

Oh, to Listen! — Psalm 81

Five Points Community Church (2/14/16) Brett Toney

Hearing But Not Listening

I watched my sermon illustration unfold before me this week. I was taking a break from working on this sermon at home, and my wife and I were in the kitchen when my oldest came in to finish gulping down some chocolate milk. Kelina says, “Mare, throw your milk box away please.” And in her joyful demeanor, Maranatha readily replies, “Ok!” And without missing a beat, she hops off the stool and ... skips out of the kitchen, leaving the empty milk box right there on the counter. Kelina and I look at each other in humored disbelief and pretty much in unison call out, “Mare!” She *heard* her mom, but she wasn’t *listening*.

Praise from the Redeemed (v.1-7)

Now as we look at this psalm, we see that it starts wonderfully. Who doesn’t like the jubilant call to exuberant praise of God the Redeemer? Right? What a great call to worship, “Sing aloud to God *our strength*; shout for joy to the God of Jacob!” Use whatever instruments to make known how great he is! And we see in v.5 that this praise is all because of God’s deliverance and work of redemption for the people of Israel from Egyptian slavery.

And it appears that this call to worship was for use at the most jubilant time of year, the beginning of the “holiday season” for the Jewish calendar. The trumpet blasts of verse three correspond to the Fall feasts of the Festival of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths). This is a joyous time of year reflecting on and celebrating God’s goodness. And it’s always good when parties are commanded—this is one part of the Law that no one would have issue with obeying. Such festivities were a statute and a rule for Israel, as v.4-5 describe them. Because of the great work God did in delivering Israel out of Egypt, he commanded that his work be commemorated.

Verses 6-7 capture how the LORD had redemptively drawn near to his people. No longer were they burdened by slave drivers; no longer were they in bondage. We're told in Exodus 2,

“[T]he people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew” (2:23-25).

In distress they called, and he delivered (v.7). He acted by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror to bring a nation for himself from the midst of another nation (Deut 4:34). They cried out, and he answered in the secret place of thunder. He gathered his newly redeemed people at Sinai and “there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain” (Exodus 19:16) as God established his covenant with his people. So it was God’s prerogative to make his praise a statute—he is infinitely worthy. Praise from the redeemed was necessary, but so was punishment for the rebellious.

Punishment for the Rebellious (v.8-12)

See, the end of v.7 starts keying us in to the fact that this psalm isn't going to be all hunky-dory. In recounting the LORD's great works of redemption, the psalmist includes the testing of Israel at the waters of Meribah. Can you picture average Joe Israelite getting ready for the big thanksgiving celebration singing this psalm? “Praise God for delivering us! Praise God for his covenant at Sinai! Praise God for the testing at Meribah! Wait—what?! Meribah?!” At this joyous celebration, the psalmist becomes a prophet. He turns in v.8 to admonish the worshipful revelers by reflecting on Israel's past.

This is a bit jarring—you're showing up for a Christmas party and get “Jesus juke.” You're coming to have a good time and thank God for all he has done, and then the song leader

pulls out this new psalm. All is going well, and then he hits you with v.8. But the psalmist is genuinely after the greatest good for the people of God. The psalmist-turned-prophet is eager for his hearers to not succumb to the same fate as their forebearers. It was at the waters of Meribah that the people acted faithlessly, where—as Psalm 95 tells us—God swore to that generation that they would not enter his rest.

As the mouthpiece of God, the psalmist says, “Hear! Listen! Pay attention to what I have to say to you! Don’t just *hear* what I say, but *listen* to me. Listen and heed the admonition I am giving.” And his message is clear, v.9: “There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god.” The psalmist’s generation was not that different from the Exodus Generation. It was while they were still encamped at the foot of Sinai that they conscripted Aaron to fashion the golden calf (cf. Exodus 32:1-6), to make a strange and foreign god, passing it off as the One True God and Redeemer of Israel. The psalmist’s generation had given themselves to the same idolatrous sin.

