

Psalms: God's Worship & Prayer Guide

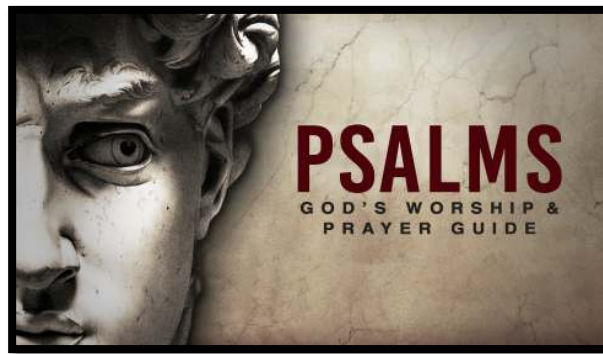
Worship and The Word

Psalm 81

Written By

©Dr. Marty Baker

February 21, 2021



How important is it for you to corporately worship the living God? Jesus educates us when He took the disgruntled, envious Pharisees to task on the glorious day of His triumphal entry into Jerusalem:

³⁷ As soon as He was approaching, near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the miracles which they had seen, ³⁸ shouting: "BLESSED IS THE KING WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" ³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, rebuke Your disciples." ⁴⁰ But Jesus answered, "I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!" (Luke 19)

Sad, isn't it? The very leaders who should have recognized the divine Messiah chose to deny Him because He didn't meet their limited, selfish expectations. Their request of Jesus dripped with unholy hubris. Ironically, His terse reply rebuked them, not His disciples for they were merely doing what God designed them for. Think about this. God has saved and redeemed us for one primary goal: to adore, praise, and worship Him who is worthy. God has called His people to do many things, but at the top of the list, really, the pinnacle is to give Him all worship.

Of course, worship can occur privately or publicly. Neither is more important than the other, but neither should be neglected either. Balance is necessary, in fact, it is a true saying when someone states that corporate worship, which is a divine mandate, should be a natural weekly culmination of a daily, moment by moment adoration of the Lord Jesus. All those sweet, intimate moments you had with the Lord Monday through Saturday should build to a crescendo on a given Sunday when you come together with God's people.

Along these lines, I must ask you a personal question: Is there balance in your Christian life between private and public worship? Covid-19 has, unfortunately, made this quite difficult. Some cannot attend for health reasons, and that is totally understandable. Some cannot attend because they care for aging family members who can't afford to be exposed to the virus. Yet through all of these complexities, we have remained committed to corporate worship. Why? Psalm 81 gives us the answers we need.

Worship Is the Saint's Mandate Followed by The Savior's Message (Psalm 81)

From the content of this particular Psalm, it is apparent it was written for reading/singing at a time of one of Israel's various religious festivals. Which one? With the psalm's emphasis upon the use of trumpets at the time of the New Moon, we can probably limit it to either the festival of Trumpets or Tabernacles. Since the word for trumpet here is shophar (v. 3), and the shophar was used during Tabernacles, this leads me to think the latter festival was in view. Further, the opening command to "sing aloud" in Hebrew (**הֲרִנְנוּ לַאלֹהִים** , Ps. 81:2, "*Sing for joy to our God*") is only used in one other place in the Old Testament, viz., Deuteronomy 32:43, (**הֲרִנְנוּ גוֹיִם עִמּוֹ** . . . "*Rejoice, you nations, with his people*"). This song Moses wrote expresses the faithfulness of God to His people during the wilderness wanderings, followed by the unfaithfulness, rebellion, and apostasy of His chosen people. As such, it served to teach Israel about God's stable, loving, and holy character, and how He responded to their historical spiritual disobedience, *with a view of this tension serving as a deterrent to future rebellion*. Since the Law, viz., Deuteronomy, was, in fact read, at the Feast of Tabernacles every seven years (Deut. 31:9-13), and since there is a clear grammatical tie between this Psalm and Deuteronomy, and since this Psalm also speaks about the danger or rebellion, I think we can safely surmise the Feast of Tabernacles is the background of this inspired song.

Why is this important to note? It helps us understand how our earthly pilgrimage is a similar journey as we head to the heavenly promised land. On the one hand, we are to make room for corporate times of worship, and on the other hand, we are to be cognizant that our spiritual walks can, and will, impact that worship either positively or negatively.

