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If My People ...

Psalm 81

Pastor Bryan Clark

I saw a classic “what if...” this week on television. I was watching *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* and the contestant had won \$125,000 and was going for \$250,000, but he was all out of lifelines. The question came up that he didn’t know, so he said, “I’m just going to quit; I’m going to walk away with my \$125,000.” So they had their little discussion back and forth, and that was his decision. Then Regis, just to torture him, said, “Well, if you were going to guess, which one did you think it was?” And he said, “I thought it was probably B.” “*And you would have been right! You would have had a quarter...*” You could read the guy’s lips: “I knew I should have gone for it.” He said it twice, and I would guess over the next 24 hours he probably said it mentally about a hundred times, *I knew I should have gone for it.*

Life is filled with those “what ifs...” What if on that December day in 1941 that young lieutenant would have taken the warning seriously that Pearl Harbor was about to be invaded? What if those who were responsible for the launching of the Challenger in January 1986 would have listened to the experts who said it was too cold to launch? What if the South had won the Battle of Gettysburg? What if... what if... what if...?

After I graduated from high school I attended Moody Bible Institute, which is named after Dwight Moody, an evangelist who literally traveled around the world. He heard a speaker make a “What if...” statement that changed his life. His son-in-law has written a biography on his life, and in it he says:

Moody once heard someone say: “The world has yet to see what God can do *with*, and *for*, and *through*, and *in* a man who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him.” That statement took hold of him. He thought to himself: He did not say a great man or a learned man or a rich man or an eloquent man or a clever man, but just simply a man. Well, I am a man. It lies within the man himself whether he will or will not make that full and entire consecration. I will try my utmost to be that man.

- from *The Life of D. L. Moody* by A. P. Fitt, p. 48

Moody heard a “what if...” and he believed that. He surrendered to God, and God used him to change the world. What if you were to fully and completely surrender to God? How would it change your life, your relationships, your marriage? How would your life look differently a year from now... five years from now... ten years from now?

The only way for that to happen is really to cultivate a proper view of God. We talk about that a lot, but there is nothing more important than a correct view of God. One of the things I greatly appreciate about the Psalms is that they are filled with beautiful pictures—imageries of God and who He is.

Psalm 81 is no exception to that. This psalm is all about God, who He is, and how He expects us to respond to Him. But there is also a beautiful picture about *why* God wants us to respond correctly to Him.

Nobody knows for sure when Psalm 81 was written, but clearly it was written in relationship to the feast of Israel, and specifically the feast that would have taken place in the seventh month of the Hebrew calendar, which would be our September and October. It was the beginning of their civil year that would be initiated with the Feast of Trumpets. The shofar would blow, which initiated the celebration. On the 10th of that month, they would celebrate the Day of Atonement, which was a celebration of their salvation. On the 15th day they would celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, which was a reliving of their deliverance from Egypt and their journey through the desert, ultimately ending up in the land of promise. Apparently what was happening was that these people were celebrating the feasts, but they had lost sight of the meaning—of what these feasts really represented. They no longer realized what these feasts were supposed to remind them of in terms of God, who He is and their response to Him. We might say they were just going through the motions.

We do know that in later years this psalm was chanted by the priests and the Levites during the festival season. During these feasts they would chant it over and over and over again, reminding people of the danger of losing sight of what God is all about.

The first five verses in Psalm 81 deal with the feast:

Sing for joy to God our strength; shout joyfully to the God of Jacob. Raise a song, strike the timbrel {*tambourine*}, the sweet-sounding lyre with the harp. Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our feast day. For it is a statute for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob. He established it for a testimony in Joseph, when he went throughout the land of Egypt.

It is fairly straightforward here—it is an all-out celebration of what God had done. Sometimes we get a little bit narrow in our view of worship, and we get this idea that worship has to be kind of quiet and sober and somber in order to be worship. There certainly is a place for that, but there is also a place for celebration. These were all-out celebrations with music, tambourines, dancing, eating and feasting. They were really celebrating who God is and celebrating who they were as the people of God.

