

“Lord, Restore Your Church”

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Series: *Psalms*

Bible Text: Psalm 80

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If you have a Bible, you can be turning to Psalm 80 this morning. If you don't have a Bible, you can follow along in your worship guide. The text is printed there. We're in the last Psalm of the summer. Next week, we'll be back in Romans, pick up in Romans 8, spend most of the semester there. You've probably noticed this over the summer. Most of the Psalms that we've covered have been pretty individual in nature. Whoever the author is, is saying I and me a lot. You'll notice that today, the language is us and we. This is a communal, corporate group sort of Psalm. Let's read and remember that this is God's word for us.

Psalm 80. To the choir master, 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 LORD 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 Lord 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!*

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Would you pray with me?

Our Father, as always, we ask for help. Please don't leave us to our own devices, to our own mental capacities to understand your word. Help us see clearly what is here. Help us understand it with our minds, but Lord, incline our hearts to you. Give us the illumination that comes from your Holy Spirit. Help us to regard your word as more precious to us than money, sweeter to our taste than honey and the best of foods. Lord, let us love and hear and take in your word, we pray, through Christ our Lord, amen.

If you're a pastor, you get a lot of questions. One of the questions that I get often is, so how's the church going? I don't know that I ever know how to answer that. You can feel free to keep asking it, but I think I know what people mean when they ask me that. I think what they're saying is something to the effect of the particular church, Christ Presbyterian, how's it going? On the negative side, is anything blowing up right now? Is there any drama or is your leadership okay, your staff team? Is there any kind of controversy? On the positive side, are there great stories of something that God has been doing because of the ministry of the church? I think I get it. How's the church going? That would be an interesting question to ask for our local church, and to ask you that and to hear how you would respond. What if the question was different though, not how's our church going? How's the Church going? Capital C Church, beyond CPC, beyond the Presbyterian Church in America. How's the church in our part of the United States in this country, how's it going? How would you answer that question? Probably a variety of responses. Would you say it's strong or weak, it's healthy or unhealthy, it's growing, it's declining?

There are people who study this stuff. Here's what some of them would say. Whatever's happening in your particular church, the church as a whole is numerically declining. The Southern Baptist Convention is the largest of the evangelical churches, 12 million people. For perspective's sake, the entire Presbyterian Church in America is 400,000. We're just tiny little nothings compared to the Southern Baptist Convention. Here statistics internally say that they, for the past two decades, have been declining, multiple percentage points a year. On the other side of the universe, the mainline churches, one of the larger ones of those, the PCUSA, Presbyterian Church, United States of America, is losing tens of thousands of people every single year. It's a sharp decline, so evangelical, mainline, decline. As to health, multiple denominations over the past decade have had power struggles, corruption, cover-ups, ministers go into jail, dark and evil practices that for years have been swept under the rug that have exploded onto the national spotlight. Other churches have capitulated to the culture on many a moral issue. They've just stopped being faithful to the Bible, and they just gave up. Plus, the statistics now show that people trust pastors less today than they've ever trusted pastors before, and unfortunately, it's for good reason because of the number of bad headlines that pastors tend to make.

I ask you again, how is the church going? At one level, we have to say, not great, not killing it. Sharp contrast to the church in other parts of the world. If you were to do some reading on the church in the global south, especially in a couple of particular areas, numerically booming, financially booming, health and gospel witness exploding, a lot of reasons for optimism there. Are there reasons for optimism here? Psalm 80 was apparently written at a time when God's people were in a period of severe decline. It's instructive for us. What do you do when it seems like the church is falling apart? Your local church or the Church large C, what do you do when the church is falling apart? This Psalm tells us that we're going to have to ask the Lord to restore his church. That implies that she needs restoring, and she does. It implies that there's a God who can restore her, and he can. Let's talk about each of those points for our outline.

Let's talk first about the fact that the church needs some restoring.

