

**“Revive Us, Restore Us”
Psalm 80**

For the director of music. To the tune of “The Lilies of the Covenant.” Of Asaph. A psalm.

1 Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,
shine forth **2** before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.
Awaken your might; come and save us.
3 Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.
4 How long, LORD God Almighty, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?
5 You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.
6 You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us.
7 Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.
8 You transplanted a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.
9 You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.
10 The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches.
11 Its branches reached as far as the Sea, its shoots as far as the River.
12 Why have you broken down its walls so that all who pass by pick its grapes?
13 Boars from the forest ravage it, and insects from the fields feed on it.
14 Return to us, God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see!
Watch over this vine, **15** the root your right hand has planted, the son you have raised up for yourself.
16 Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish.
17 Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself.
18 Then we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call on your name.
19 Restore us, LORD God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

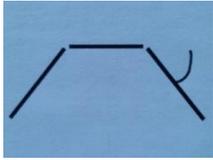
Introduction

Some years ago when Pierre Trudeau was prime minister of Canada, he informed the nation of budget shortfalls with reductions in financial assistance programs. He said, “If there is any relief, it will be narrowly directed to those in dire straits.” So the residents of New Dundee, Ontario assembled and promptly changed the name of their town to “Dire Straits, Ontario, Canada.” The mayor explained, “If we are not in Dire Straits, I don’t know who is!”

Psalm 80 is one of many psalms expressing dire straits for God’s covenant people. In II Kings 25, we hear how “Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army. The city was kept under siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. By the ninth day of the fourth month the famine in the city had become so severe that there was no food for the people to eat. Then the city wall was broken through. They killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes. Then they put out his eyes, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon... On the seventh day of the fifth month (in 587 B.C.), the commander of the imperial guard came to Jerusalem. He set fire to the temple of the Lord, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down. The whole Babylonian army broke down the walls around Jerusalem. The commander of the guard carried into exile the people

who remained in the city. He left behind some of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields” (II Kings 25:1-12). How long, LORD God Almighty, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people? Why have you broken down its walls so that all who pass by pick its grapes?

It seems that every person, family, organization, and nation goes through good times, bad times and times of even keel. This certainly happens in the life cycle of a church. It typically looks like this:



After rising to the top with King David, riding along with a status quo for about 400 years, now all of Israel had fallen to the bottom. Jerusalem and the Temple were gone.

In 1871, twelve people founded 1st Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City. Vision and ministry established this church and grew over the next 30 years. Congregational consultant Ken Priddy calls this *Incline*.

Inevitably, a congregation becomes satisfied with the programs and status of the church and the horizontal line of *Recline* sets in. Maybe this happened at 1st Pres in the 1920s or 30s. Then a *Decline* begins. And unless something causes the *J-turn* (another burst of *Incline*), the church dies. First Pres has experienced a few J-turns in its ministry life. Perhaps we need another one as American culture and the American church are increasingly at odds.

The end of a given church’s life happens all the time. It is estimated that between 5,000 and 8,000 churches will have closed their doors in 2016. Research shows that about 90% of new churches do not make it to their 100th year.

A cursory look at the Old Testament and church history will show how God acts and interacts with this common human process.

I. Expressing Confidence in God (vs. 1-2)

Here in Psalm 80, chief musician Asaph writes a song in the midst of yet another crisis in Israel’s *Incline-Recline-Decline* cycle. Obviously they are in a deep state of decline. And we hear this psalm of complaint. “How long, Lord?” And, “Why, God?” (I’m sure you have never said or thought the *how long* or *why* in life).

I left the common superscription found in many of the Psalms. This one is ironically “To the tune of The Lilies of the Covenant.” See how Asaph begins by expressing confidence in the Lord. “Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us.”

Whenever everything seems to be falling apart for us or you or me, Psalm 80 is a good example of acknowledging that God is God. God is the Sovereign Lord. I probably would have chosen the tune of

“The Choking Weeds of the Garden.” I usually start with “How long will you be angry? Why have you broken things down?” I often jump ahead in the Lord’s Prayer to “Deliver us from evil.”

No... It begins, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” The psalm begins, “Shepherd of Israel, enthroned, shine, Awaken, save.” It is saying, “Lord God, you are our wonderful, holy, awesome God. You are shepherding, guiding, leading your people, your church, my life.” In call/response preaching or in ordinary conversation, it says, “God is good/All the time. All the time/God is good.” And yet, the complaint crashes in.

II. Complaint/Lament (vs. 4-6, 12-13)

“How long, LORD God Almighty, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people? You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful. You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us... Why?”

Many psalms in scripture show the very human side of having faith in God. And how the Lord allows us to say what’s on our minds and hearts. “God, where are you? Why are you doing this? What the blankety-blank-blank is going on here? Give me a break. I’m sorry, already. God help us...”

Psalm 80 sees God as the source of this massive bitterness. The Lord is “smoking” angry (that’s actually the Hebrew word here – smoking). God is bringing down judgment. And the people are praying with no answer. Tears fill the day and night. Derision and mockery are railing against them.

The Lord is seen as the source of this distress. “Lord God, you have fed them with and you have made them drink their tears. You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors. Our enemies mock us. ”

The same questions can plague us in the absence of a J-turn of renewal. Our “neighbors” look at supposed followers of Jesus and see a powerless, just about defeated church. Enemies laugh and scorn his name.

The front of 1st Pres is seen briefly in Bill Maher’s 2008 film *Religulous*. Self-identified variously as an agnostic (he doesn’t know), an atheist (he knows there is no god), and apatheist (he just doesn’t care), HBO’s popular host is highly critical of all religion and views them as highly destructive. Maher has said, “They’re all stupid and dangerous... Religion to me is a bureaucracy between man and God that I don’t need... I don’t know what happens when you die, and I don’t care.” When discussing his apathy and his views on the existence of God, he said on a scale from 1 to 7 (7 being absolutely certain there is no god), he was at 6.9 “because we just don’t know ...”

Without getting into all the ramifications of Bill Maher’s faith (by the way, it does take faith to believe what he believes...), this approach to religion, the church and specifically Christianity and Christ

is growing throughout our culture here in North America. Who knows if or when God's judgment will fall on this part of the world in this time in history...?

III. Appealing to the Lord's Plan (vs. 8-11, 14-18)

Asaph's psalm of complaint turns out not with God relenting. Israel went through a long period of suffering, captivity and disillusionment. Psalm 137 has it: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. For there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?"

Yet Asaph ends with an appeal to the Lord's overarching redemptive plan. Three times (did you notice?), he implores, "Restore us, O God" with increasing intensity. "Restore us, O God... Restore us, God ALMIGHTY... Restore us, LORD God Almighty."

"You transplanted a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land... Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself."

Throughout the Old Testament and many times in the Psalms, the Messiah Savior is anticipated. That anticipation is so clear in the resolution to Psalm 80's complaint.

Conclusion

If you are at a point of changing your name to Dire Straits or if we as a church are singing to the tune of "The Choking Weeds of the Garden," know that the Lord our God, the Creator and Redeemer of our lives is working out his plan of salvation. Whether incline, recline or decline, hold on to God's promises. Remember Hebrews 11 and 12 that we read this morning.

"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Let us pray with and for one another.