With this foundational information in mind, let us ponder what this great, moving Psalm teaches us about worship.

The Truth About Worship (Psalm 81:1-4)

What is the truth about worship of God? The first four verses give us the answer in clear, concise terms: **[Jake: Place Bible text with this point]**

¹ Sing for joy to God our strength; Shout joyfully to the God of Jacob. ² Raise a song, strike the timbrel, The sweet sounding lyre with the harp. ³ Blow the trumpet at the new moon, At the full moon, on our feast day. ⁴ For it is a statute for Israel, An ordinance of the God of Jacob. (Psalm 81)

Underscore the verbs here because they are all imperatives, meaning they are not conditional statements but outright commands: sing, shout, raise, blow. You could rightfully place an exclamation point after each one of them as well and God would not be offended. The Pentecostals and Charismatics among us would probably break into some loud “Amens,” too.

When you know the cost of your salvation was the death of Christ, when you realize His Spirit has made you His temple, when you know how sweet times are prayer are with Him, and when you are accustomed to worshipping Him privately, getting yourself to corporate worship and becoming an active part in it is just what you do because it’s the by-product of a life of worship. Also, you, as a growing Christian, are present because you know it is your divine duty. And when you show up, you know you are not here to critique other worshippers, to critically analyze the quality of the singers and instrumentalists, or to offer your sagacious appraisal of the videos or Power Point slides.

No, you show up because it is God’s call upon your life, and you do it with gusto. Did I say gusto? Note, the Psalmist commands you “*sing for joy.*” What does that look like? I can tell you what it’s not supposed to look like: a funeral, or something that just a bother. Behind your Covid mask should be a big smile because you are worshipping the powerful Creator (Elohim, Gen. 1:1) who has given you physical and spiritual life.

You should, also, *make a joyful shout* to the God who chose Israel to be His chosen people before the Church. What does this sound like? Well, I’d dare say it is no whisper. Conversely, a shout is a shout, something akin to the military’s hoo-ah. It might be related to the noise you hear from a tight end when he catches a threaded pass between two defenders in the end-zone during a big game. I once read this question about worship, “Why do the same people who scream like a bunch of wild Indians at a football game, sit like wooden Indians in worship on Sunday mornings?” (Note, I’m not offended by the quote because my great, great grandparents were both Choctaw Indians. Hence, it’s just a usual figure of speech.). What is the shout factor when it comes to you and worship? Would the meter move if one existed?

Additionally, “*raise a song*” is related here to playing a musical instrument, viz., tambourine, harp, or a lute, which literally in Hebrew speaks of a bottle. The image takes me back to my Southern roots when a scruffy man in Hill Billy bands played a jug to add some much needed base to the group. Do you play an instrument? If so, and you are proficient, then you should be using it in worship more often than not. Ah, you say, I’m an introvert and playing in public just frightens me. To that I would reply, I’m an introvert who happens to play the piano, and I use that ability when I can. Can’t play anything? Then use your voice as an instrument by actually singing to lyrics behind that protective mask.

“*Blow a trumpet*” (Psalm 81:4) comes from the Hebrew, *shophar*, which speaks of a large, curved, and hollowed-out ram’s horn. Talk about an obscure

instrument today. What’s your obscure instrument? An oboe? A flute? A saxophone? Use it to God’s glory. My last Israel tour group kindly purchased me one. I have it here today, but don’t



look for me to blow it. Believe me, no one would go to battle or assemble in worship if I attempted to blow through the mouthpiece.

According to verse 5, the ram's horn was to be blown in Israel, especially around the Feast of Tabernacles, to call the people to worship per God's command. **Here is an audio clip of what this musical device sounds like from someone who can play it. (It's 41 seconds)**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dkEe3ph_bU

Ah, it sends chills down my spine. Why? To me I think it sounds like what we'll hear when the trumpet of God sounds and we, the Church, are raptured into His presence before the Tribulation (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Historically, however, when an Israelite heard this distinctive sound he knew what he had to do. He had to get himself to worship.

