

Song of Communal Lament

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[0 : 00] arid, dry. Rainfall totals across most of the state of Victoria in June were well below average.

In fact, June was the third lowest rainfall on record. But the country needs not only H₂O. Our nation needs the water of revival, spiritual revival. And revival generally takes place on dry ground. Speaking of spiritual water, I'm sure you'll remember these words that God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to the Judean exiles in Babylon.

God said, I'll pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground. God's always active in salvation throughout history, throughout the globe.

But there are clearly periods when the Lord powerfully pours out his spirit. One such time was the period of the Reformation in the early 16th century.

[1 : 13] Perhaps the greatest time of Reformation and revival in the history of the church. Before the ministry of Martin Luther, the church was in bad shape. Indeed, the church was in very bad shape.

Alexander IV was in the Vatican. He filled the place with his own illegitimate children. He didn't hesitate to put them in positions of esteem and influence. Then he was succeeded by Julius II, who was known as the warrior pope.

And then came Leo X. He was the Medici pope. And he's well known for his little expression, God's given us the papacy, so let's enjoy it. But across Europe, the church was in a ruinous condition.

The clergy were corrupt. People in the pews were superstitious, looking everywhere but to Christ, seeking answers in mysticism, in the relics of saints, holy days, the purchase of indulgences.

But there were some glimpses of revival. They were seen in the ministry of men such as John Wycliffe of England or John Huss of Bohemia.

[2 : 27] But it was in the 16th century that God had mercy on his church. And one writer has so clearly painted the picture.

He writes, Revival.

Do you long for it? Do we, as the gathered people of God, long for revival? Does the Western church yearn for revival?

Does the whole body of Christ throughout the globe yearn for revival? Lord, sweep back the destructive darkness of Satan's kingdom and engulf individuals and nations in the brilliant light of the kingdom of God.

I wonder if those words, if not those exact words, the sense of those words, do those words reflect the constant prayer of our hearts?

[3 : 46] Church historians have reviewed revivals over the last three years, the last three centuries, I should say, and at the risk of over-systematising, they've identified certain phases of God's working leading up to the revival.

Firstly, it's seen that revival is usually preceded by a time of spiritual depression, of apathy, of gross sin. Secondly, a small group of God's people become very conscious of their sin, the backslidden condition.

They repent and bring a new outpouring of God's grace. Thirdly, leaders arise with prophetic insights into the causes and remedies for current problems, and a new revelation of God's holiness stimulates a striving after that holiness by God's people.

I wonder if any of these phases have occurred in Australia. Certainly the first one, a time of spiritual depression, apathy, and gross sin.

Perhaps two, perhaps that second phase, a small group of people become conscious of their sin, the backslidden condition, repent and start to see a new outpouring of God's grace.

[5 : 11] But there's not a lot of evidence of the third phase. Psalm 80 pitches Israel in the midst of these phases. It is certainly in phase one.

Spiritual depression, apathy, and gross sin. And God's angry. Turn with me to the text if you would. Psalm 80, and look with me at verse four. O Lord, God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

And then down in verse 12, where there's a metaphor of the vine. Israel is the vine. Why then have you, God, broken down its walls, the walls of the vineyard, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?

John Calvin, the great reformer of the 16th century, describes Psalm 80 as a sorrowful prayer. Psalm 80 is a communal lament.

It's a corporate prayer that appeals to God to resume the favour that was bestowed on Israel in the past, restoring all that have been lost because of his anger.

[6 : 23] Laments, with their stark and their honest cries of abandonment, they're threatening. Psalm 80's view of the world is bleak.

The likely period is after Solomon's death and the division of the kingdom. We're given some indicators in the psalm of the historical context. If you look with me at verse two, you'll see the mention of Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.

Perhaps this indicates an origin in the northern kingdom, just prior to its fall in 721 BC. Those three tribes, in fact, were located in the midsection of Palestine.

The geography suggests that the psalm's origin was during Assyria's siege of Samaria, the capital of the north. We can read about it in 2 Kings 17.

But have a look with me at the text. Who's doing the praying in this psalm? I mean, is the psalm a prayer of the northern tribes for deliverance from Assyria?

[7 : 29] Perhaps. Or is it a prayer from the southern kingdom of Judah, praying for the restoration of the whole nation? Give ear, O shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock, you who are enthroned upon the cherub and shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.