Again, this Psalm was written during a period when things are not going great. There is need of saving. That's what he asked for in verse two. *Stir up your might. Come and save us.* They need restoration. That's the word he uses in verse three and three other times here in the passage. Reports are divided on when this was written. Some say it was written when Israel was split into two kingdoms, northern and southern. The northern had spun into all kinds of idolatry, and the Assyrian empire came and took them. They were just destroyed. There's an argument that this could have been written as a plea to say, Lord, come and restore the northern kingdoms. We don't know that for sure. There's reasons why it might not be that, but they may as well be in exile, whatever the case, whatever the context. They may as well be in exile. The people of God have been roughed up.

In verse four, he says to God, *how long will you be angry at the prayers of your people?* God is angry at the prayers of his people. Why? He's clearly disciplining them, bringing hard times and calamity their way. You can see the evidence of it. In verse one, he refers to God as the shepherd of Israel. Then in verse five, *the shepherd is feeding his sheep with the bread of tears.* He's giving them tears to drink in full measure. If you've ever been through a period of real intensive grief, you know what it's like to not be hungry and to not be thirsty. It feels like the only thing that your tongue is tasting is tears. That's what's happening.

This is what it would feel like to go through exile and captivity and destruction. This is a communal lament where they're acknowledging to God things are not okay. The reason for it, if you read through the Old Testament, it's always the same answer. Why aren't God's people being destroyed? Well, they sinned against God. They turned away from him. They worshiped idols. He is bringing his discipline into their lives. Often it's in the form of a military invasion. There's a reason why the exile period is sort of the paramount example of that. When Assyria came to the north and Babylon to the south, it's the full measure of their sins coming upon them. He took them out of the land. Imagine that.

Imagine losing every point that you could cling to that forms your identity. You no longer have your house. You no longer have your food supply. You no longer have your family connections. You no longer have your tribal connections. You no longer have the temple where you go with

your family for worship. All of the things that make up your existence and your identity as the people of God, gone. That's what it would be like. They would only know God's displeasure. He promised them this is how it would be in the law of Moses when he called them to obedience as a nation and gave them the rules for their nation. If they would obey him, they would experience blessing and fullness. If they disobeyed him, the only fullness they might have is the fullness of tears.

Then they're mocked mercilessly by outsiders. Look at verse six. God is making them an object of contention and their enemies laugh. The neighbors, the nations around them, rank idolaters, people who do horrible things, are coming to the people of God and saying, where's your God now? Where is this Yahweh that you have talked about so much? Doesn't it look like he really cares about you all? They laugh their objects of scorn because they're diminished. It sure seems like God has forsaken them. He hasn't. We'll talk about that in a minute. But the nations, from their appearance, it looks like God has given up on them.

Here's the principle. If you're not part of the people of God, the way that the nations think about religion is this. Religion is supposed to make your life better. Any God who makes your life worse for any reason, he's laughable, and you're laughable for believing it, and the whole situation is laughable. That's what's happening to Israel. That would be bad. But what's worse is the fact that they're really being destroyed, physically speaking. He introduces the metaphor of the vine in verse eight. Back in Genesis, God promised Joseph that his family would be a fruitful bough, a vine. The people of God are this vine brought out of Egypt at the Exodus. God drove out the nations and planted them. God made them take root and grow. They took over the world from the river, that's the Euphrates, all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, just like God promised he would do in the covenant with David. I'll make your kingdom from the sea to the river.

That's not what they see. Verse 12. God has broken down her walls. All who pass by pluck the fruit of this vine. There's this outsider, a bore from the forest that is ravaging the vine. Verse 16, enemies are burning it with fire and cutting it down. All the writer can do is acknowledge it, and lament it, and ask for mercy.

The people of God need to be restored.

The church is greatly diminished.