In verse 4 it is interesting also to notice that these feasts were established by God. It says it was a statute, a command of God that they do these feasts and carry them out on an annual basis. The reason for that is because God wanted these people to remember His faithfulness and His goodness—what He had done for them and for their ancestors, the previous generations. The danger was always to forget God and His faithfulness and what He had done.

Because God is a believer in the power of story and in the power of drama, God didn't just say, "Talk about it now and then." He said, "Once a year I want you to gather around, and relive the story." That's really what it was all about. The Day of Atonement was acting out this story of God's deliverance and the shed blood of the lamb, looking back to when God delivered them from Egypt and looking forward to the coming Messiah. And rather than just talk about it, they saw it and they smelled it—it was a real drama that was reenacted before their very eyes.

When they got to the Feast of Tabernacles, it was literally a reliving of the journey, where they would spend time in tents. They would experience just a taste of what it must have been like for their ancestors when God moved them on this journey and ultimately into the land of promise.

From time to time I hear people say they really don't think drama belongs in a worship service. I find myself wondering what Bible they are reading, because the Bible is full of drama. Communion is a drama. It's a reenactment of the death of Jesus Christ, but we don't just talk about it. You touch it, you taste it, you feel it, you enter into the story. Baptism is drama. Baptism isn't just talking about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—it is reliving the event. You actually participate in the story as you participate in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. That's drama. Over and over again, God wants us to experience His great faithfulness from the past in order to remember who He is and what He has done. That is really what these feasts were all about. The problem is, these people had lost sight of the meaning and they were just going through the motions.

The last part of verse 5 says, "I heard a language that I did not know." There's a lot of debate about who the speaker is for that phrase. Some people think this is referring to God, because God begins speaking in verse 6. They think maybe it starts at the end of verse 5, and God is saying, "I went through Egypt and I heard a language I didn't know..." *{meaning my people were in the midst of these people I didn't know, which was what led them to deliverance.}* Other people think it's the psalmist saying he heard the voice of God, and he hadn't heard that before, so that's what is recorded in the verses that follow. I don't know which one it is, but it really doesn't affect our interpretation either way.

Beginning in verse 6, what we do clearly understand is that God begins to speak and says, "I relieved his shoulder of the burden. His hands were freed from the basket." God is beginning to review, again, what these feasts were about and He is saying, "This is what I did for My people." He's talking about their life in Egypt when they were in bondage. Historians have gone all the way back to these caves which were existent when the Israelites were slaves to the Egyptians. On the walls of the caves they found pictures of slaves carrying baskets filled with straw and other materials needed to build bricks. And that is really what this is referring to—that God remembered when they were enslaved and were in bondage to Egypt. And He says, "I relieved you—I set you free from that."

Verse 7: "You called in trouble, and I rescued you." That could be referring to when God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, because the language is almost identical. When God said, "I heard their cry, and I will rescue them" it could be referring to when God heard their cry in Egypt and sent the plagues. It could even be referring to when the nation left Egypt, and they got to the edge of the Red Sea. They feared that they would perish there because they couldn't cross the sea, and the Egyptians were coming up from behind, and they cried out. God said He heard them and He parted the sea and rescued them.

I think it probably involves all of those. God is saying, "I heard you when you cried out to me, and I've rescued you. I did whatever is necessary to get you into the land of promise, just like I said I would." Then He says, "I answered you in the hiding place of thunder." Certainly, that's a reference to Mount Sinai, when God gave the Law in the midst of the thunder on the mountain. Moses came down and said, "God has spoken. He has established who He is and these are His laws. These are the benefits of walking in His ways." God said, "I spoke to you; I led you; I told you what we were going to be about as a people."

And then finally, at the end of verse 7, he says, "I proved you at the waters of Meribah." You remember, that was the place where the nation of Israel didn't have water, and they began to grumble and say, "God, why did you bring us all the way out here in the

desert just so we would die of thirst? We'd rather be back in Egypt." Moses cried out to God, and God said, "Moses, strike the rock." Out came the water and Moses named it Meribah, which means quarreling or grumbling. God said, "I met you at the place called "Grumbling" where you didn't believe that I would be faithful. You didn't believe I would take care of you, and once again, I met your need. I took care of you; I gave you water from the rock."

