

# OpenTheo

## December 2nd: Psalm 81 & Acts 24:24—25:12

December 1, 2020



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A festal rebuke. Festus becomes governor.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Psalm 81 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 is 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 toward him, And their fate would last forever. But he would feed you with the finest of the wheat, And with honey from the rock I would satisfy you. Psalm 81 is a festal psalm, beginning with a summons to celebrate a feast.

Like the psalm that precedes it, it seems to address the northern tribes of Israel in particular. In verse 5 of Psalm 81, He made a decree in Joseph when he went out over the land of Egypt. In Psalm 80 verses 1-2, Give ear, O shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock.

You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, Shine forth, before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, Stir up your might and come to save us. After the summons to worship of the first five verses, there is a two-part speech, as Conrad Schaefer highlights. A call for Israel to hear lies at the heart of the two sections.

In verse 8, Hear, O my people, while I admonish you. O Israel, if you would but listen to me. And in verse 13, O that my people would listen to me, That Israel would walk in my ways.

Both of the sections begin with hearing or listening to a voice, and end with a reference to the Lord's feeding and satisfying his people. Schaefer writes, Many commentators suggest that the celebration in view is that of the Feast of Tabernacles, verses 4 and 5 claim that the feast in question finds its origin in the time of the Exodus. The new moon in view is likely that at the beginning of the seventh month, the chief festal month, on the Feast of Trumpets, and the full moon is on the 15th of that month, at the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles, as we see in Leviticus chapter 23.

Beth Tanner questions this identification, arguing that the association with the Exodus suggests that this was more likely to be the Passover or the Feast of Unleavened Bread. However, the Feast of Tabernacles is the mirror image of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It corresponds in the seventh month to the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the first.

The explanation for the feast is found in Leviticus chapter 23, verses 41 to 43. You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I was bringing them out of the land of Egypt.

I am the Lord your God. The Feast of Tabernacles is associated with Sukkoth, the first

place that Israel went to after leaving their homes in Egypt, the very same day as they baked unleavened bread. The Feast of Tabernacles was also a time when the law was read and the covenant renewed, which might provide some context for this specific psalm.

The voice of God bursts in upon the ceremony at the end of verse 5 and in verse 6, recalling the events of the Exodus, which the festival celebrates. It is the beginning of a divine oracle. God relieved Israel's distress in the slavery of Egypt.

Israel called out to God in their suffering, and they were heard and answered by him in the secret place of thunder, which Alan Ross suggests might be an allusion to the pillar of cloud and fire that led them. They were tested by God at the waters of Meribah, an incident that is usually described as Israel's testing of God, rather than the other way round, as here. One of the complicating features of this psalm is the change in person in verses 6, 7, 11, 12, 15 and 16.

In referring to Israel, the text moves between him, you and they. Tanner writes, God is involved with the singular him, the people collectively, whether in either the singular or the plural, and ending the poem at verse 16 as the personal you. In other words, the psalm covers all of the bases and possibly indicates that the pronouns incorporated in the matrix should not be seen as set in stone, but flexible so as to address any and all future situations.

Hearing is a dominant note throughout the psalm, and perhaps especially here. Hearing, of course, was central to the charge given to Israel, as we see in Deuteronomy 6, verses 3-5. Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. God pleads with his people to listen here, and alludes to the first two commandments of the law in Exodus 20, verses 2-5.

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me. God heard the voice of Israel in its distress, and rescued them from the clutches of Pharaoh.

When he calls them to hear him, he is calling them to hear the one who heard them. The profound ungratefulness of the people is implied here. Pleading with Israel to hear, and alluding to the first two commandments, should also be recognized as a gesture towards the law more generally.

The first two commandments are the heading of the ten, and the entire body of the commandments. If they would only open their mouths, the Lord would graciously fill them, providing them with what they need, much as he did during their time in the wilderness, with the manna and the quail. The reference here to the provision of food might also fit in with the significance of the Feast of Tabernacles as a harvest festival.

In Israel's stubbornness, they refused to listen to the voice of God, or to submit to him. They rejected him, so he surrendered them to their own stubborn ways, to their own destruction. God laments that they refused to listen.

