



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 81

Bishop Youssef



Introduction

- The title of this Psalm is *To the Chief Musician. On an instrument of Gath. A Psalm of Asaph*
- The title indicates the audience of the Psalm (*the Chief Musician*), the author of the Psalm (*Asaph*) and the sound of the Psalm (*on the instrument of Gath*)
- *To the Chief Musician*, Some suppose to be a leader of choirs or musicians in David's time, such as Heman the singer or Asaph (1 Chronicles 6:33, 16:5-7, and 25:6)
- The scholars were not sure of the meaning of the word *Gath*
- Some think it may refer to a tune commonly sung in the Palestinian city of Gath



Introduction

- Or, an instrument of music that was invented in Gath
- Others, tracing the Hebrew to its root, perceive it to mean a song for the winepress, a joyful hymn for those who tread the grapes
- The word Gath is applied to two other Psalms, (8 and 84) both of which, being of a joyous character, it may be concluded, that where we find that word in the title, we may look for a hymn of joy and gladness
- There are various opinions concerning the occasion and time of this Psalm because it is difficult to identify the precise feast to which the Psalm refers



Introduction

- But it is generally agreed that it was either written for or used at the celebration of the Feast of Trumpets, (Leviticus 23:24), the Feast of Tabernacles on the fifteenth of the same month, the Feasts of the New Moons, and the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt
- The majority of the Psalm is a call for the people to remember their God and to repent of their unfaithfulness
- God is not pleased with many of them because they had forgotten His faithfulness and disobeyed His commands
- Some call it a liturgical Psalm while others categorize it as a prophetic Psalm



Introduction

Psalm Outline:

- A Call to Praise God 81:1-7
- A Call to Remember 81:8-10
- A Call to Repent (81:11-16)



A Call to Praise God 81:1-7

- Psalm 81 begins with a call to worship
- The first three verses are a call for Israel to sing aloud to God and to shout for joy
- Actually, one thing that is emphasized throughout the Psalms is that our love and gratitude for God and His salvation should be reflected in our praise
- *Sing aloud*, A call to the joyous celebration addressed to the whole congregation
- The word *sing* aloud means to rejoice
- *to God our strength*, Because nothing will bring gladness like God, being our strength, support, and joy



A Call to Praise God 81:1-7

- The Lord was the strength of His people in delivering them out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and in sustaining them in the wilderness, placing them in Canaan, preserving them from their enemies, and giving them victory
- The psalmist makes it clear who is to be praised as he highlights God's strength and His faithfulness to His people *the God of Jacob*
- God that had made a covenant with them, had chosen them to be His people, and had redeemed them out of the house of bondage
- Verse 2 is probably a call to the Levites who were appointed in the temple as singers and musicians



A Call to Praise God 81:1-7

- As the song unto God is raised, so should skillful music also be raised from instruments
- Asaph listed three: *the timbrel, the pleasant harp, and the lute*
- The instruments ordinarily used in the service of the sanctuary were harps, stringed instruments, and cymbals (1 Chronicles 15:16,16:5,25:6; 2 Chronicles 5:12; Nehemiah 12:27)
- Here the *timbrel* seems to take the place of the cymbal
- The use of all these music instruments is a symbol to praise God from all their feeling, emotion, energy, hearts, and so make a delightful melody

A Call to Praise God 81:1-7



- Verse 3 is probably a call to the priests who had the responsibility of blowing the trumpets
- So, this seems to be Asaph's call to all the people to participate in worship
- *the New Moon*, Either in every new moon, 2 Kings 4:23 or rather the first day of the seventh month on the Feast of Tabernacles
- The purpose of these festivals was for the people to remember the mighty works of God, specifically Israel's deliverance from Egypt
- This is what Asaph tells the people to recall as they worship the Lord in the next few verses



A Call to Praise God 81:1-7

- The Jews say this blowing of trumpets was in commemoration of Isaac's deliverance, a *ram* (Genesis 22:13) being sacrificed for him, and therefore they sounded with trumpets made of rams' horns
- *the trumpet*, It was at first made of horn, and then was made similar in shape to a horn, Joshua 6:5; Leviticus 25:9; Job 39:25
- St. Augustine comments on *Blow the trumpet* and says, "loudly and boldly preach, be not affrighted!"
- And he also says, "What is, 'sound the trumpet in the beginning of the month of the trumpet' ?With all confidence preach ye the new life, fear not the noise of the old life."



