

“Restore Us, O God”

Introduction: How are you feeling about the fall? As you look ahead, are you looking forward to new opportunities, like a new job or new school or new relationship? Or, do you find yourself thinking more about places where restoration is needed, in our environment, the political arena, public health, or relationships between races and nations? And where does the church fit into all of this? How are you feeling about the church, this one, as well the church throughout the world? Is the church being helpful, or is the church, too, in need of restoration?

Today, through Psalm 80, we’ll hear some people who were crying out for restoration. What led to this cry? And, in questions we’ll be exploring throughout the fall: How might restoration come about? What would restoration look like? Let’s begin by hearing the cries offered by the psalmist. [READ]

I. The Problem

A. The opening verse of the psalm contains 4 imperatives that, as they are put together, imply their opposites: hear us Shepherd of Israel . . . shine forth . . . awaken your might . . . come and save us. This people is in trouble, they need God to act, but it doesn’t seem God is doing as they would like. So they cry out, not once, not twice, but three times, the following refrain (vv. 3, 7, 19):

Restore us, O God; make your face to shine on us, that we may be saved.

B. Notice that with each refrain, the name for God is broadened, from God, to God Almighty, to LORD God Almighty, intensifying, in a way, their cry. “Restore” actually means “turn us again,” implying that the people had turned away from God in some way. And having the light of God’s face shine means they want to experience the glory and beauty of his presence once again, having their eyes re-opened.

The refrain contains overtones of the priestly blessing that God instructed Aaron and his sons to offer the Israelites when they finally stopped wandering and set up life and worship in the Promised Land:

The Lord bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace (Nu. 6:22-26).

These words should be familiar to you! And so here, years later, drawing on this blessing, the people are asking God to make good on his word.

C. What was the issue? Given the names of the tribes listed in v. 1—Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh—many scholars think the oppression being experienced is the pressure the nation of Assyria was putting on the northern kingdom of Israel in the early 720’s B.C. In essence, God, had become disappointed in his people and had taken his protective hands off them. That this is the case can be seen in the metaphor of the vine that the psalmist employs. The vine is the people of Israel that God had rescued from slavery in Egypt, and then carefully and lovingly planted in the Promised Land. But instead of bearing fruit, Israel wandered into idolatry. As the prophet Jeremiah describes God’s sadness:

I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine? (Jer. 2:21)

The prophet Isaiah adds (Isa. 5:1-7):

First God ruminating: *What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?*

Then the explanation: The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

In other words, the good grapes of social justice and moral purity that should have characterized God's people, and therefore should have been drawing her neighbors into the light and beauty of the LORD, had become sour grapes of injustice and unrighteousness. Israel's neighbors weren't attracted to her God; instead, they mocked both her as well as her God. The problem was not God; the problem was God's people. So God, the gardener, allowed wild animals to ravage the vine and insects to feed upon it, by means of the nation of Assyria, as an act of judgement.

II. The Hope

A. And yet there is hope. For the one who judges his people is also the one who brings about restoration for them. We can begin to see this in the son of man figure who makes his way into the picture. Originally, "son of man" was a designation for Israel, the one who was at God's right hand and meant to carry out his purposes in the world. But when Israel wandered from those purposes, Jesus came to embody her and fulfill God's purposes for her. Not only did he take on "son of man" to describe himself, but he also takes on the identity of the vine. As John 15:1-4 records Jesus:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

B. What is the road that leads to restoration and renewal and revival? What would it look like to cry out for God to restore us, to move us from being clean—forgiven—to fruitful, fulfilling God's purposes through being the salt of the earth and the light of the world? How might we need God to turn us decidedly back toward him, and to restore us to life?

Just before I returned home, I was sent a reflection that Susan Zwart wrote on this very thing. It sent me to Psalm 80, and I'm now taking us back to what God has laid on Susan's heart through a parable about a plant, our altar plants, and the need that they reveal to us.....

Revival – by Susan Zwart

Not sure if you've noticed the dying plants on the altar this summer. Every week I am more aware of their dried leaves, withering size, lack of vibrancy, health and growth. Every week I think a lot about who should do something about this . . . maybe I should do something? But I never do! Last week, with the anticipation of Pastor Tim's return, as well as the hope that others may also return, to worship God in our sanctuary, I took them home to try and revive them.

Revival!

That's what they need, I thought, as I began to tend to them. They were brought to our back deck. I started with water and fertilizer, for nourishment and fluids. I knew the light of the sun outside this season would provide needed elements for renewal. Next, I removed the fake foliage that was added to beef them up, and distract from their unhealthiness. I pruned the dead leaves and branches with sharp clippers, to remove all that was no longer good for it. Finally, I placed them in the shadow of a thriving shrub, to give shelter, safety and support. Now I just need to have patience. Revival takes time, persistent attention, faith and hope that new life will begin to grow.

Let us all pray that the light of God, the Living water of Jesus, the nourishment of God Word, the pruning of repentance, the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, and the companionship of God's people, the church, will revive us too.

I'll keep you posted for signs of new life!