



Sermon Transcript December 13, 2015

Jesus: God's Smile On Us Psalm 80

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on December 13, 2015, at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text

Psalm 80

To the choirmaster: according to Lilies.

A Testimony. Of Asaph, a Psalm.

¹ Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.

You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.

² Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up your might and come to save us!

³ Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!

⁴ O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure. ⁶ You make us an object of contention for our neighbors, and our enemies laugh among themselves.

⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved!

⁸ You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.

⁹ You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.

¹⁰ The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches.

¹¹ It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River.

¹² Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? ¹³ The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.

¹⁴ Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, ¹⁵ the stock that your right hand planted, and for the son whom you made strong for yourself. ¹⁶ They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your face!

¹⁷ But let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself! ¹⁸ Then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name!

¹⁹ Restore us, O LORD God of hosts! Let your face shine, that we may be saved!

Introduction

Psalm 80 is a psalm of lament. It too, like Psalm 25, is a cry of the heart. Don't you like that about the psalms? They give permission for us to cry. These psalms, with great honesty, acknowledge how hard life can be and they invite us to cry out to God not only with our needs and our petitions, but also with our feelings. It is not a lack of faith to acknowledge to God that I am sad, or that I am angry, or that I am scared. Rather, it is these very things that ought to drive me to God, and consequently, my faith grows as I trust God with my circumstances and my feelings, as I learn how "to wait" on God.

The cry and the lament of Psalm 80 is a little different than the cry of Psalm 25, the psalm we looked at two weeks ago. Psalm 25 is a cry of the individual. The cry is stated in the singular, "*To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.*" Many of the things that produce the cry of the heart are unique to the individual and our personal circumstances. You have your cries and I have my cries. But some psalms of lament are what we call "communal laments." They are cries of the heart that we share together. It is a cry that is held in common. Psalm 80 is a "communal lament." It is a collective cry of the community. Three times in the Psalm, this collective cry is repeated, "*Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*" You find this cry in verses, 3, 7 and 19.

I would like to point out a quick observation about this prayer that is repeated three times in Psalm 80. As you look at verses 3, 7 and 19, do you notice how the title for God expands as the psalm progresses? It begins in verse 3, "*Restore us, O God.*" Then in verse 7 you read, "*Restore us, O God of hosts.*" Some of your translations will translate this phrase with, "*O God Almighty!*" And then you get to the end of the psalm where the prayer expands to "*Restore us, O LORD God of hosts.*" Any time you see "LORD" with all four capital letters, it is referring to the name for God revealed to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3. He is the "*I am*", the self-existing God, who has no cause and is the source of all life. It is the name for God that was so sacred to the Jewish worshiper that he could not bring himself to even say the word. And so with the growing and expanding title for God, whatever is causing this community to cry out to God, there is a growing confidence and trust in God because they have remembered the character of God and his attributes. That is helpful for our own cries of lament. When we bring our sadness and our anger and our fears and cry out to God, it doesn't always mean that our situation will change. But our trust in God grows the more "we wait" on God.

At the heart of this prayer repeated three times in this psalm, is a phrase very familiar to the Jewish worshiper. Three times we hear this community cry out in prayer, "*let your*

face shine.” It is a prayer that takes you back to Numbers 6. At the end of this chapter, Aaron, the priest, was instructed to pronounce God’s blessing on the people of Israel. He was to say to them, “*The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*” That should sound familiar to you as well. It is a benediction I often pronounce at the end of a service.

Can I encourage you to not treat the benediction as if it is just the closing prayer of a worship service. It is so much more than a closing prayer signifying the end of a worship service. It is the pronouncement of the blessing of God on your life. Lee Eclow says that Israel treated this pronouncement of blessing as a “national treasure and a holy heirloom.”¹ Paul often ended his letters with a similar tone of benediction. In Romans 15:33 he writes, “*May the God of peace be with you all.*” In 2 Corinthians 13:14 he concludes his letter with this pronouncement of blessing, “*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*” When I pronounce the benediction, I lift up my hands towards you because that is what Aaron the priest did. In Leviticus 9:22 it says, “*And Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them.*” As the priest, he is representing God and conferring God’s blessing on the people. I would encourage you that when the benediction is stated, that you take your hands and hold them out in a receiving posture because by faith you are receiving the promise of God’s blessing to us through Jesus Christ.