A Call to Praise God 81:1-7

- Verses 4 and 5 address the reason for the celebration in the divine appointment of the festival as a memorial of God's goodness to Israel
- He stresses the *importance* of gathering God's people together
- This is no human, but a divine establishment
- God has appointed and commanded this feast to be announced and observed in this manner
- It was *a statute*, a *law*, and *established* as a *testimony* among God's people



A Call to Praise God 81:1-7

- *A law of the God of Jacob*, It was not a matter of convenience to them; it was *A law*
- It was a matter of a right and of claim on the part of God, and was so to be regarded by the nation
- God demands the observance of these feasts
- Thus, He claims the Sabbath, (the day of the Lord) the entire day, as His own
- He requires that it shall be spent in His service, that it shall be regarded as His day
- People, therefore, *rob God*, Malachi 3:8 when they take this time for unnecessary secular purposes, or devote it to other uses

A Call to Praise God 81:1-7



- The word Joseph here stands for the whole Hebrew people
- *Joseph as a testimony*, To bear continual witness to His care of Israel
- Previously, God called His people by the name of 'Jacob or Israel'; when the people were committed to strive with the spirit of joy and praise
- Here, speaking about His people in Egypt, He calls them by the name of 'Joseph'; for all went down to Egypt because of Joseph
- Asaph thought of the great assembly of God's people as they came together to leave their slavery in Egypt



A Call to Praise God 81:1-7

- They gathered together for that initial deliverance, and it became the basis for their future assemblies and feasts
- Father Onesimus, Bishop of Jerusalem says, “As when Joseph went down to Egypt, he heard a language he did not hear before, the language of the Egyptians; the children of Israel, coming out of Egypt, heading to the wilderness, heard the laws of God, which they did not hear before.”
- *a language I did not understand*, may mean the Egyptian language which was not understood by the Israelites without an interpreter, Genesis 42:23



A Call to Praise God 81:1-7

- This sense is confirmed by Psalm 114:1, *“When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language.”*
- And this is mentioned as an aggravation of their affliction in Egypt as we read *“Behold, I will bring a nation against you from afar, O house of Israel,” says the LORD. ‘It is a mighty nation, It is an ancient nation, A nation whose language you do not know, Nor can you understand what they say.’”* (Jeremiah 5:15)
- *language I did not understand*, May be also the voice of God out of the fire, which before was never heard in this unusual manner, nor understood, Deuteronomy 5:24



A Call to Praise God 81:1-7

- Asaph tells the people to recall the deliverance the Lord achieved for Israel in Egypt
- The speaker in verse 6 evidently is God
- He reminds them of how He had delivered the Israelites from the oppression and cruelty of the Egyptians; who made their lives bitter in hard bondage, and obliged them to carry heavy loads of bricks upon their shoulders
- The reference is to their burdens in making bricks and carrying them to the place where they were to be used
- They repeatedly forgot the miserable lives they were living in Egypt



A Call to Praise God 81:1-7

- The people of Israel were forced labor and were treated harshly as the book of Exodus tells us
- Israel's children at one point in time were being killed by the Egyptians
- *the baskets*, The reference is to baskets which might have been used in carrying clay, or the bricks after they were made
- Their burdens were so often referred to in Exodus (Exodus 1:11,2:11,5:4-5,6:6-7)
- *You called in trouble, and I delivered you*, God heard their groaning under their burden of slavery in Egypt (Exodus 2:23-24)



A Call to Praise God 81:1-7

- He brought deliverance to them through wonders and leaders like Moses
- God will hear those who cry out to Him
- *in the secret place of thunder*, What is that place?
- Some say it refers to the bringing the plague of thunder and lightnings upon the Egyptians
- Or rather this was done when the Lord looked out of the pillar of cloud at the Red sea upon the Egyptians and troubled them; at which time the voice of His thunder was heard in heaven, Psalm 77:18



A Call to Praise God 81:1-7

- And some believe that the reference here is to the appearance of God through the clouds, to talk to Moses
- Or, the pillar of the cloud in which and from which, God answered the cry of His people (Exodus 14:24)
- Then God reminds the people of the events at *Meribah* where the people complained for water, despite the exalted compassion of God, and Moses struck the rock to bring forth water to the people
- *I tested you at the waters of Meribah*, By withholding water from them to test their fidelity, and see whether they would be patient, and put their trust and confidence in the Lord, or not, Exodus 17:4

