

# If Only

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*Psalm 81; Romans 12:1-2*

Imagine that you are a faithful Jew looking forward to celebrating with your fellow Jews at what was regarded as the most joyous of the several annual celebrations – the Feast of Tabernacles; a week-long celebration climaxed by the Day of Atonement. In the seventh month, at the full moon, the rams' horn would blow (Numbers 29:1) launching this special feast. You and fellow celebrants there have made little booths to live in during the Festival; and for a week, you would give thanks for the harvest which had just ended AND be reminded of your redemption from Egypt and of God's protection and sustenance in the wilderness when your forefathers did not live in homes like you are now. All activities point to the central event of this festival- the Day of Atonement, celebrating the joy of forgiveness and reconciliation with God and His bountiful provisions. This is the feasts of all feasts, and as rabbis have said many times over, "Those who have not witnessed the celebration of this feast do not know what true joy is".

At this joyous celebration, a medley of songs would be sung by the temple choir, of which this Psalm 81, composed by the veteran choirmaster Asaph, was at the heart of all the songs. Listen again to the central themes. In this psalm: "God heard us, He rescued us, He warned us, we didn't listen, now we are on our own".

You might be wondering, "Why did Asaph write a psalm like this to be sung at a festival like that- the festival of Joy? When everybody is having a wonderful time celebrating at this joyous Feast of Tabernacles, why sing a song that focuses on Israel's history of disregard to God's voice and disobedience to Him?" Why did Asaph insert this song into a festival of praise?

It would be like our Choir Director, Genevieve, composing and having us sing only music that centers around our confessions of sin we recite each Sunday. ("Lord, I have sinned, I don't listen to you, I don't care what you want, Leave me alone"). That would be a bit of a bummer, right? I've been in a couple of services down through the years when what was sung and said was so depressing, I wanted to walk out.

Now fast forward, and I invite you to think of the where we are today in the quality of our praise and the level of our joy. You might say, "how does a song about Israel and a festival long ago relate to where I am today"?

I would hope the answer would be obvious in the psalms we have heard this summer. They transcend time and hit us in our hearts. They are not just readable poems; They are relevant to today. In seminary, we were taught that one key principle in understanding the psalms and prophets is that through scripture God talks not only to a nation, but directly to people through the psalms and prophets. It was Martin Luther who centuries ago said, "The Psalter is the favorite and personal book of all the saints. Each person, whatever his circumstances may be, will find in the psalms words which are appropriate to the circumstances in which he finds himself and meet and address his challenges as if they were composed exclusively for his sake, and in such a way that he could not improve on them nor find or desire any better set of words."

Centuries later, we find people who lived in a different time and culture expressing the innermost feelings, fears, and hopes of us today. And we read the psalms and the prophets, not only as a message to our nation, but as words to ourselves. So when we might ask, "why did Asaph, this well-known Choirmaster, who wrote many songs of positive praise, write a psalm like this to be sung at a festival like a festival of joy?"

One answer. Because God knows that many times in our Christian journey, we are also, as Asaph describes, "People don't listen, or submit to me, so I handed

## “...God seeks to develop in us. To make the “if onlies” rarer and rarer.”

them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices”. Asaph had been through 69 years as choir master for two kings – David and Solomon. He had experienced the ups and downs of God's people; sometimes fervent, other times going through the motions of praise outwardly, yet inwardly having ears that weren't listening; wills that became focused on things other than God, making decisions that reflected what they wanted rather than what God wanted. In the rule of Solomon, he saw the division of Israel into two kingdoms and witnessed the “wisest man who ever lived” change from a great man of God to a wicked king, bringing the Kingdom down.

So, let's ask ourselves, “What does this psalm say to us - you - me?” What have been the results, the consequences for us when we didn't listen to God and instead followed Frank Sinatra's siren song: “I did it my way”? I could tell you some of the things that happened when I didn't listen. I can tell you in retrospect, that when I didn't listen to God, some unfortunate things happened, there were some disappointments, and a couple of times the cost was significant. Like you I too am human and but in some particular cases, I believe that if I had listened to that still small voice of the Divine and prayed about these matters more seriously, rather than listening to my own voice, the outcomes would have been different.

If only I'd listened! And here's the point the psalmist makes (Vs. 13). God is sovereign, but he loves us too much to overrule us. It is especially sad to God when we don't listen and let our inner lives be directed by other influences. He sees what might have been. “If only” - potential wasted.

All of us, in our own way, know about wasted potential. An initial profession of faith, then decisions that take us down another path. Once being all in, now cooled off, following other priorities than what God wanted. And downstream, we ask ourselves; “What might have been. IF only?”

