

The Open Ear

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Date: 09 December 2018

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our Bibles and to our reading for this morning. Edward has been leading us through some of these Psalms, the bittersweet songs of Israel, God's people. And we're going to read this morning in Psalm number 81. Psalm 81, it's page 491 if you have one of the church visitors' Bibles. And it begins, To the Choir Master, according to the Gittith of Asaph.

Sing aloud to God our strength. Shout for joy to the God of Jacob. Raise a song. Sound the tambourine, the sweet lyre with the harp. Blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon on our feast day. For it's a statute for Israel, a rule of the God of Jacob. He made it a decree in Joseph when he went out over the land of Egypt. I hear a language I had not known. I relieved your shoulder of the burden. Your hands were freed from the basket. In distress you called and I delivered you. I answered you in the secret place of thunder. I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Hear, O my people, while I admonish you. O 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. I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it. But my people did not listen to my voice. Israel would not submit to me.

So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own counsels. O that my people would listen to me. That Israel would walk in my ways. I would soon subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes. Those who hate the Lord would cringe towards him and their fate would last forever.

But he would feed you with the finest of wheat and with honey from the rock. I would satisfy you. Amen. And may God bless us. This is word.

Well, friends, let's open our Bibles up at Psalm 81, which you'll find on page 491 in our large hardback Bibles. Psalm 81. You'll see it begins with the title, which is part of the ancient text, to the choir master, according to the Gittith of Asaph. And if you look down at the bottom of the page, you'll see the footnote to the Gittith says probably a musical or liturgical term.

[3 : 06] That means that the editors have no idea what it really means. The best guess probably is that it's the name of a tune. Do you know most of the hymns that we sing, certainly all the old-fashioned hymns and their tunes? Those tunes all have names. So they have names like Rockingham or Kumronda or Aberystwyth or something like that. And almost certainly these little markings would have been the same kind of thing. Psalm 80, for example, back over the page, is according to lilies. So that might well have been a tune as well.

That is not the most important thing that we need to think about, however, this morning. So let us pray again for a moment. God, our Father, we thank you so much for the scriptures. The Bible teaches us to have an open ear.

But the purpose of the open ear in the Bible is not simply that we should listen to what God says, but also that we should respond to it with ready obedience and joyful obedience.

Now think of it in terms of our ordinary life. It's possible to hear something very clearly, but not to respond in the right kind of way. So for example, at work, you might hear your boss perfectly clearly asking you to finish your particular project by Friday. But you don't respond by doing as he asks, because you don't want to make the effort. Or at home, a little boy might hear his mother calling from the kitchen, come and have your tea, Kenny. But he doesn't come because he doesn't want to stop playing with his toys. He's got something that he'd prefer to do.

It is possible to hear perfectly clearly and yet not to respond. But in the Bible, God frequently commands us to hear and to respond with joyful obedience. Famously, in the book of Deuteronomy, God calls out, hear, O Israel, hear, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Hear, O Israel.

[5 : 37] Now we find just the same kind of insistence in the teaching of Jesus. So for example, he tells a parable like the parable of the sower. And having told the parable, he calls out, he who has ears to hear, let him hear. And what he means by that is, you've all got ears, but are your ears willing to listen to my teaching and willing to respond to it? He says in Luke's gospel, chapter eight, take care then how you hear. We might expect him to say, take care how you speak. But he says, take care how you hear. Now, if you date back in the life of this church a few years, you may remember that I think it was about 10 years ago, we had a big poster hanging up outside the church, the old church building down in Buchanan Street. It was a photograph, a large photograph of a human ear.

And underneath the photograph was the caption in one word. It said, listen. When Jesus says, he who has ears to hear, let him hear, his implication is plain. He is saying, some of you have an open ear, but I know that some ears are purposely deaf. They hear superficially, but they have no intention of taking my teaching to heart. But it's impossible to be a Christian at all without opening our ears and listening carefully to what the Lord God says to us. The Bible has been described as God preaching.

That's a good description. The Bible is God's sermon to the world. It's preached to the world because God loves the world. But the question is, do we hear his glorious sermon with an open ear?