I wonder if we can see those points of commonality in our own day. Thanks be to God, our specific church, CPC, there's a lot to be encouraged about. A lot that is exciting. Anytime we see a particular church with some markers of health, you stop and you say thank you to the Lord, and you trust him for the future. We also, little c church, belong to the capital C Church. If we're honest, we have more points of contact with decline than we might be willing to admit.

We have sins. There are outsiders who wreak havoc.

Consider our own day. In our land, the church is filled with theological confusion. You could pick your topic. From a theology of scripture, to a theology of sexuality, and everything in between. If nothing else, we can say there is mass confusion in the theology of the church.

There are leadership problems all over the place. There's corruption at times.

The church is mocked and ridiculed, sometimes for the usual reasons, which is persecution. If you're part of the people of God, you're going to be mocked. But then there's the reasons that we give them. The bad reasons.

What's the world supposed to say when we profess to belong to God and know him, and then we deny him by our words and deeds and actions and thoughts?

Shouldn't we be mocked when we profess holiness, and then we just appear very not holy?

Could it be said of our churches that we're actually reaching our communities with the gospel of Jesus?

Could it be said that members of churches in our part of the world are consistently doing deeds of love and service in Jesus' name for their neighbors?

Could it be said that we're living holy lives consistently? It's not just about numbers and money and corruption. It's possible to be a theologically sound, numerically growing, healthy budget, godly leadership church and still have a very weak and anemic witness.

Here's the underlying issue, though, and one that I think is specific to Westerners like us. Do you identify with the church? Lower case c, capital C. Can you rejoice with the confession of faith that we read earlier, that last line where it says, I believe that I am and forever shall remain a living member of it, the church? Do you have any feeling about the church's decline because you actually think that you are a part of it? Or do you have this tendency to think, that stinks, good thing it's just me and Jesus. We're fine. We're doing great. We're going to be okay. That's not a category that we have the option of having in the scriptures.

I think this might be the greatest area of decline of the church in our day is we can't avoid the individualism that we swim around in. It's the world that we live in, and that individualism makes us keep the church at an arm's length. We just don't know how to be part of an us. We're really good at being part of a me. We tend to treat the person like someone we date when convenient rather than the spouse to whom we've made a commitment.

Let me make a confession to you. If I'm here at CPC and I'm out in the hall talking to somebody and I hear a child cry, here's the process that I go through. I hear a child cry. First thought, is this an emergency? Does somebody need to run? Do I need to run to this child's aid? Assess, not an emergency. Second question, this is all happening as fast as my little brain will go. Second question, is that my kid? They know the sound of their own kid's voice. If my brain answers, no,

that's not my kid. There's another thought that happens simultaneous, and I bet you can guess what it is. Not my kid, not my problem. Isn't that a great confession from your pastor? How sweet. I can get around to the compassion and the being concerned and, oh, little Bobby scraped his knee. What a bummer. But my first thought is, emergency, no, not my kid, no, not my problem. Someone should do something. Maybe I'll talk to somebody about that.

But I thought of that this week and thought, I wonder if that's the mentality that we have when it comes to the church. When we notice the problems that are out there, our tendency is to just assume, okay, that's not my church, therefore it's not my problem. Those are not my people, not my problem. That's not my family. That's not my problem. All the while, Jesus is consistently telling us, no, no, no, this is your family. These are your people. You're part of them. As they go, so you go. Their problems are your problems. We can't lament the problems in the church if we don't identify ourselves with the church.

Do you love Jesus? I hope you do. Do you love what he loves? Jesus loves the church so much, so much. He loves the church enough to break down her walls if they need repairing. Jesus loves the church enough to make her the object of mockery if that's how she will realize the error of her ways and turn back to him. If you belong to Jesus, you belong to his people. Her problems are your problems. Identify with her lament, corruption, and confusion, and decline. Identify those places where she needs to be restored, and then there's only one thing to do about it. Go to the one who can actually restore her. That's the second point here, the second thing that we see. There's only one who can restore. God alone does the restoring.

