

PSALMS

Chapter 81

Sing for joy to God our strength; shout aloud to the God of Jacob! ² Begin the music, strike the tambourine, play the melodious harp and lyre. ³ Sound the ram's horn at the New Moon, and when the moon is full, on the day of our Feast; ⁴ this is a decree for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob. ⁵ He established it as a statute for Joseph when he went out against Egypt, where we heard a language we did not understand. ^b ⁶ He says, "I removed the burden from their shoulders; their hands were set free from the basket. ⁷ In your distress you called and I rescued you, I answered you out of a thundercloud; I tested you at the waters of Meribah. *Selah* ⁸ "Hear, O my people, and I will warn you— if you would but listen to me, O Israel! ⁹ You shall have no foreign god among you; you shall not bow down to an alien god. ¹⁰ I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it. ¹¹ "But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. ¹² So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices. ¹³ "If my people would but listen to me, if Israel would follow my ways, ¹⁴ how quickly would I subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes! ¹⁵ Those who hate the LORD would cringe before him, and their punishment would last forever. ¹⁶ But you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."

Ps 81 A festival song. But it is unclear whether the festival is Passover/Unleavened Bread (v. 5; see Ex 12:14–17) or the Jewish New Year (v. 3; see Lev 23:24; Nu 29:1) or the Feast of Tabernacles (v. 3; see Lev 23:34; Nu 29:12). It may have been used at all three. But more likely it was composed for use at both New Year (the first day of the month, "New Moon") and the beginning of Tabernacles (the 15th day of the month, full moon); see notes below. Whether the psalm is preexilic or postexilic cannot be determined, but it clearly shows the grand significance of Israel's annual religious festivals (see chart on "OT Feasts and Other Sacred Days"). As memorials of God's saving acts they called Israel to celebration, remembrance and recommitment (see Ps 95). In this psalm Israel is addressed by a Levite, speaking (prophetically) on behalf of God. (CSB)

Though the psalm falls into two parts (vv. 1–5, 6–16), thematic development follows a symmetrical pattern: two verses, three verses; two verses, three verses; two verses, four verses. Note also the contrast between vv. 6–7 and vv. 11–12, and the thematic link between v. 10c and v. 16. (CSB)

Possibly written for tabernacle festival usage (v 3), this psalm of unknown date speaks about a time when Israel's worship practices were not impeded by war or exile. References to the exodus (vv 5, 10) and wilderness journey (v 7) illustrate how Israel's

worship focused on God's past deeds of deliverance, anticipating the coming of the Messiah and the greater, future deliverance He would bring (v 15). (TLSB)

Format: Vv 1–3, sing with instruments; vv 4–7, deliverance; vv 8–10, no idolatry; vv 11–16, God delivers those who listen to Him. (TLSB)

81 title *For the director of music.* See note on Ps 4 title. (CSB)

According to. See note on Ps 6 title. (CSB)

gittith. See note on Ps 8 title. (CSB)

Asaph. See note on Ps 73 title. (CSB)

81:1–5 A summons to celebrate the appointed sacred feast. (CSB)

81:1 *Jacob.* A synonym for Israel (see Ge 32:28). (CSB)

Both a forefather and a synonym for Israel (Gn 32:28). (TLSB)

81:2 *tambourine.* See note on Jer 31:4 (Used on joyful occasions (see Ps 68:25), especially following a military victory.). (CSB)

harp and lyre. See note on 57:8 (Instruments (here personified) to accompany the praise of the Lord at his temple in celebration of deliverance.). (CSB)

81:3 *ram's horn.* The ram's horn trumpet (see Ex 19:13). (CSB)

The new moon which marked the start of the seventh month was celebrated with blowing of the ram's horn. The full moon on the fifteenth day of the seventh month marked the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles. (PBC)

our Feast. Probably the Feast of Tabernacles, often called simply "the feast/festival" (see 1Ki 8:2, 65; 12:32; 2Ch 5:3; 7:8; Ne 8:14, 18; Eze 45:25; see also Dt 16:14). As the great seven-day autumn festival, beginning on the 15th of the month (full moon), it followed shortly after the Day of Atonement (observed on the tenth of the month, Lev 16:29), recalled God's care for his people during the desert journey (see Lev 23:43), served as a feast of thanksgiving for the harvest (see Lev 23:39–40; Dt 16:13–15) and marked the conclusion of the annual cycle of religious festivals that began with Passover and Unleavened Bread six months earlier (see Ex 23:14–17; Lev 23; Dt 16:16). Every seventh year at this festival the covenant law was to be read to all the people (see Dt 31:9–13; Ne 8:2, 15). The first day of this month (New Moon) was commemorated with trumpets (see Lev 23:24). It later came to be known as New Year since the seventh month marked the end of harvest and the beginning of the rainy season, when the new crops were planted. (CSB)

81:4–5 *decree ... ordinance ... statute*. See the passages referred to in note on v. 3. (CSB)

Repetition for emphasis. (TLSB)

81:5 *Joseph*. See note on 77:15. (CSB)

when he went out against Egypt. Some believe this indicates that the festival referred to is Passover and Unleavened Bread (see Ex 12:14, 42). More likely it serves as a reference to the whole exodus period, while highlighting especially God's triumph over Egypt by which he had set his people free (see vv. 6–7). (CSB)

Reference to Ex 12:29–30, if not to the entire period of Israel's exodus. (TLSB)

heard a language we did not understand. Were aliens in a foreign land (see 114:1; see also Dt 28:49; Isa 19:18; 33:19; Jer 5:15; Eze 3:5–6). If the alternative translation in the NIV text note is taken, the "voice" is the "thunder" of God's judgment against Egypt (see v. 7), which the Levitical author then proceeds to interpret as to its present reference for the celebrating congregation (vv. 6–16). (CSB)

