
Psalm 81

Psalm 81:1–16

Outline of Chapter 81

Inscription

- Vv. 1–5 **The celebration of the Israelite is a testimony to God**
- Vv. 6–10 **God speaks—His provision for His people is well-documented**
- Vv. 11–16 **God would pour out additional grace if His people would only listen to Him**

Charts and Maps

- v. 3 **The Time of the Month that Feasts Begin**

Introduction: Psalm 81 is again written by Asaph, the poet-historian of his day. Whereas the thrust of Psalm 78 was the exaltation of the tribe of Judah over Ephraim, this psalm deals with the faithfulness of God and the rejection of God by Israel. The central themes are similar in these two psalms, although Asaph is not making the same point as he made before.

This is a psalm for a feast day, although it is not clear which one. Thieme said this refers to the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:24) and NIV suggests either the Passover/Unleavened Bread Festival or the Jewish New Year or the Feast of Tabernacles. However, the new moon suggests that this begins at the beginning of a month and the full moon suggests that this psalm applies to the middle of a month (v. 3). The Jewish New Year is not really an Old Testament feast; however, the Passover/Unleavened Bread and the Feast of the Tabernacles both occur at the middle of the month; whereas the Feast of Trumpets occurs at the first of a month. Also, even though *festival* is in the singular, this does not mean that this psalm only applies to one festival. The naming of the new moon and the full moon both indicates that we are speaking of two different times of any given month.

Although the NIV Study Bible is uncertain as to whether this psalm was written before or after the exile, it bears the name of Asaph, indicating that this was written during the time of David or Solomon. We are studying it here because of its several references to historical events which took place at the exodus and during the wanderings of the Israelites.

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Literally:

To the choir director, on [or, perhaps, concerning] the Gittith; to Asaph

Psalm 81
inscription

Smoother English rendering:

To the choir director, concerning the Gittith; penned by Asaph

This psalm is written again by Asaph and we have already examined the preposition proceeding his name and we have examined Asaph back in Psalm 78. This psalm is written to the Piel participle of *nâtsach* (נָצַח) [pronounced *naw-TZAHKH*], a word which means *pre-eminent, enduring*. It refers to a person in a supervisory position (I Chron. 23:4 II Chron. 2:2, 18 34:13). Often, this position is related to music (I Chron. 15:21 Psalm 4:intro 5:intro 6:intro etc.). This is why we have such varied renderings as *overseer* (Young), *choir director* (NASB), *choirmaster*

(Owens) and *chief musician* (Rotherham). Strong's #5329 BDB #663. Then we have the preposition 'al (אֲל) [pronounced *al*] and it means, *upon, against, above*. Strong's #5920, 5921 BDB #752.

Now, the next substantive is rather obscure, occurring only in Psalms 8:intro 81:intro and 84:intro.* This word is most similar to the proper noun Gittite, which leaves us with very little to go on. Strong's #1665 BDB #388. The NIV suggests that this is a psalm of a *winepress*; or, in the alternative, a reference to the Philistine town of Gath (see II Sam. 15:18). The only Hebrew word that this is similar to is the one for *winepress*. Barnes suggests that this is a musical instrument common to the Gittites.

This psalm serves as a reminder and a testimony of God's faithfulness and of Israel's continued disobedience to His Word, a very reasonable theme for a feast day. The Israelites are to praise God and to celebrate His faithfulness to them (vv. 1–5) because He has shown Himself to be a protector and a provider for them (vv. 6–10). However, Israel would not listen to God (vv. 11–13); although God could and would easily subdue her enemies (v. 14–15); and He would pour blessings upon them (the finest of wheat and honey from a rock, if necessary; v. 16).

The last line reads *to [or, for] Asaph*. Every psalm is written that way. The author's name is preceded by the lâmed preposition. We would expect, as English-speaking people, for this to have psalm in the construct followed by the author's name (that would be *a psalm of Asaph*). However, I am not aware of any psalms which are written that way. Therefore, we would have to assume that this indicates the human author's name. We can conclude this for several reasons: (1) It seems only natural to indicate the author of the song at the beginning, as has been the custom of most composers. (2) Just as Paul or Peter identify themselves at the beginning of an epistle, it seems only right for the human author of a psalm to identify himself. (3) Lâmed also means *in regards to*, which would be a reasonable way of translating this. (4) Often, a composer will claim that the song was just there and he happened to write it down. These psalms are all divinely inspired. God breathed them into the human authors, although the language, vocabulary and literary style all belong to the human writer. However, these psalms are *to* or *for* the human author from God; and when something is given *to* you, then it belongs to you; therefore, *belonging to* would be a reasonable way to render lâmed. (5) Peter, in misapplying Scripture, attributes authorship of Psalm 69 and 108 to David (Acts 1:16–20). Both psalms have the lâmed preposition and David's name. Peter also attributes Psalm 16 to David (Acts 2:25–28), Psalm 2 (Acts 4:25–26). (6) Paul attributes Psalm 32 to David (Rom. 4:6–8) and Psalm 69 (Rom. 11:9–10). (7) The writers of Hebrews attributes Psalm 95 to David, as the human author through whom the Spirit spoke (Heb. 4:7). (8) Finally, Jesus attributes authorship of Psalm 110 to David as written by means of the Holy Spirit in Mark 12:36–37, and the by-line of that psalm literally reads: *to [or, for] David, a psalm* (Psalm 110:intro). See Luke 20:41–44 for the parallel passage. The theological argument that Jesus was making rested partially upon the human authorship of David, which was accepted by our Lord and the scribes questioning Him. (9) Therefore, since the very same language conveys authorship of these various psalms to David, and this authorship is confirmed eight times, once by our Lord, I think it would be safe to assume that this psalm was written by Asaph (these titles are a part of Scripture).