Stir up your might and come to save us. The lament begins with one of the great titles of Yahweh, shepherd. And in so doing, the psalm picks up the imagery that's been in the preceding psalms, psalms 77, 78 and 79 of flock and shepherd.

I want you to notice particularly the four imperatives that are directed to the shepherd of Israel. Give ear. The people seem to believe that God is inattentive.

Shine forth. This is the language of theophany used to describe the appearance of God on mountains. People seem to believe that God's absent. Stir up your might.

Come to save us. God seems to be asleep. People are suggesting that the shepherd of the nation is inattentive, absent and asleep.

[8 : 50] But notice that they're praying to him. They're praying to the shepherd. You see, if God is the problem, they also believe he's the solution.

Despite the situation that they're in, the people affirm that God reigns supreme. Restore us, O God. Let your face shine that we may be saved.

This is the first of four very similar refrains that you likely noticed as Tony read the psalm to us. When God is angry, he turns his gaze away.

Do you remember a few weeks ago when we looked at Psalm 30? We read in verse 7, you hid your face. I was dismayed. And when God is gracious, scriptures speak of God's face returning, the return of his gaze.

And God's shining face is salvation. Again, just, what was it, a week ago, two weeks ago, we looked at Psalm 67. And the opening of that, taken from Numbers 6, with the great priestly benediction.

[9 : 59] May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to what? Shine upon us. That your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among the nations.

Restore us, O God, is the cry. And the root of that verb, just translated as restore, it's got the sense of motion.

It's, in a physical sense, it's like people returning, turning back, going back. Not surprisingly then, the word is a central word in the concept of repentance.

The imagery is of someone doing a turnabout. And of course, in repentance, what's the critical direction? Critical direction is to Yahweh.

And in the years leading up to the fall of the northern kingdom, at the hands of Assyria, the prophet Hosea, he just pleaded with the nation to return to the Lord, to repent of their rebellion and apostasy.

[11:03] In Hosea 14, we read, Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you've stumbled. Why? Because of your iniquity. Take words with you and return to the Lord.

But they didn't. They did not return to their God. And God, who's long-suffering, God, who's gracious, will not always turn aside from his anger in the face of persistent wrongdoing, in the face of idolatry and apostasy.

And as we read through Isaiah and Jeremiah and the prophet Hosea, we see a picture of Yahweh. And it's a picture of Yahweh sending forth his anger. Think of it as an arrow.

And Yahweh may or may not recall his wrath before it reaches its target. And Israel, the northern kingdom, had practiced all manner of evil over an extended period.

They'd ignored God's call for repentance. Indeed, they had sought to silence God's very messengers. And God's judgment has fallen on them.

[12:22] And the Assyrians are being used as God's agent of judgment. And in the midst of this national calamity, the communal lament, the communal prayer arises, and it's most likely from a godly remnant.

Perhaps a godly remnant in the north. However, the reference at the beginning of the psalm to God's ark might suggest a godly remnant in the south, in Judah, in the southern kingdom, pleading for God to God for national restoration.

Not just a coming together of these twelve tribes, but restoration in the sense of God's covenant people, honouring him as their Lord, as their king, as the only true and living God to whom all worship is due.

That's a lesson for us as we look at the visible church, whether in this land or broader. Praying for revival, knowing that the fuel of revival is heartfelt repentance.

Well, those problems that are implied in verses 1 and 2, they're right up front when you get to verses 4 to 6. God is now addressed as Lord, God of hosts. Divine intervention is needed and the psalmist stresses God's power.

[13:51] And the question that just so often characterises the laments as you read through the Psalter, that poignant question, how long? How long, O Lord?

And I suspect there are many in the congregation gathered here this morning who know that question, who've posed that question many times to the Lord.

How long? How long, O Lord? God's angry. He's angry with the people's prayers and he refuses to listen to them.

And the imagery is just so vivid. The people's tears are so great that they've simply become like bread and water to them. And the nation is being laughed at, it's being scorned at by its neighbours and by its enemies.

Who does the psalmist attribute the source of this massive bitterness to? To God.

[14:54] The people of the north are not enjoying that priestly benediction of number six. Sin does have its consequences.

And the cry goes out again, Restore us, O God of hosts. Let your face shine that we may be saved. Restore us, O God. Put us in a right relationship with yourself.

That's the sense of it. These are prayers for revival because at its heart, revival is nothing less than the manifest presence of God.

