

Listen to the Heart of God
(What do you hear?)

Psalm 81

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I was arrested on March 19, 2009. My arrest explains how this sermon came to be, and is an integral part of the sermon. Telling the story of my arrest will delay - perhaps longer than you are accustomed to waiting -- my stating the three main points of the sermon, but I believe that my doing so will “humanize” the doctrine we discover in this psalm: Rejoice, remember, repent and be surprised by the intimate supply of God’s love. As I tell of being arrested and as we unfold the doctrine together, I will ask you from time to time, “What do you hear?” It’s a question which I believe that the Holy Spirit is always asking us as we read the word of God devotionally.

The Arrest: It took place almost three months ago, but I remember it as if it were this morning. There wasn’t another conscious mortal within half a mile of me when I was arrested, but I was arrested nonetheless.

I was stopped “dead in my tracks” when, in private worship that morning, I read the first half of the opening verse of Psalm 81: “Sing aloud to God our strength.” Arrested; stopped; even stunned -- mostly by these three words, “God our strength.” I invite you to enter in with me to the thrill of that morning . . . into the delight of being arrested by the Holy Spirit.

I have sat down at that desk in that chair dozens and dozens and dozens of times before the sun has announced the morning. The setting was familiar -- almost

deadeningly so. Familiar activities and familiar sights often evoke familiar responses. God's mercy does not always *feel* new every morning even though it *is*.

Lam 3.23 All scripture references NASB 1995 unless otherwise noted

Despite the numbing familiarity of the scene, "Sing aloud to God our strength" was -- to me -- a jolt of spiritual caffeine (with none of the gastrointestinal side effects). Why would I be so "primed" to hear from God that morning as distinct from any other morning? My answer is no fancier than that He was ready to be heard, and so, when I read, "Sing aloud to God our strength," I literally gasped.

As I have revisited that experience in my mind, I have come to believe that less was more as God grabbed my heart during those awaking hours. Two missing words made the difference. The scripture did not say ". . . to God *who is* our strength" but ". . . to God our strength."

We are accustomed to reading in scripture that God *is* this and God *is* that. NASB translation of the OT contains 117 such references -- 27 in the Psalms alone. "God *is*" appears 63 times in the NT. "God our strength" isn't like that. It's a grammatical construction called an *appositive*. I want you to have that word so that we can talk about the power in appositives. Here's how they work: Two elements, normally noun phrases, are placed side by side with one element serving to define or modify the other. Something always goes away when you do that. Often it's that "who is" phrase. Examples from everyday life: [Conan *who is a* the Barbarian, Ivan *who is* the Terrible, Catherine *who is* the Great] More powerful this way. That's why authors like it.

“God our strength” is a restrictive appositive, telling us specifically which God the author is referring to. Restrictive appositive “imports” the quality being described *into* the person who has the quality.

“God our strength” seems, in a sense, *external* to us. I believe that we will see just how intimately internal it is. For now, I will simply observe that, if it were *not* internal, it would be meaningless and ineffective -- a sort of “throwaway” line by the psalmist.

“God our strength” communicates at least three ideas:

1. God is. (We might even say “God is God.”) Cannot “wear out” this simple statement. The very first presupposition of a Christian worldview. God is. He proclaims His existence in His creation, in Christ the living Word and in His written Word. God is. The fool, by contrast, has said in his heart, “There is no God.” ^{Ps. 14.1} That is the first presupposition of a materialistic or naturalistic worldview, and from there one can reason to any conclusion one desires because the first materialistic presupposition cuts everything off from reality. If you’re not tied to reality, you can argue for anything.

2. He *is* strength . . . in the same way perhaps as He said of Himself, “I AM.” ^{Ex. 3.14} Strength is part of His being. It defines Him -- not completely, to be sure, but most certainly in part. This is not the same as saying “God is strong.” Strength is a noun; strong is an adjective. The noun tells you who He is; the adjective tells you what He is like. The noun approaches you -- the listener or reader -- from the inside looking out; the adjective gives you an outside-looking-in perspective. “Strength” is to God what “nourishment” is to “food” or “frame” is to “car.” Corpse to

tombstone? Sap to tree (not “sticky” or “goeey” or “runny” but “alive”)? I dare not risk “limiting” God by failing to mention that other attributes are equally essential to His person -- attributes like infinity, eternity, immutability. WLC 7 and WSC 4 have more to say about those other attributes.