A Call to Praise God 81:1-7



- God says that He tested the people in that situation and the people failed because they did not maintain their trust in Him
- They *called in trouble*, and God *delivered* them, they had tested Him and found Him faithful, but they were not faithful to Him
- The name *Meribah* or Strife was a reminder of repeated unbelief and ingratitude (Exodus 17:7; Numbers 20:13; Psalm 78:20)
- The *Selah* after these words marks a pause, during which the people might reflect on the manifold mercies which God had given to them in Egypt, in the wilderness, and elsewhere
- God's mercies are great and ought to be reflected upon



A Call to Remember 81:8-10

- In verses 8-10 the Lord rebukes and warns the people, calling for them to listen to the words He has to say
- Before He instructed His assembled people, He first called for their attention, telling them to *listen*
- God calls their attention to what He required of them; to what His law demanded; to what was the condition of their being His people
- *O My people*, Israel is still God's people
- They were His people, and He was their God

A Call to Remember 81:8-10



- St. Augustine comments *O My people* and says, “For it is not to a strange people, not to a people that belongs not to the press: ‘Judge ye,’ He saith, ‘between Me and My vineyard.’”
- The Lord recognizes that the people will not listen, *if you will listen*
- So the Lord reminds them of the covenant that they are to keep with the Lord
- They are not to have nor worship any other gods
- Some 400 years of slavery in Egypt exposed Israel to the many pagan gods of Egypt



A Call to Remember 81:8-10

- The command God gave to Israel when the Israelites came out of Egypt is again stated to them in the days of Asaph
- Coming from Egypt, Israel was commanded not to *worship any foreign god*, and the same command was for Israel in the land under their kings
- One of the causes of the fall of Jerusalem and the captivity of the people was that their hearts had been turned toward the foreign gods of the Canaanites and Israel no longer worshipped the Lord in sincerity
- Thus, the Lord reminds the people that they are not to bow down to any foreign gods because the Lord is their God



A Call to Remember 81:8-10

- The reminder was continually needed (Exodus 20:2; Leviticus 26:13; Deuteronomy 5:6; Hosea 12:9,13:4)
- He is the one who brought the people out of Egypt
- He was *the LORD*, the covenant God of Israel
- He was the one who *brought them out of the land of Egypt*
- No foreign god had done such things for Israel
- If the people will simply listen to the commands of the Lord, God says that He would provide for the people, *Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it*



A Call to Remember 81:8-10

- Possibly an allusion to young birds, when fed by the parent-bird
- God wants to take care of His people
- God made a promise to His faithful people
- If they would in faith anticipate God's provision, God would provide
- The reverse is also implied: God would not *fill* the closed mouth, the one with no eagerness of faith
- God's gifts, both temporal and spiritual, are proportioned to our eager longing for them

A Call to Remember 81:8-10



- As Christ could not do His miracles in one place because of their unbelief (Mark 6:5-6), so God cannot give plentifully unless we desire
- We open our mouths wide when we have a sense of need – when we are hungry and when we understand the greatness of the God we pray to
- St. Augustine says, “For we all were brought out of the land of Egypt, we have all passed through the Red Sea; our enemies pursuing us have perished in the water. Let us not be ungrateful to our God; let us not forget God that abides, and fabricate in ourselves a new god ... ‘open wide thy mouth,’ in confessing, in loving: ‘and I will fill it,’ because with Me is the fountain of life.”

A Call to Repent (81:11-16)



- This was the great sorrow
- God was ready to fill the open mouths of His people, but they would not obey Him
- God said in sorrow, *Israel would have none of Me*
- Rebellious Israel rejected God who had done so much for them and would have done much more
- St. Augustine says, “For they are baptized and pass through the Red Sea: but on the way they murmur, complain, are stirred with seditions, ungrateful to Him who delivered them from pursuing enemies, who leads through the dry land, through the desert, yet with food and drink, with light by night and shade by day.”



