

Hearing God

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[0 : 00] So one of the questions we're always asking when we read Psalm is what is this Psalm about? And most people agree that it's actually pretty clear what Psalm 81 is about because one way you can know is just is a word repeated over and over again.

And when you get to Psalm 81, the word that's repeated over and over again is the word to listen or to hear. So the theme verse is verse eight where God says, here, O my people, while I admonish you.

I can't tell you how much Israel, if you would, but listen to me. And so he says here and then he says listen. But in Hebrew, those are the same words. So he's repeating this idea of keeping our ears open to God for emphasis.

And then he says it again in verse 11, verse 13. He's calling us to hear him. And one of the interesting things about Psalm 81 is we talk about the Psalms as if, and they are.

They're where we go to raise our voices up to God. So we go to the Psalms and we sing these songs to God. But when you get to Psalm 81, almost the entire Psalm is actually God speaking to us.

[1 : 09] So it's like here in the middle of the Psalms, God interrupts our worship. And he comes down to us and it's as if he's saying, you know, you're raising your voices to me and you're asking me to hear you.

But here in Psalm 81 he says, but are you listening to me? You know, even as you come together and worship me, do you actually hear what I have to say? And to be honest, the news in Psalm 81 is not great news on the face of it because God is saying my people are not listening to me.

And it's a part of what he's doing is this is an indictment against the people. And it's an indictment against ancient Israel. This is, you know, two, three, three thousand years old.

And so in one sense, this is very distant from us. But our series is called Songs for Life because the assumption is that when we go to the Psalms, even if it's about the Israelites, we see ourselves and that God actually placed these texts here for us to see our own hearts.

And if that's true, then whenever God says, will you hear me? Why don't you hear me? He's not just talking to the Israelites. He's talking to us. And he's saying one of our problems is even though we claim to want to follow God so often, we don't hear what he has to say.

[2 : 25] And so the question this morning is really simple, which is why is it so hard for us sometimes to listen to what God has to say? And that's all I want to talk about this morning. And I want to give three reasons why I think from this text, sometimes it's hard for us to hear God and then what we can do about it.

And the first reason is this, it's faulty memory. We forget who, by that I mean, we forget who God has been for us in the past. And that actually limits our willingness and our ability to hear what he has to say in the present.

And that's not just some spiritual fact. I mean, that's the way that we communicate with other people is your willingness to listen to another person is based on who you know them to be, right?

So what was the problem with the boy who cried wolf? We knew that the boy who cried wolf was a liar so that when he actually wanted us to listen to him, nobody cared what he had to say.

And so if you know that someone has a history of lying, you're not going to listen to them. But the flip side is also true, right? So say you have a best friend that you've known since childhood and they have been with you through thick and through thin.

[3 : 29] They've been loyal to you. They've seen you at your worst. They've seen you at your best. You know, when you needed help, they were the one that came to you and say that friend comes to you one day and says, you know, you have a problem, whether that's drinking or anger or

something.

Even if you don't like that message, you're going to listen to what they have to say because they've proven themselves faithful and steadfast to you. So who we know a person to be affects our willingness to listen to them.

And when we get to Psalm 81, almost all of the first seven verses of the Psalm is God telling us who he has been to the Israelites.

And there's an implicit criticism in that. And the criticism is he's telling them, if you really remembered who I have been to you throughout all these centuries, you would listen to me.

So he's almost accusing them of having either a bad memory or of ignoring what the relationship has been in the past. And so the whole Psalm is structured around this idea that remembering like for us, remembering our history with God and what he has done for us is essential to our ability to listen to him.

[4 : 41] So when you read this Psalm, one thing you notice is God doesn't just tell us about himself. He tells us about himself and who he has been for us. So if you look at verse one, he says, well, excuse me, this isn't God talking, but still God is navigating this conversation.

It says sing aloud to God our strength. Shout for joy to the God of Jacob. So the Psalmist could have said sing aloud to God who is strong.

And he would have been right to do that. And some of the Psalmists do say that. But what he says here is sing aloud to God our strength. So he's saying, we're not just worshiping God because he's strong. We're worshiping God because he has been strong for us.

And the same thing when he says sing aloud to the God of Jacob, we're not just praising the God of the universe, even though we are praising the God of the universe. We're praising the God who even though he was the creator of the universe, he came down and entered into a relationship with us.

And that means that we, it doesn't just mean that we're obligated to listen to him. It means that it makes sense to listen to him because he's been so good to us. And then when you get to verse six, which is actually where God starts speaking for himself, God says, well, every line starting in verse six is a reference to a different story of when God came to his people and saved them when they had no hope.

