

27. Psalms 81-82

Praying Psalm 81 with Jesus



The psalmist, from the northern kingdom ('the house of Joseph', verse 5), calls on the assembly to celebrate the festival in obedience to God's decree.

¹Sing aloud to God, our strength;
shout for joy to the God of Jacob.

²Raise a song, and sound the timbrel,
the sweet sounding harp and the lute.

³Blow the trumpet at the new moon,
and when the moon is full, on our feast.

⁴For it is a statute for Israel,
a command of the God of Jacob,

⁵who decreed it for the house of Joseph,
when we marched from Egypt.

Suddenly (verse 6), he is moved to utter an oracle from God, calling on the people to heed God's word. To celebrate according to tradition is good, but we must listen to God and obey (verse 8).

⁶I hear a voice I had not known:

'I relieved your shoulder of the burden;
your hands were freed from the load.

⁷You called in distress, and I rescued you.

I answered you, hidden within the thunder.

I tested you at the waters of Meribah.

The language of the exhortation is that of the covenant: ‘**your GOD**’ (verse 10); ‘**my people**’ (verses 8, 11 and 13).

⁸Hear, O my people, while I admonish you.

O Israel, if only you would heed!

⁹There are to be no strange gods among you;
you will not bow down to an alien god.

¹⁰I am your GOD. It was I who rescued you from Egypt,
I fed you when you were hungry.

¹¹But my people would not listen to my voice.
Israel, you would not obey.

¹²So I left you to your stubborn hearts,
to follow your own designs.

¹³O that my people would heed me.

Israel, if only you would walk in my ways!

¹⁴At once I would subdue your foes,
and use my power against your enemies.
¹⁵Those who hate me would cringe before you,
and their doom would last forever.
¹⁶And you, Israel, I would feed on the finest wheat,
and on honey from the rock.'

In verse 7 the psalmist recalls how God tested the people at the 'waters of Meribah' (see Exodus 17:7). The people's hearts were stubborn, and they followed their own designs. According to the understanding found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, this must mean that it was God who organised things that way: 'I left you to your stubborn hearts, to follow your own designs' (verse 12).

Paul draws on this traditional language when he writes: 'Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts: to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves ... For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. ... And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done' (Romans 1:24-28).

The opening words of the oracle are: 'I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the load. You called in distress, and I rescued you' (verse 7). They recall God's liberating action in Egypt: 'GOD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians' (Exodus 3:7-8).

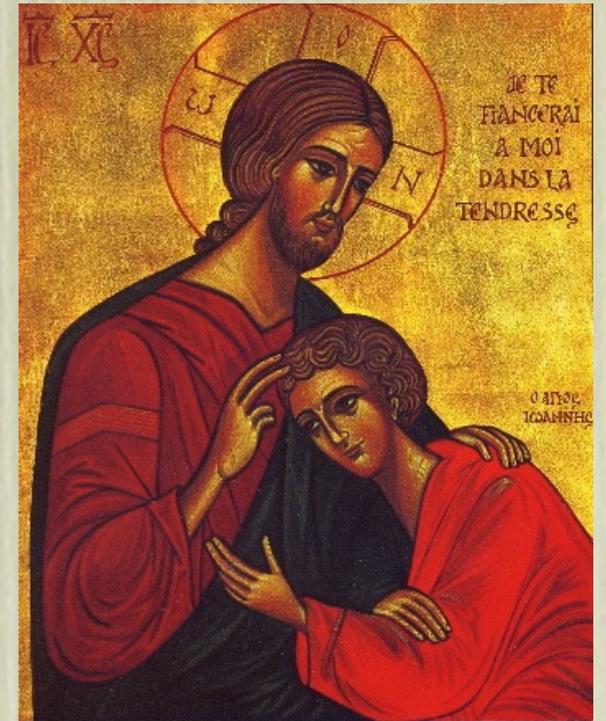
The closing words remind God's people that God is faithful to the covenant love. If they would walk in God's ways: 'At once I would subdue your foes, and use my power against your enemies. Those who hate GOD would cringe before you, and their doom would last forever. And you, Israel, I would feed on the finest wheat, and on honey from the rock' (verses 14-16).

Jesus encourages us to love and pray for those who oppose us (see Matthew 5:43-48), not to want them to cringe before us, and not wanting their **'doom to last forever'** (verse 15).

The God Jesus knew is not defined by the way God is understood by any of the psalmists. We must keep this in mind whenever we pray a psalm. Jesus wants us to 'be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48). He wants us to be perfect in compassion.