Now, this theme of the open ear is really the theme of Psalm 81. And you'll see that our version of the Bible, this is the editorial title, gives a good title there. Oh, that my people would listen to me. And you'll see just that thought expressed in verse 8. Oh, Israel, if you would but listen to me. And again in verse 13. Oh, that my people would listen to me. Which suggests that very often their ears were closed to the voice of their God, the God who loved them, and they were not listening to him. [7 : 56] So friends, let me ask this morning, what is the state of our ears? Are our ears regularly open to the teaching of the Lord? Or do we prefer to keep them shut? Or possibly do we suffer from selective deafness? It is possible to hear parts of the word of God, but to shut out the parts that we particularly need to listen to. C.S. Lewis, before he became a Christian, thought of God as the great interferer. He didn't want God to come and interfere with the comfortable way in which he'd arranged his life. He didn't want to listen. He wanted to keep his ears firmly closed. But the Lord did not let him get away with that forever. Well, let's look at this psalm's message under two headings. First, remember your rescue back then. And second, listen to my voice right now. First then, remember your rescue back then. You'll see the psalm begins with a command to sing and shout and rejoice. Now those are loud words. This is not subdued or quiet. The psalmist, Asaph, is not an Englishman with a stiff upper lip who insists that any display of emotion is obviously inappropriate. Not at all. He's a prophet of God, and he knows that God's care for his people is so wonderful that it needs to be celebrated loudly.

Look at his phrases there. Verse one, sing aloud. Open your mouth, people of God, and sing. Then still in verse one, shout. Shout for joy to your God. Verse two, raise a song. Sound the tambourine. If you look in verses two and three, you'll see that Asaph, who was a musician, is interested in percussion and strings and brass. The tambourine for rhythm, the lyre and the harp for sweet melody, and the trumpet for shock value. Something to make even the deaf elderly gentlemen in the congregation sit up and take notice. But this is not to be indisciplined celebration. In fact, it's celebration that is subject to regulation. Verse three says that it's to happen at certain times, at new moon, at full moon, on our feast day. In other words, it needs to be according to the calendar of the law of Moses. Now, the psalmist is probably referring here to the book of Numbers, chapter 29, verse one, which says, on the first day of the seventh month, you shall have a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work. It is a day for you to blow the trumpets. Now, this whole psalm is in fact full of a sense of the law of Moses. Look at verses four and five. It is a statute for Israel, a rule of the God of Jacob. He made it a decree in Joseph. So this is a statutory celebration. It's to be an annual day of joyful remembrance. And what are the people to remember and celebrate? Nothing less than their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Verse five, he made it a decree in Joseph when he went out over the land of Egypt. And that phrase refers straight back to a passage in Exodus chapter 11, just before the Exodus, in which Moses is speaking to Pharaoh. And Moses, frustrated and cross, says to Pharaoh, thus says the Lord, about midnight, I will go out in the midst of Egypt and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die. And then Moses describes to Pharaoh everything that is going to happen on that dreadful night of the Passover. And you'll see in our verse

five here, that phrase when he went out over the land of Egypt, that precisely echoes the words of Exodus 11, about midnight, I will go out in the midst of Egypt. And then verses six and seven describe in just a few words, what God did for his people at the Exodus. Verse six, I relieved your shoulder of the burden.

Your hands were freed from the basket. And you'll remember that in their slavery, the Israelites were in great distress. They were, they were having to make bricks without straw. They were carrying heavy loads of bricks in baskets with shoulder straps. Verse six conjures up a picture of slaves who are bowed down and worn out, their backs and their shoulders aching intolerably, their hearts despairing and demoralized. But God relieved them and freed them. You'll see those two verbs are used in verse six.

Verse seven, in distress, you called. I heard your voice at that point. I was listening to you and I delivered you. I made it possible by the terrors of Passover night for you to escape.

[12:58] You came across the Red Sea. And then verse seven, I answered you in the secret place of thunder. That means Mount Sinai, where I gave you my law, my statutes and my rules. So it's all about the Exodus.

