

“God is Saving Us”

Psalm 80:1-3 & Matthew 1:18-25

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The psalmist sings a prayer pleading for salvation. **Psalm 80:1-3 NRSV** “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! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

The psalmist calls out in anguish to God, because they do not understand why there is suffering. Why is there an enormous contrast between God's earlier redemptive acts and what is now occurring? How long must we wait for the Messiah to come and save us?

The psalmist implores the Shepherd of Israel to show the brilliant light of God's glorious presence and deliver God's flock. Since humanity is unable to comprehend the glory, joy, love, saving grace, or any attribute of God we use metaphors. God, like a shepherd, nurtures and cares for all the sheep, finding every stray, bringing them all together in safety to enjoy green pastures and still waters. God worked through the shepherd David to save, restore and bless everyone.

The name Israel means “strives with God”. Israel is the name given to Jacob after he wrestled with God and was blessed by God. The name was later applied to the descendants of Israel, who were called to fulfil the covenant to bless all people with the blessings God gave them. At the time the psalmist prayed today's psalm, Israel met striving with God to bless and save all people.

God is enthroned upon the Cherubim who are mighty angels. A reminder of God's presence symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant. In those days, it was viewed as the belly button of the earth. God's blessings abundantly flowed into the Ark, through the priests, to the worshipers, to Israel, to all the earth, saving all people.

The psalmist prays for God's saving light to guide Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh, three people, who had three tribes of Israelite descendants named after them. Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh were called to lead the other tribes and all people in saving and blessing the world. Ephraim means “doubly fruitful”. Benjamin means “son of the right hand”. Manasseh means “causing to forget”. The full context conveys forgiveness, grace, and salvation. Manasseh was the first son of Joseph born in Egypt who enabled Joseph to let go of the bitterness he had for his brothers who sold him into slavery and all the pain Joseph endured because of their betrayal. God saved Joseph through Manasseh enabling him to be gracious to his brothers and save the Egyptians and Israel from famine.

The full prayer of Psalm 80 repeats "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved," three times with growing intensity. The prayer conveys the escalation of the psalmist's inner groaning and heartfelt plea to God, who alone can restore what has been lost. There are four elements: (1) "Restore us," (2) a calling upon God, (3) "let your face shine" and (4) "that we may be saved." The psalmist praying on behalf of Israel and the entire world is confident that God will bring saving light to their dark lives. It is a prayer for God our shepherd to send a shepherd to restore and save our souls.

Hear again the prayer this time from the Message paraphrase. **Psalm 80:1-3 MSG** “Listen, Shepherd, Israel's Shepherd—get all your Joseph sheep together. Throw beams of light from your dazzling throne So Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh can see where they're going. Get out of bed—you've slept long enough! Come on the run before it's too late. God, come back! Smile your blessing smile: That will be our salvation.”

Matthew explains that Jesus is the fulfillment of this prayer. **Matthew 1:18-25 NLT** “This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the

child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through God’s prophet: “Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.”

Understanding the meaning of the names deepens our understanding of God’s saving love. Joseph means "God increases". In the Old Testament Joseph was the son of Jacob who we already identified. Jacob after a blessing night with God was renamed Israel. God worked through Joseph to save the Israelites, his relatives, his father’s descendants, from famine and later blessed them in Egypt where they increased. The Old Testament Joseph lived God's increase in his personal life -- rising from a slave to a government official -- and in his public life by saving Israel when the famine threatened the nation with starvation.

Mary's fiancé, Joseph, is also a wonderful example of God's increase. When it would have been much easier to separate from Mary and the child she was having, Joseph listened to God and stayed with her. Joseph didn't take matters into his own hands but allowed God to work in his life and the lives of Mary and their child. Joseph loved, protected, saved, and blessed his family taking Mary and Jesus to Egypt when threatened and brought them back when it is safe to do so. Joseph consistently gets out of the way to make room for God to do God's work in his life. He allows God to add to him, rather than trying to force his own will, even when God's plans completely alter the course of his life. Joseph is described as righteous, that is one who observes the law. Yet, his regard for the law was balanced by gracious compassion that exemplified the higher value of the Kingdom of Heaven which Jesus later revealed. How can you be more like Joseph, someone in whom the presence of God grows large, saves, and bless others?

Mary's name has two meanings, "cherished beloved" and "rebellion." Mary needs both qualities for the work to which she is called. Mary is the beloved one, cherished of God, who is selected to carry and give birth to the Messiah. When the angel Gabriel first appears to her to tell her about her role in the Christmas story, he calls her "favored one."

Mary is a rebel. Her determination and tenacity, we might even call it stubbornness, gave her the ability to follow her inner voice when others tried to convince her to behave differently. She rebelled in keeping, carrying and delivering the baby Jesus. She rebelled with courage, traveling to Elizabeth’s to meet John and later traveling to Bethlehem. She rebelled in singing songs of restoration. Mary sang of the corrupt being humbled and the poor exalted. Mary sang of the saving love of God through Jesus. Mary’s rebellious nature gave her the ability to say yes to being used by God when she knew the consequences would be dire. How can you be more like Mary, rebelliously courageous, because you know you are loved by God?

You might think God would have given God’s special child a unique name. He could have been named Healer, Teacher, Miracle-Worker, Feeder of Thousands, One Who Walks on Water, Forgiver, Living Water, or something like that. Instead, he is given a name that was common among first-century Jews. The angel tells Joseph, "Call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." The name Jesus means "God saves" and "God will save us."

First-century Israelites living under the occupation of Rome, named many of their children Jesus, "God saves," as a prayer to God. It was a way of claiming the promise that God will come and set them free. In this Jesus, however, the name will take on an expanded meaning. Jesus brings a new kind of freedom that God is bringing to the whole world. Through the life, grace, and resurrection of Jesus, we receive forgiveness of sins, are restored, and saved. This Jesus is abundantly more glorious from the others named "God saves." Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise to save us to abundant eternal life. God chose the common name Jesus to indicate God’s unity with humanity, that God came to save all people, even the commoners.

Jesus' last name was not and is not "Christ." Christ is a title, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word Messiah. Jesus was probably more commonly known as Jesus of Nazareth, as the Roman soldiers put on his cross. Or possibly as Jesus bar Joseph, that is, Jesus son of Joseph. Or, maybe he was known as Jesus the tekton, meaning, “Jesus the handy carpenter”. But, as Peter would later understand, and as we know today, he is Jesus the Christ. He came to save us and bless us.

Matthew gives us another name for Jesus explaining that Jesus' birth fulfills the words of the prophet Isaiah. "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel which means 'God with us'."

When one is baptized, they receive an additional name – Christian which means "follower of Christ". Christians strive to love like Jesus, thereby saving and blessing everyone. Christians explain to each other and the world that God is with us. Christians proclaim how God is saving and blessing them and the world.

Martin Laird said, "Because you don't know that you are one with God, you believe all these labels about yourself: I'm a sinner, I'm a saint, I'm a wretch, I'm a worm and no human, I'm a monk, I'm a nurse. These are all labels, clothing. They serve a purpose, but they are not who you are. To the extent that you believe these labels, you believe a lie, and you add anguish upon anguish."

Advent is a good time to reflect on who we are. You are beloved, cherished, and created in the image of God, to love, save, and bless. You are created to be rebellious to injustice, prayerful for God's grace to restore and a Christian, a person who brings the Kingdom of Heaven to earth. You are a dreamer who perceives God and is doing more than any human can do on their own for you are filled with the Holy Spirit, therefore you are a dream fulfiller. You are always with God. You are being saved by God. Know who you are. Amen