Psalm 81

- ¹Sing aloud to God, our strength;
shout for joy to the God of Jacob.
- ²Raise a song, and sound the timbrel,
the sweet sounding harp and the lute.
- ³Blow the trumpet at the new moon,
and when the moon is full, on our feast.
- ⁴For it is a statute for Israel,
a command of the God of Jacob,
⁵who decreed it for the house of Joseph,
when we marched from Egypt.
- ⁶I hear a voice I had not known:
'I relieved your shoulder of the burden;
your hands were freed from the load.
- ⁷You called in distress, and I rescued you.



⁷I answered you, hidden within the thunder.
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O Israel, if only you would heed!

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Praying Psalm 82 with Jesus



Surrounded by lesser gods, the High God is holding court. We find this mythical language in other psalms: 'GOD is the High God, the Sovereign over all the gods' (Psalm 95:3). 'All gods bow down before him ... For you, GOD, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods' (Psalm 97:7, 9). In monotheistic Judaism 'gods' and 'sons of the gods' was interpreted as referring to angelic beings: 'O heavenly beings ['sons of the gods'], acclaim the glory and might of GOD' (Psalm 29:1).

¹God has taken his place in the council of the gods.

It is there God holds judgment:

²'How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked?

³Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
defend the lowly and the destitute.

⁴Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the power of the wicked.'

GOD condemns the lesser gods (and so the foreign governments that worship them) for not caring for the poor in their administration of justice:

The lesser gods are accused of ‘groping in the dark’. It is in the dark that injustice thrives. It is because of injustice that ‘the world falls to pieces. The gods might think that their immortal status will save them, but they will ‘share the fate of humans and die like any prince.’

⁵The gods know nothing.

They grope in the dark, while the world falls to pieces.

⁶I say: ‘Although you are gods,

all of you children of the Most High;

⁷nevertheless, you shall share the fate of humans,

and die like any prince.’

⁸Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for you rule all the nations.

The psalm stresses the importance of justice, and, since it is the poor who suffer most from injustice, it stresses the importance of concern for ‘the weak and the orphan, the lowly and the destitute’ (verse 3).

The Hebrew Scriptures show that the people of Israel were constantly struggling to free themselves from the many conflicting images of God that they had before they came to know GOD, images that prevailed in the surrounding polytheistic cultures. We find images of God in the Hebrew Scriptures that are not easily reconciled. However, among all the different ways of envisioning God, a fundamental one is that God is just, which is to say that God can be trusted to act always according to God's nature.

What is God's nature? The God of Israel is the God of Moses, the God of the Exodus, the God who liberates from slavery:

'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them' (Exodus 3:7-8).

‘GOD passed before Moses, and proclaimed, ‘GOD, GOD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin’ (Exodus 34:6-7).

Of course, since God is just, God must act not only according to who God is, but also according to who we are. God cannot turn a blind eye to sin. The above text continues:

‘yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation’ (Exodus 34:7).

Though God must judge sin for what it is, God never stops being a God of love: ‘How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath’ (Hosea 11:8-9).

The psalmist cannot believe that ‘God will always reject me, and will never again turn and grace me.’ He cannot accept that ‘God’s kindness to me is exhausted’, that ‘God’s promises have come to an end’, that ‘God can forget to be gracious’ (Psalm 77:7-9).

‘The covenant love of GOD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness’ (Lamentations 3:22-23).

As the idea of God is purified, especially by Jesus, so is our understanding of God's justice. We have come to see that God's initiative is always loving, and everything that God does expresses this love. God's justice is God acting always and only out of love. When we sin, we cut ourselves off from God, but we cannot stop God loving. Even when the consequences of our sinful behaviour are seen as punishment from an angry God, the aim of God's punishment is that we change and renew our communion with God. God wants us to repent and live: 'Your Maker, the mighty GOD, is your husband. The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. GOD has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says GOD, your Redeemer' (Isaiah 54:5-8).

Jesus reveals God as a God of love. We find this truth expressed beautifully also in the Hebrew Scriptures. The difference is that Jesus' revelation of God's love is such that every other image of God has to be re-thought. We no longer think of God as controlling the world. God loves the world, and love does not control. God has made us free and respects our freedom. If we choose to reject God's love, God will not stop loving us; but neither will God force this love upon us. Our rejection of God's love, our choosing to live without this love, affects our lives and the lives of those around us. It blocks out the light. But if we change and genuinely turn to God, we will be immediately bathed in light. God's love is unconditional. We can choose to reject God's love. We can plunge ourselves into darkness, but we cannot alter God's love. We no longer think of God as reacting to our sin with anger. What the ancient Israelites thought was a sign of divine anger, we see as the disruptive consequence of human sin.

God is just. God, therefore, cannot pretend that things are other than they in fact are. We are meant for light, not for darkness. We are created to live in God's love. The darkness into which we plunge ourselves through sin is unnatural. We are ill at ease. The darkness itself can be a reminder that we are meant for the light. In this sense the effect of our sin can be spoken of as 'punishment', so long as we recognise that it is self-inflicted. It is not something which God inflicts upon us from the outside. The prodigal son in the parable of Jesus ended up in a pig yard as a consequence of his dissipation (see Luke 15:11-32). This was a 'punishment', but not something inflicted on him by anyone other than himself, certainly not by his father.

