

Psalm 80: Restore, Revive, Renew

God's People Complain to Him and Ask for Continuing Conversion/Transformation

Like us, the ancient Israelites lived in the “already” and the “not yet”. They knew YHWH’s promises to Abraham and to David about His blessing that would come through Israel to the whole world. But they struggled with **how to wait**.

Psalm 80 seems to come from the period of the exile, when the cities of Israel (northern kingdom) had been destroyed. It was a traumatic time when people, even faithful people, were dragged off to a foreign land.

How would they respond? Would they live daily in Torah obedience from their hearts and keep trusting the goodness and power of YHWH in the reality of the hard, rough things in their lives? Or would they live by the appearance of things, by sight, trusting in themselves and other limited humans, and doubting YHWH’s intentions and ability to help?

Psalm 80’s superscription attributes it to the musical family of Asaph, a temple singer. The tune is specified, though no one knows it today. Notice its structure with 3 *refrains* in **80:3, 80:7, 80:19**, and perhaps a longer version of the same request in 80:14-18, especially **80:14 and 18**.

1. **Psalm 80 is a community lament** that invites us to join in **complaining to God** and also to join in **asking God** to keep changing us from the inside out.

Identify the *powerful images* in **80:1a, 80:1b, 80:5, 80:8-16**. Notice the juxtaposition of earthly and divine images of God in **80:1**.

Reflect on what these images mean to you in Advent 2020. Which images are especially meaningful and why?

2. This sorrowful psalm is a national lament, a prayer for national deliverance. Once the nation had been brought out of slavery in Egypt during the Exodus and planted like a tender vine in the vineyard of Canaan land. But now the people, at least the northern tribes, have experienced hard things. God has punished their persistent idolatry and rebellion with foreign armies carrying people into exile.

Two of the tribes mentioned may have escaped into Judah, the southern kingdom, as the Assyrians were destroying the northern kingdom, Israel. The Septuagint includes “concerning the Assyrians” in its superscription to Psalm 80, and Joseph is referenced in **80:1** rather than Judah or Jacob. The faithful in Judah may be in solidarity with northern tribes, recognizing their joint dependence on YHWH’s care for them and His Presence with them.

What are they asking for, petitioning for in 80:1-2?

Think of hard things you or people you know have experienced or are experiencing now. **What images of difficulty do you identify with?** (See verses 5-6, 12-13, and 16.)

In addition to asking for yourself, who else might God be drawing you into solidarity with to ask for these things?

3. One of the most notable features of Psalm 80 is its refrain:

“Restore us again, O (LORD) God of hosts; let your face shine (show the light of your countenance), that we may be saved (and we shall be whole).” See verses **3, 7**, (14-18 in more detail), and **19**.

“Restore us,” “bring us back,” “turn us again” is the common Hebrew verb *shub*, “turn, return.” It is the word used often for “repent.” Here it is a plea for God to “turn” and “return” his people from their fallen state in exile to a rebirth of the nation in their homeland. It can mean “turn us again,” pointing to the continuing conversion/transformation that *God initiates and we cooperate with* as we live by trusting Him. Note 80:18a, “...we will not turn back from you...”

Notice how God is addressed slightly differently in each refrain—80:3, 7 and 19. What do those differences in address communicate to you?

Write your own paraphrase of the truth of this refrain about repentance, the presence of God, and salvation/wholeness. Make it a personal Advent 2020 prayer.

4. Noticing the psalmist’s use of the imagery of the Vine in 80:8-16, what do we learn about how this destruction of the vine happened?

Perhaps 80:4 hints at the cause. What might it be?

What images from Psalm 80 point to the *destructiveness of sin* (independence from God) and especially habitual sin?

How does Jesus being the Vine deepen our understanding of the *destructiveness of sin*?

(The huge door of Herod’s Second Temple had a large vine sculpted on it that Jesus and His disciples would have seen during that last week in Jerusalem and been reminded of how the branches of the vine must be pruned again and again to bring forth fruit Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches.”)

5. **What is your understanding of 80:17?** (“Son” in 80:15 refers to Israel.)

Israel was supposed to carry out God’s purpose in the world. New Testament writing calls Jesus God’s Son and the Son of Man: this shows that he embodies all that Israel was called to be, and he is the ideal heir of David.

6. **Psalm 80** shows a faithful psalmist expressing the distress of the community in a time of pain. Advent 2020 acknowledges the challenge of believing “God is with us” in this time of trouble and suffering.

- Advent takes us into the darkness of this present world and our own lives.
- Advent asks us to revisit and ponder all the claims of Jesus’ first coming and second coming.
- Advent invites us to see our own and the whole church’s need for renewing grace, for revival and restoration.

God initiates and by his grace we respond:

“Then we shall not turn back from you: give us life, and we will call upon your name! Restore us, O Lord God of hosts! Show the light of your countenance, and we shall be whole.” Psalm 80:18-19

We see a similar sentiment in the exile-era song of Korah in **Psalm 85** and its plaintive prayer:

Restore us again, O God of our salvation,
and put away your indignation toward us!
Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?
Will you not revive us again,
that your people may rejoice in you? (**Psalm 85:4-6**)

Next week we will focus on Advent Psalms 85 and 126.