And if you look onto verses nine and 10, those two verses almost exactly reproduce the words in which God introduces the 10 commandments in Exodus chapter 20. I am the Lord, your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Verse 10, and you shall have no other gods besides me. Verse nine.

So what is Asaph the psalmist saying to his contemporaries in Israel, some four or five centuries after the Exodus? The Exodus probably happened in about 1440 BC and Asaph would have been writing probably in the 10th century, nearly 500 years later. Well, he is saying to them, fellow Israelites, remember how God saved you back then, how he gave you his law so that you should know how to live and now celebrate that deliverance with great joy. But you must do it regularly.

It's a statute. It's a rule. It's a decree. It's a statute that you should celebrate your deliverance. Now we modern people, very laid back people, we might think, but wouldn't it be better for them if they celebrated spontaneously? Did they really need to do it by law, by number, by the calendar?

Well, yes, they did. Because they, like us after them, were naturally sluggish and lazy and apt to forget. What the psalmist is teaching us is that if we are going to shout and sing and rejoice and remember God's deliverance of us, we need to do it with disciplined regularity. If we just leave it to chance and spontaneity, it probably won't happen at all. Now think of it like this. You needed, I needed, to apply a certain degree of self-discipline to ourselves to be here this morning, didn't we?

[15:05] If you had simply abandoned yourself to chance and spontaneity, I think you would still be at home at this very moment. You might be sitting in your kitchen, listening to music and eating your third slice of toast and marmalade. You could possibly be in the bath reading the Sunday newspapers, in which case you'd be thinking about Brexit or about Manchester City and Chelsea. But you wouldn't be thinking about the Lord who has rescued you from ruin and destruction. The ancient Israelites, they needed discipline to remember their deliverance at the Exodus. And we too need the discipline of regularly remembering our deliverance, which is a much more wonderful deliverance because it's a deliverance from sin and death and hell, which Jesus accomplished for us by his death and resurrection. It's no good leaving it to chance and spontaneity. I, speaking for myself, am spontaneously an inactive slug.

Martin Luther apparently had to discipline himself to go to church, especially on a Sunday evening. He found Sunday evenings pretty hard. He'd be sitting in his armchair comfortably by his fire, just imagine it. And he would feel at about five in the afternoon that he just didn't have the energy to drag himself down to the meeting house. But he would do it. He would wearily get up out of his chair, put on his coat, go to church, and then, he said, then, as they sang the first hymn together, and as he looked around and saw the faces of his fellow Christians, he came to life, and he was filled with joy.

Do you know that experience? I certainly do. But there's a certain discipline required, and that's what Psalm 81 is teaching us. Some years ago, Dr. Jim Packer wrote a book called Laid Back Religion.

And in that book, there's a chapter which is called The Discipline of Joy. Isn't that an interesting chapter title? And in that chapter, he makes the point that we're commanded in Scripture to rejoice. It's a discipline for us. Think of Paul the Apostle writing to the Philippians from prison. You don't feel very happy in prison, do you, necessarily? But from prison, Paul said to the Philippians, rejoice in

the Lord always.

[17 : 18] And just in case you didn't hear it the first time, I'll say it again. Rejoice. It's a command, not a suggestion. And it's just the same here in our psalm. The first three verses are commands.

Sing, shout, raise a song, blow the trumpet. Asaph does not say, could I possibly prevail upon you to shout with joy? No, he commands it.

So we need the discipline. We need the command. And the command in Psalm 81 is, remember your deliverance with joy. Remember your rescue back then.

For the ancient Israelites, that rescue happened at the Exodus. The Exodus was the defining event of their lives. They kept looking back to it. The Psalms are full of it. And for us, the whole Bible urges us to remember our deliverance from the grip of death and hell, which has been won for us at such great cost by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Now, there are lesser parallels in later human history. So, for example, we have a remembrance Sunday every November so that we can look back with gratitude to those who died in the great wars to secure our freedom.

[18 : 32] It's an excellent custom. The Americans celebrate Thanksgiving every year towards the end of November to thank God for the safe arrival of their founding fathers, the pilgrim fathers, in the 17th century.

And the New Testament teaches us to remember the saving death of Jesus as we regularly celebrate the Lord's Supper. Do this in remembrance of me.

