

“Hear, O My People”

Psalm 81

The superscription has the phrase “*upon Gittith*” (which is also seen in Psalm 8 and 84). This is apparently a musical instrument that came from Gath (probably a harp).

All we can determine as to the occasion is that it was given to be used at occasions of celebration and festivals.

This is another “*Psalm of Asaph*,” given for the worship of God’s people (“*To the chief Musician*”), but its message moves far beyond the outward form of worship. It opens with joy and celebration, yet soon becomes a solemn exhortation from the Lord Himself. In it, God reminds His people of His redeeming grace, rebukes their refusal to hear His voice, and reveals the blessing they lost through disobedience.

I. THE WORSHIP OF GOD’S PEOPLE (VS. 1-7)

A. God’s people are summoned to rejoice before Him (vv. 1-5)

1. The object of their joy — God Himself (v. 1)

- a) “*Sing aloud... (הִרְנִינֵה) make a joyful noise*” — both expressions call for public, glad, vocal praise. Worship here is not cold formality, but joyful confession.
- b) “*Unto God our strength... unto the God of Jacob*” — Israel’s strength was not in herself, but in her God. The “*God of Jacob*” reminds them that He is the God of covenant grace, who chose, preserved, and sustained His people.

➤ True worship begins with the right view of

God.

2. The expression of their joy (v. 2)

- a) Their praise was to be outwardly expressed in song and instrument.
- b) The language here suggests corporate, joyful worship.

(1) Song — *"Take a psalm"*

(2) Accompaniment — *"and bring hither the timbrel, the pleasant harp with the psaltery."*

(3) Participation — God's people were called to join together in deliberate praise.

3. The occasion of their joy — appointed by God (vv. 3-5a)

- a) The exact feast in verse 3 is debated, whether the seventh-month festivals (Feast of Trumpets and Feast of Tabernacles) or Passover (my view), but the main point is clear: this was worship at God's appointed time.
- b) Israel did not worship the moon, as pagan nations did, but worshiped the God who made the moon and ordered their times and seasons.
- c) Verse 4 explains verse 3: the trumpet was to be sounded because this feast was commanded by God.

d) Verse 5 — the redemptive setting of worship

(1) *"This he ordained"* — Israel's worship was tied to redemption as well as regulation.

(2) *"Joseph"* stands for the people of Israel (cf. Ps.

80:1).

- (3) *"When he went out through the land of Egypt"* is best taken of the Lord going out over Egypt in judgment.
- (4) The final line shifts from God's action to Israel's experience: "where I heard a language that I understood not," recalling the foreignness and oppression of Egypt (cf. Psalm 114:1).
- (5) The point of the verse is that this feast was bound up with God's redeeming acts in history.

B. God's people are reminded of His redeeming work (vv. 6-7)

1. He removed their burden (v. 6)

- a) This is the language of deliverance from Egyptian bondage.
 - (1) The *"shoulder"* speaks of the weight they bore.
 - (2) The *"hands"* speak of the labor they endured.
 - (3) The *"burden"* and *"pots"* picture the hard servitude of Egypt.
- b) The emphasis is that God Himself removed what they could not remove on their own. Their worship was to be rooted in the memory of divine deliverance.

2. He responded to their cry (v. 7a)

"Thou calledst in trouble, and I delivered thee..."

- a) God not only saw their oppression; He heard their cry (cf. Exod. 2:23).
 - b) Their trouble drove them to call out to God — mercy moved God to answer.
 - c) Israel cried to God in their distress, and He answered with deliverance. How grievous, then, that the people who had been heard by God would not afterward hear God.
3. He revealed His majesty and tested their hearts (v. 7b).

"I answered thee in the secret place of thunder: I proved thee at the waters of Meribah. Selah."

Two important truths seen here:

- a) God revealed Himself in power.

The phrase *"the secret place of thunder"* points to the majesty of God's presence. "The meaning is, that he gave a response — a real reply — to their prayer — amid the solemn scenes of Sinai [cf. Ex. 19:17-18], when he gave them his law; when he recognized them as his people; when he entered into covenant with them" (Barnes).

- b) God tested them at Meribah

This brings into the psalm the wilderness wandering, where Israel's heart was manifested. Meribah was a place where their unbelief and contention came to light. In other words, God proved what was in their heart.

II. THE WARNING OF GOD'S VOICE (VV. 8-10)

The God who delivered them now demands to be heard.

A. A solemn call to hear (v. 8)

1. The people addressed — *"my people," "Israel"*

Although this is terminology often used for God's covenant relationship with Israel, it can also be used for the believer today, under the new covenant. We are God's *"people"*, as they were — we belong to Him, as they did, and we are bound to *"hear"* Him, as they were.

2. The plea expressed — *"Hear"*

The imperative *"Hear"* (to listen) is central to the whole psalm. The problem in Psalm 81 is not ignorance alone, but unwillingness to listen.

3. The testimony announced — *"I will testify unto thee"*

This phrase has the sense of solemn divine witness or earnest charge. God is not only offering a suggestion; He is speaking as One who has authority to *"testify"* (declare, warn, and bear witness) against His people if they refuse Him.

