

**Psalm 80: Restore us, O LORD God of Hosts**  
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There's a certain level of honesty that is needed when we assess where we are as a presbytery. It has been said that in the last several years—a vacuum of leadership has happened among us—and this has caused us to ask who we are as a presbytery. There was a time when Roy Blackwood was younger and this presbytery was being built by church planting and discipleship. RB told the story of Second Indy growing and their session requesting money from the synod for chairs and psalters and the synod told them no. Church planting was a new idea for many.

In the more recent history of the Great Lakes Gulf Presbytery, we have seen Dave Long rather surprisingly die; Gordon Keddie retired, stayed away from the courts of the church, and then got quite ill. Rich Holdeman got cancer and that changed some plans for sure. We saw Barry York go to seminary, later followed by Keith Evans and David Whitla taking away from leadership in our congregations. We have had something of an unspoken divide between the larger congregations which are suburban and our smaller ones that are urban or rural. That's been described to me, rightly or wrongly, as a "power struggle." We may have some differing views on subscription issues—leading to some saying that we have two different *systems of doctrine* among ourselves; that blossomed in a very cantankerous exam process of Sam Ketcham, which furthered the divide and added fuel to our fires.

Over the last couple of years we have been plagued with the issues surrounding Michael Lefebvre and Jared Olivetti, both of whom are no longer pastoring. We have seen ruling elders that we trusted removed from office, including one who was a father in the presbytery. We have seen a dark satanic attack and fleshy abuse upon children. The last three moderators have either resigned or suffered serious health problems while serving. We have watched the closures of several churches, the last two being Christ Church and Grand Rapids. The name of the presbytery has been dragged through the proverbial mud in the press, lawsuits have occurred, relationships have been fractured. Immanuel voted to leave the denomination; JF resigned and deaths have shocked us and caused us to hurt and meditate deeply: Eric Bibby and Jon Held being the most recent.

In the meantime, not one church has been planted in about a decade and various relationships are fractured—within leadership and within the presbytery's congregations and families. Most recently we refused to celebrate to sacrament of the Lord's Supper together; it didn't happen although it was tentatively scheduled.

Many of you sit here today exhausted in your ministry, experiencing a certain level of distrust; maybe you brought a new ruling elder delegate with you and are secretly embarrassed; maybe shamed to be a part of this or at least saddened by the last several years of our presbytery culture and ministry.

Some of you here can still hear Roy Blackwood's voice when I say, "Christ will built his church," but maybe that auditory memory is fading distantly as the noise of where we are rings in your ears. Is that truth fading among us? Do we believe or do we merely long to believe?

What do we need as a presbytery? Fathers and brothers, I want to draw your attention to Psalm 80 and I would refer you to the refrain of the Psalm that is said three times in Psalm 80.

*"Restore us, O God; Cause Your face to shine, And we shall be saved!"*

What do we need as the Great Lakes Gulf Presbytery of the RPCNA—what do you need as an officer within this presbytery?

*"Restore us, O God; Cause Your face to shine, And we shall be saved!"* I would like to meditate on this Psalm with you and apply it to our context.

The Psalm itself is a difficult Psalm. It is Psalm that laments, that cries out, that is filled with despair as the ancient church of the time lay fractured, discouraged, and broken.

Why did this happen?

Why would God allow for this to occur?

What is God doing among us?

Why has he allowed us to get this low?

This Psalm unfolds our need and our remedy, presbytery. We need to own this Psalm as a song of Zion for us and our time.

## **A Plea of Faith**

I want to draw your attention in the first place to verses 1-3. *"Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock; You who dwell between the cherubim, shine forth! Before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, Stir up Your strength, And come and save us!"*

In these verses we see firstly "a plea of faith;" our first heading is a plea of faith. Someone may say that the Psalm is dark and depressing and maybe even from a place of unbelief or lack of assurance—but I want you to see that despite the dark nature of the Psalm—as his experience among the people of God has been dark—he cries out to God from a place of faith. There's some markers here.

Notice the word "shepherd" in verse 1. The word shepherd is a sweet word in the text that shows that the psalmist is trusting and pleading by faith. For it was the shepherd that brought these sheep through the valley of the shadow of death. There is darkness, trials, difficulty, enemies—and yet the plea of faith says: *"Hear us O shepherd. Hear us O shepherd."*

Despite the troubles, the psalmist does not step off of the fact that God's presence is known and there is an experiential component to this plea of faith. Look again at verse 1: "You who lead Joseph like a flock; You who dwell between the cherubim, shine forth!"

We see an acknowledgment of the leadership of the Shepherd over the church: you lead Joseph like a flock.

And we see the experiential reality of the people of God: he reigns between the cherubim and the with the benediction of God—that great glory that comes down to us though his word—glory pouring forth down from his throne.

