

## The Gospel According to Asaph

A sermon by Larry Kirkpatrick  
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Introduction	2
Psalm 50	2
Psalm 73	3
Psalm 74	4
Psalm 75	5
Psalm 76	5
Psalm 77	6
Psalm 78	8
Psalm 79	9
Psalm 80	9
Psalm 81	10
Psalm 82	11
Psalm 83	11
Summary and Conclusion	12

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## **Introduction**

The Bible contains four gospels, accounts written, so the Greek literally reads, “According to Matthew,” “According to Mark,” “According to Luke,” and “According to John.” We don’t have a book called the gospel “According to Paul,” but no less than three times, Paul refers to what he calls “my gospel” (Romans 2:16; 16:25; 2 Timothy 2:8). The gospel is not limited to the New Testament. Again, speaking of the Hebrews who left Egypt for Canaan, Paul says “unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them” (Hebrews 4:2).

Asaph is a common name in the Bible. But we are particularly interested today in the Asaph appointed by David, we find mention of him in 1 Chronicles 25:

Moreover David and the captains of the host separated to the service of the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who should prophesy with harps, with psalteries, and with cymbals: and the number of the workmen according to their service was: Of the sons of Asaph; Zaccur, and Joseph, and Nethaniah, and Asarelah, the sons of Asaph under the hands of Asaph, which prophesied according to the order of the king . . . . All these were under the hands of their father for song in the house of the Lord, with cymbals, psalteries, and harps, for the service of the house of God, according to the king’s order to Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman (1 Chronicles 25:1, 2, 6).

The Bible contains a dozen Psalms by Asaph. Most mention a subject very close to our hearts—God’s sanctuary. In his Psalms, Asaph tells us a great deal about his faith in God, his personal view of God’s good news. Our object today, then, is a bit different than usual: an overflight of the 262 Bible verses written by Asaph.

## **Psalm 50**

Psalm 50 emphasizes that God is judge, that is, leader, of His people (3-6). He cannot be bought by our good behavior. Our offerings do not enrich Him, for He already owns everything

which we might give to Him (8-15). He asks us to give the one thing that is ours to give, our thanksgiving. As free creatures, we may choose our attitude, and He would have us choose a thankful one (14, 23).

In contrast, He warns the wicked. If they take His name in their mouths and make as if they are His people, but if their behavior misrepresents Him, He will hold accountable. The behaviors He calls attention to may have been engaged in by the wicked with limited thoughtfulness (Psalm 50:16-20). He tells us that He has restrained Himself from punishing, but that this restraint will end (21).

The highlight is the last verse (23). The bottom line here is that the one who orders his behavior aright will see the deliverance of God. Behavior matters; what we do matters. One approach leads to oneness with God, and another, to opposition to Him. Our part, according to Asaph, is to diligently choose to pursue God's way.

### **Psalm 73**

The remaining 11 Psalms are all found in 73-83. You may know that the Psalms are divided into five sections:

Book 1 - Psalms 1-41

Book 2 - Psalms 42-72

Book 3 - Psalms 73-89

Book 4 - Psalms 90-106

Book 5 - Psalms 107-150

God is good to Israel, says Asaph, especially to those who do good (1). But the wicked prosper and go unpunished? What use then is being good? (2-16). But when Asaph went into the

sanctuary, then he understood their end (17). The wicked may not perceive it, but God will work providentially to facilitate their destruction (18-19). He will withhold protection of them from their demonic guides. When He does act, God will despise their image (20). He sees what they are choosing to become, less than human, degrading of their own humanity. Asaph reproves himself for his failure to recognize this answer. It was there in the sanctuary all along! God will deal with sin and sinners!

The closing verses of Psalm 73 offer a personal perspective. Asaph reiterates that he is continually seeking and experiencing God's presence (23). He trusts in God's guidance and final deliverance (24). For Asaph, seeking God is his first and foremost desire (25, 26). He is sure that the wicked will at last perish, but that trusting in God is the pathway for man (27, 28).

#### **Psalm 74**

Psalm 74 is a plea for deliverance. The third book of Psalms is understood to correlate with invasions by Assyria, and Israel is being overrun. The sanctuary is mentioned as under attack (3, 7). There is talk of devastation of worship places and of prisoners being taken. The key point here is something that we often forget: Rising up against God's people is viewed by Him as actually rising up against God Himself (4, 7, 8, 10, 18, 19, 22, 23).