A Call to Repent (81:11-16)

- God, on His part, intends to fulfill all the needs of His people
- Yet the problem is in the diversion of the people's heart, and in their intention to have none of God Himself
- So, what is God supposed to do with a people who refuse to listen to His commands?
- What is God supposed to do with a people who will not submit their lives to the Lord?
- What shall God do towards people who will not bend their will to the Lord?
- Verse 12 tells us what God does, *So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, To walk in their own counsels.*

A Call to Repent (81:11-16)



- God is not going to stop people from doing evil
- God's Spirit will not always strive with men, *“and the Lord said, ‘My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, for he is indeed flesh.’* (Genesis 6:3)
- After a time, if they persist in evil and disobedience to His commands, He *gave them over*, withdraws from them, leaves them, *to their own stubborn heart*, to their own wicked wills and imaginations
- Here is a good answer for people who ask the question why there is evil in the world if there is a God
- God does not stop people from doing what they want to do



A Call to Repent (81:11-16)

- God is the author of free will and choice and we are allowed to follow our own desires
- God allows us to live our lives however we would like to live them
- Free will is not an exemption from judgment and the wrath of God, *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”* (Romans 1:18)
- But rather than talk about the wrath that was to come against Israel, God talks about the good life the people are missing due to their stubbornness



A Call to Repent (81:11-16)

- God's mercy is infinite and unlimited
- Even now if Israel would obey Him, He would subdue their enemies, and bless them abundantly
- God could say of Israel, *My people*
- They belonged to Him and He had claimed them
- Yet they would not *listen* to Him; they would not *walk in* His ways
- Such were the laments of Jesus over Jerusalem
- It expresses what was the earnest desire - the wish - the preference of God, namely, that they had been obedient, and had enjoyed His favor



A Call to Repent (81:11-16)

- Israel is still surrounded by enemies, eager for their destruction
- God could subdue them and sweep them away in a moment, if He pleased; and would do so, if Israel would repent and return to Him
- The hand which is now turned against Israel in chastisement would be turned against their enemies
- This was an unclaimed blessing God wanted to give to a believing obeying people
- If God's people would only listen and obey, God would *subdue their enemies* and fight for them *against their adversaries*



A Call to Repent (81:11-16)

- Israel's enemies are always spoken of as God's enemies, (Psalm 3:2,7,9:3,68:1,79:6-7, etc.)
- They "hate" God (Psalm 21:8,83:2), not merely as Israel's Protector, but as the Source of all good, whereas they delight in evil
- *The haters* Being always an unwilling to submit to God
- Those who hate the Lord assume that they are capable of destroying His people
- *endure forever*, They will be punished with everlasting destruction



A Call to Repent (81:11-16)

- *“Their worm does not die And the fire is not quenched.”* (Mark 9:48)
- It is everlasting, and *“And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night.”* (Revelation 14:11)
- *But their fate would endure forever,* Some think it is to be understood of the time of His people
- If they had heeded and listened to the Lord, and walked in His ways, they would have continued to be a happy and a flourishing nation



A Call to Repent (81:11-16)

- God desires for His people to repent and to return to Him
- He is ready to deal with their enemies (verses 14-15) and satisfy their souls (verse 16)
- Verse 16 describes the blessings God would bestow on the people of Israel
- God would have richly provided for them and *satisfied them* – if His people would have only listened and obeyed
- The expression, *honey from the rock* is taken from Deuteronomy 32:13
- It evidently means "*honey of the best*" - native honey, stored by the bees in clefts of the rocks

A Call to Repent (81:11-16)



- Both the "*wheat*" and the "*honey*" are metaphors of all temporal and spiritual blessings and it may mean also the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ
- The rock spiritually means Christ, the Rock of salvation, 1 Corinthians 10:4, the honey out of the rock, the fulness of grace in Him
- St. Augustine says, "And this honey is not from any chance person, but 'from the rock.' But 'the Rock was Christ.'"
- One has a choice as to what he/she will do with God, the outcome of their choice is determined

A Call to Repent (81:11-16)



- Submit to God and one will have the blessings of God
- Reject God and God will turn them over to their lusts and they will face the wrath of God
- There is no changing of the outcome
- The Psalm serves as a reminder of our own sinfulness and God's faithfulness
- The whole of what is here said shows what Israel lost by disobedience, it clearly suggests what such enjoys who hears and obeys



Discussion

- What is the point of feast days?
- How does God consistently address the Israelites – by what name? Why might this be significant?
- What is God’s reaction to the “not listening” of His people?
- How is the Lord described in verses 1-5?

Discussion



- What were the costs of Israel's disobedience?
- How does God want His people to respond to His help?
- What promise does the Lord offer His people in return for their obedience?
- What do we learn about God in the Psalm?