Likewise, on any given Sunday morning when you walk into our large foyer, there is time to talk and greet each other; however, when you hear the music start that's your cue from God to get into worship and become part of the service. It's why Jesus saved you, and it's a command to be in corporate worship, which means it's not a suggestion. If you are able, God expects you to be with His people more often than not lifting up His holy, righteous name. Sure, at this season in your life you might be restricted to worshipping God on-line, and I completely understand that. Ostensibly, I do know that as some point in time you will need to move to corporate worship because it is God's mandate, and because once you fulfill this divine command you will feel complete. I can't say how many times I've heard from saints who've recently returned to corporate worship say something like, "Being here felt so right. It was like I was holding my spiritual breath, and now I'm breathing again."

Worship is all about us giving God the praise due His name with our voices and with instrumentation . . . and just in case you don't play an instrument, take heart, because even spoons can be used to praise God. Check out this video where Chris Rodrigues sings "*Angels In Heaven, I Know I've Been Changed*."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLmM9kcBKs>

This is the truth about worship. But there is so much more to it as we encounter in the ensuing verses. By law of proportion, the Psalmist wanted to make sure we all fully understand . . .

The Teaching In Worship (Psalm 81:5-16)

We give to God in worship and He turns and gives back to us in the form of teaching. By means of songs, we focus on Him. By means of teaching, He focuses on us and tells us what He wants us to know so we can either come to know Him or how to walk in order to please Him. In verse 5 we encounter the moment in worship when the worship leader, Asaph, received teaching from God which needed to be given to the people.

⁵ He established it for a testimony in Joseph when he went throughout the land of Egypt. I heard a language that I did not know:

He quickly and abruptly moves from stating how God gave him an inspired Word during a worship service. What did God say? He moved from giving Israel the mandate to worship Him during the Feast of Tabernacles, to talking about the time when God personally went *against*

(which is a better translation than “throughout”) Egypt in order to deliver His chosen people. At that time, God’s revelation to Moses, coupled with His commandments designed to free His enslaved people sounded to them like a foreign language . . . probably because they had been in captivity so long. Later in the NT, Stephen recounts how the Israelites did not at this time understand exactly what Moses, their deliverer, was talking about (Acts 7:25). In this sense, God sounded to them like one who spoke a foreign language. They eventually got the picture, didn’t they?

In the ensuing verses, the Psalmist recounts the education word of spiritual enlightenment God gave him during worship. What do we learn during this ancient worship service? *God will first establish that He worked powerfully and compassionately to redeem His people from bondage.* It’s a point He will make in verses 6, 7, and 10.

⁶ I relieved his shoulder of the burden, His hands were freed from the basket. ⁷ You called in trouble and I rescued you; I answered you in the hiding place of thunder; I proved you at the waters of Meribah. Selah.



No one on the planet could have delivered Israel from the iron-fisted, ruthless grip of one of the most power potentates of the day, Pharaoh. That freedom could only be achieved by means of the intervention of the living God in human history. And intervene He did through two old men, Moses and Aaron, and His intervention was anything by ho hum. In the ten plagues, God not only definitively

controlled everything in the cosmos from gnats to darkness to free His people. He purposefully and strategically focused His divine wrath on ten major sections of the “mighty” religious pantheon of the Egyptians.

- Plague #1: Nile turned to blood = Khnum: Guarding of the Nile; Hapi: spirit of the Nile, and Osiris: the mighty Nile was a bloodstream
- Plague #2: Frogs = Heqt: form of a frog; god of the resurrection
- Plague #3: Gnats
- Plague #4: Flies
- Plague #5: Cattle = Hathor: mother-goddess; form of the cow, Apis; bull of the god Ptah; the symbol of fertility; Mnevis: the sacred bull of Heliopolis
- Plague #6: Boils = Imhotep: the god of medicine
- Plague #7: Hail = Nut: the sky goddess; Isis, the goddess of all life; Seth: the protector of all crops

- Plague #8: Locusts = Isis, the good of all life; Seth, the protector of crops
- Plague #9: Darkness = The gods Re, Aten, Atum, Horus: all “powerful” sun gods to various degrees
- Plague #10: Death of Firstborn = The Pharaoh as a deity; Osiris, the supposed giver of all life. Right.