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The Celebration of the Israelite Is a Testimony to God

**Sing aloud to God, our strength;
shout for joy to the God of Jacob.**

Psalm 81:1

**Sing aloud to God, our strength;
shout for joy to the God of Jacob.**

The listener is enjoined to shout or to sing aloud to God—this is the Hiphil imperative of *rānan* (רָנַן) [pronounced *raw-NAHN*], and it means *to give a ringing cry* either in joy (Isa. 12:6 24:14) or in distress (Lam. 2:19) or in wisdom (Prov. 1:20 8:3). In the Hiphil, the listener is told to cry out aloud, but the Hiphil means that there is motivation involved—that is, they are motivated to sing aloud from their souls. Strong's #7442 BDB #943. **Deliver me from bloodguilt, O God, God of my salvation. My tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness** (Psalm 51:14). **As for me, I will sing of Your strength; in fact, I will joyfully sing of Your grace in the morning, for You have been my stronghold and a refuge in the day of my distress** (Psalm 59:16). You see, the singing is a result of what is in their souls. In context, God is the strength of Israel. It was in God that their armies were strong; it was because of God

that Israel was a world power. Similarly, our strength, our righteousness, our everything depends upon Who and What God is. Without God, we have no righteousness. **God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble** (Psalm 46:1).

The second verb is the Hiphil imperative of *rûwa* (רוע) [pronounced *roo-AH* or *roo-AHG*], which means *to raise a shout, to give a blast*. It can be a war-cry shout or an alarm (Judges 7:21 | Sam. 17:52), a sound which signals a war or a march (Num. 10:7, 9), a triumphal shout (Psalm 41:12 | Zeph. 3:14), a shout of applause (I Sam. 10:24), a shout in worship or under religious impulse (I Sam. 4:5 | Psalm 47:2), or a cry of distress (Isa. 15:4 | Micah 4:9). Strong's #7321 BDB #929. In both cases, the listener is called upon to shout or sing aloud and vigorously as being motivated from his own soul. The key of the Hiphil (causative) stem is motivation from doctrine in the soul. The last reference to the God of Jacob is not a reference to Jacob in particular, but to the entire tribe of Israel. Recall, that is called a metonymy.

**Lift up a song,
give a timbrel,
a sweet lyre with harp [or, lute].**

Psalm 81:2

**Lift up a song,
play a tambourine
and a sweet lyre with harp.**

The timbrel was a type of tambourine which was held and struck with the hand. It was used to accompany singing and dancing. It is always associated with joy and gladness in Scripture. The lyre is sort of a harp, a stringed instrument. It is smaller and hand held, easy to carry around, having only a half-dozen strings as opposed to a harp, which might be larger and have more strings. In any case, the emphasis is upon the motivation of the soul to sing in celebration of God's care for them. The *sweet lyre* means *pleasant-sounding*. Some music is so beautiful, that for some of us, it brings tears to our eyes. There are just some sounds in melody then speak directly to our souls. For me, it is more often the human voice than the lyre; but that is a matter of personal taste.

One of the areas in which we are confused is our relationship to God after salvation. Even prior to, we have some goofy notions about God. Prior to salvation, we often think that God is going to make us do the absolute worst stuff that we can imagine and that we will have to grit our teeth and bear it until the end of our life. Some people even put off believing in Jesus Christ because they don't want to be sent to some mission field in some desolate, third-world country where our life and the life of our family are in danger. Or they put off learning doctrine for the same reason. Do you know the lazy employee who does everything he can to make it look as though he is working, but he is merely wasting time waiting until the day is over? If he worked, the day would end up going by much quicker and work would be more meaningful and enjoyable. However, he is caught in this idea that he's getting away with something for every day that he doesn't work a full eight hours (or whatever). God may or may not have the worst thing you can imagine set up for you to do in the plan which He developed for your life. However, that is not the issue. The issue is doctrine and growth. Once you begin learning that which you need to know, God will begin to allow His plan for your life to unfold. It will be much greater and much more enjoyable than you can imagine. Let's take salvation. People will spend their entire lives, every waking minute, pushing God away. But without salvation, you live a terrible life, things go wrong, plans go awry, intentions are misunderstood, people die, you can't complete a tenth of your goals, you blink and suddenly your life is half over; and then when you die, you spend eternity in hell. However, God's plan is that, if you spend but five seconds believing in His Son, when you die, your suffering is over and you enter into a veritable paradise—forever. Regardless of how horrible your life was, regardless of all the mistakes you have made, regardless of the people you have hurt and regardless of how you never seemed to get where you wanted to go—at least, after death, you will spend the rest of your existence in happiness. Now, you have certainly had the dream where you have made a grave mistake and it will affect you for the rest of your life; but then, you wake up, and it was just a dream? Life can be like that, if you have believed in Jesus Christ.

But now for the living part prior to death. If God has provided for you a wonderful existence after life, and this He did for you while you were in sin and while you were against Him; what do you think He has planned for your life after salvation now that you are His son and righteous in His sight? **But God demonstrated His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died in our behalf. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we will be saved from the wrath through Him. For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God**

through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be delivered by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through Whom we have now received the reconciliation...Therefore, we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become intimately tied to in the likeness of His death, certainly we will also be intimately tied to His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to our sin nature. For you see, he who has died is freed from the old sin nature. So, if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin, once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives with reference to God. Even so, consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but live with reference to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts (Rom. 5:8–11, 6:3–12). **Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice!** (Philp. 4:4). My point is this—if God has provided so well for our eternity, then it only stands to reason that He has provided quite well for our lives. Just because you learn God's Word and His will, doesn't mean that you are going to lead a crappy life doing a lot of stuff that you abhor. God has a marvelous plan for your life which sometimes cannot begin to take shape until you find out what it's all about.