If they would only listen and turn to him, he would subdue their enemies and drive back those who prey upon them. Their foes would be the Lord's foes, and their fate would be fixed. In contrast to them, Israel would be bountifully fed from the Lord's hand, enjoying the good gifts of God's land in faithful enjoyment of his presence and his provision.

A question to consider. Set at the time of a feast, Psalm 81 presents Israel with their sin and challenges them to hear the voice of the Lord, to turn and to know the Lord's blessing. What are some of the ways in which Israel's festivals were calculated to inspire repentance and recommitment on the part of the nation? Acts chapter 24 verse 24 to chapter 25 verse 12.

After some days, Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity, I will summon you.

At the same time, he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him. When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Portius Festus, and desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea, and the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem, because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea, and that he himself intended to go there shortly. So, said he, let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him.

After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to

Caesarea, and the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove. Paul argued in his defense, neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.

But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem, and there be tried on these charges before me? But Paul said, I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer, and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death.

But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar. Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, To Caesar you have appealed, to Caesar you shall go.

After the high priest Ananias, the elders and Tertullus had come before Felix, and Paul had given his defense, Felix adjoined the trial until Lysias the tribune would arrive. Now at the end of chapter 24, we discover that he summoned Paul before him again, this time with his Jewish wife Drusilla present. As Cray Kina notes, Drusilla might have appreciated having someone like Paul, who was familiar with Greco-Roman thought, and was able to express traditional Jewish convictions within that sort of idiom, having a potential influence upon her husband.

Paul's speaking before Felix and Drusilla here is also part of the way in which he fulfils what Christ foretold in Luke chapter 21 in the Alphabet Discourse, in verses 12-13. But before all this, they will lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness.

And Paul takes his opportunity to bear witness here, he speaks boldly about faith in Christ Jesus, shorthand for the Gospel message. More specifically, he speaks about righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment. These are core implications of the Christian message for someone in the office of civil authority.

Felix is such a ruler, and he must submit to the authority of Christ as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Civil authority comes under the rule of Christ. A governor like Felix bears the sword, but he is responsible to Christ for the way that he does so.

He must learn about righteousness, he must learn about self-control, a classic virtue for rulers in Greco-Roman thought, but here framed in terms of Christian teaching. The ruler without self-control is apt to be tyrannical. The leader, however, who has controlled himself, will be much less likely to use his power to prey upon others or to fulfill his lusts.

As we learn more about Felix as a character, we will see that he has failed in this regard, and is a corrupt ruler in many respects. A message of judgment to come was also very prominent within the teaching of Paul and the other apostles. There was a higher throne to which this world's authorities must answer, and the fact that such judgment would come, and the one by whom it would be rendered, was announced by the raising of Christ from the dead.

Paul makes the same point in his Areopagus speech in Athens in Acts chapter 17. Here we might get some indication of the fact that Paul has a particular form of his message that is especially targeted at those who exercise civil or political authority. Felix seems to be rattled, and he sends Paul away, saying that he will call him again when he has the opportunity.

He continues to talk to him on regular occasions, but he does not free him. This is not the brief postponement of Paul's trial that we might have anticipated. We begin to realise that Felix is a corrupt ruler.

He is hoping to be given a bribe. The longer he delays, the greater the pressure would be for Paul or his friends to give one. He also wants to appease the Jews by keeping Paul imprisoned, and yet he knows that Paul is innocent, so he does not want to condemn him.

Two full years elapse before Portius Festus replaces Felix as the governor of the province. Three days after Festus arrives, he goes up to Jerusalem, and at the very start of his tenure as governor, the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews present him with Paul's case. They want him as a favour to them to bring Paul back to Jerusalem.

They are hoping to ambush and kill him on the way. This is the second time that they had played the part of brigands in trying to take Paul's life through an ambush. Festus's rejection of the petition of the chief priests and the leading men of the Jews highlights divine protection of Paul.