To attack God's people is to attack God's purposes. The Psalmist calls for intervention. "Arise, O God, plead Thine own cause!" (22). Looking into the sanctuary, Asaph sees God's larger purpose: the end of sin for all time, the salvation of man, the restoration of all that has been lost and the accomplishment of the original divine intent for man.

## **Psalm 75**

Psalm 75 calls to humility and prayer. The wicked are warned. The wicked will be cut off but the righteous will be exalted. (10). But the main insight is found at verse 2. “When I shall receive the congregation,” says God, “I will judge uprightly.” The earth and all its inhabitants will be dissolved, but the righteous will be preserved. Who are the righteous? Are they merely accounted as righteous? Verse 2 says that those whom God receives in His congregation He will judge uprightly. That is, He will evaluate with justice and mercy. He will do what is moral and right. He will judge His own congregation.

Some seem to think that the Bible is teaching that God’s judgment is arbitrary, everything predetermined; man can do neither good nor evil, in any true sense. God’s intervention in the world is entire, moving even the human will. There is no genuine freedom for man. We are actors, marionettes manipulated on a stage we have neither sought nor can control.

If this were true, then God’s judgment would actually be all arbitrary. The very statement that He will judge uprightly says that He will weigh that which we have freely chosen, that which we can and must own as our own. The gospel according to Asaph is full of human free will.

## **Psalm 76**

God’s mighty works are recounted (1-7). He contends with and overcomes men. He is to be respected (11). His tabernacle is mentioned again (2). Man can do nothing against God’s ultimate purposes (10). But most of all, verses 8 and 9 say that God rises in judgment to save all the meek of the earth.

Later, Jesus says the same (“The meek shall inherit the earth” Matthew 5:5 cf. Psalm 37:11). This has always been God’s plan. God will save but He will save persons who have chosen to be truly human; and to be truly human means to have learned meekness. We recognize how thin is the line between the animal and the spiritual. We choose to deny self, subdue, keep under. Asaph says that it matters what we choose. It is not that we are saved by our works, but that those who have chosen to walk with God become like Him. It is not a matter of what is first and what is second; it is a matter of learning to walk with God.

### **Psalm 77**

Psalm 77 is often noted by Adventists, because Asaph says that God’s way is in the sanctuary (13). But let’s look at the whole Psalm. He seeks God, but He seems not to hear (1-9). Be that as it may, Asaph determines that he will dwell upon God’s mighty works. (10-12). Two examples of God’s works are especially noted; God’s way is in the sanctuary (13-15). God’s way is in the [Red] sea (16-20).

God delivers (1-6). But He does it in His own time, which leads to the temptation of perception that He is indifferent or not listening (7-9). The solution is to call to mind His works of old, to think on these, and to speak of His doings (10-12). The sanctuary is linked with redemption (13-15). Then, God’s deliverance of His people at the crossing of the Red Sea likewise recounted (16-20).

The Exodus is placed parallel to the sanctuary. God’s ways in redemption are not wholly known to man but they are awesome; likewise, His ways in the Exodus. He delivers from the world (Egypt) and He delivers from misguided religious understandings (Sanctuary), from physical bondage (Egypt) and spiritual (Sanctuary).

Contemporary Judaism considers the Exodus, and little about the sanctuary; contemporary Christianity considers little of either. Seventh-day Adventist thought seeks to give full place to Sanctuary and Exodus, to discover in full God's deliverance. And we should do better. Hear this pointed paragraph from the book *The Great Controversy*:

The intercession of Christ in man's behalf in the sanctuary above is as essential to the plan of salvation as was His death upon the cross. By His death He began that work which after His resurrection He ascended to complete in heaven. We must by faith enter within the veil, 'whither the forerunner is for us entered.' Hebrews 6:20. There the light from the cross of Calvary is reflected. There we may gain a clearer insight into the mysteries of redemption. The salvation of man is accomplished at an infinite expense to heaven; the sacrifice made is equal to the broadest demands of the broken law of God. Jesus has opened the way to the Father's throne, and through His mediation the sincere desire of all who come to Him in faith may be presented before God (Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 489).

Some today make a sharp distinction between what Jesus does FOR us in His sanctuary and what happens IN us during its cleansing. Psalm 77 warns against this. The parallel with the Exodus is helpful. In the Exodus, God guided and empowered but the people actually chose to walk out, determined and acting upon their determination to leave Egypt. There was much for them to do, although it did not directly save them. The same is true for us. There is much for us to do although it does not save us. There are necessary conditions to our being saved but for which we do not receive merit.

God's way is in the sanctuary. He is laboring to seek and save the lost. We have been lost. We must seek Him where He is to be found, and today He is to be found exactly there.