A major revival occurred in the mid-18th century. It's been called the first great awakening. And God in his sovereign mercy just poured forth his spirit in the countries of Germany, Great Britain, and what was then known as the American colonies.

And a key point in the great awakening was when God encountered its leaders and empowered them with his Holy Spirit. John Wesley records this in his diary.

[16:04] He writes, Mr Hall, Hinching, Whitfield, Hutching, and my brother Charles were present at our love feast in Fetter Lane with about 60 of our brethren. About 3 o'clock in the morning as we were continuing in prayer, the power of God came upon us mightily.

As soon as we were recovered a little from the awe and presence of his majesty, we broke out with one voice. We praise thee, O God, we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.

You see, here is the shining face of God. Well, the psalm began with the image of God as shepherd. And now from verse 8 and following, the second great metaphor of the psalm is of God as the planter, as the planter and the keeper of a great vineyard, and of Israel as of his choice and the abundant vine.

Notice particularly in verses 8 to 11, firstly, that the song of lament focuses on the past. You see, God brought the nation, the vine, out of Egypt, he cleared the promised land for the vine, and he nurtured the nation.

He nurtured it and it grew into this mighty tree. That's the picture. But this past glory of God's people, in fact, intensifies the present anguish.

[17 : 35] And then in verses 12 to 13, we have the present situation and their complaint. Then, why then have you broken down its walls so that all who pass along the wall pluck its fruit?

The boar from the forest ravages and all that move in the field feed on it. See, the vineyard, the vineyard has been ruined.

God, why on earth have you allowed this? And no answer is forthcoming.

And so again, the petition is renewed. Turn again, O God of hosts, look down from heaven and see, have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted.

The devastated north needs to be restored. But the plea goes deeper. You see, the congregation, the ones singing, if you like, this song of lament, whether they're from the south or the north, are asking in this lament that God would not just restore nor yet to return, but that God would turn around so that his face will once more shine on Israel.

[18 : 53] The north had turned its back on almighty God and he's turned his back on them. Verse 14 is the crux of the psalm.

The initiative for restoration rests exclusively with God. And as we come to verse 16, we see the vine's bad state defined and described, burned with fire, likely picking up the imagery of God's anger, his wrath, spoken of back in verse 4.

The vine cut down, again picking up the imagery of verses 12 and 13. Notice at the end of verse 16, the cause of this is the rebuke of God's countenance.

Again, God's called upon to act, but let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we'll never turn back from you.

Give us life and we'll call on your name. And those little phrases there, the one at your right hand and the one whom you made strong, both likely refer to Israel.

[20 : 06] And we know, where we sit in salvation history, we know that this prayer is ultimately fulfilled in Christ, who's the true Israel, the faithful and the obedient son, the one who came to bring salvation.

Jesus, the true vine and the son of man. He's the vine, he's the essential, he is the enduring vine. Without God, Israel herself could do nothing.

Well, not quite the case. They could do nothing except sin. And that's what the nation continued to do until it was swept away in judgment.

To survive, to prosper, even to live, the people of the old covenant had to abide in God. So then what about us?

Without Jesus and without his power, we can't come to faith. Without Jesus and his power, we can't live a righteous life and turn back away from sin.

[21 : 19] Without Jesus, we can't produce any spiritual fruit. Restore us, O Lord, God of hosts. Let your face shine that we may be saved.

How might we apply such a communal lament? A communal lament reflecting a disastrous situation in the nation of Israel?

How do we apply that to ourselves? You see, there isn't a direct equivalence. It's not as if there's just a perfect little equal sign between Israel and the body of Christ.

Israel was a geopolitical entity. but within it, there was a remnant, godly people who loved and served Yahweh.

But many, many within the nation did not. Wheat and tares. Perhaps the comparison, although still not exact, is with the visible church in our time in Israel.

[22 : 30] You see, not all who are simply associated with the visible church, are necessarily followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Wheat and tares.

What about if we look at the ancient kingdom of Israel and our nation of Australia? Again, the equivalence is not exact. But useful application can be made when we remember that God calls on the nations, not just on individuals, to follow his ways, to submit to his son, the King Jesus. So, friends, we need to be careful as we work through our application. And notwithstanding the challenge of moving from that context through to our context, the psalm does speak powerfully to our situation.

We need to see God in the midst of our life. The only one who can bring new life, not just resuscitation, but resurrection life.