This brings us back to the heart of this prayer, “*let your face shine.*” It is literally a request that the smile of God would rest upon them. It is a prayer that the favor of God would be upon them. I think of that verse that says, “*If God is for us, who can be against us.*” But here is the question, “is God for us?” Do we have his smile? It makes all the difference in the world. That is why the benediction at the end of a service is so important. I want you to leave with the assurance of the smile of God upon you as you walk back out into whatever you are dealing with in life. Whatever has caused this communal lament in Psalm 80 to be written is bringing into question whether or not God is still smiling upon them. Jamie Greenling says, “clearly the psalmist believes that part of the problem is that God has not been smiling on them.”² He likens it to when he was a boy in elementary school and when he got his paper back from the teacher, if it was good work there would be a red stamp on the top of the paper with a smiley face. But if it was not good work the teacher would put a stamp with a frowny face. It raises the question, “How can we receive the smile of God when we do frowny face work?”

In a few moments, we are going to discover that Israel was doing frowny face work. The

cry, “*Restore us, O God*”, literally means, “turn us again.” It implies that the community has turned away from God. And so the cry for God to save them is because they now feel the frown of God and they want to once again know his smile. The prayer in verse 14 is “*Turn again, O God of hosts.*” In other words, if God does not turn to us with his smile, we cannot turn to God with any sense of hope.

This, by the way, is the lament we hold in common with each other. This is our communal lament. How does one gain the smile of God? I think a lot of people assume that God smiles upon them. “I mean, we assume, what is there not to like?” But that is not the testimony of Scripture. It is written that “*all we like sheep have gone astray.*” In Romans 3:12 it says that our common lot is of such that “*All have turned aside; together they have become worthless, no one does good, not even one.*” We all do frowny face work and so how can we gain the smile of God? How can I stand before you and raise my hands and pronounce the assurance of God’s smile upon you? How can you stand with your hands in the receiving posture and rest in the assurance of God’s smile upon you? The answer is that God in his grace must first turn to you.

This is where Psalm 80 will take us. This is why this psalm is a “Psalm of Christmas.” This psalm will take us to Jesus. Christmas is the story of God in his grace turning to us with his good smile. The announcement of the angels to the shepherds was “*Glory to God on the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.*” There is peace and blessing for those on whom God is pleased. You can know his smile this morning. Have you turned to Jesus? Have you turned to the one who has already turned to you? Jesus is the smile of God upon us. My prayer is that at end of the service you would leave knowing that if you turn to Jesus you can walk out of here with the assurance of the smile of God on your life.

I want to point you to Jesus through this communal lament, Psalm 80. I am going to point you to Jesus through this psalm by identifying three key terms in this psalm. Each of these terms had meaning for Israel and each of these terms are words that Jesus claimed for himself as the source of God’s smile upon us. The words are “*shepherd*” found in verse 1. Then there is “*vine*” found in verse 8. Then finally, there is the title “*son of man*” found in verse 17. Once we see Jesus in these words, we will discover the source for God’s smile on us as we collectively confess our sins to God.

Israel and the Smile of God

Lets first consider what it was that prompted this communal lament from the people of

Israel. What was going on that caused them to share in common this cry, “*Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*” When you read verses 4-5, the smile of God upon his people seems to be absent. “*O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers. You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure.*” It is commonly held that this psalm was written in response to the ten northern tribes of Israel being carted off into captivity in 722 B. C. at the hand of the Assyrians. When Israel settled the promised land they were twelve tribes strong. After King Solomon, there was civil strife that led to a divided kingdom. The ten tribes to the north were known as Israel and the two tribes to the south, where Jerusalem was, was known as Judah. After the kingdom of Israel divided into two, the ten tribes to the north never had a king who followed after God. They turned their back on God and so the smile of God upon them was removed and off they went into captivity. This is what caused this communal cry of lament and despair.