Prior to salvation, I thought of Christianity as giving up everything I wanted to do and fasting and doing a lot of stuff that I did not want to do and would spend the rest of my life hating. I thought that maybe I would have to be a monk, leading this depressing, celibate life. I viewed the Christian life like the life of Job; a great deal of suffering which I would have to bear in order for God to make some point. You see, I knew a small amount of God's Word, but not very much. I've come to find that any area in my life where I have failed or suffered great pain, is my own damn fault. What God's plan is was not for me to lead an unhappy, monastic life. It is just the opposite. We learn God's Word, we are filled with the Holy Spirit through rebirth, and our lives and His plan for our life begin to take shape and we begin to prosper, if not financially, then at least emotionally. God did not fill the lives of the Israelites with fasts where they were to sit on heaps of ashes bemoaning their wretched lives; God told them to feast, and they had several festival days throughout the year to celebrate what God had done on their behalf. These verses are telling them to rejoice, to make music, to sing. **Let them praise His name with dancing; let them sing praises to Him with timbrel and lyre** (Psalm 149:3).

**Blow a trumpet at the new moon,
at the full moon on a day of our feast.**

Psalm 81:3

**Blow a trumpet at the new moon,
and blow a trumpet at the full moon on a
day of our feast.**

The Hebrews had three classifications of instruments: percussion, stringed and wind. In these two verses, we have all three groups. Because these feast days occur several times throughout the year, two of the early printed editions of the Massoretic text, the Aramæan and the Syriac codices have *feast* in the plural.

Throughout the commentaries which I have read, some say that this applies to this feast; another claims, no, it really applies to this other feast. Keil and Delitzsch spent several pages discussing this. Allow God's Word to interpret itself. It speaks of the new moon, which is the beginning of a month; it also speaks of a full moon, which is the middle of the month. Since we have no feasts which begin on the first of the month and extend all the way through to the middle of the month, this verse is not speaking of celebrating a particular feast, but it refers to those which occur either at the beginning of a month or during a full moon. Specifically, this verse refers to any feast where the trumpet is blown to celebrate it. Most of God's feasts occurred at the beginning of the month or in the middle of the month:

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The Time of the Month that Feasts Begin	
The new moon; i.e., the beginning of a month	The Feast of Trumpets
The full moon; i.e., the middle of a month	The Passover/Unleavened Bread Feast/Firstfruits and the Feast of Tabernacles (tents)

However, in general, this applies to all God's feasts. They were festivals, mandated by God, times for the Israelites to celebrate and to bring their offerings to God. "Also, in the day of your gladness and in your appointed feasts, and on the first of your months, you will blow the trumpets over sacrifices of your peace offerings, and they will be a reminder of you before your God. I am Y^howah your God." (Num. 10:10). "Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'In the seventh month on the first of the month, you will have a rest [or, Sabbath], a reminder by blowing [the trumpet]; a holy gathering.'" (Lev. 23:24).

**Because it [is] a statute to Israel;
an ordinance of the God of Jacob.**

Psalm 81:4

**Because it [is] a statute for Israel;
an ordinance of the God of Jacob.**

It appears as though the Israelites are being mandated to sing. That is, music and singing were to be a part of their worship to God. We have a pronoun *it* which implies the verb *to be*. This literally reads: **because a statute to [or, for] Israel it**. At the first read, I looked all over for what was the particular statute or ordinance Asaph was referring to. However, it is simple: the blowing of a trumpet at the new moon is the statute which is referred to; that the Israelites were to celebrate these feast days is what this statute and ordinance refer to.

**A testimony in Joseph¹ He placed it
In His going forth over the land of
Egypt:**

Psalm 81:5

**"A language [or, voice] I had not known
I hear.**

**He appointed it a testimony in Joseph
In His going forth over the land of
Egypt:**

**"I heard a voice that I was not familiar
with.**

The testimony is each feast day in Israel. As we have studied in Leviticus and Numbers, the feast days spoke of Jesus Christ; each one was a testimony to Him. Asaph is placing the origins of these feasts back in their historical context. He mentions Joseph, as a metonymy for the nation Israel embedded in Egypt, because Joseph was taken to Egypt in slavery and eventually moved his entire family there. God placed Israel in Egypt that way, by taking Joseph there and exalting him to a rulership status.

In the second line, it is a mistake to suppose that this is the exodus out of Egypt because we do not have the correct prepositions for the moving out of Israel from Egypt. Furthermore, it would confuse the interpretation of the last line. In the exodus, Israel, led by Y^howah, marched out of Egypt; they did not go forth over Egypt. The former sense is that of an exit; however, here we have more of a reconnaissance, or, better yet, rounds.² This second line is like an anthropopathism. There must be a name for this kind of expression. Until then, I will call it a faunapopathism. The picture is of God flying over a country, as if He were a bird flying over from country to country to see what was going on.³ God is simply making His rounds throughout the earth, going from place to place, examining the hearts of man. As He goes of Egypt, He hears a voice that He had not heard for a long time; so long,

¹ *Joseph* here is spelled slightly differently than elsewhere. Elsewhere it is yôçêph and here it is y^hôçêph; I would chalk this up to poetic license.

² See Keil & Delitzsch's *Commentary on the Old Testament*; ©1966 Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.; Vol. V, pp. 544–545 for a more detailed explanation.

³ In truth, this is not exactly a *faunapopathism*. If you would like, imagine God in a helicopter or running a scanner over the various channels. Obviously, God is omnipresent and He in His omnipotence, He knew what would happen in Egypt in eternity past. However, this is how such an event would seem to humankind.

that He didn't know who it was at first. Now, obviously, this is not what happened, but this is language of accommodation combined with poetic license. Anything could happen!

The last line is a bit confusing:

<i>The Amplified Bible</i>	The speech of one whom I knew not did I hear [saying]...
<i>The Emphasized Bible</i>	A language I liked not used I to hear;
KJV	...where I heard a language that I understood not.
NASB	I heard a language that I did not know:
NIV	...where we heard a language we did not understand.
NRSV	I hear a voice I had not known:...
Owen's Translation	...a voice which I had not known I hear.
<i>Young's Lit. Translation</i>	A lip, I have not known—I hear.