Keep on doing it. The broken bread is a symbol of Jesus's broken body. We eat it. We take it into ourselves. We linger over it.

We think of the love expressed for us on the cross. Then we pick up the cup, which represents his blood. We drink it. We take it in. We think quietly and gratefully about the blood pouring from his wounds.

We remember our rescue accomplished by Jesus. That Friday, so gloomy, so awful, is truly Good Friday. Look at verse 6 again in our psalm.

[19 : 36] Look at those ideas of relief and freedom. The death of Jesus relieved us and freed us, not from pain in the shoulder, not from the weight of bricks in a basket, but from the deadly burden of our sin and from the pains of everlasting ruin.

We have something to celebrate. We have something to be deeply thankful for. Thinking about the cross of Jesus is the best antidote to self-pity and gloom.

If you ever feel that you're not worth very much, that your life is insubstantial and very frail, think about Jesus dying there on the cross.

And then say to yourself, I may feel very small. I may feel worthless in my own eyes, but I'm enormously valuable in his eyes. His death on the cross shows me how much he has cared for me. And he has cared for me like that because he wants to share his eternal home with me. He wants to seat me at his table to talk to me and to enjoy my company forever.

[20 : 42] So we've been relieved from a burden much weightier than a basket of bricks. But Asaph is teaching us here to sing for joy to the Lord and to do it regularly.

And as we learn the discipline, and it can take some time to learn it, the discipline of meeting with the Lord's people frequently and regularly, we discover that the joy of it follows.

The appetite comes with the eating. It's as we learn the regular practice of being with the Lord's people that our desire to sing and rejoice in the Lord grows. So there's the first thing that Asaph is teaching his fellow believers, to look back in history to their rescue at the Exodus.

That rescue defined their identity as the people of God. And our rescue through the work of Jesus defines our identity as God's people today. It means that we're cross and resurrection people.

We look back in history to those great events. We look back regularly and it makes us sing to God and rejoice in him. Remember your rescue back then.

[21 : 50] Now secondly, listen to God's voice right now. You'll see the tone of the psalm changes abruptly and painfully when we get to verse 8.

Verses 1 to 7 have been joyful and positive. Sing and shout and blow the trumpet because God has rescued us. But then the Lord, speaking in the first person, expresses his surprise and his grief and astonishment as verse 8 begins.

Hear, O my people, while I admonish you. O Israel, if you would but listen to me. You're not listening to me. If you had listened to the Ten Commandments, he's saying, then the very idea of

having strange gods or foreign gods would be hateful to you.

You wouldn't entertain it for a moment. You seem to have forgotten that I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Verse 11. My people did not listen to my voice. Notice the my and the my. Do you feel the pain of that statement? How could it be that my people were not willing to listen to my voice? It's rather like the lock rejecting the key that has been made for it.

[23 : 05] Or like a fledgling bird in the nest rejecting the parent who comes to feed it. How could God's people not be listening with an open ear to the voice of their own God?

Now we'll come to the 21st century A.D. in just a moment. But let's think first of what this meant in the psalmist's own day. There's a painfully sad strain that runs right the way through the Old Testament.

And it's this. That God is a perpetually faithful God. Faithful to Israel always. But Israel is repeatedly unfaithful to the Lord.

It's often pictured like a marriage which is falling apart. God is the faithful husband. Always faithful. But Israel has become the unfaithful bride who lusts after other lovers and goes off with them.

This is why God has to say to Israel in verse 9 here. There shall be no strange God among you.

You shall not bow down to a foreign God. I am your true God. I am your rescuer.

[24 : 09] I am the one who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. And then notice the next phrase in verse 10. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it. The meaning of that command is simple and overwhelming.

He's saying to them, if you would but listen to my voice and obey my commands, you would be blessed with everything that you need. There'd be beef and lamb on your table, plenty of it. Your olives and figs and vines would be laden with fruit.

The land of Canaan would indeed be a land flowing with milk and honey. The open mouth being filled is a picture of the happy life that God's people should have been enjoying and would have been enjoying if they'd been listening to him.