Only through the mercy seat, that place of atonement, does the psalmist come—and here he experiences the presence of God. And as he experiences this trouble and cries out for help from a place of faith: "*Stir up, O Lord. Stir up, and save!*"

The word "stir" can also be translated as "turn." *Turn us O Lord.* Not turn the circumstances. Not turn the hearts of the guy next to me. Not turn a blind eye to our problems or our maltreatments of one another: "*Turn us towards you, O Lord that we might be saved.*" Turn. Convert. Grant repentance. Stir and turn.

One late-medieval writer said, "*Convert our rebellious wills to thee... show thy countenance that we may know thee; show thy power that we may fear thee; show thy wisdom that we may reverence thee; show thy goodness that we may love thee.*" — Savonarola

This plea of faith is a plea for Jesus to come to his church and to stir her up—to turn her—to convert and save her. The experiential realities of God's presence is known and his shepherding is acknowledged.

## **A Posture of Brokenness**

But in the mist of this faith—things are not right. Things are not good. The people of God—are broken. In the second place I want you to notice verses 4-13 and 16. Secondly we see "a posture of brokenness."

*"O Lord God of hosts, How long will You be angry Against the prayer of Your people? You have fed them with the bread of tears, And given them tears to drink in great measure. You have made us a strife to our neighbors, And our enemies laugh among themselves.*

*You have brought a vine out of Egypt; You have cast out the nations, and planted it. You prepared room for it, And caused it to take deep root, And it filled the land. The hills were covered with its shadow, And the mighty cedars with its boughs. She sent out her boughs to the Sea, And her branches to the River. Why have You broken down her*

*hedges, So that all who pass by the way pluck her fruit? The boar out of the woods uproots it, And the wild beast of the field devours it. It is burned with fire, it is cut down; They perish at the rebuke of Your countenance.”*

It is as if the psalmist—Asaph—as a prophet—speaks on behalf of the entire church and he says: we have two problems:

1. Spiritual depression.
2. A broken witness.

As a church we are broken and downtrodden, O Lord. Notice how the psalmist comes to this understanding of spiritual depression. Look at verses 4-5, “*O Lord God of hosts, How long will You be angry Against the prayer of Your people? You have fed them with the bread of tears, And given them tears to drink in great measure.”*

From the experience of the church, the Lord is angry and against the prayers of his people—he is feeding them bread and drink in an abundance of tears—the church is in a posture of brokenness.

Within this posture of brokenness, the public witness of the church has been trampled and made of no effect. Verse 6 says the church is a strife to the neighbors and a laughingstock of the enemies of God.

You see fathers and brothers, the experience of the posture of brokenness that Asaph experiences is quite similar to your experience—our experience as a presbytery.

Our pride has been trampled.  
Many spirits have been broken.  
Ministers contemplate other vocations.  
Elders question the value of voluntary service.  
Friends have turned on friends.  
Has our voice been quieted?  
Neighbors laugh in scorn.

Fathers and brothers—we are nothing and we have been brought low. We are broken and in need of repair. We are confounded and left bewildered.

We are *unhappy* in the most biblical sense.

And we ask ourselves why?  
Why are we spiritually depressed?  
Why do we have a broken witness?  
What can help us to grasp this more deeply?

It is all so overwhelming—who can even grasp what Asaph contemplates?

For clarity, by way of illustration, Asaph says to you: “The church is a garden. God himself planted the vines and they grew tall. There was a time when the roots were deep and the soil was rich. Even when you looked up to the hills—the shadows that came from this garden were cast high—for the vine was extraordinary and all knew of her glory.”

Some of you men were here then. Some of you have been through days of glory and days of rich soil and days of great harvest and days when you would walk into synod and there in the depths of your chest you knew that you were part of something special that God was doing—for you were men of “the GLG.”

But the illustration of Asaph goes on: Her hedges are broken down. People are walking by and plucking her fruit. Wild boars have made their way into the garden and are gnawing the vines—destroying her. Fires have come and burned the garden and so much of it was in need of being cut down.

The garden that once was glorious is now in need of total repair.

Why’d this happen, pastors? Why did this happen, elders?

Are you angry that it has occurred? Are you ready for extending discipline and admonishment? Are you discouraged; spiritually depressed; with a broken witness?

The psalmist bypasses the excuses and the blame and the shifting of guilt—and he goes right to the doctrine of God’s providential care over his church.

*“For God has done this.”*

It is outside of my purpose in this sermon to interpret this providence for us—why has all this happened? I will not propound the mysteries of who is to blame and what year things turned and which deaths are noteworthy and what appointments and pulpit exchanges effected the life the Great Lakes Gulf Presbytery the most—but I will say this, which is found within the Psalm and is the most consistent and best doctrine related to God’s providential care: God has done this. God did this.

Notice that? Look at the psalm.

You are angry.  
You have fed them with tears.  
You have made us a strife.  
You brought forth the vine.  
You caused it to deeply root.  
You caused it to grow.  
You broke down her hedges.

Did you hear that? You broke down her hedges.

God has done this, presbytery. God has done this. So what ought we to do?