The first problem is whether this goes with the previous line, whether it stands by itself, or whether it goes with the next verse. The connecting adverb *where* is not found in the Hebrew. The first word is *sâphâh* (סָפָה) [pronounced *saw-FAWH*] and, according to BDB, it means *lip, speech, edge*. Let me go with Rotherham's work: lip (I Sam. 1:13 Psalm 22:7); mouth, speech, language (Gen. 11:1 Isa. 19:18 33:19); the border of a garment (Ex. 28:32); the boundary of land (Judges 7:22); the shoreline or a bank (Gen. 22:17 41:3 Ex. 14:30).⁴ These are all tied together as the edge or brink of something (the lips are the edge of the mouth); and language and dialect comes from this. In this case, I would go with *speech* or *dialect*. Strong's #8193 BDB #973.⁵ This is followed by the negative and the 1st person singular, Qal perfect of *yâda'* (יָדָעַ) [pronounced *yaw-DAHĠ*], a verb which means *to know*. Strong's #3045 BDB #393.

The interpretation of this overall passage is not difficult. tough. However, if you will note, there is no first person until now to be found in this verse. From the next verse on, everything in the first person can be easily attributed to God—the psalmist speaking for God in the first person. Therefore, it would only make sense to attribute this remark to God. This would leave us with two reasonable explanations: (1) The gist of this does not mean that God has just heard a language which He does not understand but that the prayers and religious rites of the Egyptians are not reaching Him; it is as though they are speaking in a language which He does not understand. (2) The other explanation is that God has suddenly heard the voice of the people of Israel calling to Him for help (this is if we translate the word *sâphâh* as *voice, speech*). (3) Finally, the key to the interpretation is context; in v. 7, still in the first person, the psalmist, speaking in the place of God, speaks of the removal of the burden of slavery from the Israelites. What could be more natural than the following chronological series of events:

- God, in His rounds over the earth, travels over Egypt.
- Suddenly, from Egypt below, He hears an unfamiliar voice. You see, 400 years have passed since Joseph moved his family to Egypt. Now, suddenly, **the sons of Israel signed because of the slavery, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of slavery rose up to God** (Ex. 2:23b).
- God removes the burden of slavery from their shoulders (v. 6).
- Quite simply put, the Jews cried out to God in distress and He delivered them (v. 7a).

⁴ *The Complete Word Study Old Testament*; Dr. S. Zodhiates; p 2377.

⁵ Israel has already been promised to be invaded and overthrown by those whose language they do not know. "Y^ehowah will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as the eagle swoops down, a nation whose language you do not understand; a nation of fierce countenance who shall have no respect for the old nor will it show favor to the young." (Deut. 28:49–50; see also Jer. 5:15). However, this is not what v. 5 is speaking of. What we need to do is to tie the end of v. 5 with w. 6–7, as this is all spoken by God through the psalmist. That we will do in v. 7.

God Speaks—His Provision for His People Is Well-Documented

**“I caused the removal from a burden
his shoulder;
his hands from the brick receptacle
passed through.**

Psalm 81:6

**“I caused the removal from the burden
his shoulder;
his hands from the brick receptacle
passed through.**

The first verb is translated *I relieved* (NASB, Owens), *I turned aside* (Young), *I took away* (Rotherham); the word is the Hiphil perfect of שׁוּר (סוּר) [pronounced *soor*] generally means *to turn aside*, however, in the Hiphil, it means *to cause to depart, to remove, to take away*. Strong's #5493 BDB #693. To understand what is being said, we see the burden as something being carried upon the shoulder and we would think that this should read *I caused the removal of a burden from his shoulder*. That is, we think of the burden as something which they are carrying on their shoulders. However, the burden is a huge block of clay bricks in front of them and they are pushing it forward with their shoulders. God removes that burden from them. This poetically states that God removed from them the burden of slavery. **And the Egyptians compelled the sons of Israel to forced labor; and they Egyptians made their lives better with hard labor in mortar and bracks and labor in the field—all the labors which they rigorously imposed upon them...and they cried out for help because of their slavery, and this cry rose up to God and God heard their groaning** (Ex. 1:13–14, 2:23b–24a). God has heard our cries from this bondage to our flesh, in this life of slavery and He has reached down to deliver us as well.

The second line reads: *his hand from a* and then we have the word דוּד (דוּד) [pronounced *dood*], which means *pot, jar, kettle* (I Sam. 2:14 II Chron. 35:13 Job 41:20); and it is used for *a receptacle for carrying* (II Kings 10:7 Jer. 24:2); here, it is used for a receptacle for the carrying of bricks.* Strong's #1731 BDB #188.

The final verb is in the 3rd person feminine plural (matching *hands*) of אָוַר (אָוַר) [pronounced *aw-BAHR* or *aw^b-VAR*] and it means *pass over, pass through, pass on*. Strong's #5674 BDB #716. What is being said is that Israel was relieved from slavery by God.

**“In distress you called, then I delivered
you
I answered you in a secret place of
thunder [or, black thunder cloud].
I tested you concerning the waters of
Meribah. Selah!**

Psalm 81:7

**“When in distress you called, and I
delivered you
I answered you in a secret place of a
black thunder cloud.
I tested you at the waters of Meribah.
Selah!**

Notice the change of person. In v. 6, God speaks of the Israelites in the 3rd person and in v. 7 in the second person. In the 3rd person, this would be primarily gen x—those who were twenty and above at the exodus. They called to God for help and God sent them Moses. The first line was the cry for help while under a severe form of slavery. It is a poetic repeat of v. 6 with a change of person. This also encompasses their cry to God for help when pursued by the Egyptians as they left Egypt. **And as Pharaoh drew near, the sons of Israel looked, and observed the Egyptians were marching after them, and they became very frightened, so that the sons of Israel cried out to Y^ehowah** (Ex. 14:10). The psalmist ignores their immediate failure of then going to Moses and whining in Ex. 14:11. He focuses on the deliverance by their God. Moses told them, **“Do not fear! Stand by and observe the deliverance of Y^ehowah which He will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will never see them again forever.”** So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal state at daybreak, while the Egyptians were fleeing right into it. Then Y^ehowah shook off the Egyptians in the midst of the sea (Ex. 14:13b, 27).