But, verse 11, you've not been listening to my voice. You've not been submitting to me. And how does God respond to Israel when she turns a deaf ear to him?

Well, look at verse 12. He gives them over. It's a very sad verb. He gives them over to the consequences of their own folly. In essence, he says to them, if you must go your own way, you will have to reap what you have sown.

[25 : 18] If you choose to turn away from me, you can only blame yourselves for the distress and the wretchedness that you will end up in. This kind of behavior is painfully illustrated in a book like the book of Judges.

In the book of Judges, again and again, to use the shocking phrase which the book employs, the people of Israel go whoring after foreign gods, after the Baals, fertility gods, fertility religion.

And God, as a consequence, gives them over to the power of enemies, Canaanites or Ammonites or Midianites or Philistines. And their life becomes unbearably painful until they cry to the Lord and he mercifully sends them a savior figure, a judge like Gideon or Jephthah or Samson, who then rescues them for a while.

But then the pattern of disobedience repeats itself over and again. Now, our psalm is telling us what would happen to the people of Israel if they did listen to the Lord and obey him.

Verse 13. Oh, that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways. Then what would happen? Verse 14. I would soon subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes.

[26 : 35] Those who hate the Lord would cringe towards him and their fate would last forever. So the enemies of God's people would be subdued and put down. And that would mean that Israel would flourish.

But verse 16. He would feed you with the finest of the wheat and with honey from the rock. I would satisfy you. The very rocks would produce honey. If only you would listen to my voice and obey me. One of the great themes of the Old Testament is that obedience brings blessing, but disobedience leads to ruin and misery. Asaph is saying to his contemporaries, you are cloth-eared and clot-headed.

Open your ears and listen to the voice of your God and you will be blessed. Now let's think about the 21st century church. The message to us is surely the same wonderful message.

Open your ears and listen to my voice. And then you'll be able to open your mouth wide and I will fill it with good things. Listen to me and obey me. Don't be selectively deaf.

[27 : 42] Listen to the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible. And I will bless you. But there's a problem. Our enemy, the devil, is in the business of manufacturing earplugs.

Now that has always been his business, right from his first appearance, when he said to Eve in the Garden of Eden, Did God really say, you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?

Oh, come, come, you gullible little soul. There's more to life than the things that God seems to say. Don't be naive. Cut yourself a little slack, my dear. Now let's think of the kind of earplugs which the devil has been manufacturing in recent years to put into our ears.

We'll think of a worldly earplug and then we'll think of an ecclesiastical earplug. First of all, worldly earplug. In this country, this came out really in Willie's prayer a few minutes ago, but in this country, the Bible was highly honored for many centuries.

It fashioned the nation's life. It fashioned our laws. It was honored. It was honored in this city, the city of Glasgow. Let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of your word and the praising of your name.

[29 : 00] It's a God-centered motto, isn't it? What is it today? People make Glasgow. I discovered just last week that in the First World War, just a hundred years ago, every British soldier was sent into battle with a Bible as part of his standard kit.

So in that big backpack, he would have knife, fork and spoon, razor blades, lather brush, water bottle, ground sheet, two pairs of socks, rifle, bayonet and Bible. It was standard issue.

It was paid for by the British government. Something has happened to the Bible in British society during the hundred years since the First World War.

Imagine a heated debate taking place in the House of Commons today. Imagine a member of Parliament standing up and saying, Mr. Speaker, I would ask this house to listen to the teaching of Jesus on this particular point in Matthew's Gospel.

The Speaker, who's not normally short of a word, would be short of many words, wouldn't he? I think he'd have an apoplectic fit. He'd keel over. The House would be in uproar. That member of Parliament would be verbally cut to pieces in two minutes for daring to think that the teaching of the Bible might have some effect upon a debate.

[30 : 15] Those who formulate new legislation today don't want the influence of the Bible in their decision-making. And yet, historically, over the last 1,500 years or more, everything that is best in British society, our morals, our manners, our sense of truth and loyalty and honor and honesty, and not least the system of government which has gradually emerged, these things have been largely fashioned by the teaching of the Bible.