Reference to God's people living in the foreign land of Egypt. (TLSB)

81:6–10 God heard and delivered and now summons his people to loyalty. (CSB)

Israel was invited to worship God, but they were also warned of the consequences of disobedience. Israel's main motive for obeying God's command to worship only him was to be the love they had for him because of what he had done for them. However, God also encouraged them with promises of continued blessing. How tragic it was that Israel forgot the past blessings and threw away the future blessings by turning from the Lord to idols. (PBC)

81:6 God now speaks. (TLSB)

burden ... basket. The forced labor to which the Israelites were subjected in Egypt (see Ex 1:11–14). (CSB)

81:7 *you called and I rescued*. See Ex 3:7–10. (CSB)

Cf Ex 3:7–8. (TLSB)

out of a thundercloud. See 106:9; Ex 14:21, 24; 15:8, 10; see also note on 76:6. (CSB)

Refers to the abode of God in heaven. Cf 18:11–12. (TLSB)

I tested you. See Ex 17:1–7. (CSB)

SELAH – Hebrew; untranslatable. Mainly in the first two books of Psalms. Probably refers to the accompaniment of the harps during the psalm. (TLSB p. 993)

This often occurs in the middle of a psalm and which apparently signals an interlude. “The Sela indicates that one must be still and quickly think through the words of the psalm; for they demand a quiet and restful soul, which can grasp and hold to that which the Holy Spirit there presents and offers” (Luther). (Psalms – The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer p. 23)

Selah may be a musical notation. It could also be a point where a pause is desirable for the singer or reader of the psalm in order that the statement last made or the thought as a whole just developed may be reflected upon before the next turn of the thought appears. (Leupold)

81:8–10 God heard his people in their distress (vv. 6–7); now they must listen to him. (CSB)

81:8–9 *admonish.* God subjected Israel to distress because of their continual flirtations with idolatry (e.g., Ex 32). Although He had delivered them from the bondage of Egypt, they felt continually tempted by the strange and foreign gods of the Canaanites. (TLSB)

81:9–10 See Ex 19:4–5; 20:2–4; Dt 4:15–20. (CSB)

81:10 *Open wide your mouth.* Trust in the Lord alone for all of life’s needs. (CSB)

I will fill it. See v. 16; as he did in the desert (see 78:23–29; see also 37:3–4; Dt 11:13–15; 28:1–4). (CSB)

Just as God provided for Israel during the exodus (e.g., Ex 16) and after their entry into Canaan (cf Jsh 5:12), so also shall He gladly provide daily bread to His people, filling their every need. (TLSB)

81:11–16 Israel has not listened—if only they would! See Eze 18:23, 32; 33:11. (CSB)

Israel chose the curses instead of the blessings. Instead of victory they received defeat. Instead of plenty they received famine. Instead of life they received death. The sad history of Israel is a warning to us. If God sent terrible judgments against his chosen people when they became unfaithful, can we expect to be let off more leniently if we follow their example of ingratitude? (PBC)

81:11 See 78:10, 17, 32, 40, 56; Dt 9:7, 24; Jer 7:24–26. (CSB)

81:12 It is God who “circumcises” the heart (see Dt 30:6; see also 1Ki 8:58; Jer 31:33; Eze 11:19; 36:26). Thus for God to abandon his people to their sins is the most fearful of punishments (see 78:29; Isa 6:9–10; 29:10; 63:17; cf. Ro 1:24, 26, 28). (CSB)

gave them over. God gave them the desires of their unfaithful hearts, just as He had given them the king they demanded (1Sm 8). Similarly, Moses allowed divorce because the people would have it no other way (Mt 19:1–8). (TLSB)

81:13–16 See the promised covenant blessings outlined in Ex 23:22–27; Lev 26:3–13; Dt 7:12–26; 28:1–14. (CSB)

81:13 God reveals His heart’s desire. (TLSB)

IF MY PEOPLE – Of all the sad words of tongue and pen the saddest are these: “It might have been.” The most tragic thing about Israel’s sad history is that it could have been so different. All the suffering which was causing so much distress to the psalmist was unnecessary. If only Israel had obeyed the Lord, how different their history would have been! They could have remained in their land, loaded down with blessings. They could have waited for the Messiah’s coming in joy and peace. (PBC)

my ways. See 25:4 and note (Metaphors for “the demands of his covenant.”). (CSB)

81:15–16 As in vv 1–5a, the psalmist speaks about God. But God has the final word in 16b (“and with honey ...”). (TLSB)

81:15 *cringe.* Expecting not a blessing, but only wrath. (TLSB)

forever. Term of their punishment. (TLSB)

81:16 *honey from the rock.* See note on Dt 32:13 (In Canaan, bees sometimes built their hives in clefts of rock.). (CSB)

Miraculous nourishment. God satisfies a “hunger” that people cannot. Cf Dt 32:13. (TLSB)

Ps 81 Even while worshiping the one true God, His people were not listening to His Word. Here God laments the plugging of their ears (v 11), longing for the day they will turn again in repentance. God loves to speak to His people! He especially loves to tell you repeatedly of His great love for you, shown to you in the death and resurrection of His Son. With His Word God feeds His people (v 16), nourishing them with eternal life. • Let me never grow sated, dear heavenly Father, but allow me always to hunger for Your Word and to listen attentively to it. Amen. (TLSB)