All of these things that he is talking about in verses 6 and 7 are things they were reminded of at the Feast. These were things they were supposed to remember about how God had been faithful to them and provided for them and delivered them when they cried out. He had been such a faithful God!

But starting in verse 8, it refers to the fact that they just wouldn't listen. "Hear, O my people, and I will admonish you. O Israel, if you would listen to Me, let there be no strange god among you, nor shall you worship any foreign god. I, the Lord, am your God who brought you up from the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it."

The words in verses 8, 9, and 10 are very carefully chosen, because each statement takes us back to something they previously were aware of in the Old Testament. For example, in verse 8, when it says, "Hear, O my people..." it is certainly a reference back to what is called the *shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4, when they remembered the words, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." That was a statement that they had a personal relationship with the covenant God, who was their one and only God. He would take care of them. He would deliver them, and He would be faithful to them.

What made Israel unique was the fact that they had only one God. Every other pagan nation was polytheistic—they worshipped multiple gods. But God said the nation of Israel was going to be different. They were going to have one god and that God was going to be the personal, intimate Creator of the universe. That was their theme and their message that identified them as a set-apart people. Verse 9: "Let there be no strange god among you, nor shall you worship any foreign god. I, the Lord, am your God who brought you up from the land of Egypt."

If you go back to the declaration of the Ten Commandments, which is really at the beginning of the giving of all of the Law, you see these exact same words. It is going back to the giving of the Law where God established from the beginning, "I am going to be your God ... I delivered you out of Egypt ... you are to have no other gods." It was kind of flowing into the whole Law that was laid out before them. It is taking them back to things they had heard generation after generation after generation—things they should have known so well. And yet, what he says to them is that they are not listening. It's not sinking in, and they're not getting the message.

One question that might arise is: Why? Is God a power-monger? Is God some kind of a fascist? Is He a dictator? Does He just like bossing these people around? He addresses that in the end of verse 10 when He says, "What I want is to pour out my blessing upon you. Open your mouth and I will fill it." He even says to open your mouth *wide*—as much as you can hold, and He will fill it up.

From the beginning, when God called out Abraham to set apart this people to Himself, the purpose has always been the same. God said, "I want to call out a people, and I want you

to be my people, and I want to be your God. I'm going to lead you into a land of promise, and it will be your land flowing with milk and honey. There I will be your God and you will worship Me, and I will pour out my blessings upon you. What I want to do is `bless you beyond what you can imagine. And from that, the pagan nations will see that your God is a powerful God, and they, too, will turn to Me." That was always God's plan, but the only way for that to work was that they had to only have one God. Because if there were multiple gods, then the pagan nations would never know which god was delivering the goods. So they were to acknowledge Him as God and walk in obedience. But God said, "The purpose has always been so I can bless you. Open your mouth wide; let me deliver the goods."

You know, we would say it's too bad that they went to these feasts and they forgot what they were all about. We don't have feasts like this. But what we *do* on a weekly basis that is very similar is that we come and gather as a people and worship, and our worship is to accomplish the same purpose. We come together and we remind ourselves who God is and what He has done. We remind ourselves of our salvation and His faithfulness and His power and His goodness. Then we remind ourselves what our response to Him should be. Are we ever like these Israelites, where we are just going through the motions but we aren't really thinking about what we're doing? We focus on the instruments and are thinking, *I do like this one...I don't like that one...I like that song...I didn't like that song...It's too loud...It's too soft...* and on and on we go. But do we really think about what we just did here this morning?

Let me ask you a question. What was the theme of the worship this morning? What attributes of God did you acknowledge that you believe to be true? There are several of them. Were you thinking about what you were saying as you sang? We gathered as the people of God this morning and we said, "God, we know that You are faithful and true; we know we can count on You." But we walk out those doors with fear and anxiety, and those two things don't add up. We just said we know God is faithful and true, so why the fear and anxiety? Do you realize in our worship we just said, "God, I surrender everything to you. I'll have no other gods but you; I will only worship You." We even went so far as to say, "God, you are the potter and I'm the clay; do whatever you want with me." Are you aware of the fact that you made that commitment to God this morning? You did ... in the worship. If I hadn't brought this up, would you have thought about these things when you left here this morning? By the middle of the afternoon would you have said, "Man, it was so great to be reminded of the faithfulness of God"... or could you have even named one song that we sang this morning? See, it's easy to just go through the motions and kind of crank it out and not really think about what we're doing or what we're saying. That's the same thing that was happening with these people.