Concerning spiritual depression, Martyn Lloyd Jones once said, “Go directly to God and seek His face, as the little child who is miserable and unhappy because somebody else has taken or broken his toy... So if you and I find ourselves afflicted by this condition, there is only one thing to do, it is to go to Him, If you seek the Lord Jesus Christ and find Him there is no need to worry about your happiness and your joy. He is our joy and our happiness, even as He is our peace. He is life, He is everything... Seek Him, seek His face...” —Spiritual Depression

### **A Promise of Visitation**

And this exactly where the psalmist goes next. We see thirdly, “A promise of visitation.” A promise of visitation... We see this in verses 14-15 and 17-19.

*“Return, we beseech You, O God of hosts; Look down from heaven and see, And visit this vine And the vineyard which Your right hand has planted... Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand, Upon the son of man whom You made strong for Yourself. Then we will not turn back from You, Revive us, and we will call upon Your name.”*

And then that refrain that appears three times: *“Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; Cause Your face to shine, And we shall be saved!”*

The promise here is a promise that when the God of hosts—the Lord of armies visits his vine that promise of revival will come. Restore us. Cause your face to shine! We shall be saved.

As God is here called upon to look down from heaven upon his church we are shown that this is a Christ-centered promise that Jesus Christ will be at the center of our restoration and our revival of visitation from the Lord. The revival needed as a presbytery is a great visitation from the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ.

David Dickson once said, *“Neither the church... needeth any more security for their stability and perpetuation, but Christ; for now when the vineyard is burnt, and the visible church defaced... Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, upon the son of man whom thou madest strong for thyself... The perpetuity of the church... is founded upon the sufficiency of Christ... Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand; so will not we go back from thee.”* —Psalm 80 Commentary

When Christ stands to restore this vine—when this promise of perseverance and promised prosperity is realized through the church throwing herself at the love and mercy and restorative graces of this Christ—then we own this promise: *“Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; Cause Your face to shine, And we shall be saved!”*

Christ restores his church—visitation and revival come through him.

Brothers, this is our greatest need as a presbytery—this is our greatest need as we walk through the darkness together with the Great Shepherd as our guide: Christ will stand and restore. Christ will stand and shine his face. Christ will stand and we will be restored.

I want to leave us with five applications as we go into this meeting this weekend. Five applications for us to examine and to own as the great needs that flow from this gloriously dark and lamenting psalm.

One: God has done this: he has broken us and humbled us. No matter what we believe are the reasons—we can be assured that where we are as a presbytery comes from his very fatherly hand. Answer 27 of the Heidelberg Catechism says, “Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand.”

I would call upon you to search your hearts—to confess this great truth and be humbled before God. For God has broken pride and self-reliance.

Two: Revival in our presbytery is needed: the refrain is for you to own. Meditate often this weekend on this great cry of Asaph: “Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; Cause Your face to shine, And we shall be saved!” Own it, plea for it, confess the need for it, pray earnestly for it. How often do we have not because we ask not—Revive us O Lord. For we have come to the end of ourselves. There will be times this weekend when we need to pause and sing—own this psalm. Cry for God to visit this his vine!

Three: In dark providences we are called here to look to Christ. In the midst of darkness the shepherd will stand and shine his light upon us. We must not give up and we must not lose heart—we instead must provide our hearts promptly and sincerely to Jesus Christ—and to look to him as our only hope as a presbytery.

Four: It is no surprise to any of you that we are in need of aid from on high; we need Christ’s presence in our presbytery—maybe now more than ever. We need to be restored. Often we think we can manipulate and “fix” our problems but God calls us to plead rather than provoke. It is time to put aside provocation and begin to plead. Would you plead with me? The time of provocation is behind us—we now need to plead.

Five: Know that when we have repented, when we’ve turned, Christ will carry us through. We are broken—we are a bruised reed among those that stand. Thomas Watson once said, “The Lord has always been most solicitous for his bruised ones. As the mother is most careful of her children who are weak and sickly, He shall gather the

lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom. Those who have been spiritually bruised, who like lambs are weakly and tender, Christ will carry in the arms of free grace.” —Godly Man’s Picture

Friends, it is time to let Christ carry us—for we are broken, yet there is a cry for visitation—carry us, O Lord.

Brothers, we must plead by faith. We must confess our posture of brokenness. We must cry out for the promise of visitation.

*Revive us, O Lord.*

One hundred years ago in the Presbyterian Church, the midst of great controversy and conflict, J. Gresham Machen asked this very important question:

“Is there no refuge from strife? Is there no place of refreshing where a man can prepare for the battle of life? Is there no place where two or three can gather in Jesus’ name, to forget for the moment all those things that divide ... to forget human pride, to forget the passions of war, to forget the puzzling problems of...strife, and to unite in overflowing gratitude at the foot of the Cross?”

He answered that question by saying, “If there be such a place, then that is the house of God and that the gate of heaven. And from under the threshold of that house will go forth a river that will revive the weary world.” —Christianity and Liberalism

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*Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; Cause Your face to shine, And we shall be saved!*

Amen.