## Psalm 78

Psalm 78 recounts at length God's wonderful works in Israel's wilderness experiences. The psalmist's purpose is to pass to his children record of the mighty works of God (4-6). Israel's disobedience is tied to forgetfulness (7-11). The remaining 61 verses of the psalm mostly recount the stubbornness of God's people and His patient but firm guidance.

An important principle in Psalm 78 is found at verse 41. When Israel turned back and tested God, they limited Him. That is, there was much that He would have preferred to do for them, but Their own unbelief prevented His blessing them as He desired to. Consider also the corporate aspect of this. God's people should have been largely united, but they were not, and they were not able to function as a collective of believers. This limited God.

Here is an important lesson for us. God's people ought to be substantially united. When they are not, then the very blessings so crucial must be denied them. God will not do mighty works for an unbelieving people. This principle is also found in the gospels. Matthew 13:58 says of Jesus, in one location, that "He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief." Hebrews 3:19 says that the Hebrews who died in the wilderness could not enter in because of unbelief.

Sometimes we have trouble getting into the Hebrew mindset. Why would this psalm go on for 72 verses recounting historical incident after historical incident? We think, why did not God list promise after promise, instead of event after event? But every historical incident of chastening was itself a demonstration of God's watchcare and promise. The father who chastens is demonstrating love for his children (Hebrews 12:6, 7). In fact, the very message to the Laodicean church includes the concept: "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous

therefore, and repent” (Revelation 3:19). Thus, there is a sense in which some of the apparent failures of the church can be understood as God chastening us. His purpose is redemptive.

### **Psalm 79**

In Psalm 79 we have another prayer for deliverance. The sanctuary is referenced again at verse 1. The psalmist asks when will God intervene and deliver (5)? In 8 and 9 he joins in responsibility for the sins of Israel collectively. He calls them “our” sins.

Asaph asks a pointed question. Our sins, he says, are preventing God from intervening as He would. But the unbeliever does not see it this way. He asks, Where is their God? The disobedience of God’s people strengthens the unbeliever in unbelief. God’s people are thus doubly responsible to lay hold of repentance when God offers it, that the heathen may be impressed with God’s power to save. All else is missed opportunity.

### **Psalm 80**

Speaking of the gift of repentance (Acts 5:31; 11:18), it is especially featured in Psalm 80. While free will is the psalmist’s, he recognizes his great depravity, and pleads with God: “Turn us again” (3, 7, 19). Whereas today we are prone to pray, “Turn *me* again,” the psalmist thinks of Israel as God’s people. He sees himself bound to his fellow believers. He sees the problem of Israel’s obedience and disobedience from a collective basis. And so he prays, turn “*us*.”

Asaph presents the image of a vine that God has delivered from Egypt and planted in His own land. His plea is,

Return, we beseech thee, O God of hosts: look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine; and the vineyard which Thy right hand hath planted, and the branch that Thou madest strong for Thyself (14, 15).

Quicken us, he pleads, and we will call upon Your name (18). Clearly, for Asaph, repentance is impossible without a divine intervention. The starting place, always, is to ask God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. The servant of the Lord agrees:

After we have offered our petitions, we are to answer them ourselves as far as possible, and not wait for God to do for us what we can do for ourselves. The help of God is held in reserve for all who demand it. Divine help is to be combined with human effort, aspiration, and energy. But we cannot reach the battlements of Heaven without climbing for ourselves. We cannot be borne up by the prayers of others when we ourselves neglect to pray, for God has made no such provision for us. Not even divine power can lift one soul to Heaven that is unwilling to put forth efforts in his own behalf. The unlovely traits in our characters are not removed, and replaced by traits that are pure and lovely, without some effort on our part (Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, August 14, 1884).

Our part is continuously binary: trusting and acting, pleading and moving, working out our own salvation with fear and trembling, all while realizing that it is God who works in us both to will and to do according to His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12, 13). We are constantly driven back to the “I believe, Lord, please help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24) place. If we seek Him with our whole hearts, we may be sure that He will hear us and turn, and visit this vine.

### **Psalm 81**

In Psalm 81 we have a peculiar mixture: How God delivered (6, 7) and side by side with that, what could have been (11-16). If Israel obeys God, the promise is ready: God will intervene and aid them so that they worship no false gods (9). If His people but open their mouth wide, He, God, will grant them what they need.

What will He put into their mouths? Praise (1-3). Divine opportunity often knocks, but God's people are not always listening. This is the warning of Asaph in Psalm 81.