So: God is; God is strength and . . . well, before we can get to number 3, we must address the Scooby-Doo problem. Are we defined by our being or our doing? At the end of the day we must know who we “be” before we can rightly determine what we can do. The \$3-word for “study of being” is ontology.

3. A union exists by which what is His ontologically becomes ours, not just as a possession, but as part of our being. Paul gave simple expression to this idea when he wrote, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” ^{Phil 4.13} And he wrote of “. . . the mystery which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” ^{Col. 1.26-27}

As we work our way further into our psalm and discover why the heart of God aches, we will be surprised and encouraged by discovering just how intimately this strength becomes ours in union with Christ.

The Context: Psalm 81 was written in a context, of course. Feast of tabernacles (booths or ingathering) -- 15th day of 7th month (Tishri) for one week -- our September/October -- celebrating the harvest, living in booths and offering sacrifices. Memorialize the journey from Egypt to Canaan; give thanks for the productivity of Canaan. After resisting His brothers’ urgings to go to this feast in

Jerusalem, Jesus finally attends at the halfway point, as related in John 7 (sermons of April 27 and June 15, 2008).

Derek Kidner, the late Anglican theologian, divides the psalm into three parts, which I have adopted for this sermon. Rejoicing (vv. 1-5), remembering (vv. 6-10) and repenting (vv. 11-16). I find delightful “surprises” in vv. 5, 10 and 16 and will emphasize those in making application of the psalm. 3 R’s . . . 3 surprises.

First -- rejoicing: [READ VV. 1-5b] The choir and the orchestra are being assembled for the beginning of the feast, and Israel is doing this because God commanded it (a statute for Israel, a rule of the God of Jacob, a decree in Joseph) when God Himself went against Egypt. Remember, now, that this celebration was being undertaken by a people quite conscious of its history and, in particular, of its deliverance from Egypt. The similarities between this call to worship and Moses’ call in Deuteronomy 32 would have, in a sense, transported them back to the wilderness and caused them to reflect on their deliverance. As we think about this call, let us remember that we are Israel, and we have been delivered from bondage to sin.

The first of the surprises is found in verse 5c -- “I hear a language I had not known.” Notice in the printed text in the order of worship that there’s a colon after “known.” The words which follow the colon are those spoken by the voice previously unknown to the psalmist. Kidner describes v. 5c as “. . . a lead-in to God’s oracle by the one who is inspired to speak it, who testifies to his inspiration.”^{P.}

This surprising verse links past with present in an *arresting* way. The psalmist has been happily calling the people to the feast, using the approved language of the past (remember the link to Moses' song in Deuteronomy 32), when -- without warning, it would seem -- he begins to hear an unfamiliar voice. It's the voice of God, speaking in the present about what He has done in the past.

And God calls the people, **second**, to **remember**: [READ VV. 6-10b]
No abstract theological discourse here. God does not talk about "oppression" or "redemption." He speaks in very concrete terms -- "shoulders," "hands" and "baskets." He invites them to relive -- even *feel* -- the suffering of their ancestors so that they might value their deliverance more highly than they otherwise would.

And then He invites them to listen while He admonishes them. **What do you hear?** In the very act of admonishing them, God acknowledges their belonging to Him ("Hear, O *my people*"). He admonishes them precisely because they belong to Him.

What do you hear when you read the words "O Israel, if you would but listen to me!" Do you hear at least as much of His *longing* for you to listen to Him as you hear of His *demand* that you listen to Him? Do you hear that you have something called "free will" -- that God has granted to you the privilege of experiencing His mercy even while His justice is served? Do you hear the liberty which is yours in Christ to both listen and obey? ^{Gal. 5.1} Do you hear the heart of God the Pursuer (appositive)?