[6 : 05] So in verse six, he says, I relieved you, I relieved your shoulder of the burdens and your hands were free from the basket. And that's a reference to when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt and they carried these heavy baskets and all these things.

And God is now saying, remember that time and remember when you had no hope, you had absolutely no hope, I was your liberator. And each line is a different reference. I just want to point out the last line to you, the last line of verse seven, because you may be less familiar with this story, but it's just as important.

He just says briefly, he says, I tested you at the waters of Marybeth. And you can go read that story in Exodus chapter 17. But what happened at Marybeth was the people have just been, just think of all these events.

The people have been freed from Egypt through these miraculous plagues that God has sent. When they're about to be annihilated by the army of Egypt, God opens the sea so they can walk through and he saves them.

And then they are out in the wilderness and they get hungry and they get thirsty. And already by the time of Marybeth, God has provided for them in miraculous ways. And then you get to Marybeth and the people are thirsty again.

[7 : 20] And they begin to complain to Moses. And one of the things they say to Moses is they say, it would have been better for us if we had never left Egypt, which almost sounds like saying it would have been better for us if we had never met this God Yahweh in the first place.

They were hopeless in that present moment because they had forgotten how good God had been to them in the past. And Psalm 81 calls that a test.

He said, I tested you at the waters of Marybeth because God was testing them. Would they be faithful to him in hard times? Would they be able to trust him in hard times? And they failed the test. And what's even more amazing is that even though they failed the test and they complained about God, God still provided for them. This is the story whenever Moses takes his staff and touches a rock and water, gushes out of it.

But even in their faithfulness, God still provided for them. And again, the question is why dredge up all this history? Why remind them this in Psalm 81? And it's not because God is a narcissist.

[8 : 29] And it's not because he has this need to say how great he is, even though he has every right to say how great he is. What he's doing in here is for a purpose. And he's saying, it's actually the most selfless thing he could do, the most loving thing he could do, because he's saying, remember how good I have been to you so that you can be wise in the present moment when you decide whether to listen to me or not.

And so we can pause that narrative and put the question back on ourselves and say, why is it so hard for us to listen to God sometimes? And one of the answers has to be that we forget how good God has been to us in the past.

And because we forget, and the more that we forget, we're unwilling to trust him in the present. We cannot live the Christian life, and we cannot live through all the hard times in this life unless we remember how good God has been to us. And God has been really good. And in fact, all of Christianity, the whole gospel, is based on this radical proposition that what, just what if, even if you're a skeptic of Christianity, what if there is a God who is infinitely powerful and infinitely wise, and not just that, what if that infinitely wise and powerful God actually loved you so much that he came down from heaven and became a man and gave his life to save you and to rescue you, and that even in the moments when you're unfaithful, he still stands by you and loves you.

Say that's a what if. If that were true, would it not be good and wise and right to listen to what that God had to say because of who he was?

[10 : 19] And even a skeptic might say, well, that's just not true. But if a skeptic were to say, well, a skeptic would say, if that were true, then of course we would listen to him because he is good and wise and not just because of that because he has entered into a relationship and he loves us.

And that's what God is saying here in Psalm 81 is remember how kind I have been to you and let that dictate whether you'll listen to me in the present.

And so then the obvious question is how do we fix that faulty memory? And there's a lot of answers we could give. I mean, God has communicated himself to us in his word. And so we have to actively go back to his word over and over again and listen.

What does he have to tell us? And then we go to things like small groups and we hear other people say how they have seen God be faithful to them in their lives. And we remind ourselves every day this really is a good God who loves us.

I heard someone one time say that the whole Bible paints a picture of God and you could actually read a very small portion of it and know everything you need to know to be saved.

[11 : 33] But the more you read the Bible and the more you understand how that story fits into our lives, the more you see the fuller picture and how beautiful God actually is and it changes you.

So the first problem we have here in the Psalm, why can't we listen to God? And one answer is our faulty memory. We forget how good he's been to us in the past. The second reason is this interference.

And when I say interference, I mean we allow other voices to speak to us and we give them the place that only God should have in our lives. So if you look at verse eight, God says, here, oh, my people, while I admonish you, oh, Israel, if you would but listen to me, there shall be no strange God among you.

You shall not bow down to a foreign God. Now that's the first commandment. So he's saying, he's repeating the first commandment and saying, you shall not worship another God.

And God here is not just pointing to a hypothetical problem. When you read the Old Testament, it is filled with stories of people, of God's people, even while they would say we still love God and want to follow him, they would go worship other gods at the same time.

[12 : 40] They would go worship the God Baal in the high places. And what God does here in this psalm is he doesn't just say that is bad and it's wrong, even though he does say that.