4. The obedience desired — *"if thou wilt hearken unto me"*

This phrase carries both yearning and reproof. The issue is not whether God has spoken clearly, but whether His people will listen obediently.

B. A strict command against strange gods (v. 9)

1. Warning against the presence of idolatry — *"There shall no strange god be in thee."*

2. Warning against the practice of idolatry — *"neither shalt thou worship any strange god"*

The God of Israel would not share His place with another — He didn't then and He won't now.

C. A gracious claim upon His people (v. 10)

This verse gives the reason for the command of verse 9.

1. His authority is absolute— *"I am the LORD thy God"*

He is not just a deity among many; He is the LORD, and He is thy God. That is authority joined with grace.

2. His claim is redemptive — *"which brought thee out of the land of Egypt"*

The psalm again returns to the Exodus and shows that God's commands are grounded in redemption. He has the right to command because He is the One who saved them.

3. His provision is abundant — *"open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it"*

- a) God invites His people to come to Him with great need and confident trust, and He promises sufficiency.

- b) This is not the language of indulgence or selfish desires. It's stating that the Lord is able and willing to supply what His obedient people truly need. Instead of turning to idols, they are to turn to Him (cf. Phil. 4:19; Matt. 6:33).

- c) This makes the warning all the more searching. Idolatry is not only disobedience; it is distrust. To

seek another god is to deny that the Lord is enough.

III. THE WILLFULNESS OF GOD'S PEOPLE (VV. 11-12)

These verses form a solemn turning point in the psalm. The Lord had called, warned, and invited His people. He had spoken as Redeemer, Lawgiver, and Provider, but instead of hearing Him, they refused Him. Thus, these verses show both the sin of Israel's rebellion and the judgment of God in giving them over to their own way.

A. The refusal of God's people (v. 11)

1. The stark contrast with the verses before is found in the first word — *"But..."*
2. God called His people to hear, and they refused — *"would not hearken..."* This was a deliberate resistance to the voice of God.
3. *"And Israel would none of me"* — that is stronger than simply saying they disobeyed a command. It means they would not have Him. They rejected not only His word, but His rule. They did not merely refuse instruction; they refused the God who gave it.

B. The response of God to their refusal (vs. 12)

1. The judgment declared — *"So I gave them up"*

This is one of the most sobering lines in the psalm, and one of the most sobering in the Bible.

Similar language in Romans 1, where three times God uses very similar language — *"God also gave them up"* (v. 24); *"God gave them up"* (vs. 26); and,

"God gave them over" (v. 28).

2. The desire followed — *"unto their own hearts' lust"*

Their problem was not just sinful outward behavior, but an inward sinful inclination. The heart that rejects God will not stay neutral; it will follow its own sinful desires.

3. The direction chosen — *"they walked in their own counsels"*

This is the outward result of their inward sinful desires.

IV. THE WISH OF GOD'S HEART (VV. 13-16)

Even after exposing their refusal and declaring His judgment, the Lord does not leave them there. In these verses, His voice takes on the tone of yearning, as He declares the blessing they forfeited by not walking in His ways.

A. The longing God expresses (v. 13)

1. He desired their hearing (v. 13a).

The central issue in the psalm returns here — hearing the voice of God. They didn't lack opportunity to hear; they simply lacked obedience.

2. He desired their walking (v. 13b)

Hearing was to lead to walking. True response to the voice of God is not just hearing with the ears, but obeying what is heard.

B. The victory God would have given (v. 14)

1. Their enemies would have been subdued (v. 14a).
2. His hand would have been turned against their adversaries (v. 14b)
 - The Lord was fully able and fully willing to act for His people, but their disobedience caused them to forfeit the blessing of His favorable intervention.

C. The judgment God would have maintained (v. 15)

1. The enemies of God would have submitted (v. 15a)
2. Israel's settled blessing would have endured (v. 15b)
 - God would have so acted on behalf of His people that even His enemies would have been made to bow, and Israel's secure condition would have been prolonged under His blessing.

D. The blessing God would have bestowed (v. 16)

1. The richness of His provision — *"The finest of the wheat"*

This speaks of rich and choice provision. God would not only have sustained them, but blessed them abundantly.
2. The wonder of His provision — *"Honey out of the rock"*

This refers to wild honey found in rocky places,

especially in the clefts of rocks, and was regarded as the most delicate and valuable of all the honey in the region. The expression is drawn from Deuteronomy 32:13 and pictures God's abundant provision — sweetness from an unlikely place.

3. The fullness of His provision — "should I have satisfied thee"

The verb "*satisfied*" (שָׂבַע) is important. This is not mere survival, but speaks of fulness. The Lord presents Himself as the One who truly satisfies His people.

Conclusion:

This psalm began with a call to sing in praise, but ends with a lament over a people who would not hear. It teaches us that worship, even today, without obedience is empty, and that the Lord's commands are never contrary to the good of His people. The God who calls for their hearing is the God who desires their blessing.