When He was finished, not only had the Pharaoh’s firstborn “divine” son died during the first Passover Feast, God, as I have said before, broke the back of the mighty sea God, Yam, by dividing the sea in order to make a way for the deliverance of His people. Talk about a spectacular, jaw-dropping exodus! To highlight the absolute power of God, the Psalmist, by divine inspiration, leaves out the main verb/copula in the opening phrase of verse 10.

¹⁰ I, the LORD [*Yahweh*], am your God [*Elohim*], who brought you up from the land of Egypt; open your mouth wide and I will fill it.

Indeed. He was the covenantal God, *Yahweh*, who used His power as the Creator, *Elohim*, to completely dominate the Egyptian despot, his crack troops, and his state of the art armaments. Dealing with them was child’s play to God.

By stopping the worship service with this divinely ordained snapshot from Israel’s history, God wanted to underscore one thing. *When He delivers you from sinful, slavish bondage, He expects you to remember it the rest of your life.* You might need to re-read that, especially if you’ve been saved for a long time.

If you are ten, twenty, or thirty years out from your divine deliverance from Egypt, God wants you to stop everything in worship and remember what He saved you from. Do you remember? Do you remember when you were lost in sin, when you merely lived for yourself and your lusts? Do you remember when you knew deep down in your heart that nothing you attempted in life gave you ultimate meaning and purpose? Do you remember when the darkness in your soul seemed to only ever get darker the longer you lived? Do you remember when you were so enslaved by sin that you got to the point where you weren’t even shocked, nor embarrassed by the types of sin you engaged in? Yes, do you ever stop and remember who you used to be when you were a slave to sin in your own version of Egypt? And when you do this do you, then, naturally turn and remember the moment the grace of Christ’s salvation poured all over your sin-stained soul and broke your shackles?

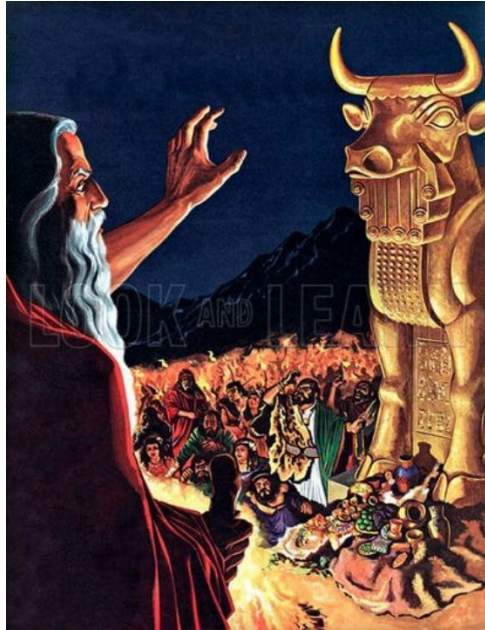
Such is the nature of worship. On the one hand, we lift God up, while on the other hand we learn about ourselves. When the Word is opened, analyzed, imparted, and applied, we all should know what God has just said and what He wants from us when we walk out of this room. From Psalm 81, we readily learn that God is all about us remembering from whence we have spiritually come. I used to be a drug addict. I used to be an atheist who questioned everything except my own untenable belief system. I used to be absorbed with all of the false ideologies I learned while attending the university. I used to be bound to a false religious system which placed heavy emphasis upon my works in order to secure a place in God’s presence. But, then, the miracle of the cross, the power of the gospel broke into my life and I was free at last by the power of God. Remember this because it will keep you humble as you grow up in the faith. Remember this because it will motivate you to thank Jesus more often than not for the spectacular way He worked in history and in your life to free you from the chains of sin. Remember this because it

will serve as a deterrent from walking away from God. Obviously, ancient Israel didn't do a whole lot of remembering in their walk with God.

What did God want from His people? In a word: obedience.

⁸ Hear, O My people, and I will admonish you! O Israel, if you will listen to Me!

⁹ There shall be no foreign god among you; nor shall you worship any foreign god.