He explains why it's wrong. And I want to talk through that logic for just a minute. So if you look, so in verse, what is it? Verse nine, where he says there shall be no strange gods among you. And then in verse 10, he says, I'm the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.

So he's repeating that theme of don't forget who saved you. And then he says, open your mouth wide and I will fill it.

And that may seem like some disjointed logic at first. So he says, don't worship idols. And then he says, open your mouth wide and I will fill it, which is like hunger language. I will satisfy you. And the point that he's making is you are going to idols because you're looking to be satisfied. There's something missing that you're looking to be satisfied. And you're going to the idols to be satisfied.

[13 : 44] But if you would come to me, I would give you as much satisfaction as you could possibly long for. And what he's doing is he's locating the issue of idolatry in the context of satisfaction.

So he's saying, you go to these idols because you want them to bless you. You want to be blessed or you want to be protected or you want to be content and you go to those idols and God's saying, I'm the only one who can truly satisfy the deepest longings of your heart.

I heard a pastor one time say, it's not that God is saying, please pick me. It's that he's saying, no one else is coming for you. You worship these things that aren't real.

And I'm the only one who has ever been here saying, I will be with you till the end. And idolatry can sound like a foreign language because few of us are tempted to worship things like animal gods and gods of fertility and gods of the sun.

But the way that this connects to us is the fact that God places this all in the context of satisfaction because all of us are looking for satisfaction. And it's so easy to search for satisfaction in something else in a way that only God can provide it.

[15 : 00] And so the challenge for us is not saying, what gods are we worshiping in our house? What idols do we need to throw in the trash can? But he's saying, where are we looking for satisfaction in a place that only God can provide it?

And one example, just one example, even though there's many would be money. And Colin came up here and gave an amazing presentation on the good power that money can have for the kingdom.

You could say that money is morally neutral. I guess that's another theological topic we can talk about another time. But it has a tremendous power for good. And yet over and over again in the New Testament, Jesus has to warn the people that are listening to him, be careful about the power that money can have over you.

And he actually sometimes talks about it in terms of idolatry. So there's a point where he says, don't store up for yourselves treasures on earth, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.

And he concludes that by saying, no one can serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money. And that's idolatry language. He's saying some of you are looking for money to provide a comfort and a sense of protection.

[16 : 11] And money does offer a sense of protection sometimes. If you have enough money, you can keep yourself safe. It does offer a level of comfort. But he's saying make sure that the comfort you're looking for isn't the comfort that should only come from God.

And the idols in the Old Testament, they offer practical benefits like comfort, safety, contentment, and God is saying that always only comes through me.

It's the problem of interference. We're going to listen to other voices that say we can offer you this. And did you see what the tragedy is in Psalm 81? What is the awful thing that God does to people who worship idols here?

If you look in verse 11, what he does is he lets them go. He lets them do what they want to do. He says, but my people did not listen to my voice.

People would not submit to me. And so God says, so I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their counsels. So the punishment of someone who worships idols is that they spend their whole life pursuing something that can never satisfy them.

[17 : 19] It's worshiping idols is in one way its own punishment. And you could say it's like trying to satisfy your thirst by drinking from the ocean. And what God says to us is whatever you love in this world more than me.

Maybe that's the best way to think about what an idol is. It's anything that we love in this world more than God. And God's saying, whatever you love in this world more than me, even when you have it in your grasp, it will never satisfy you like I can.

It will only leave you hungry. And so what we have to do as Christians is, it's something that has to be done at an individual level. We have to search our own hearts.

And we have to say, what voices are telling me I can make you happier? I can satisfy the deepest desires of your heart in a way that only God can.

And then we look to God and we say, God, here are these desires that I have, but I want to love you more than anything else. Can you help me?

[18:21] So we've mentioned two reasons why it's hard to hear from God sometimes. One is this problem of faulty memory, we forget how good God has been to us in the past. The second is that it's interference.

So we begin to listen to other voices and we search for satisfaction in other things besides God. And the last one I want to talk about is misinterpretation.

Sometimes we can hear everything that God has to say and we can still misinterpret what he's saying. And this is especially true when criticism is involved just in human relations, right?

So if you do a job, someone can give you 10 compliments and one constructive criticism right there at the end and you walk away saying, boy, that was harsh.

And what they're actually trying to do is to help you and to help you do an even better job next time, you can miss the point of what the person is actually saying. And so the question that I want to ask as we kind of wind towards the close here is, what is this Psalm really about?

[19:22] What's the main point? And I mean, I know it's about hearing, but hearing what? What is God trying? Like what's the takeaway here? And you could say, well, this Psalm is about God's judgment on idolatry and sin.

And certainly there is truth to that, isn't there? And we don't need to sugarcoat that, that God in this Psalm takes sin and idolatry very seriously.