### **Psalm 82**

In short Psalm 82, Asaph points out that God is Judge. Then he berates Israel for judging unjustly. How can Israel be God's and do the opposite of God? The call is for justice. Psalm 82 feels like Isaiah 58. We know Isaiah 58 well because it includes a powerful passage about the sabbath, but we sometimes pay little heed to other truthful passages, particularly those which call us to right behavior. Let us hear what the sanctuary psalmist is saying to us.

### **Psalm 83**

Finally, the 83rd Psalm is another prayer for deliverance from the enemies of God's people. What interests us is how Asaph counts transgressions against God's people as direct attacks upon God and His purposes. Consider verses 4 and 5:

They have said, Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation; that the name of Israel may be no more in remembrance. For they have consulted together with one consent: they are confederate against Thee.

Here we see the Great Controversy War just as we see it elsewhere, such as Revelation 12 and 14. Asaph's argument to God is, An attack upon Your people is an attack upon You. Act! Rise up! Intervene! It is everyone against God and His people (6-8). Still, hard as it may be to see how, the ultimate purpose is redemptive. "Fill their faces with shame; that they may seek Thy name, O Lord" (16). In the fulfillment of God's purpose is the end "That men may know that Thou, whose name alone is Jehovah, art the Most High over all the earth" (18).

## Summary and Conclusion

We cannot buy of God by our behavior; we are saved according to His mercy and not our own deeds. Still, our hearts benefit when we give the offering of thanksgiving. Behavior does matter. When Asaph went into the sanctuary, then he understood the end of the wicked. His walk with God is close and personal. We should not see the Great Controversy War as something imposed on Scripture; far from it. God has a cause, and Asaph calls upon Him to arise and plead His own case.

Far from being arbitrary, God's interaction with man takes place in harmony with the free will He has granted us. He will judge uprightly, and He calls us to represent Him in our acts. God rises in judgment to save the meek of the earth, not the powerful, not the mighty, not the educated or the popular.

God's way is in the sanctuary but also in the sea. He delivered His people from Egypt in the Exodus. Exodus and Sanctuary are placed side by side in Psalm 77. This is a warning for us: We cannot separate them; we cannot separate out the sanctuary doctrine and focus only on the various time aspects of the prophecy, viz., 457 B.C., 1844 A.D., etc., and leave aside the exodus aspect of God's work. He is engaged in delivering us as completely from sin as He did in delivering Israel completely from Egypt. His way is in the sanctuary, and we forget it at our own peril.

When we disobey we limit God. God's past acts for His people is evidence that He will act for us now if we do not limit Him now. As fellow believers, we are responsible not only to God but to each other. Your sin affects me and mine you. We are in this together. God has called

His church, and it is a collectivity. When you forsake sin, I am much closer to final deliverance, and vice versa.

We need to pray “Turn us again.” God gives the gift of repentance. He will visit this vine if we will seek His face. We always have two parts, trusting and acting, pleading and moving forward. God is ready to deliver but He is hindered by our slowness. The largest record in heaven almost certainly is a listing not of what was for God’s people, but what could have been. We should be the generation that moves from what could have been to what can be! If God is Judge, how can we treat others unjustly? An attack upon God’s people is an attack upon God Himself, for what happens to you and I, amazing as it may seem, is deeply integrated in God’s overall purpose. There is a war on between good and evil. God did not start it, but He will finish it. He calls upon His people to do a bit of soldiering along the way.

In conclusion, it is fruitful for us to consider the gospel according to Asaph. The Psalms are rich with help. They speak of the close relationship between Jesus and His people. They remind us that spirituality is much more than merely an intellectual understanding. Asaph speaks especially of the sanctuary. God’s way is in the sea and in the sanctuary. If we want to understand what he means by that, we should study what he has written about the God whose way is in the sanctuary. Psalms 50 and 73-83 are those materials. If we seek Him, we will see His salvation and find His way, and walk in it.

**Biographical Note:** Pastor Larry Kirkpatrick is a convert to the Adventist faith. Since 1994 he has served in the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He holds degrees from Southern Adventist University and the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. His work has included research assistant for the Ellen G. White Estate, pioneering Adventist internet ministry, involvement in GYC, and presenter at the 50th Anniversary *Questions on Doctrine* Conference. He is author of the books *Real Grace for Real People* and *Cleanse and Close*. For many years his sermons and papers have been published on the internet. Larry and wife Pamela have served churches in Nevada, Utah, and California. The Kirkpatricks presently serve at the [Mentone church](#) near Loma Linda, California.