And in a society like this, where the world wants to sideline the Bible and wants to push it out into the margins of our national life, one consequence can be, and here's the danger, that Christians can feel that their confidence in the Bible is undermined.

And we can be tempted to be ashamed, not simply of Jesus, but of his words, which are the words of the Bible. Friends, we must not allow the devil to put the world's earplugs into our ears.

Let's stand by the Bible, rejoice in it, teach it and live by it. Now, the devil has another workshop in which he fashions ecclesiastical earplugs.

Now, the ecclesiastical earplug is a subtle one. It's very carefully disguised. The devil loves to do disguise work, doesn't he? He does a very good line in sheepskin clothing as well, doesn't he?

[31 : 43] The wolf wears it so carefully that you can't tell quite what it is. But let's think of the disguised earplugs, which can get into our ears without our realizing that they're there at all.

I want to describe a typical example of it. Its real name is liberal theology. You go to a church where you don't normally go. Perhaps you're on holiday, or for some other reason you go to church.

Other than in your own church. And as you go into the church building, you'll see posters around the building with Bible verses printed on them. Very nicely displayed.

Pretty pictures of mountains and the ocean and deer and that sort of thing. There might even be tapestries and banners displayed in the church building, which show biblical themes. The creation or Noah's Ark with a rainbow overhead.

And when the service begins, you sing hymns and songs with words and ideas in them, which speak of God and the Lord Jesus. And one or two Bible passages are read out clearly and loudly during the service.

[32 : 44] Then the preacher begins the sermon, very often starting with a quotation from the Bible, thus giving the impression that he's teaching the Bible. But when you listen carefully to what he says, you realize that his main interest in Bible ideas is in what they say about man, about the conditions in which human beings operate.

So he may use a Bible story to illustrate, for example, what it means to be a refugee or what it might mean to be socially disadvantaged. He'll preach about prison reform or disability in children or dementia in the elderly.

He'll preach about human flourishing. He'll preach about love. In fact, almost every one of his sermons in the end will be about love. Now, it's good for us to be encouraged to love each other. Of course it is. But that's good advice, isn't it? It's not good news. What he won't do is to preach about God. All he'll really want to say about God is that God loves us and therefore we should love each other.

What he doesn't want to engage with is the story of the Bible. Because the story of the Bible is about God. It shows us how God is working out a righteous and unstoppable purpose through history right until the end of history when the human race will be eternally divided into the saved and the lost.

[34 : 14] Now, the liberal preacher cannot bear the Bible's teaching about that eternal separation. He cannot bear the idea that God is calling a people to himself who are distinguished from those who refuse to bow the knee to Jesus as their king.

The truth about the Bible is that it's all about salvation and judgment. It's about God saving his people from his own righteous judgment. That's how God has shown his love to the world by sending a savior to rescue us from the wrath to come.

That's the love of God. But the liberal preacher doesn't want Jesus to be a savior. He only wants him to be a nice example of how to live well.

Friends, we must listen. We must open our ears to God's words. Everything depends upon it. If we will listen to the whole Bible, to what it teaches us about God, God the savior, God the judge, God who rescues us from the power of sin and death, if we will keep listening to the whole Bible, we will have, in the opening words of our psalm, something to sing about, something to make a shout for joy.

Listen to me, Israel, says the psalmist. Don't go bowing down to gods who are no gods. I am the Lord your God. I am your rescuer. Open your ears and respond with joyful obedience.

[35 : 42] And then you will be blessed. Let's pray together. Dear God, our Father, we do confess to you that sometimes we listen to the Bible with selective deafness.

and we pray that you will humble our hearts and fill them with a fresh desire to listen to everything that you have to say to us in the Bible, to conform our lives to it and to do so gladly and joyfully. And as we've prayed already earlier in the service, we do ask that more and more churches up and down our country where maybe there is a liberal voice sounding in the pulpit, that those who preach that way will be able to repent and turn to you and discover again the joy of salvation, real salvation given to us through the Savior who came to rescue us from the wrath to come.

So bless us, we pray. Help us to love your words, to treasure them up in our hearts and to have our lives deeply shaped and formed by them.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.