

## **Psalms of Advent Week 2: Lamenting and Repenting In Our Secure Union with Christ and His People**

“Deck the Halls with boughs of holly...Tis the season to be jolly.” Our countercultural Church calendar and its Psalms call us to face the darkness in the world and in ourselves before we start the party.

In addition to Advent’s call to contemplate our King and Savior’s Incarnation and Ultimate Return, Advent also calls us to *lament* and *repent*. Like Lent, Advent is a *penitential season*, a time to face hard realities in our world and in ourselves with lamentation and repentance.

**Psalms 80, 85 and 126** are community laments, Hebrew lyric poems used by God’s people to cry out and complain to Him in their distress. Lamenting and grieving their losses and disappointments clears the way for ongoing, God-empowered repentance, continuing conversion and transformation.

May these ancient, poetic laments help us face brokenness in our world and in ourselves. May they stir us and give us words to ask our loving and powerful God to *turn us to Him as He turns to us*, to keep changing us from the inside out. We can breathe this prayer, “Turn me to you, my King and Savior.”

### **Psalm 80: God’s People Complain to Him and Ask for Continuing Conversion/Transformation**

Like us, the ancient Israelites lived in the “already” and the “not yet.” They knew YHWH’s promises to Abraham and to David about his blessing that would come through Israel to the whole world. But they struggled with *how to wait*. Would they live daily in Torah obedience from their hearts and keep trusting the goodness and power of YHWH in the reality of the hard, disillusioning things in their lives? Or would they live by the appearance of things, by sight, trusting in themselves and other limited humans, and doubting YHWH’s intentions and ability to help?

As we read **Psalm 80** aloud, join with these people who had experienced hard things. Think of hard things you or people you know, or know about, have experienced or are experiencing now.

**Q1.** Notice the images of difficulty in **80:5-6, 12-13, and 16**. Which images of difficulty do you identify with and why?

Two of the tribes mentioned may have escaped into Judah, the southern kingdom, as the Assyrians were destroying the northern kingdom, Israel. The *Septuagint* includes “concerning the Assyrians” in its superscription to **Psalm 80**. Maybe the faithful in Judah are in solidarity with the northern tribes, recognizing their joint dependence on YHWH’s care and presence.

**Q2.** What are the four requests in **80:1-2**? In addition to yourself, who might God be drawing you into solidarity with to ask these things for?

One of the most notable features of **Psalm 80** is its *refrain*:

“Restore us, God; make your face shine on us, so that we may be saved.” See this request in **Psalm 80:3, 7, 19**, (and a similar request for God to return, “turn again,” in 80:14-15).

**Q3.** How does the *refrain* intensify each time?

“Restore us” can mean “*turn us again*,” pointing to the continuing conversion that God initiates and we cooperate with as we live by trusting him. Just like the future for Israel was with God and his people, not in living in captivity, our futures are with God in Christ, our “true home,” not in living in the captivity of the world system, our lingering sin nature, or the Evil One’s accusations, lies and assaults.

**Psalm 80:3, 7, 19**, and **14** each have verbs from the same Hebrew root, *shuwb* [shoob]. This same root is also in **Psalm 85:4** and **8** and in **Psalm 126:4**. It captures *the Advent call to repentance, asking God to turn us back to him*. “Turn us to you, Our King and Savior, and don’t let us go back to foolish ways.”

**Q4.** How has your understanding of *repentance* changed over time? What might reading and praying these Advent psalms of lament and repentance add to your understanding and practice of repentance, especially corporate repentance?

**Q5.** What does **Psalm 80** (also **Psalms 85** and **126**) direct the community to do when they look around and see nothing but destruction?

When the gruesome present doesn’t make sense, it’s time to cry out God “to turn us back” to him, to all he has already done for us, and to the fact that outside of God there is no life, only destruction and evil.

**Q6.** *Find and consider* the images of God as both a shepherd (**80:1**) and a vinedresser (**80:8-18**) and his people as sheep and a vine. What do you think those two pictures of God (and his people) have in common?

These images inform the one reading them of:

...what this God is like and why one turns in that direction in times of trouble...We learn about God as we pray them. We say what we know and believe about God as we cry out. (Patrick Miller, *The Lord of the Psalms*, from the introduction)

**Q7.** What is your understanding of “son” and “son of man” in **80:15-17**?

Recall that Jesus as God’s Son and Son of Man embodies all that Israel was called to be.

## **Psalms 85 and 126: Past Restoration, Present Need, Future Hope**

These two community laments have a similar shape, both beginning with recollection of past deliverance, a foundation of God's favor (**85:1-3** and **126:1-3**), and then asking God to "do it again." **Psalms 85:4** and **126:4** are heartfelt requests for God's continuing restoration of external circumstances and internal spiritual condition.

The restored community of **Psalm 126:4** now wants God to act quickly, suddenly, like a flash flood filling bone-dry gullies that produce flourishing fields and bumper crops. But the reality is "sowing in tears," lots of hard work, sacrifice, and patient endurance that will eventually lead to a joyous harvest.

**Psalm 85's** description of current need for restoration goes deeper, focusing more on their community's spiritual condition. Only God can forgive their sin and revive them again. Scholars debate whether this psalm is pre-exilic or post-exilic. Some associate it with Israel's sin with the Golden calf in Exodus 32-34 and others with the idolatry and injustice leading to the Babylonian captivity (**85:4-7**).

Notice that the "turn" verb comes five times in this psalm (**85:1, 3, 4, 6, 8**) and speaks of God's turning to his people and of his people turning away from folly.

**Q8.** What does the community ask for in **85:7**?

They are probably recalling God's revelation of himself to Moses when he interceded for the people after the golden calf incident, made the new stone tablets, and met with the LORD who proclaimed his name, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness..." (Exodus 34:6).

**Psalm 85: 8-13** is an individual's response to this corporate prayer (v. **8a**). This individual *listens* to a message from God, a message of cascading blessings for God's people, overlapping words of blessing, a *prophetic meditation* on the theme of renewal/revival (ongoing "turning"). These are words about who God is and what God does for his people as he "turns us" to him and enables us to not to "turn back" to foolish ways, words foreshadowing the work of Jesus Christ.

**Q9.** What are the four qualities that come together in the touching picture of the person of God in **85:10**? Commenting on **Psalm 85:10-13**, Brueggemann writes:

Here the entire vocabulary of fidelity is thrown toward the future—steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace, faithfulness twice, righteousness three times—all in the "will" of the not yet. At the center of this hope is YHWH: "The Lord will give." **Psalm 85** imagines the steps of this God into a future of well-being... There is

more to come, and it is good. There is more to come because God (long before Martin Luther King Jr.) said, “I have a dream,” a dream of *shalom*. We live toward that dream because God’s dream will not be defeated. (Walter Brueggemann, *From Whom No Secrets Are Hid*)

*The New Bible Commentary* connects **85:13** with Revelation 22:20. “‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen, Come, Lord Jesus!” Our Triune God is making all things right in Jesus Christ: “Righteousness will go before him to prepare the way for his steps.”

Think of “righteousness” as a verb, God’s action for and in us, making us right with him, drawing us into alignment with him and empowering us to change.

**Q10.** In the week ahead, when might you use “Turn me to you, my King and Savior” as a *breath prayer of repentance*, submitting yourself to God’s restoring grace?

Breathe an Advent prayer also for the Church, “Turn us to you, our King and Savior.”

May Advent 2021 bring us deep, internal change that opens minds and hearts for new actions.