If we speak of it as punishment 'of God', we are not saying that God is the cause; rather that it is a self-inflicted punishment that affects our relationship with God (it is 'of God').

The Catholic Catechism has this to say: 'To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from God for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called hell' (n.1033).

The mystery is that we are able to resist love, and so can die an eternal death. However, we must remember that to do so we must break through the loving arms of Jesus extended on the cross, for Jesus 'gave his life to save us from our sins' (Galatians 1:4), whether it be through a last-minute promise to a dying thief (Luke 23:39-43), or a last-minute appeal to a desperate Judas (Luke 22:48). It is from these consequences that Jesus would save us, not by any suggestion that God overlooks our transgressions, but by the amazing truth that God offers us a love which offers to transform us, attracting us away from sin and towards the communion which alone can satisfy our hearts. The God of love and communion that Jesus shows us highlights that aspect of justice in the Hebrew scriptures that is concerned with being in right relationship with God and right relationship with each other.

That God is just is a theme found in many of the psalms. In Psalm 17, the psalmist prays: 'O GOD, hear my appeal for justice. Attend to my cry. Listen to my plea.' In Psalm 31 he prays to God: 'May your justice be my security.' In Psalm 51 the psalmist admits that he has sinned and pleads for forgiveness. He acknowledges God's justice in judging him as a sinner: 'You are just in your sentence, blameless when you pass judgment' (verse 4). The psalmist goes on to focus on God's justice in bringing salvation. God, being God, will always show mercy and re-create a sinner's life, so that, freed from sin, we will be able to live beautifully from the heart. In Psalm 54, the psalmist appeals to the divine tribunal for the justice that his enemies are denying him. He appeals to God's reputation as a just and faithful judge.

In Psalm 85 the psalmist looks forward to the time when 'covenant love and faithfulness will meet; justice and peace will embrace. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and justice will look down from the sky. GOD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Justice clears a path for God. Justice points the way to peace' (verses 10-13).

Justice, especially in regard to the poor, is central to Israel's faith. Psalm 94 is a lament against those who perpetrate injustice, foolishly thinking that God does not notice. They 'crush GOD's people, and oppress GOD's heritage. They kill the widow and the stranger, they murder the orphan, and they say "GOD does not see" (verses 5-6). In Psalm 140 the psalmist declares: 'I know that GOD maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor' (verse 12).

The Book of the Covenant is one of the oldest sections of the Law. It gives us an insight into the understanding of pre-monarchic Israel. Among its injunctions we find the following:

‘You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry ... If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbour’s cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down’ (Exodus 22:21-26).

The prophetic scrolls reiterate the same message:

‘Thus says GOD: I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals — they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed’ (Amos 2:6-8).

‘Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!’ (Isaiah 5:8).

‘Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!’ (Isaiah 10:1-2).

‘Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of GOD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and GOD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am ... and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail’ (Isaiah 58:6-11).

‘Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbours work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says, ‘I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms,’ and who cuts out windows for it, panelling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father [King Josiah] eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says GOD. But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practising oppression and violence’ (Jeremiah 22:13-17).

Jesus bears witness to God's justice, with special focus on the poor. In describing Jesus' Baptismal experience the Gospel writers point us to Isaiah 42.

'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth a just verdict to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth a just verdict. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established a just verdict in the earth' (Isaiah 42:1-4).

At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, Luke outlines Jesus' agenda in the scene where Jesus is preaching in the Nazareth synagogue.

'Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: The Spirit of GOD is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of GOD's favour. And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them: Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4:17-21; Isaiah 61:1-2).

Again and again in the Gospel narratives we see Jesus caring for the poor, the oppressed, the needy, the marginalised, the neglected. As we watch him we are seeing God's concern. Jesus declared the poor 'blessed and happy' (Luke 6:20). The reign of God is a reign of love, and God was coming to free them from oppression, through Jesus' ministry and through the ministry of his disciples.

When John the Baptist sent his disciples to inquire whether Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah, Jesus replied: 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them' (Luke 7:22).

Jesus challenged his contemporaries: 'When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind' (Luke 14:13).

For the poor to be released from their most crippling oppression they must open themselves to God's love. Matthew highlights this when he has Jesus say: 'Blessed and happy are the poor in spirit' (Matthew 5:3). To grasp what this means we must look at Jesus. Being 'poor in spirit' is presented by Matthew as the fundamental attitude of a person who is to receive the good news, only because it is a fundamental attitude of Jesus himself. The blessedness, the bliss, the profound delight of intimate communion with God which the poor are to experience is a sharing in the religious experience of Jesus.