In the second line, we have the specific manifestation with which God delivered the Israelites from the Egyptians. **And the angel of God, Who had been going before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and stood behind them. So it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness, yet it gave light at night. Thus the one camp did not come near the other all night** (Ex. 14:19–20). We had a cloud of light on the side with the Israelites, providing them enough light to see the way that God would deliver them. However, on the other side was the cloud of darkness.

It was the same cloud, but the side of the cloud facing Egypt was dark. The same God is light to some, and judgment to others. The reason that the cloud on the side of the Israelites was light was so that the Israelites could see God move aside the waters and so that they would have light by which to cross. The darkness on the other side kept the camp of Egypt from the camp of Israel, placing Israel into a *secret place*, as it were.

When it became day and the Egyptians went to march across, God was still manifested as a black cloud of thunder.⁶ *And it came to pass in the morning watch that Y^ehowah looked down on the camp of the Egyptians in the pillar of fire and cloud and brought the camp of the Egyptians into confusion. And He caused their chariot wheels to swerve and He made them drive with difficulty, so the Egyptians said, “Let us flee from Israel, for Y^ehowah is fighting for them against the Egyptians.”* (Ex. 14:24–25).

However, despite the marvelous wonders and signs which Israel observed, Israel was weak. Their true character was tested when they had no water. Rather than to turn toward God and ask for deliverance, they turned to Moses and bitched and moaned. *And the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, “Why, now have you brought us up from Egypt? To kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”* (Ex. 17:3). Having taught for years, I can tell you the most irritating sound is incessant whining. At the beginning of every school year, when my students would find out that I actually expected them to learn something and that I would not do each and every thing for them, several would whine and it was the most galling sound. Fortunately, I did not have the same manifestation of power that God allowed Moses or else every year, on day one of every class period, I would have struck down ten students as an example. I personally cannot imagine being in the position of Moses, with hundreds of grown men coming to him and bitching and complaining and whining. In his place, had God given me the choice to wipe out this generation and start from scratch, I would have taken God up on that offer in a heartbeat. God tested them and brought out their true character in the no-water tests.

As I have mentioned several times, we need to examine God’s Word bit by bit, word by word, and phrase by phrase. However, we sometimes lose the context and the train of thought. Therefore, let’s examine these last few verses as a contiguous whole: *In His going forth over the land of Egypt, God said, “I hear a voice that I was not familiar with. I caused the removal from the burden his shoulder; his hands from the brick receptacle passed through. When in distress you called, and I delivered you I answered you in a secret place of a black thunder cloud. I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Selah!”* (Psalm 81:5b–7). Israel lived for some time in Egypt—400 years—during which time, we have no recorded Scripture (except, perhaps, the book of Job, which was not written in Israel). There was the same passage of time between the two testaments. Then, suddenly, God hears Israel, calling to him, calling for help. *And the sons of Israel signed because of the slavery, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of the slavery rose up to God. So God heard their groaning; and God then recalled His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob* (Ex. 2:23b–24). This was the voice which God had not known. It was the voice of His people, a new generation, several generations removed from that of Joseph and his family. God had not heard their voices before and then they thought of their God and prayed to Him and, suddenly, God heard these voices with which He was unfamiliar. However, he responded to their call for help and removed the burden of slavery from them.

**“Listen, O my people
and I would admonish you
O Israel, if you would listen to me!**

Psalm 81:8

**“Please listen, O my people
and I would admonish you
O Israel, if you would only listen to me!**

God had communicated with Israel in a number of ways. They had seen His signs and wonders; He spoke directly to every one of them; He spoke through Moses; and He spoke through His Word which Moses recorded. God calls out to Israel to just listen to Him! The writer of Hebrews, hoping to reach God’s people, wrote: **Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says,** “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me; as in the day of trial in the wilderness where your fathers tried Me by testing Me. And they had seen My works for forty years. Therefore, I was disgusted with this generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart and they did not know My ways.’ As I swore in My wrath, they will not enter My rest.” **So take care, brothers, so that there should**

⁶ There are many passages where God manifests Himself in the form of a thunderous black cloud—Ex. 14:24 19:19 20:18.

not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart which revolts against the living God (Heb. 3:7–12 Psalm 95:7–11). To paraphrase the NIV Study Bible, God had listened to their calls for help and He answered them; now they are to listen to Him.⁷

**“There will be no unauthorized god
among you
and you will not bow down to a foreign
god.**

Psalm 81:9

**“There should be no unauthorized god
among you
and you will not bow down to a foreign
god.**

The thrust of this psalm is idolatry. The Israelites had a tendency to chase after other gods. The first verbal adjective to describe *god* is the Qal active participle of *zûwr* (זָוַר) [pronounced *zoor*] and this means *estranged, separated, disengaged, alienated, sequestered, unauthorized*. Strong's #2114 BDB #266. The second descriptor of *god* is the adjective *nâk'rîy* (נֶכְרִי) [pronounced *nawck^e-REE*], and it means *foreign, alien*. Strong's #5237 BDB #648. All roads do not lead to Rome. God continually taught that only He was to be worshipped. There is no doctrine in the Bible indicating that we all worship the same God; we just have different names for Him. From the very beginning, it has been taught that there is but one God, Y^ehowah of the Old Testament and Jesus Christ of the New, Who are One and the Same.⁸

**“I [am] Y^ehowah your God,
the One bringing you up out of a land of
Egypt.
Enlarge your mouth and I will fill it.**

Psalm 81:10

**“I [am] Y^ehowah your God,
I brought you up out of the land of
Egypt.
Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.**

All Israel had to do was to place before God their needs and God would fulfill them. If they were hungry, God would feed them. If they were thirsty, He would refresh them. *Delight yourself in Y^ehowah and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to Y^ehowah, trust also in Him, and He will bring it to pass* (Psalm 37:4–5). Because of God's provision, even in their reversionism, *Man ate the bread of angels and God sent them meat in abundance in the wilderness* (Psalm 78:25). *For He [God] has satisfied the thirsty soul and the hungry soul He has filled with what is good* (Psalm 107:9). *“If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you.”* (John 15:7).