In Psalm 80:2, three of the twelve tribes of Israel are mentioned: *Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh*. Ephraim and Manasseh were the sons of Joseph. Joseph was the brother sold into slavery into Egypt and he eventually rose to great prominence in Egypt. He became second only to Pharaoh and God used him to not only preserve the sons of Jacob, the people of Israel, but during a great famine that lasted for seven years, Joseph brought blessing to all the peoples of Egypt and beyond. And then Benjamin is mentioned. He was the full brother of Joseph, they were the only two sons of Rachel, the one whom their father Jacob loved the most. So why are these three tribes mentioned? I don’t think they are being singled out because they are the problem. Rather, they are representative of all of Israel. Ephraim and Manasseh were part of the northern kingdom, while Benjamin was one of the two tribes to the south. I think they are singled out because there is something about the story of Joseph that mirrors the story of the ten tribes going off into captivity. There is something in the story of Joseph that provides hope to all of Israel in this dark time. This divided and now broken people of God are wondering if they will ever experience the smile of God again.

It is in verse 1 that we are introduced to God as the “*Shepherd of Israel.*” We read, “*Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.*” This is very interesting. We all love the image of God being our shepherd. What is the most familiar and often favorite psalm of the people of faith? “*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.*” It is in this psalm where we learn how God, like a shepherd, guides and provides and protects us, even in *the valley of the shadow of death*. But here is what is interesting. When Jacob is coming to the end of his life, he gathers his twelve sons around him and he makes various statements about each of them. When he gets to Joseph, he recalls that Joseph

did not have an easy life. At times, Joseph may have wondered if the smile of God was really upon him. His brothers were jealous of him and they sold him into slavery. He landed in Egypt as a household servant where he was falsely accused for trying to rape his master's wife. He languished in prison for fourteen years for a crime he didn't do. And yet in the blessing Jacob pronounces on Joseph in Genesis 39, he mentions God being a shepherd to him. At times it may not have seemed like it, but God was still at work. Jacob does the same thing in the previous chapter when Joseph brings his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, to Jacob to receive a blessing. In blessing his grandsons, he says that God has been "*my shepherd all my life long to this day.*"

So by conjuring up memories of Joseph, Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh, and how God had been their shepherd at times when his favor and smile did not seem to be present upon them, they cry out with hope. They ask God to *restore* them and to turn their hearts back to God. They pray for God's good smile to once again rest upon them and that he would indeed save them. The story of Joseph for these fragmented twelve tribes of Israel can offer hope when you don't feel the smile of God because it reminds you that God takes hard things and uses them for our good. So in their distress, the community of faith cries out together and they appeal to God as the *Shepherd of Israel*.

As you read further into this communal lament, you discover that Israel is referred to as a vine. In verse 8 we read, "*You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.*" It is a figurative way to describe how God brought them out of slavery in Egypt and gave them the land promised to their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And for a time, they prospered. It says in verse 10, "*The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea and its roots to the River.*" But now, to describe the state of Israel, in verse 12 you discover that this vineyard is no longer taken care of and it has grown wild. The walls are broken down and the fruit is being plucked and wild boars are ravaging what was once a choice and cared for vineyard.

It is interesting to me that the major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all refer to Israel having once been a choice vineyard, but has now unattended and has gone wild. In fact, they speak of how the wood of a grapevine is rather useless. It is only good for burning. And when these prophets speak, they are referring to the downfall of Judah, the two tribes to the south. Now, seemingly all hope is lost. The ten tribes to the north had already been scattered 150 years earlier. And now you barely have a remnant left in the land. Perhaps you wonder why that is of grave concern to the one reading the story of the Bible. Here is the concern in all of this. It is the question we asked a few years ago

when we did our series on the book Isaiah. This is the critical question that underlies the book of Isaiah and Psalm 80. If the vineyard of Israel is destroyed once and for all, where is the hope for the world? God promised Abraham that through Israel God would bless the world. The promise was that through Israel will come the smile of God upon the world. But now, seemingly, God is not even smiling upon Israel. This is not just a communal lament that reflects the national pride of a fallen nation, Israel. This is the communal lament of the world that needs to know the smile of God. If Israel has fallen, how will we ever come under the smile and blessing of God? And so the prayer emerges from verse 14, *“Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, and stock that your right hand planted, and for the son whom you have made strong for yourself.”*