And He's telling them, if you don't turn to me, things will not go well for you and you'll destroy yourselves. And one of the most unnerving aspects about this Psalm to me is how open-ended it is. So God tells them, turn to me. But this isn't like a story that tells you, well, in the end they did turn to Him. It's as if this Psalm is presented to each of us and God is saying, will you turn to me, but then the decision is for us to make.

So there's this hypothetical possibility that you could listen to this Psalm and you could still follow your idols and it will destroy you. And all of that's true. Judgment is a serious theme in this Psalm.

[20:33] But if that's what we say the Psalm in the end is about, I think we missed the point of what God is doing here. Because what is the context of all those hard words?

Is it not this? God's saying, as much as you have forgotten me, as much as you have not listened to me, and as much as you have drowned out my voice with all the other idols in this world, God says, even now, if you will hear me, even now, after everything you've done, if you will listen to me now, I can heal you.

And that's mercy. And that's the heart of God that we see in this Psalm. So you notice after every really harsh thing God has to say in this Psalm, he follows it up by holding out hope.

So in verse 13, God says, oh, that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways. That's a lament. And then he says, what does he say? I would soon subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes.

So he's saying, God's people so often look elsewhere for security, but God says, if they would just turn to me, I would destroy their foes for them. I mean, when the God of the universe is on your side, that's a fortress that you have on your side.

[21:54] And God was saying, all it takes is for you just to turn to me. And then in the very last verse of the Psalm, it's a reference to Marybeth again. So what does God say here in the last verse, he says, if they would turn to me, I would feed you with the finest of wheat and with honey from the rock, I would satisfy you.

He says, with honey from the rock, I would satisfy you, which is, he's one-upping himself. He's saying, at Marybeth, you were thirsty and I gave you water. But if you would listen to me now, I would do even more.

I would give you honey from the rock. And nowhere is God's mercy more clear in this passage than in verse 10, where God says, open wide your mouth and I will fill it.

That's a food metaphor, and we've already talked about it a little bit. But I want us to take seriously what God is saying here in verse 10. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.

And God is saying, He's not just saying, He'll give us enough. He's saying, as much as much blessing as you're willing to receive, that's how much blessing I'm prepared to give you.

[22 : 59] He's saying, our problem is not that we're, the problem is not that God is too stingy with His blessings. It's that we're not asking for enough. And I have to tell you, I almost laughed out loud this week when I was sitting in my study at New College because I was reading John Calvin's commentary on this.

And Calvin, it'd be worth going back and reading. He almost sounds sarcastic when he says this, and that's what made it funny, but it's a serious point. Because I'm paraphrasing here, Calvin said, there's so many people in this world who want God to bless them, that want to be fed by God, but they just don't open their mouth.

And it reminded me of how often I want to feed my children, and they complain about how hungry they are sometimes. I love my kids, but sometimes they complain about how hungry they are. When I have a delicious meal sitting right in front of them, but they just want to open their mouth.

And that's what God is saying here is, if you just ask for the blessing, I have always been here willing to give it to you. It's not that your desires are not strong enough. It's that they're pointed in the wrong direction.

And C.S. Lewis has this really great quote where he talks about how the problem is not that we desire too much, but that we go to the wrong place to satisfy it. And he says this, he says, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak.

[24 : 16] We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. And like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum, because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea, we are too far easily pleased.

So God is saying, you know, he has made us to be desiring creatures, but he's also saying, just know that all those desires were meant to be fulfilled in me, and wherever else you go to fulfill them, you will be hungry.

And so as much as this Psalm is a lament, and it is recognizing real problems in this world, God is saying, if you will turn to me, I can satisfy you. And that's what, in a way, this mirrors the gospel, right?

Because God does the same thing in the gospel. He never sugarcoats our sin. He says, your sin is real, and you have real problems that are deadly serious. But if you would turn to me, I can satisfy you.

I'll close with this as the band marches down the way for me. If God can really satisfy all of the needs of our hearts, and if that's what he's offering when he says, open your mouth wide and I can feel it, then that means that he can also satisfy the one need that this Psalm tells us that we have, which is the ability to listen to him.

[25 : 39] And so if you've ever found yourself struggling to listen to God and saying, God, so often I want to hear you and I want to obey you, but I find myself turning away from you, we can actually ask God to help us to hear him.

And because God is generous, he'll meet even that need. God helped me to hear you so that I can obey you. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we love you. We praise you for your kindness and your goodness to us.

And we pray that as we go throughout this week that you would be with us and that you would help us to hear you, not just with our ears, but with our hearts and that that hearing would turn into obedience. And we ask all this in your son's name.

Amen.