

To Seek and to Save the Lost

In my previous article on Psalm 80 we were given information about God's loving care of the Israelites when he brought them out of Egypt in the past and then settled them in the Promised Land of Canaan. "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it." (80:8). I then took us to the New Testament where Jesus declares, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the Vinedresser." Even though Israel was spoken of as "a vine" in the Old Testament, the true vine is the Lord Jesus Christ. This should encourage Christians to reflect on the truth of our glorious salvation in Jesus Christ which is a free gift. Let's go now from past to:

—Present

This next portion of Psalm 80 depicts the **present** as it's being spoken of by the Psalmist at that time in redemptive history as given in verses 12-16a. One of the most well-known passages where Israel and Judah are metaphorically seen as a vineyard is in Isaiah 5:1-7 where God is depicted as caring for his vineyard, and yet, even with God's care, the vineyard yielded "wild grapes." In Isaiah 5:5 we read: "And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down." Look with me now in verses 12-13 of our Psalm. "Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it."

There are some scholars who hold that the Psalmist is recording the complete overthrow of Israel by the Assyrians. On the one hand, some hold that the Psalmist is speaking of the wall around the city of Samaria. On the other hand, it sometimes happens in Scripture that a "wall" or a "fence" may be speaking metaphorically of God's *protection* rather than a literal wall. For example, in the book of Job, Satan complains to God that he's "put a hedge around Job and his house and *all* that he has on every side..." (Job 1:9-10) which simply refers to God's protection of Job and his family. If this is the best way to see this, it may be that this portion of the Psalm is speaking of God's removal of some aspects of his protection of his people which could allow some intrusions of the pagan nations on the outer borders of the Northern Kingdom of Israel but not yet at the capital of Samaria. I say this because when Israel was finally and completely ravaged by the Assyrians, the Israelites were carried away and people from other nations were brought in to settle the land. This doesn't seem to have happened at this point in the Psalm. You can read about the capture of Samaria and the resettling of the people by the Assyrians in 2 Kings 17. So, then, the punishment is present and it's very real, but it's not yet at its absolute worst.

If you take verses 14 and 15 together, what you have is the longest refrain in the Psalm and yet, it's also somewhat different from the other three recorded refrains. "Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted, and the son whom you made strong for yourself." The phrase translated "right hand" in verse 15 connected to God's "planting" would simply be referring to God's power to do all his

holy will in the lives of his people Israel. The Hebrew word translated “stock” in this verse could also be translated “branch” or “bough” or “shoot.” In the context of verse 15 at this point in the Psalm, this refers to the nation Israel as a whole which we see in the synonymous parallel phrase, “the son whom you have made strong for yourself.” Verse 16a reads: “They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down....” This may also speak metaphorically of a measure of harm that’s already come upon Israel by Assyria, but it doesn’t seem to reference the final blow as already noted. We go now from the present that’s being referenced in this Psalm to something that the Psalmist is speaking of that’s still in the future from the time being spoken of in the Psalm.

This takes us now to verses 16b-19. “.....may they perish at the rebuke of your face! But let your right hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man in whom you have made strong for yourself!” There are differing views on the identity of the “son” in verse 17. Because of what we saw in verse 15, it may be right to think of this as referring to the nation Israel as a whole. If this is the best way to see this, the “man of your right hand” in this particular verse, would speak of a desire that Israel would, once again, be given the place of honor. Other scholars suggest that this may be referring to the king who was in power at that time. But notice now verse 18:

“Then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name!” Even though it may be true that the initial reference is to the people of Israel, it was only the true Vine and the true Israel who always obeyed the Father. It seems, then, that this Psalm ultimately points forward to Jesus for its final fulfillment. In John 15 Jesus declares: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser....Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:1, 4-5). In verse 19 of our Psalm, we read the final refrain: “Restore us, O LORD God of hosts! Let your face shine, that we may be saved!” This language reminds us of the New Testament. In Luke 19:10 it was Jesus who, speaking of himself said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Not only during the Christmas/Advent season, but all year, may we be reminded of, and tell others about, Jesus Christ, the Savior of sinners.

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