This brings us to the third image of this psalm, the son of man. Israel is referred to here as God’s son. But as you read a little further, you discover that their hope is in the promise God made to David. If you remember last week, we looked at Psalm 72, a “royal psalm.” Through this psalm we learned that the blessing and smile of God on this world would ultimately come to us through Israel’s king, the son of David. That is the hint you begin to see at the end of this psalm as well. Look at verse 17, *“But let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself.”* So yes, the ten northern tribes of Israel have already been carted off into captivity. We know from the story that unfolds, eventually Jerusalem itself will be destroyed and Judah will be carted off to Babylon. That leaves us with the question, “how will we ever experience the blessing and smile of God?” Again, the answer is found in the coming Messiah. What Israel could not do, Jesus can do. In fact, the message of the New Testament is that Jesus is the true Israel who is able to bring the smile and blessing of God on us. God will be true to his promise and he has turned to this world with his grace and his favor and his smile. So even though this community is lamenting their situation, with great confidence in the promise to David, they can pray, *“Restore us, O LORD God of hosts! Let your face shine, that we may be saved.”*

That is the request of this communal lament in verse 14, *“Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine.”* And he has. The promised son of David, Jesus has come. Jesus is God’s smile of favor upon us.

Jesus and the Smile of God

This really is the message this morning from Psalm 80. The smile of God has come to this world. Jesus is the smile of God upon this world. In fact, it is hard to even make the

announcement of Christmas without a smile. *“Behold, I bring you news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”* The smile of God has come into this world. As the gospels unfold, you can hear Jesus identify himself as being the source of God’s blessing and smile on our lives. In John 10 Jesus calls himself *“the Good Shepherd.”* In John 15, Jesus identifies himself as *“The True Vine.”* And then in John 3, we find the title that Jesus most often used to refer to himself, *“the Son of Man.”* Each of these titles connect us back to Psalm 80 and tell us that Jesus is the answer to the prayer that is repeated three times in this communal lament, *“Restore us, O God, let your face shine; that we may be saved.”*

Jesus says of himself in John 10:11, *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.”* One of the reasons the people of Israel turned away from God is because their shepherds, their religious leaders, failed to lead them well. In Ezekiel 34, God pronounces judgment against the spiritual leaders of Israel, and then he makes this wonderful statement of his commitment to his people. He says in Ezekiel 34:11-13, *“Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered . . . I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries.”* Psalm 80 is a cry to God, *“the Shepherd of Israel”* because the people have been scattered. But God promises to seek for his own and bring them to himself.

Isn’t it interesting that the announcement of the birth of Jesus is made to a group of shepherds? Why shepherds? I can’t help but think that this is purposeful. For the one who was born is the *good shepherd*. To what extent did our *good shepherd* seek us so that we might come under the blessing of God? He laid down his life for us. We all do frowny face work. We can not do anything of ourselves to earn the smile of God. Jesus earns it for us. When Jesus came out of the waters of baptism, the voice from heaven said, *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”* The smile of God that rests on Jesus rests on us when we turn in faith to Jesus.

In John 15:1 Jesus can also be heard saying *“I am the true vine.”* To the Jewish mind steeped in Scripture, this would conjure up all kinds of images for them. Israel, in the Old Testament was referred to as *“the vine.”* We see that in Psalm 80, though at this point is a wild vine and not a source of blessing. But by Jesus identifying himself as *“the true vine”* he is saying that he is the *“true Israel”* the one through whom the blessing of God has come to the world. Jesus is the smile of God upon us.