As we proceed through this remembrance section of the psalm, we come to a recapitulation of sorts. In the manner of Exodus 20.2 ("I am the Lord your God,

who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”), God first commands that “there be no strange god among” the Israelites (v. 9) and then recounts His deliverance of the people in v. 10. We almost expect here another recital of the Decalogue, but instead we get another surprise: “Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.” I’ll “tip my hand” by noting here that God will surprise us in similar fashion in v. 16.

And now I want you to be *especially* good Bereans. ^{Acts 17.11} I am going to use vv. 10 and 16 to expound v. 1. My purpose is to encourage you to look closely at the strength which is ours in Christ and to discover for yourself just how intimate God is with us. What I am about to teach is not doctrine. It is method. It suggests how you might approach the scriptures in order to develop a full sense of what this strength is that the psalmist speaks of and that so arrested me three months ago.

How might we discover what God’s *strength* is like? In answering that question, I turned first to the WSC, knowing that the answer to Q 4 is that “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, *power*, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” “Power” is enough like “strength” in English that I went to the proof texts for “power,” and there I read, “Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty . . .’” ^{Gen. 17.1} “God Almighty” in that verse (and through the OT) translates the Hebrew *El Shaddai*. “So,” I thought, “it might be profitable to study the names of God to get a sense for the root meaning of *El Shaddai*.”

I turned to chapter 7 of Robert Reymond’s **A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith**. That chapter is titled “The Names and Nature of God.” After

disposing of a competing but “highly doubtful” explanation of the origin of “God Almighty,” Reymond explains who *El Shaddai* is in these redacted terms:

[Because of] contextual considerations in Genesis, . . . the more probable root is *shadad*, from the more original *shadah*, meaning “to moisten” or “to breastfeed” (*shad* means “breast”), hence “God the Blesser, the Nourisher, or Provider.” In Genesis 17:1-8, God reveals himself as *El Shaddai*, to Abraham, . . . In 28:3, it is God in his character of *El Shaddai*, whom Isaac invokes to bless Jacob and to make him fruitful. In 35:11, it is in his character as *El Shaddai*, that God admonishes Jacob, “Be fruitful and multiply; . . .” In 43:14 Jacob uses this same name to speak of the God who would grant mercy to his sons. In 48:3, he declares that it was *El Shaddai* who appeared to him and promised that he would make him fruitful . . . Finally, in 49:25 Jacob blesses Joseph with the declaration that *El Shaddai* would bless him with “blessings of the womb.” Clearly, in Genesis, *El Shaddai* is . . . God the Blesser or Succorer . . . We see God here . . . as the God who is able to succor his people and to supply their every need. ^{p. 156}

Take what you’ve just read as a sort of “picture frame” or “lens” -- a device to look through -- as we circle back to v. 10, where God offers to fill our mouths if we will but open them wide. Now how does that offer look? What might you have learned about the One who makes the offer? **What do you hear?** Do you sense that “God our strength” intends to bless and succor us in deeply fulfilling, intimate ways - - *almost* like a mother feeds her infant? Is there a better offer out there from your television set, from your paycheck, from the successes of your children, from the title to a new car, from the triumph of your favorite sports team? Sing aloud to God our strength.

Third, God calls us to **repent** [READ ALOUD vv. 11-15]: The contrast is remarkable. God the Blesser has just offered in verse 10 to fill our mouths if we will

open them wide. The filling would be both intimate and powerful. “*But my people did not listen to my voice.*”

How can we be *His* people if we would not listen to *His* voice? Kidner says “. . . it is as if the lock rejected its key.”^{P. 295} Well, once again, if you ever wonder if, in a universe ruled over by a sovereign God, there really is such a thing as “free will,” here you have further proof and proof, as well, of the extent to which sin has infected every human. *Radical* corruption.

We discover in verse 12 that not even the most diabolical mind -- not Hitler, not Stalin, not Pol Pot, not Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, not your least favorite American politician, not that nasty boss or neighbor of yours -- not even the most determined opponent of God can upset His plans or even “ruffle His feathers.” With a dismissive gesture, perhaps, He says, “So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels.”

But then (vv. 13-15), **What do you hear?** In the very next “breath” (God is a spirit, not needing to breathe in order to go on living), God almost wails over His people as Jesus did over Jerusalem^{Matt. 23.37} and He speaks of what He “would” have done had His people only listened. Has someone upset His plans after all? Is God describing here a history unrealized because of the deafness and waywardness of His people?