Do you notice all the different things God is called in this passage? Verse one, he's the shepherd of Israel who leads his flock. That immediately pushes you over to Psalm 23, the Lord is my shepherd. But he's also the shepherd who's enthroned upon the cherubim in verse one. That's temple language. The cherubim are the carved angelic statue type things, for lack of a better phrase, that are on top of the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant is that box that is described throughout in places in the Old Testament. Sits in the central chamber in the temple. The Lord's presence is supposed to symbolically dwell above the Ark of the Covenant, above the cherubim, in the inner chamber of the temple. And only one person is allowed in there one time a year. It's the high priest. And he had better walk in with blood for his sins and the sins of the people. It's this picture of a shepherd who dwells in his sheep and who has made provision for the sheep to be able to come to him and be represented and to be made clean. So they're calling on that God to come and save them. You who dwell among us, you who have made provision for us.

He's also the vine dresser. If Israel is the vine, and throughout the Old Testament that's the image, Israel's the vine. God is the vine dresser. God is the one in charge of the vine. He, look at verse eight, it's God who brought the vine out. It's God who planted it. It's God who caused it to grow. It's God who broke it down. It's God who has caused it to be diminished. And in verse 14, it's only God who could look down from heaven and have regard for the vine. To put it more agriculturally, it's only the master gardener who could see the ravages of the bore and of everybody who's come by and picked fruit and has cut it and burned it, and actually caused

those very cuts to somehow produce new growth, something good. The very cuts and many destructions that seem like death can be for the health of a plant in the hands of a good gardener. Which is to say, whatever calamity God brings on his people because of sin and rebellion, only God can cause it to turn out somehow for our good. But does he want to do that? Does God want it to turn out for your good?

The phrase we see throughout the Psalm, restore us, verse three, seven, and 19, restore us O Lord, God of hosts, literally translates to turn us back, implied to you, God. Turn us back to you. In verse 14, the phrase translates to God of angelic armies, you please turn, meaning don't just turn us back to you, you turn back to us. This is a plea for God to be merciful. You've turned your face away from us, turn it back to us. Let it shine upon us with your favor again. And we see how he does that in the rest of the Psalm.

Verses 15 and 17 talk about, they ask God to have regard for the son whom you made strong for yourself, the son of man whom you made strong for yourself. Who is that? In one sense, that's Israel, right? That's the people of God, they're the son. But Israel turned from God, he disciplined them. They're saying, turn us back to you, you turn back to us, give us life and we'll call upon your name. But son of man, and the man of your right hand, seems to push us beyond just the Psalm. And you get to the book of Daniel and there's this figure that appears who's called the son of man who appears to be this true embodiment of Israel, a true Israelite king who sits in the line of David who will last forever and his reign will endure forever. Jesus. If you've ever read through the gospels, pretty quickly you realize that he has a way that he likes to refer to himself. And we would really like for him to say, we would like for him to go around saying, I am the son of God and the savior of sinners, repent and believe. But instead he does something that would be even more on the nose for an Israelite audience. He goes around calling himself the son of man. He is the figure, he is the king. The vine in this passage, it's Israel, yes, that's true throughout the scripture. Israel is the vine. Then you read in John 15 and Jesus says, no, I'm the vine, you're the branches. Jesus is the true Israelite. God is described as the shepherd here, but then you read in John chapter 10 and Jesus says, I'm the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

See, in this unique psalm, we see all these markers of the uniqueness of the son of God himself, the Lord Jesus. He is God the shepherd who leads the flock. He's the vine and the son of man. True Israel. What Israel was supposed to be, what Adam was supposed to be, what humanity was supposed to be. Yet as the God man, he's the vine cut down. He's the shepherd that struck. He is God enthroned above the cherubim and he's the blood sacrifice made in the true holy place so that sinful people can come before God and call him our father.