God Would Pour out Additional Grace If His People Would Only Listen to Him

**“And my people did not listen to My
voice;
and Israel would not yield to Me!**

Psalm 81:11

**“But my people did not listen to My
voice;
in fact, Israel would not yield to Me!**

The final verb is the Qal perfect of *'â^bvâh* (אָבָה) [pronounced *aw^B-VAWH*], which is almost always found with a negative. It means *would, consent, yield, willing*. Strong's #14 BDB #2. *Then they despised the pleasant land. They did not believe in His word, but they grumbled in their tents. They did not listen to the voice of Y^ehowah. Therefore, He swore to them that He would cast them down in the wilderness* (Psalm 106:24–26). *“Remember—do not forget—how you provoked Y^ehowah your God to wrath in the wilderness; from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you arrived at this place, you have been rebellious against Y^ehowah.”* (Deut. 9:7). *And you neglected all of my counsel and you did not want my reproof* (Prov. 1:25).

⁷ *The NIV Study Bible*; ©1995; p. 866.

⁸ We have covered in great detail idolatry in the past. For your further study, examine Ex. 20:3 Deut. 32:12 Psalm 44:20 Isa. 43:12.

“And so I sent them over into the sphere of stubbornness of their heart; they will walk in own counsels.

Psalms 81:12

“And so I gave them over into the sphere of the stubbornness of their heart; they will pursue their own counsels.

The first verb is the Piel imperfect of the verb *shâlach* (שָׁלַח) [pronounced *shaw-LAHKH*], which means *to send, to send forth, to send away, to dismiss*. Strong’s #7971 BDB #1018. *I suffered them to have what, in the hardness of their hearts they desired, or what their hard and rebellious hearts prompted them to desire. I indulged them in their wishes. I gave them what they asked, and left them to themselves to work out the problem about success and happiness in their own way.*⁹ The second verb is the Qal imperfect of the verb which means *to walk, to go, to come*. Strong’s #1980 (3212) BDB #229.

*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.*¹⁰ **“Furthermore, Y^ehowah your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants to love Y^ehowah your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.”** (Deut. 30:6). The concept that choosing to sin can result in being trapped further in the sin that you yielded too is as old as the second oldest book of the Bible: **“If your sons sinned against Him, then He delivered them into the hand of their transgression.”** (Job 8:4). **Therefore, God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to immunity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, Who is blessed forever; Amen. For this reason, God gave them over to dishonorable passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and, in the same way, also the men abandoned the natural function of the women and turned in their desire towards one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error** (Rom. 1:24–27).¹¹

“O that My people would listen to Me; [that] Israel would walk in My ways!

Psalms 81:13

“O that My people would listen to Me; if only Israel would walk in My ways!

This verse is in direct contrast to the previous verse. In the previous verse, God has sent Israel over to the stubbornness of their own hearts. This is because they would not listen to God. Israel walks in their own counsel (v. 12); they will not walk in God’s ways (v. 13). In this verse, God states His preference. He has given all of Israel free will, and they continually chose against Him. **“Oh, that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever!”** (Deut. 5:29). **“Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked?”** declares Lord Y^ehowah, **“Is it not that he would turn from his wicked ways and live?”** **“Therefore, I will judge you, house of Israel, each according to his conduct,”** declares Lord Y^ehowah God. **“Change your mind and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you. Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For why will you die, house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,”** declares Lord Y^ehowah. **“Therefore, change your mind and live.”** (Ezek. 18:23, 30–32). **“If only you had paid attention to My commandments! Then your well-being would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea.”** (Isa. 48:18). **“But this is what I commanded them, saying, ‘Obey My voice, and I will be your God and you will be My people; and you will walk in all the way which I command you, that it may be well with you.’ Yet, they did not obey or incline their ear, but they walked in their own counsels and in the stubbornness of their evil heart, and went backward and not forward. Since the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have sent you all My servants the prophets, daily rising early and sending them.**

⁹ Barnes’ Notes, Vol. IV, book 2, p. 325.

¹⁰ The NIV Study Bible; ©1995; p. 866.

¹¹ I can’t help but take this sidebar and point out what the New Testament says about homosexuality as illustrative of this principle. The more a person practices acts of homosexuality, the further in they are dragged into it. There are certain sins which affect the soul in that way. The more you commit the sin, the greater hold it has over you. And, like it or not, this verse indicates that most if not all homosexual behavior begins with an experience which pulls the homosexual further into the sin.