All God wanted was for His people to remember His grand, glorious redemption so they would worship Him and Him only. But that's not what happened. From the beginning they couldn't even keep the first two commandments from Exodus 20. No sooner were their backs up against the Red Sea with the Egyptian army closing in and they forgot the great God who had just magnificently delivered them, choosing to complain to Moses that the end was near (Ex. 14:10-12). Even after He parted the sea and permitted them to walk to safety over a dry sea bed, it only took three days of walking in the wilderness to cause them to complain about the bitter, brackish water supply at Marah (Ex. 15:22-27). Even after God told Moses to make the water potable by throwing a tree into it, yes, even after this unusual miracle in a place where trees were in short supply, a mere two months later we find them complaining (again) about the lack of bread and meat (Ex. 16:1ff). What ingrates. They longed for the

foreign gods of Egypt and even eventually constructed a god of their own to replace the living God.

From verse 11, we learn a sad truth. Those who don't remember what God has done for them are prone to spiritually drift and rebel against Him. Tragic, isn't it? He, who had done so much to woo and win them found them to be self-absorbed, selfish, and ungrateful. When they should have naturally bowed before the One who displayed their salvation in a spectacular fashion, they used their free will to live freely where sin was concerned:

¹¹ But My people did not listen to My voice, and Israel did not obey Me.

What an understatement, and it's stated in the most emphatic fashion in the Hebrew by means of wedding the negative, lo, to the coordinating conjunction, and (waw).

How did God respond? As He always does where sin is concerned. If you want to go after it, He will back up and let you go your own way. This is an ominous move of God, for sure. When you chose to walk over the redemption He has provided by failing to recall His work in your behalf and by living to embrace carnality, He will discipline you by means of turning you over to the sin . . . most likely with the goal of waking you up (Heb. 12:1ff).

¹² So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, to walk in their own devices.

This is the OT version of Romans 1 where Paul talks about the whirlpool nature of sin. Zechariah talks about it too in chapter 7 of his prophecy:

⁹ Thus has the LORD of hosts said, 'Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; ¹⁰ and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.' ¹¹ But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears from hearing. ¹² They made their hearts *like* flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets; therefore, great wrath came from the LORD of hosts. ¹³ And just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen," says the LORD of hosts . . . (Zechariah 7).

Believe me, the last thing you want is for God to pull back from you because you won't pull up next to Him. What did God want from the people He had redeemed by means of many outright miracles? Verse 13 tells us: ¹³ *"Oh that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways!"* Is God saying that about as you sit in worship?

For those who decide to obey him more often than not, God gives a word of encouragement and hope:

¹⁴ I would quickly subdue their enemies and turn My hand against their adversaries.

God's heart is for us to be obedient to Him, especially in light of the wonders of His salvation (Deut. 10:11-12; Isa. 48:18; Matt. 23:37; Luke 19:41-42). That's all He wanted from Israel. Had they given it to Him, He would have blessed them greatly.

On the contrary, those chose to play games with the God who redeemed them:

¹⁵ Those who hate the Lord would pretend obedience to Him, and their time of punishment would be forever.

As God reveals here, those who pretend obedience while they embrace disobedience can count on His punishment until they come to see the error of their ways and repent. When they do come clean from their backsliding He promises to restore them and bless them. What grace!

¹⁶ But I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."

And to think that all of this revelation came to the spiritual leader during worship, and he wasted no time giving it to the people even though they lived hundreds of years after the events presented. This is, of course, the tension or balance we are supposed to encounter in worship. We enter to worship the living God who has redeemed us, and we expectantly wait for a word from Him so we can align our lives to reflect His holy life.

What word will we typically hear? God wants us to remember the glory and wonder of the salvation He has given to us if we are saved. Yes, most sermons you hear in worship will have something to do with the magnificence of the salvation He has secured on the cross for sinners. Do you remember? Those who remember will be more apt to obey the One who saved them. Those who don't will tend to drift away from Him, when that, my friend, is the last thing He wants from them, or from you.

You drifting today? That's God's practical question in worship this morning. If you are, I know you are not happy. I know your conscience is getting the best of you, too, because the Spirit is working overtime on you. I know your worship isn't what it used to be either because you sin sucks the joy out of it.

What do you need to do? Remember the love you had for Jesus when He first saved you, and repent of being rebellious. Do this and He will open the floodgates of blessing He details in these verses.