The psalmist keeps asking, let your face shine upon us again. That's from the book of Numbers. We say it here at the end of the service pretty often. It's a way of saying, Lord, let us have your favor. There's only one way to have the favor of God. It's to belong to the one who for a moment did not know the favor of God. On the cross, Jesus only knew the shadow of darkness as he underwent the full justice of God almighty on behalf of sinners like us. Jesus knew the malediction, the curse. He knew darkness and because he did, if we're united to him in faith, we

know the shining face of the favor of God upon us forever. It's really, really good news. That's our hope and that's the only hope for the church, that we have a God who sets his shining face on us because of the person and work of God the son, the Lord Jesus.

If you're not a Christian or you're not sure, or maybe you're interested in Jesus, but you think the church is a joke, which is very common, you're just part of the world, right? That's what people think now. I do want to put something on you. If everything that we've said here is true, God will save the church. By his grace, she will become everything she's supposed to be. His face will shine upon her forever, all because of the person and work of Jesus. In the end, nobody else stands. This is the one institution that's promised to last forever, not necessarily CPC, but the people of God.

Verse 16, he says that those who are part of burning her and cutting her down, may they perish at the rebuke of your face. To not know the shining face of God is to know the rebuke of God's face. If you're not in Christ, that's what awaits you. I would urge you, plead with you, believe in the Lord Jesus and become part of this thing that God is doing that yet looks shabby now, and it's unimpressive, and it seems like it's fallen apart, but God has committed to her, and that's our only hope.

For those who belong to the Lord Jesus, who are seeing their own sin and weakness, who long for the church to be strong and healthy and on mission, ask your God to restore his people where there is decay and decline. Ask him to do that. You see something lamentent then ask him to change it. He's the only one who can. He does it in the usual ways, the ordinary stuff, the preaching of the word and prayer and the sacraments and fellowship and all that kind of stuff.

See, our temptation even inside the church is to assume there's got to be some new method. There's got to be a program that will fix this thing. Surely there's some kind of think tank that's developed a seven-point plan that will produce the continuity and health of the church, and it just doesn't work that way. It doesn't work by a regimen of obedience where we can try to somehow force God to get on our side. Look at how much we've obeyed you. No, that's not how it works. It's not going to be an emotional worship experience that we could somehow conjure up that will render us instantly holy. Wouldn't that be nice? But no, that's not how it works. We can't be on the mission of drawing the nations in by developing a cleverly devised entertainment plan. I always joke in our inquirers class that we can't out Disney Disney, so should we try to out Disney Disney? I don't think so.

More than that, the answer to the church's problems is not to give up on her and leave her forever. If Jesus is committed to the church, we have to be committed too. Sheep without a flock don't survive, and branches without the vine will just wither. To quote Paul Tripp, there's no system of redemption that can fix us, but there is a redeemer, and he will fix us, and that is good news.

This is a good place to end our summer in the Psalms. We need to be restored, but we belong to a God who loves to do the restoring. He does it through sending the good shepherd, the

sacrifice, the true vine, the son of man who is reigning at the right hand right now, and promises to return again. The one who took on all the shadows of God's justice so that we can know his shining face. Brothers, sisters, own your faults. Repent and confess where you need to. Believe the good news again for yourself, and come to Jesus who promises to build his church and the gates of hell will not stand against her. Let's pray.

We ask now, Father, that you would restore us, O Lord God of angelic armies. Let your face shine on us that we may be saved. Give us the grace of repentance and faith. Help us see our unfaithfulness, our inconsistency, our sinfulness, our confusion, where the walls are broken. Help us not worry about human solutions, but to come to you, the only one who can help us, the Lord Jesus who saves and restores. For any who have not trusted him today, I pray that this would be the day when they see the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and they throw themselves on him and believe. For all of us, help us to entrust ourselves, our children, your church, and our future into the strong hands of the resurrected King Jesus, who will reign over his church forever, and in whose name we pray, amen