God is the great subject of Psalm 80. Did you notice that as it was read through? The focus of the psalm is actually God. He's the one who's identified by the people in their experience of suffering. [23 : 49] He's the only one who can bring salvation. And so what's called for is our total dependence on the Lord, not on ourselves, not on our methods, not on our techniques.

And the question that the text poses is this. Are we, are we as the gathered people of God, longing for an outpouring of God's grace?

Put it another way. Are we moved, deeply moved by God's spirit, to pray and work for revival? In the major revival of the mid-18th century, that first great awakening, preachers such as Jonathan Edwards, George Whitfield, John Wesley, were used in a mighty way as God's instruments to bring great and widespread salvation throughout cities and indeed throughout nations.

And I read this week of the lessons arising from that revival. And I believe they're relevant to us here, to the Melbourne Diocese, for the church in Australia, and indeed for the nation of Australia. And we'll just bring up on the wall there these points, four simple points. The first one is no day is too dark for revival.

[25 : 19] revival. See, a local church should pray, preach, and hope for revival. Holy Trinity Doncaster needs to pray, preach, and hope for revival.

Our day and our time are not without hope. Not without hope that our sovereign God can and will pour out his spirit upon the church and upon the world.

No day is too dark for revival. Secondly, one of the great lessons coming out of the revival is the importance of sound doctrine and preaching.

It's interesting that there was a quite a variety of denominations involved in the great awakening.

But all of the major denominations had a God-centered theology and gospel.

And the church today needs a reformation in doctrine, particularly in relation to what does it mean to be right with God, to be justified.

[26 : 28] What does it mean to be regenerated? What does it mean to be converted? No day is too dark for revival. The importance of sound doctrine and preaching and thirdly, the need for real experimental Christianity.

You see, along with sound doctrine must go real experimental Christianity. It's interesting when you read the accounts of the great awakening, it was actually dead orthodoxy that opposed it.

On the other hand, we need to be aware that fleshly enthusiasm is no substitute for true spirituality. We need to be aware of counterfeit religious experiences.

And that calls for discernment. And discernment calls for the word of God to dwell richly amongst the people of God.

In Jonathan Edwards' words, he writes, true religious affections must motivate our worship and our service to God. One way I just think of that is loving God with our whole person, including our emotions.

[27 : 46] prayer. And the fourth point, prayer. As we remember God's mighty acts of revival in the past, may our hearts just literally rise up in prayer to our Father to do it again.

As I close, I want to highlight just one other point of application. question. And it's simply this. Who is part of the flock? Who is in God's flock?

You see, there was rank evil, massive apostasy in the northern kingdom. But do you remember who also lived up there?

Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea. They continued to live there. Who is in God's flock?

Is it just simply all who come to church on a Sunday? Just this week I was chatting with someone who commented to me that the church he attended was doing a series of, quote, Bible studies produced by Bishop Spong.

[29 : 05] I mean, one's mind boggles at the content of those sort of studies from a man who just denies essentially every pillar of the Christian faith.

God will judge apostasy, he has done it in history, and he'll continue to do it. But what about my friend? I mean, I don't know the state of his heart before God.

I do know that he has a great desire to be in relationship with the Lord. What I'm most confident of is the church that he attends needs revival.

You see, it's pretty easy, isn't it, to actually identify those who are in the north, the northerners, if we were to use that metaphor of the psalm. And we should pray for revival in their midst.

But if we happen to see ourselves as part of the southern kingdom, as the southerners, how then should we pray for ourselves?

[30 : 16] Perhaps we should pray something like this, that the sin in our own lives, individually, the sin in our corporate life, would be exposed, that we would confess it, and that God would, in his gracious mercy, bring the fire of revival through where?

This place. And that then such a fire of revival would spread throughout the land. I trust today that you might capture a revival vision, if you like.

In times past, cities and nations were transformed by the Holy Spirit. Do we believe that God can do that today?

Let's be steadfast in praying for revival. Turn again, O God of hosts, look down from heaven and see, have regard for this vine.

Father, we thank you for your word. We pray that by your spirit you would just continue to speak to us, teach us, convict us, challenge us.

[31 : 59] Lord, may we indeed, individually and corporately be a people who seek to see your glory, your name revered and honoured through this suburb, through this city, through this nation.

Lord, may we indeed be steadfast in praying for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and revival. we ask this in Christ's name and for his glory.

Amen.