In verse 11 God says they just won't listen to Him. "But My people did not listen to My voice, and Israel did not obey Me. So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, to walk in their own devices." God said, "Over and over again I have told these people through these feasts and festivals, and through My Word, that I want to be their God. I want to pour out my blessings upon them if they'll just walk in obedience to Me. But they just won't listen ... they just won't listen."

I've recently been reading through 1 & 2 Kings, and if you want a good example of what He's talking about here, read those books, because what you find is staggering. Over and over and over again, the people of Israel chose to worship the pagan gods, and they didn't sneak around the barn and do it in private. They set up altars. They did it publicly. They thumbed their noses at God. And over and over again God would come back and admonish

them by saying, “Why won’t you people listen to Me?” He would look at them, with their lives in a mess, and He would say, “Why don’t you people listen?” But they wouldn’t listen.

Throughout the Old Testament God uses the analogy of a husband and wife to represent His relationship with His people; and over and over again, God talks about the nation of Israel committing spiritual adultery. If you read through 1 & 2 Kings, what you see over and over again is that God, as the “husband” keeps finding his “wife” in bed with one lover after another...after another...after another. Let me ask you a question: How would you respond to that? How would you respond to that if, in plain sight, your spouse kept sleeping with one lover after another? That is what God was going through. But God, in His grace and mercy, kept saying to these people, “Why won’t you listen to me? Why don’t you come to Me and obey Me and let Me pour out My blessing upon you?”

In our culture today we are saturated with the message. We come to church ... and to youth group. We have Christian bookstores...we have Christian radio...we have Christian television. We are bombarded with the message, but are we listening? Are we really listening to the message? Are we hearing what God is saying? Are we really taking it to heart? As God continually cries out to us, why don’t we listen to what He says? We’re just like that young lady in the skit presented by the youth this morning. It just doesn’t sink in and we keep doing our own thing, our own way. God says the consequences were that He just let Israel have their way. He said, “If that’s the way you want it...” and they suffered the consequences of their choices.

Some of you are right in the middle of a mess. It may be a relationship mess...or a financial mess. It’s some sort of life mess, and it’s making your life miserable. The truth is, because you are determined to do it your own way and you will not listen to God, you are suffering the consequences of that choice. And if you listen carefully, you will hear the voice of God saying, “It doesn’t have to be this way. Why won’t you listen to Me? Why won’t you follow Me and obey Me? Let Me bless you!” But we don’t listen.

Look at what He says in verse 13: “Oh that My people would listen to Me.” Look at verse 8, verse 11, and verse 13—the emphasis is on “My people.” He is not talking about the pagans. He is not talking about anybody else but just His own people. “Why won’t My people listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways?” Why? Verse 14: “I would quickly subdue their enemies and turn My hand against their adversaries.” You have to realize that, for the nation of Israel, that was their number one fear—that they would be invaded by surrounding countries and they would be taken over. They lived with that fear daily. As a matter of fact, some people think this psalm was written right on the threshold of the Assyrians invading the Northern Kingdom of Israel and conquering them. If so, they lived every day terrified at what was about to happen. And God was saying, “You know, you wouldn’t have to worry about this at all. If you just listen to Me, I’ll protect you; I’ll defeat the enemy; I’ll make this a place of tranquility. I will give you everything you want here, if you’ll just listen to Me.”

Verse 15: “Those who hate the LORD would pretend obedience to Him; and their time of punishment would be forever.” That’s a really interesting verse because what was happening is that the surrounding nations weren’t afraid of Israel’s God. They were laughing at Him and mocking Him. Their god was powerless—he was irrelevant. But God was saying, “If My people would listen to Me and walk in obedience to Me and let Me defeat their enemies and pour out blessings, these people would be so terrified of Me. They would

pretend to obey Me because they would be so intimidated. They would be so awestruck that they wouldn't laugh and they wouldn't mock—they'd pretend obedience."