The word 'poor' applies literally to those who do not have the resources to meet their own needs. We are 'poor in spirit', therefore, to the extent that we recognise that everything we are and everything we have is a gift from God on whom we are totally dependent. Jesus is telling his disciples that we will be 'blessed'. That is to say, we will have that special happiness that flows from God's blessing. We will share Jesus' communion with God to the extent that we recognise our own powerlessness and complete dependence on God. This will mean giving up attempts to rely on ourselves without reference to God. It will mean looking to God as the source of our hope and salvation, trusting that God wants only to love us.

We should make an important clarification. It should be obvious from Jesus' own commitment to the poor and oppressed that he is in no way justifying material, economic poverty, nor is he saying that there is anything good about any of the deprivations experienced by the oppressed poor. One point he is making is that when our lack of resources to meet our pressing needs is obvious, we are less likely to think of ourselves as self-sufficient than when our material welfare is secured. The deceptive and superficial self-reliance that goes with wealth is a trap that caused Jesus to say: 'How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God' (Luke 18:24). However, it can be hard for the materially poor too because of the temptation to envy and despair.

The 'poor' are those who recognise their need and cry out to God in their distress. As we watch Jesus, we see that he cannot resist the cry of the poor. When he meets a person who wants to be his disciple and who has resources to help the poor, he asks him to rid himself of his possessions — of the riches that burden and 'possess' him — and to give them to those who need them. Only then will he be free to follow Jesus (Luke 18:22).

Jesus, therefore, is not praising poverty. He is calling his disciples to recognise that we are not independent, that we do not have the resources in ourselves to be or to do anything, but that we are totally dependent upon God. He is assuring us that, if we place our trust in God and act accordingly, we will experience now the communion with God that will satisfy our deepest need and longing.

A perfect image for the 'poor' is found in Psalm 131. Here, the psalmist places before us a little child, utterly dependent, simply and totally looking to the mother, and doing so joyfully, because of the security provided by the mother's love: 'O GOD, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in GOD from this time on and forever more.'

For this reason, Jesus says to his disciples: 'Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it' (Luke 18:17).

The 'poor' are those who recognise their dependence. The 'poor' are open to hear the good news. They believe that God who delights in Jesus delights also in them.

The poor believe that it is God's purpose to save them from all that hinders their full communion with God and thus limits their freedom to live full human lives.

Perhaps Jesus' most powerful statement on justice and care for the poor is when he tells us how our lives will ultimately be judged:

'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me' (Matthew 25:34-36).

Luke is a realist. The poor will experience hunger; they will weep; and they will be rejected, as Jesus and the prophets were rejected (Luke 6:21-23). It is one thing for a child to trust. It is another for an adult, in a world of sin, oppression and suffering, to maintain this same loving trust in God while being committed to do God's will. The challenge presented by Jesus to his disciples is to remain 'poor' under persecution. We will see Jesus living with this childlike trust in his own public ministry and especially in his suffering and death. In the face of a cruel death Jesus can still say to God: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Luke 23:46; see Psalm 31:5). As we pray this psalm with Jesus, let us pray to share his trust in God.

Psalm 82

¹God has taken his place in the council of the gods.

It is there God holds judgment:

²‘How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked?’

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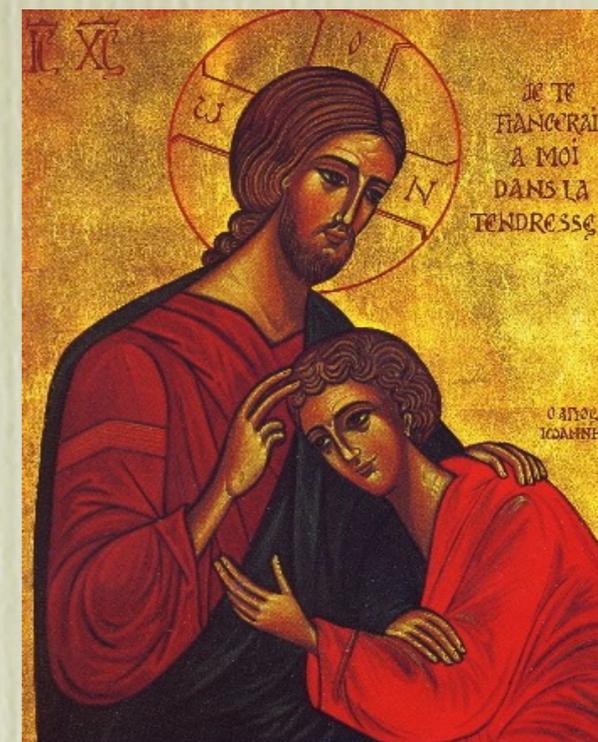
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Christ has no hands but yours