“Forsake your idolatry for it was the LORD who redeemed you! He is the one who brought you up out of the land of Egypt! That’s what this festival is all about! So don’t go on partying and forget the very reason for this season. We mark the great redemption of our God with this celebration, and we dishonor him by doing so all the while holding on to our little idols.” That’s the admonishment the psalmist is bringing. He wants his covenant community to press on in singular devotion to the LORD. If they would but open their mouths wide, God would fill them. I initially thought this was a reference to the provision of food, in line with the provisions mentioned at the end of the psalm. However, Allen Ross suggested God would fill

their mouths with the faith-filled confession that the *LORD* is God.¹ May God's words be on their lips rather than them paying homage to idols.

And we would do well to heed the same admonishment. We come together in worship every week to pause and give thanks to God for his great redemption accomplished through the person and work of Jesus. We come together to sing aloud to God our strength and shout for joy to the God of Jacob. In our distress, when our eyes were opened to see our sin for the chains of slavery that it is, God answered far more powerfully in delivering us. I love how the hymn captures it:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
fast bound in sin and nature's night;
thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
my chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

And yet how quickly I will scurry back to sit in the well-worn spot on the dungeon floor. How readily do we still cling to our idols? You know them well. In your heart, you bow down to the god of comfort and ease, the strange god that is a blending of the God of the Bible and a god of your own making, or the foreign god of temporal pleasure. Whatever competes for your joy that is not the Lord or enjoyed for his praise, that's the idol you bow down before. And perhaps you paid homage to your idol right before getting in the car to come this morning.

So we need to hear the psalmist's admonishment—I need to hear it—because *we* also readily turn from finding sole satisfaction in God alone. We may be perfectly orthodox in our practice, even in what we say, but then we turn in the secret places to continue to look for hope in something else, look for strength in something else, look for affirmation in something else.

¹ Ross, Allen. *A Commentary on the Psalms*, vol 2. (Kregel: Grand Rapids, 2013), p.711.

Christian, because of your faith in Jesus and the Spirit's work in you, know that you have been brought up out of your enslavement to sin. You've been freed from bondage to that false god. You don't have to bow before it any longer. Your God is strong and mighty to save.

But we find that there are those who have witnessed wondrous works of God and been the recipients of much grace, yet persist in rebellion against the LORD. Verse 11, "But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me." That generation who was redeemed from Egypt *heard* what the LORD had commanded but did not *listen* to him. They stood at the mountain as God's presence thundered and called them into covenant. And they gladly said, "Yes!" to his covenant, but just as quickly they turned and walked the other way. By and large, the very people who walked through the sea on dry ground and heard his voice in the thunder at Sinai persisted in rebellion against God. They heard him but refused to listen.

And in one of the worst expressions of judgment, God gave them over to their desires. "You want to go your own way? You know what is best? Your own counsel is sufficient? So be it." God "gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels" (v.12). That left them dead in the wilderness, far from God's presence or place. The preventative grace of God that curbed their sin was removed. And like running down a steep hill, the natural course of things took over and they lost control.

The psalmist's point in recounting this part of Israel's past is that his generation would not do the same thing. He's trying to take advantage of the festivities to awake his generation to the hardness of *their own* hearts. He is doing the same thing that David does in Psalm 95. In that psalm, David recounts the same era of Israel's history and warns against the same stubborn hearts that refuse to *listen* to what God has said. At the climax of Psalm 95, David exhorts, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." The writer of our psalm would make

the same plea. He shares the same objective in reviewing Israel's past failures; he wants to promote present faithfulness. He wants his hearers to be stirred up by the reminder of God's redeeming grace and the call to be resolutely faithful to God alone.

This word is written by the Holy Spirit for our good as well. May we be quick to heed the warning implicit in the history. We have been the recipients of far greater grace and born witness to a far greater act of redemption. God's deliverance of his people from Egypt foreshadowed the great deliverance of his people from sin. So if we hear his voice in these words, may we not harden our hearts. May we not hear him but refuse to listen. May we not follow our own counsels in the stubbornness of our hearts. Being given over to our sin is a fearful thing. That's why the Preacher of Hebrews exhorts us,

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end (Hebrews 3:12-14).