Yet they did not listen to Me or incline their ear, but they stiffened their neck; they did evil more than their fathers. And you will speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you; and you will call to them, but they will not answer you.” (Jer. 7:23–27). **For God does not wish that any should perish but that all will come to a change of mind** (II Peter 3:9b). *This is in accordance with all the statements, all the commands, all the invitations, all the warnings, in the Bible. In the entire volume of inspiration there is not one command addressed to men to walk in the ways of sin; there is not one statement that god desires that they should do it; there is not one intimation that he wishes the death of the sinner. The contrary is implied in all the declarations which god has made,—in all his commands, warnings, and invitations,—in all his arrangements for the salvation of men...When men, therefore, do not walk in the ways of God it is impossible that they should take refuge, as an excuse for it, in the plea that god desires this, or that he commands it, or that he is pleased with it, or that he approves it. There is no possible sense in which this can be true; in every sense, and on every account, he prefers that men should be obedient, and not disobedient; good, and not bad; happy, and not miserable; saved, and not lost.*¹²

**“As a little thing, I would subdue their enemies;
and I would turn My hand against their adversaries.**

Psalm 81:14

**“It would be nothing to Me to subdue their enemies;
and I would turn My hand against their adversaries.**

V. 14 begins with the prefixed preposition *as, like* and the word *m^er at̄* (וַיִּנ) [pronounced *m^e-GAHT*], which means *a little, fewness, few*. Strong’s #4592 BDB #589. Although some render this as *soon*, the idea here is that it would be a little thing to God to perform such an act. He could rid Israel of their enemies instantly, if necessary. **Y^ehowah lives and blessed be my Rock; and exalted be the God of my salvation. The God Who executes vengeance for me and subdues peoples under me. He delivers me from my enemies. Surely, You lift me above those who rise up against me; You rescue me from the violent man. Therefore, I will give thanks to You among the nations, O Y^ehowah and I will sing praises to Your name** (Psalm 18:46–49). Some people, particularly unbelievers and stuffy self-righteous types dislike what is implied by all of this, but it is a fact that God will avenge us against our enemies. We don’t have to worry about those who hurt us, who take advantage of us, who run roughshod over us (unless we are in a position of authority over them; then we have to exercise our authority). God takes care of these people. All we have to do is to let Him. There is no discipline for the unbeliever from God. However, one of the reasons an unbeliever will suffer in this life is that he has caused a believer to suffer.¹³

**“Those despising Y^ehowah would feign obedience to Him
and their time would be for eternity [or,
and He is their time to the ages].**

Psalm 81:15

**“Those despising Y^ehowah would feign obedience to Him
and their time would be for eternity [or,
and He would be their time for eternity].**

We have some significant differences in the rendering of this verse.

The Amplified Bible

[Had Israel listened to Me in Egypt, then] those who hated the Lord would have come cringing before Him, and their *defeat* would have lasted forever.

The Emphasized Bible

The haters of Yahweh should come cringing unto him, Then let their own good time be age-abiding!

KJV

The haters of the LORD should have submitted themselves unto him: but their time should have endured forever.

¹² *Barnes’ Notes*, Vol. IV, book 2, pp. 325–326.

¹³ Other reasons an unbeliever will suffer is (1) that they choose sins which result in personal suffering; (2) God gives them over to Satan as an instrument of Satan, who has little or no regard for our suffering; (3) God sometimes causes unbelievers to suffer in order to turn to Him. As we have seen, few people turn to God when everything is going well. If you are an unbeliever and hearing this, then save yourself a lot of suffering and heartache—believe in Jesus Christ. God can speak to you and you can respond, or He can hit you over the head and you can respond. It is your choice.

NASB	“Those who hate the LORD would pretend obedience to Him; and their time of punishment would be forever.
NIV	Those who hate the LORD would cringe before him, and their punishment would last forever.
NRSV	Those who hate the LORD would cringe before him, and their doom would last forever.
Owen's Translation	Those who hate Yahweh would cringe toward him and would last their fate for ever.
Young's Lit. Translation	Those hating Jehovah feign obedience to Him, But their time is—to the age.

We begin with the Piel participle of *hate*. This is followed by the tetragrammaton YHWH. This would be rendered *those hating God* or *those despising God*. The enemies of God are often represented in Scripture with such phrases as haters of God (Ex. 20:5 Rom. 1:30), of Jesus Christ (John 7:7 15:18, 23–25), of believers in Jesus Christ (Psalm 25:19 Prov. 29:10 Luke 6:22 I John 3:13), of His Word (Prov. 1:29 5:12); therefore, they despise His plan, His character, and His government.

The first main verb is the Piel imperfect of *kâchash* (כַּחַשׁ) [pronounced *kaw-KHAHSH*], a word which indicates *lying* and *deception*. *Kachash* is found primarily in the Piel (Joshua 7:11 24:27 Lev. 19:11 Zech. 13:4), and it means *to defraud*, *to deceive*. It could possibly mean *to feign devotion* and *to feign obedience*. Strong's #3584 BDB #471. This is followed by a conjunction, the verb *to be* (in the Qal imperfect) and the word *'êth* (אֵת) [pronounced *gayth*], and it means *time*, *the right time*, *the proper time*. Strong's #6256 BDB #773. What throws me for a loop is that the verb *to be* is in the 3rd person *masculine* singular while *'êth* is in the 3rd person *feminine* singular. Literally, this should be *he is their time to eternity*. However, I just don't know exactly what this verse means. Our other option, if we allow this phrase to lack subject and verb agreement, is: *and their time is to eternity*. However, what does appear that God is speaking, but in these last two verses, Y^{eh}owah is in the third person.

Let me attempt an interpretation: if those who despised God—that is, the Gentile unbelievers—even just tried to feign obedience to Him, then God would bless them as well. In fact, God would even provide for them a place in eternity and, as we will see in the next verse, God would even bless them with prosperity. The idea here is that there are certain divine operational laws for government that, if a Gentile government just attempted to structure itself in accordance with those laws, even as feigned obedience (that is, as unbelievers), they would be blessed. God's laws and principles work for believers and unbelievers alike. The temperance, self-control and work-ethic found in the Bible would cause any unbeliever to be blessed by the fruits of his labor had he participated in these things. This is why Mormans and Jehovah's Witnesses and Black Muslims can enjoy great prosperity in this life; they are unbelievers, they belong to a cult, they will, for the most part, spend eternity in hell, but they follow many of the principles found in the Bible and are therefore blessed. On a national level, the same thing is true. Even attempted obedience on the part of a nation—an effort to follow God's Laws—results in national blessing in terms of time on this earth and in terms of material prosperity. A nation perpetually based upon Biblical principles, even filled with unbelievers, would be preserved until the end of this age.