Festus was a very new ruler, and they are requesting a favour at this point, which would have put them in his debt and created goodwill at the outset of his governorship. The petition seems to have been made with some insistence too. Festus, however, seems to be wary.

He invites the leading men of the Jews to join him in going down to Caesarea, where they can bring their charges against Paul if there is anything wrong about him. Unbeknownst to Festus, he is protecting Paul in this way. The providential protection of God should clearly be seen to lie behind all of this.

God has a purpose for Paul, and Paul will come to no harm before that purpose has been fulfilled. Festus only stays in Jerusalem for a few days, eight to ten days, and then he

goes down to Caesarea, and immediately on the very next day, he takes up his seat in the tribunal to judge and orders Paul to be brought. As Kena observes, there is likely a great irony here.

There was quite likely a backlog of cases after Felix's tenure as governor. As we have seen, he used his power to imprison people as a means of extracting bribes. However, the Jewish authorities' concern to get rid of Paul actually leads Festus to expedite his case and to deal with him immediately.

The Lord actually uses the enemies of Paul to move his case up the queue. What's more, seemingly as a result of this expediting of his case, he gets to speak to Agrippa and Bernice shortly afterwards. It is possible that Luke had access to Roman archives.

There were carefully kept records, and speeches would be of similar length to those that we see in this chapter. Festus is accompanied by a number of Jews from Jerusalem, who come to present the case against Paul. They take a very confrontational tone, but they cannot prove their charges.

Paul's response gives some indication that both Jewish and Roman legal concerns are at play. Is Paul a rabble-rouser among his own people, opposing the law, the people and the temple, as he was accused of a few chapters ago? Is he seditious against Caesar? He insists that both are not the case. He's a good Jew, and he's a good citizen.

The Jews had earlier asked of Festus that Paul be brought to Jerusalem to be tried there. Although Festus was wary, he still wishes to do the Jews a favour in offering him a trial in Jerusalem. He might be suggesting a Jewish proceeding over which he presides.

But Paul recognises that the Jews are not to be trusted. He had been involved in their murderous plans against Christians before, so he has seen things from the inside. He knows better than to trust them.

He wishes for justice to be done. He isn't seeking to avoid death. And there is an implicit criticism of Festus here.

He knows that Festus is too much swayed by political concerns, and that he might not get justice from him. He makes clear that he knows that Festus is aware that there is no substance to the allegations made against him, and that if Festus were to do this favour for the Jews, he would effectively be handing Paul over to them. At this point then, he makes the key move of appealing to Caesar.

He gives himself over to the protection of the state. He rejects Jewish oversight of the Christian church in the process too. This turning away from the court of the Sanhedrin, and turning towards the Emperor for justice, is one more sign, one more step, on the parting of the ways of the early Christian movement and the Jewish authorities.

Daryl Bach notes that what became an appeal for Caesar's judgment was originally the right to have the people, rather than an official, render judgment. By the time of the first century, this had become a matter of the highest official casting judgment in the case. This request was outside of the official code of law, so Festus would have enjoyed some latitude in how he handled the appeal.

This also gives Festus an out, a way of escape. Paul knows that Festus is entangled in Jerusalem politics and its machinations, and that it would make a righteous judgment very unlikely. Festus in some ways has his hands politically tied.

The exact character of an appeal to Caesar is not entirely clear. In what cases was it permitted, for instance? Just in capital cases? Just in cases with Roman citizens? The Caesar in question would have been Nero. Paul isn't necessarily expecting to find justice, but he knows that his chances would likely be greater.

Throughout the book of Acts, Paul shows great shrewdness in the way that he approaches Jewish authorities and Roman authorities, the way that he will take advantage of certain laws, the way that he will use certain situations to his advantage. He is adaptable and resourceful, always alert to clever ways in which he could turn things to his favor. In Paul's appeal to Caesar, he is doubtless thinking about something else though.

In Acts chapter 23 verse 11, the Lord had declared to him, take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome. He knew that the Lord wanted him to go to Rome, and this would be a way of precipitating that movement. A question to consider.

Considering Paul's teaching in his epistles, what do you imagine that his message to Felix concerning righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment might have contained?