One of my closest friends disastrously turned to his own way. Thank God he returned to a close relationship. When we sat down to talk about his circuitous journey, he made an observation that has stayed with me for all these years: “There was not one time when I didn't follow God leadings and I turned against him that what I was looking for turned out to be more satisfying, did me real good, gave me more pleasure over the long haul. Not one time when I gave into self-justifying attitudes of hate or revenge, superiority, that made me a more whole person, or gave me lasting pleasure”

The message of the psalmist Asaph in this Festival is clear. “Yes, come and rejoice. Celebrate the feast. But in your rejoicing, remember the past. Remember those times that would have been much better, IF ONLY you had listened to your God and obeyed.” It was John Greenleaf who penned those famous but sorrowful words: “For all said words of tongue or pen: the saddest of these is “it might have been.” And Asaph writes, “Remember what might have been, had you listened. Let that remembrance strike a solemn note in your rejoicing”. “Oh that my people would but listen to me,” If only I would have listened.”

But thanks be to our God, this song does not end here, This song ends with a wonderful invitation of mercy and grace. Asaph – the faithful veteran-

reminds them of what God did when they listened and followed. “I removed the burden from their shoulders – I set your hands free from the bonds of enslavement. I answered you out of a thundercloud and tested and gave you the waters of Meribah”. I brought you out of Egypt. When you opened your mouth, I filled it.”

And then he reminds them that God hasn’t changed. (Verses 13-16) If Israel would but listen to me, follow my ways, how quickly would I subdue their enemies, and turn my hand against their foes. I would feed them, with the finest wheat and honey. Remember, listen, and I will be faithful to you”.

Asaph was an older man when he wrote this. He had been through a lot, watching God’s people doing well, failing, repenting, then falling back in their journey with God. He might have said by then, “Forget it; they will never let God be in permanent control. I won’t compose anymore.” But he doesn’t. That’s what is so notable and makes Asaph a great example for us. He has that strong faith that someday people will come around and rather than wavering–up and down–let God be God–for good. He knows that God will not give up on his people. And, to the end he kept his faith. And the choir kept singing.

There are three significant messages for us in this passage.

1. God has a great plan for each of us, when we listen. If there is one life to live in this world, and if it is not to be wasted, nothing is more important than finding out what God wants that will make our life worthy.
2. When we do go our own way and screw things up, if we ask Him, God will restore us. As a friend once put it, God is in the recycling business - transforming the damage we have done to ourselves. Listen again to the passage from Paul in Romans:” There is therefore no condemnation for those are in Christ Jesus.” New hope. New start. Restoration! This is the indeed, the good news.

Scripture and history are filled with recycled people. Paul: transformed from a life of hatred and violence

into a great missionary and leader. Augustine, saved from a life of moral impurity, recycled to become godly man of great influence. John Newton, debauched slave-trader: transformed into a major force for good and author that wonderful song, “Amazing Grace.” Chuck Colson - devious jailed politician who God recycled to change the lives of countless prisoners. Or like many you and I have known and seen, of lesser fame, making a real difference in their walk with God. People who were restored and recycled for service to God, who vividly lived out the words of the song, “Grace will always be better than their sins”.

3. The third and especially important lesson is this. There is far more than restoration in God’s plan for us, if we would just be open. Remember the words of Paul: “Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind – then you will be able to hear and test what God’s will is”. And: “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live for myself (Gal. 2:20) And: “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. (Philippians 1:21)

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, he makes Reference to “cheap grace”, which goes beyond basic restoration. Cheap grace is grace without serious discipleship, grace without identifying with the cross of Jesus, grace without allowing Jesus to become completely incarnate in us. Grace is still grace, and God’s wonderful gift, but God wants to not only redeem us, but transform us as people of whom to “live is Christ”. Conveying of His grace and forgiveness – definitely yes; but the next question is; “Are we allowing God to reproduce the death and life of Jesus in and through us? Is he living through us in every experience, situation and relationships of our lives? Are we taking the time to fully listen to Him and ask him to be present in everything do and say?” Is it easy to do this? No! And often we fall short. But the cost and effort are worth it, if we want to make “if only” rare in our life. And guess what? Part of the Holy Spirit’s ministry is to help us do that, to lay the groundwork for the potential God seeks to develop in us. To make the “if onlies” rarer and rarer.

At this stage of life, here is my prayer: “Lord, enable me to listen to the point, where you can say to me, Alan, your life is not wasted. You are allowing me to live in you work on doing a good thing through you. So far, it’s good, my son”.

Are we listening?



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Only...

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