**“Then He would feed him with the fat of
the wheat
and from the rock with honey, I would
satisfy you.”**

Psalm 81:16

**“Then He would feed him with the
finest of the wheat
and from the rock with honey, I would
satisfy you.”**

The change of person confused me at first; and I was not the only person who had trouble with the changing of person in this verse. The Septuagint, Syriac and Vulgate codices read: *would I satisfy him*; and Ginsburg's Hebrew Notes reads: *would he satisfy him*. Here is what some translators did:

<i>The Amplified Bible</i>	<i>God would feed Israel [now] also with the finest of the wheat, and with honey out of the rock would I satisfy you.</i>
<i>The Emphasized Bible</i>	<i>Then would he feed them from the marrow of the wheat, Yeah out of the rock with honey would I satisfy thee.</i>

KJV	He should have fed them also with the finest of the wheat: and with honey out of the rock should I have satisfied thee.
NASB	"But I would feed you with the finest of the wheat; and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."
NIV	"But you would be fed with the finest of wheat; and honey from the rock I would satisfy you."
Owen's Translation	And he would feed him with the finest of the wheat and from the rock with honey I would satisfy you.
Young's Lit. Translation	He causeth him to eat of the fat of wheat, And <i>with</i> honey from a rock I satisfy thee!

The key is to examine this verse in context. God's will is for every person to come to a place of repentance (change of mind)—moral and immoral, His chosen, Israel, as well as Israel's enemies, who are also the enemies of God. God graciously wants to bless His enemies as He desires to bless Israel. "O that My people would listen to Me; if only Israel would walk in My ways! It would be nothing to Me to subdue their enemies; and I would turn My hand against their adversaries. Those despising Y^ehowah would feign obedience to Him and their time would be for eternity [or, and he would be their time to the ages]. Then He would feed him with the fat of the wheat and from the rock with honey, I would satisfy you." (Psalm 81:13–16).

One option for interpretation is that the middle few sentences are parenthetical, spoken directly by the Psalmist rather than by God, as in: "O that My people would listen to Me; if only Israel would walk in My ways! It would be nothing to Me to subdue their enemies; and I would turn My hand against their adversaries." [Those despising Y^ehowah would feign obedience to Him and their time would be for eternity [or, and he would be their time to the ages]. Then He would feed him with the fat of the wheat] "And from the rock with honey, I would satisfy you." (Psalm 81:13–16). The problem with that idea is that the psalmist has no reason to butt in for a sentence or two; and this ruins the parallelism of the last two lines, as one is spoken by the psalmist and one by God.

It is more reasonable to suppose that all the Gentiles had to do is just act as though they were devoted to God and that would have been enough. He would have taken care of them throughout eternity, providing for their every need, feeding them with the fat (the best) of the wheat. Simultaneously, God would feed Israel from the rock with honey, indicating a miraculous and sweet existence. We do have a change of person here; however, it seems reasonable that this is merely poetic license; that the first person singular (*I*) is God and the third person singular subject (*He*) is God. The third person plural (*their*) and third person singular would refer to the Gentiles and the second person singular (*you*) is Israel. In other words, "O that My people [Israel] would listen to Me [God]; if only Israel would walk in My ways! It would be nothing to Me [God] to subdue their enemies [Gentile unbelievers]; and I would turn My hand against their adversaries." Those despising Y^ehowah [Israel's enemies; Gentile unbelievers] would feign obedience to Him [Y^ehowah] and He [Y^ehowah] would be their [the Gentile's] time to eternity. Then He [Y^ehowah] would feed him [the Gentile] with the fat of the wheat. And from the rock with honey, I [God] would satisfy you Israel." (Psalm 81:13–16).

With respect to the imagery of honey from a rock, the psalmist borrowed this from the song of Moses. Recall the translation: "He made him ride upon high places of the earth; then he caused him to eat the fruits of field; and He caused him to nurse honey out from a cliff and oil out of a flint of rock." (Deut. 32:13). Honey and oil are not produced from cliffs or from a flint of rock. There were several possible interpretations here: even though we have the appearance of *impossibility*; bees would sometimes build their hives in the cleft of rocks; and olive trees grew on rocky hillsides (hence the name, Mount of Olives).¹⁴ Barnes also noted, that honey was obviously a well-liked food, mentioned many times in the Bible (Gen. 43:11 Deut. 8:8 I Sam. 14:25–26). Barnes personally testified to the purest and whitest honey coming from Chamouni in Switzerland. Then he quoted Dr. Thompson from *Land and the Book*, Vol. II, where Thompson testifies to the honey being in such great abundance in one area that it dripped down from the trees onto the ground. Thompson also personally observed wild bees in the clefts of the rocks in Israel.

¹⁴ Barnes noted that Israel was able to produce great produce from unproductive areas and Freeman that that the flinty rock is what the olive press is made from.

Let me conclude with remarks made by Barnes: *The meaning here is plain, that, if Israel had been obedient to God, he would have blessed them with abundance—with the richest and most coveted productions of the field. Pure religion—obedience to God—morality—temperance, purity, honesty, and industry, such as religion requires—are always eminently favourable to individual and national prosperity; and if a man or a nation desired to be most prospered, most successful in the lawful and proper objects of individual or national existence, and most happy, nothing would tend more to conduce to it than those virtues which piety enjoins and cultivates. Individuals and nations, even in respect to temporal prosperity, are most unwise, as well as most wicked, when they disregard the laws of God, and turn away from the precepts and the spirit of religion. It is true of nations, as it is of individuals, that “Godliness is profitable until all things, having promise of the life that now is,” I Tim. iv. 8.*¹⁵

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¹⁵ Barnes' Notes, Vol. IV, book 2, p. 327.