Then in John 3, as in many other places, claims to be the *Son of Man*. This is not a title that emphasizes the humanity of Jesus. Rather, it is an exalted title for Jesus that comes out of Daniel 7:13-14. Here we are told of one who is *like a son of man* coming in the clouds. “*And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.*” In other words, the kingdom of God and the blessing of God will come through Jesus, the *Son of Man*. And so we hear Jesus saying in John 3, “*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*” Once again, Jesus is identified as the source of the smile of God on our lives.

Psalm 80 is a communal cry, born out of judgment, longing for God to *shine forth* his favor and grace upon his people. Christmas tells us that Jesus is the answer to that prayer, “*Restore us, O God; let your face shine; that we may be saved.*” God’s smile is upon this world because of Jesus. He is our good shepherd who laid down his life for us. He is the true vine through whom the blessing of God comes into this world. He is the Son of Man, strong and able to deliver us from our sin. And he saves us by dying for our sins and rising from the dead.

You and the Smile of God

That brings us to one last thought. In a few moments, I will close the service with the benediction out of Numbers 6. “*The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*” Is that benediction for you? Are you able to claim this benediction for your life? Does the smile of God rest on your life? It all depends with what you do with Jesus.

Our communal lament, the cry we share in common with each other, goes like this. “God, have mercy on me a sinner!” God has turned to us in Jesus. Remember, the cry for God to restore us is literally, “*turn us back again, Oh God.*” To know the smile of God on your life, you must humbly repent of your sin and turn in faith to Jesus.

When Jesus claims to be the *Good Shepherd* he says that his sheep hear his voice. Do you hear the voice of God calling you this morning? Maybe you have never experienced that before, but you are feeling your heart strangely warmed by what you are hearing this morning. That is the work of the Spirit of God drawing you to God. Turn to him in faith! Receive the smile and the blessing of God that comes to you from Jesus. When Jesus claims to be the “*True Vine*” he is claiming to be the “true Israel” the one through

whom the blessing of God comes into this world. Jesus says that the blessing of life is for the one who abides in Jesus. And then, as the Son of Man, the promise is that when Jesus is lifted up on the cross, “*whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*” As the glorious Son of Man he is able to rescue us from our sin and bring the smile and blessing of God into our lives.

Conclusion

Whether it is an individual lament or a communal lament, one thing we know about life is that “the laments of life” will come. The only thing that can sustain us during the lament is the knowledge of the smile of God on our lives. It is the confidence that the *face of God is shining* upon us. That smile comes to us through our Good Shepherd, the True Vine and the Son of Man. Jesus is the smile of God upon us and if we have his smile, we truly have all we need.

I was recently given a book called *Joy in the Journey*. It is the CaringBridge pages written by Steve and Sharol Hayner as they chronicled Steve’s journey with pancreatic cancer. Death is one of the communal laments we all share in common. Only the knowledge of the smile of God will sustain you through that lament. Knowing he was celebrating his final Christmas with his family he reflected on the words of the carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin
Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in*

His prayer for that day was, “Today I want to be one of the “meek” ones—one of the humble, attentive yielding lambs into whose life God can quietly enter, bringing whatever joy is a part of today.”³ Joy comes in knowing the smile of God is upon us. Jesus is the smile of God. Turn to him in faith and find rest for your soul. It is because of Jesus I pronounce the benediction with confidence and you can receive it with faith and assurance. This assurance of blessing will sustain you in your moments of lament. The message of Christmas is that the smile of God has come. It is Jesus!

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- ¹Lee Eclov “Let Us Stand for the Benediction” *Christianity Today* Winter 2009
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2009/winter/letusstandbenediction.html?paging=off>
- ²Jaimie Greening “Psalm 80-A Meditation for Advent One” Nov. 30, 2014 Pastor Greenbean Blog
- ³Steve & Sharol Hayner *Joy in the Journey* (Downers Grove: IVP 2015) 120-121

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