We need to be watchful of sin's deceiving, heart-hardening work not only in ourselves but in one another. We need to be vigilant in the fight against sin *for one another*. Endurance in the faith is a community project.

Provision from the Restorer (v.13-16)

Now even though there is punishment for the rebellious, there is provision from the Restorer. The first word of v.13 captures a significant shift in tone. The psalm moves from harsh judgment in vv.11-12—the just punishment from a holy God who demands holiness from his covenant people—shifting to compassionate pleading in v.13. "Oh, that my people would listen to me." Oh! If only they would but *listen!* God does not revel in the punishment of his people; he yearns for their faithfulness. Oh, how God yearns for more for his people. Oh, how he longs for

their faith-filled obedience. Oh, how he wants them to find their joy in him that their joy might be full. Can you hear the heart break of a loving Father? He sees his children hell-bent on self-destruction through their idolatry, and he weeps for them. “Why?! Why will you not walk in my ways?! I will lead you by still waters. I will lead you on paths of righteousness. If only you would follow after me rather than after your gods that are no gods.”

His holiness necessitates that he give them over to their stubborn hearts, but oh how he wants them to turn from their own counsels and trust in him. So deeply does he want them to not turn to broken cisterns that can hold no water but rather come and drink deeply from the spring of living waters. That’s how Jeremiah characterizes the idolatrous sin of Israel. Jeremiah 2:11-13,

Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

And we hear Jesus similarly lamenting the stubbornness of God’s people in Matthew 23:37,

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

The LORD stands ready to turn his hand against Israel’s foes; he is ready to subdue their enemies. Like a mother hen, he would gather his own under his protective wing. But they are not willing! They trust in their own stubborn counsel. He is more than ready to restore his rebellious people to right relationship. But so long as they persist in their idolatry, he will send their enemies against them to afflict them.

I think what we are catching a glimpse of here is what David Powlison has called “contraconditional love.”² We’re all familiar with unconditional love—we’re told that is the best and highest form of love, especially today. We’re told love with no strings attached, love that is blind, is what true love looks like. But unconditional love does not adequately account for when the relationship of love is broken. It doesn’t account for the truth of hurt and sorrow. And it is not how God loves; his love is “*contraconditional*.” He loves contrary to what the conditions would dictate. He had been openly rejected and spurned by the very people he redeemed. They blatantly turned their backs on him. The anticipated response would be unfettered vengeance. The expectation would be that there is no hope for forgiveness. There are indeed consequences for their sin, but contrary to those conditions, he moves towards his people in love. Despite their rejection and idolatry, he beckons them earnestly, displaying how readily he will receive them back.

If they would but repent, he would turn to be a terror against their foes. Rather than pouring his judgment out on his rebellious people, it would be poured out eternally against those who hate him. And instead of covenant curse coming on his people, he would lavish them in covenant blessing. He would wonderfully provide for them just as he did in the Wilderness. The reference to the honey from the rock is an allusion to the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 and speaks of how abundantly God had provided. If only they would listen to him, he would satisfy them.

And how much more so will the Lord do for us in Christ? Your sin does not have to define you. You are not bound to it any longer. If you have been filled with the Holy Spirit, you have all that you need to turn from the altar of your idols and *listen* to God’s voice, to walk in his

² See the blog post titled “Is God’s Love Unconditional?” at thegospelcoalition.org for a summary and links to related resources.

ways. The motivation that God put before Israel and puts before us is *not* that we forsake pleasure and joy and turn to follow him. The motivation is that we turn from what will not truly satisfy to hope in him who will satisfy you with the very best forever. After all, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32).

This psalm takes the occasion of temporal praise to admonish those who would profess faith in God that they might praise him for eternity. Contrary to our unfaithfulness, no matter how long it has endured or how grievous it has been, God stands ready to demonstrate his great love in Christ. The covenant blessing that is freely offered might not be enjoyed in this life, but it is no less real and tangible, and it is far greater than anything that could be enjoyed in this life. So may we not just *hear* what the Lord says and the holiness that he has called us to, but may we *listen* that we might walk in his ways.