

## **An Expectation of Joy for the Coming New Year**

As we've worked through Psalm 80 in this series, it seems clear that this psalm helps us to learn more than we otherwise might have known of an actual historical event in Old Testament redemptive history. Yet, because the psalm addresses the lack of obedience of God's people Israel, it also points us forward to the remedy that God has for rebellion against his word.

This psalm speaks about a specific time in redemptive history when God punished his disobedient people, Israel. Yet we can also see how this psalm can apply to the church in every age.

As in Old Testament Israel, there will always be wheat and tares in the church that exist alongside one another. On the one hand, there will always be those who are seeking — with grace-driven effort — to obey God at every point in their lives. On the other hand, there will always be others who seem to live more for themselves than living as if they are a part of the body of Christ.

To be sure, the church will always be less than perfectly obedient to God's will. Yet, even though we're sometimes faithless, God is always faithful. This psalm points us initially to the care and compassion of the Shepherd for his people.

Remember these words from Psalm 80:1: "Give ear O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!" This may remind us of John 10:11, where Jesus states: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Later in Psalm 80, we see that the metaphor of Israel as a "vine" is used: "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it." (Psalm 80:8)

Although implied in Psalm 80 and brought out more clearly in John 15 in the New Testament, it also points us to the "vinedresser," who cares deeply for the vine and who "prunes us" when it's necessary so that we will bear fruit. As we think of what we learn of God with the differing metaphors of "shepherd/sheep" and "vine/vinedresser" in this psalm, how can this passage of scripture, written so long ago, still apply very directly to our daily lives?

As our shepherd, Jesus loves his true sheep completely (John 10:11)! What a blessing to know and experience his daily care and compassion. He protects us and our covenant children from much harm that might befall those who are not his by grace through faith. He provides for all our needs and so much more according to his perfect will for each of our lives. There's no better place to be than in the care of our loving shepherd, Jesus Christ. Jesus loves his true sheep completely!

Like sheep, we are dependent on our shepherd for everything! As sheep, it's so easy to wander off from the things of God and try to find other ways that we think we can nourish ourselves or other ways that we think we'll be happy and satisfied apart from the ways of God. The secular

world and its trinkets will always seek to take us away from God, but the things that it offers can never truly satisfy.

This leads us to my third and last point. We were also reminded in this series of the metaphor of God's people being a vine. We saw that when the people rightly followed God, they flourished and produced fruit. When we bring this metaphor to the New Testament, we see that Jesus focuses on the same thing in John 15:10-11, where he declares that he is the vine, and we are the branches: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept the Father's commandments and abide in his love."

But notice what else Jesus adds: "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

Are you lacking joy? Are you discontented with God's provision for your life? This can't be true in any ongoing way if we're seeking God's will and ways as a pattern of life. When Christians are consistently obedient, by God's grace, what we'll see — not perfectly but consistently — is Christians who are producing fruit, growing spiritually and exhibiting a joy that flows from the inside-out. As we grow in our knowledge of and trust in God, it will show up in joyful lives no matter what comes.

As we close this series, I want to share a quote from Dr. Sinclair Ferguson: "Knowledge and love of God create an environment in which discouragement and a sense of depression or spiritual desertion find difficulty in breathing. . . . I do not believe that it is possible to overstress the importance of this principle. Of course, it is unglamorous; but there is much in the Christian life that is unglamorous. The important thing is not its glamor, but that it's God's way. And because it's his way, it works." Beloved, like the Old Testament children of Israel, we will fail at times. But, by God's amazing grace, may we continue to grow in our knowledge of and love for God and continue to turn to him in ongoing repentance when we disobey. And may we continue to rest in his faithfulness, care and compassion. God loves his people in Jesus Christ. As we think of Christmas Day 2024 that's just past and as we ponder the upcoming new year, may we resolve, by grace, to commit our lives to a single-minded devotion toward keeping the commandments of God in all things. As Jesus reminds us in John 15:10-11: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."