when Israel *complained* concerning whether God was among them (Ex. 17:1-7).
3. God expects us to remember His deliverance and its demands as well.
 - a. We must remember God is our redeemer and worship Him for it.
 - i. Remember that God has *redeemed* us *Gentiles* from the curse of the law that we might receive God's blessings (Gal. 3:13-14 – "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"), ¹⁴ that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.").
 - ii. Remember that He has redeemed us *at our call* and at great cost (1 Pet. 1:17-18 – "And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear; ¹⁸ knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.").
 - iii. And, our faith will be tested and proven (Heb. 12:3-6 – "For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. ⁴ You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. ⁵ And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; ⁶ For whom the Lord loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives. ⁷ If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?").

B. Remember God's condition of freedom: *Serve Him only* (81:8-10).

1. The Lord desires to admonish Israel, to instruct them for their salvation and good, if they would only listen (81:8). How sad that their deliverer had lost His hold upon their hearts!
2. Remember the *singular devotion* that God demanded (81:9-10).
 - a. Remember that He alone was their Lord and God, their deliverer and redeemer (81:8-10a).
 - i. When God revealed Himself to Israel at Mt. Sinai He demanded this singular devotion (Ex. 20:3 – "You shall have no other gods before Me. ⁴ "You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; ⁵ you shall not bow down to them nor serve them...").
 - ii. This devotion was to come from the heart (Deut. 6:4-6 – "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. ⁶ And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart.").
 - b. Here one may have expected a scathing rebuke of those not devoted to God, but instead we find a promise of great blessings, of *what could have been* (81:10b).
 - i. The imagery is of God tirelessly providing for His people as a mother bird tirelessly seeks to fill the open mouths of her young!
 - ii. God sought their good, their enjoyment of His bountiful blessings, which could only be rightfully given the faithful (Deut. 6:24-25 – "And the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that He

might preserve us alive, as it is this day. ²⁵ Then it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to observe all these commandments before the Lord our God, as He has commanded us.”).

3. God wants us to diligently serve Him based because we remember our deliverance (add to our faith virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love, “For he who lacks these things is **shortsighted**, even to blindness, and has **forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.**” (1 Pet. 1:9).
 - a. If we, like Israel, forget what we are saved from, we will forget what we were saved for!
 - b. Israel their reward by forgetting. And, we can, if not careful, lose it too!
- C. Remember the *consequences of their disobedience* (81:11-12).
 1. Despite all that God did for them, Israel refused to listen and rejected God (81:11).
 - a. It is hard to see how Israel could experience so much by God’s hand and still reject Him.
 - b. But it happened over and over (Isa. 1:2-3 – “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the Lord has spoken: ‘I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me; the ox knows its owner and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, My people do not consider.’”).
 2. God was left with no choice but to give them over to their stubborn ways (81:12).
 - a. God will not force faith and obedience upon anyone.
 - b. If one chooses to reject what God has done for them and made known to them, His judgment will be as it was here, “So be it,” followed by consequences (Rom. 1:18-24).

III. Repent: Know what could be (81:13-16).

- A. Again, God laments Israel’s unwillingness to listen to Him and obey His ways (81:13-15).
 1. God’s deliverance was no farther away than their humble repentance and submission.
 - a. If they would obey, God would fight against their enemies (81:14; Exodus 23:20-22 – “Behold, I send an Angel before you to keep you in the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. ²¹ Beware of Him and obey His voice; do not provoke Him, for He will not pardon your transgressions; for My name is in Him. ²² But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.”)!
 - b. If they would obey, all who stood against God and Israel would be defeated (81:15).
 2. Deliverance is offered today for all who will repent and obey the Lord.
 - a. Deliverance from sin’s bondage (Rom. 6:16-18 – “Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? ¹⁷ But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you **obeyed from the heart** that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. ¹⁸ And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.”).
 - b. Deliverance from chaos (Phil. 4:6-7 – “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.”).
 - c. Deliverance from death (John 10:27-28 – “My sheep **hear My voice**, and I know them, and they **follow Me.** ²⁸ And I give them **eternal life**, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.”).

CONCLUSION:

1. As we conclude, consider God’s final statement (81:16 – NASB – “But I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.”).
 - A. Salvation and true life were so close to Israel, waiting to be dispersed by God’s himself upon a penitent and obedient people! Oh, what could have been!
 - B. The same offer holds true for each of us here today if you will listen to God, B, R, C, B, LF!
2. Great rejoicing, hope, and blessings are awaiting you in Christ. Why not come to Jesus today!