For years I've heard churches and radio ministries and television ministries and books blasting the culture, as if the culture would somehow understand what it means to be pleasing to God. We talk about the schools, and we talk about all these ways that people are attacking Christian principles, but have we ever stopped to ask the questions: Why do these people laugh at God? Why do they mock God? Why is God fodder for jokes? Why do they make these movies about God?

It's because the people of God have not walked in obedience to God. We have portrayed God as weak, irrelevant, and powerless, so they have no fear of God because of how we have represented God to them. I expect pagans to live that way, but God says, "My people ought to be different; and if they were different, it would change the pagan world." The next time we think about pointing at the culture because of something that's wrong, I suggest we look in the mirror and ask ourselves, "How are we representing God to the world? Why is it they are not fearful of Him?"

Finally, verse 16 is a beautiful insight into the heart of God: "But I would feed you with the finest of wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you." That is what God has always wanted for His people. That's what God wants for you today. God says, "What I've always wanted is to protect you. I want to take care of your enemies. I will pour out my blessings upon you, and I will satisfy you. I will give you everything you're looking for. If you would just trust Me ... if you'd just listen to Me ... if you would just do it my way."

There once lived an ancient Persian by the name of Ali Hafed. He owned a very large farm, orchards, grain fields, gardens. He had many investments and was wealthy and contented. One day he was visited by an ancient Buddhist priest, a wise man of sorts. They sat by the fire and the priest recounted the detailed history of creation. He concluded by saying diamonds were the most rare and valuable gems created, "congealed drops of sunlight," and if Ali had diamonds he could get anything he wanted for himself and his family.

Ali Hafed began to dream about diamonds – about how much they were worth. He became a poor man. He had not lost anything but he was poor because he was disconcerted and discontented because he *feared* he was poor. He said, "I want a mine of diamonds," and he lay awake nights.

One morning he decided to sell his farm and all he had and travel the world in search of diamonds. He collected his money, left his family in the care of a neighbor, and began his search. He traveled Palestine and Europe extensively and found nothing. At last, after his money was all spent and he was in rags, wretchedness, and poverty, he stood on the shore at Barcelona, Spain. A great tidal wave came rolling in, and the poor, discouraged, suffering, dying man could not resist the awful temptation to cast himself into that incoming tide. He sank, never to rise again.

The man who purchased Ali Hafed's farm led his camel to his garden brook to drink one day. As the camel put its nose into the shallow water, this new owner noticed a curious flash of light from a stone in the white sands of the stream. As he stirred up the sands with his fingers he found scores of the most beautiful gems: diamonds. This

was the discovery of the most magnificent diamond mine in the history of mankind – the Golconda. The largest crown jewel diamonds in the world have come from that mine.

Ali Hafed's diamonds were under his own feet but he didn't realize it.

- From *The Myth of the Greener Grass* by J. Allan Petersen, p. 179

Do you realize that everything you're looking for to satisfy is made available to you? God cries out for you to listen to Him. Listen to Him, and let Him be your God. Walk in obedience to Him. Let Him pour out His blessings on you and satisfy you in a way you've never known before. God is saying, "Listen to Me...listen to Me. Let Me be your God."

Last night I preached this message, and then I went home. At about 10:45 the phone rang. It was a young man I had known in Broken Bow. When I knew him then, he was a teenager and was absolutely determined to be rebellious. Over and over again we would talk about this, but he was just determined to live his life his own way. Now he calls me every so often—about once a year. His life is still a mess. His marriage is a mess. He is absolutely miserable, but he will not listen. After I hung up the phone, Patti said, "Who was that?" When I told her, she said, "You know, I remember way back when he was in high school. You came home one day and said 'I wonder if he'll ever listen.'" I still wonder that. But if he would listen, he'd hear God's voice say, "It doesn't have to be this way."

Just imagine... what if ... what if?

Father, we're thankful for the truth of Your Word. God, we can be such a rebellious people and make such a mess of our lives, and then we wonder what happened. God, help us to have ears that hear, that we might listen—not to a power-hungry God that wants to dominate our lives, but a loving, personal, intimate God who wants to pour out His blessings on His people... if they would just choose to obey. Lord, we pray this is Jesus' name. Amen.