No -- that cannot be. The Bible everywhere portrays God as completely in control of His creation. WSC 7 says, in part, that “. . . for His own glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.” When God speaks, as He does here, of

“what might have been,” we can understand that He is describing history which He sovereignly chose not to foreordain, for, if He had, it would have come to pass.

And, then, finally, in our explication of the meaning of the psalm, we come to the foreshadowed surprise in v. 16 -- **But** he would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you. **What do you hear?**

R. C. Sproul speaks of the “apostolic **but**” in Eph. 2:4, where Paul, *having described our awfulness, our moral degradation* -- much as the psalmist has just described it here in vv. 11-15 -- says:

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. ^{Eph. 2.4-10}

Almost as a preview of Christ the Coming Attraction, the psalmist gives us here that same, resounding “BUT” -- But He would feed you -- and not just feed you, but with the finest of the wheat and with honey from the rock He would **satisfy** us.

Once again in this concluding verse, we find the psalmist drawing his listeners/readers back to the song of Moses. In this short passage I’ll read from Deuteronomy 32.13-14, the subject “He” is God, and the object “he” is Jacob.

He made him ride on the high places of the earth,
And he ate the produce of the field;
And He made him suck honey from the rock,
And oil from the flinty rock,

Curds of cows, and milk of the flock,
With fat of lambs,
And rams, the breed of Bashan, and goats,
With the finest of the wheat—
And of the blood of grapes [he] drank wine.

Is not this God our Strength, God the Blessor, God the Succorer speaking to the children of Israel just as He spoke to them through Moses hundreds of years earlier? Are we not, as His children today, to rejoice, remember, repent and be surprised by the intimate supply of God's love? **What do you hear?**

Applications: First -- Kidner rightly observes that vv. 1-3 raise the question whether we can “rejoice to order.” We can and we do -- every Lord's Day morning, as one example. But if, as scripture tells us, our created purpose is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, when is the time when rejoicing is not in order? True, we are to weep with those who weep,^{Rom. 12.15} but when the church gathers to worship, we put aside our weeping (or our tooth-gnashing over the events of the week just ended) and we worship -- we rejoice. Yes, we can rejoice to order because we were made for rejoicing.^{1Thess. 5.16-18}

Second -- v. 6 suggests that there is value to us in recalling God's answers to our prayers “with some sharpness of detail.”^{Kidner, p. 294} A journal of specific prayer requests and God's specific answers might be indicated here. This is not a new law being laid down, but rather a shepherding question: How might your devotional life be enriched by meditating on the psalmist's specific references to shoulders, hands and baskets?

Third -- The same verse 6 must leave us wondering if God's voice is “foreign” to us on a day-to-day basis . . . if He speaks, that is, a “language we do not know”

when He admonishes us through the scriptures. Do you allow the word of God to accuse you regularly -- not because you are the most wretched scum on earth who must be accused daily but because all of us are sufficiently scummy that we have mistaken the scum for our normal condition (yes, even the redeemed in Christ do this) and fail even to consider the possibility that God may wish to admonish us (scrape off the scum) through His word?

Fourth, *v. 12* -- We must be careful not to exclude ourselves from the application of the principle of this verse: "I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own counsels." The psalmist refers here not only to the reprobate, but also to the elect in the sense in which Westminster tells us in chapter V, paragraph 5 (among other places) that:

The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave, for a season, His own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.

And now a few concluding words about strength. How often in scripture is strength pictured as an aspect of weakness? No, that question does not propose a sophisticated, intellectually contrived contradiction designed to impress the listener/reader with its obscurity. (How often in college I thought that a professor must be brilliant because nothing he said made sense!)

After asking God to remove the thorn from his flesh, Paul candidly reported that God's response was to deny the request. "And He said to me, 'My grace is

sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong." ^{2 Cor 12.9-10 NKJV}

Church of Jesus Christ -- especially when you are weak -- rejoice in that weakness, remember God's strength, repent of your human efforts to be strong and be surprised by the intimate supply of God's strong love.