

# That Men May Know the Most High

## Psalm 83

The heading of this psalm places it as “A Song or Psalm of Asaph” (this is the last of the psalms attributed to him). The key consideration of Asaph for this psalm is that he was not only the chief musician — he was also a *seer*, or prophet (2 Chron. 29:30).

That has led some to approach this psalm as primarily prophetic, especially in light of ongoing conflict in the Middle East. And while we shouldn’t ignore that Asaph was prophetic at times, we must also recognize that the psalm itself is a prayer in the midst of real danger.

In this psalm, we find that Israel is surrounded by enemies that are united against them and that God seems silent. Because of this, Asaph cries out, not simply for survival, but for divine intervention that reveals who God is.

That is where the psalm takes us: not just that the enemy would be scattered or destroyed, but “that men may know... that thou... art the most high over all the earth.”

So, this psalm isn’t ultimately about the enemies of Israel — it is about the exaltation of God’s name in the face of opposition.

### I. THE SILENCE OF GOD (VV. 1–2)

#### A. The cry against divine silence (v. 1)

1. The psalmist opens by addressing what was perceived as God’s apparent inaction (and this is a cry the child of God still prays today, at times).
2. The terms used in this verse are seen as intensified repetition — three parallel pleas, each

stressing the same burden: “God, do not remain inactive while this is happening.”

a) “Keep not thou silence”

(1) The word for “silence” (דָּמָיו) functions as verbal noun rather than an adjective (“silent”).

(2) The Hebrew word expresses more of a state or condition: not just *what God is* (silent), but *what God is doing* (remaining inactive, holding silence). The psalmist isn’t saying “don’t be silent,” but “don’t continue in silence.”

Psalm 35:22

<sup>22</sup> *This* thou hast seen, O LORD: keep not silence: O Lord, be not far from me.

b) “Hold not thy peace” (אַל־תִּתְּקַרְשׁ) — do not be deaf, do not ignore.

Psalm 28:1

<sup>1</sup> Unto thee will I cry, O LORD my rock; be not silent to me: lest, *if* thou be silent to me, I become like them that go down into the pit.

c) “Be not still” (אַל־תִּשְׁקַט) — do not rest, do not remain undisturbed.

## B. The threat behind the silence (v. 2)

1. Asaph now explains *why* the silence is so troubling:

a) “Thine enemies” — this is God’s cause, not just Israel’s.

b) “Make a tumult” — loud, raging, restless (like roaring waters)

c) “They that hate thee have lifted up the head” — rising in bold defiance.

2. This shows that this is not just political conflict or national danger — it is spiritual opposition to God Himself.

### C. The faith beneath the cry — “O God” (אֱלֹהִים)

This is faith that appeals to God’s character — only those who believe God hears will cry out when He seems silent.

## II. THE SCHEME OF THE ENEMIES (VV. 3–5)

### A. Their subtlety — “crafty counsel” (v. 3a)

1. The word “crafty” (עָרָץ) carries the idea of shrewdness, cunning, calculated planning.
2. This shows planning, not just reaction to an enemy. It shows the consistent pattern of Scripture where opposition to God is often organized and premeditated.

#### Psalm 2:1–3

<sup>1</sup> Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?

<sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, *saying*,

<sup>3</sup> Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.

### B. Their target — God’s people (v. 3b)

1. Notice the shift: not just *Israel*, but “thy people” and “thy hidden ones.”

a) "Hidden ones" (ἡ κρυπταῖς) — speaks of those treasured, those protected, those under God's care.

b) The idea is that they are precious and preserved by God.

2. The enemies are targeting who (and what) belongs to God.

### C. Their intent — erase God's people (v. 4)

1. "Cut them off" (ἀποκόψω) — eliminate, destroy

2. "That the name of Israel may be no more in remembrance" — this speaks of total eradication. Their goal was to so completely destroy them that there wasn't anything left to be remembered.

### D. Their unity — "one consent" (v. 5a)

1. This is unified opposition.

#### Genesis 11:6

<sup>6</sup> And the LORD said, Behold, the people *is* one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

#### Acts 4:27

<sup>27</sup> For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together,

2. There is something striking about this: the enemies of God often unite more easily than the people of God.

## **E. The agreement against God (v. 5b)**

The key point here is “against thee” — not just against His people.

## **III. THE SOCIETY (CONFEDERACY) OF NATIONS (VV. 6–8)**

As the psalmist speaks of their scheming, he now begins to name them — one by one — showing just how widespread and overwhelming this opposition really is.

### **A. The breadth of the alliance**

Most of the peoples named in Psalm 83 would correspond today to areas in Jordan, Lebanon, Gaza/the southern coastal plain, northern Arabia, the Negev, and Assyria’s old heartland in northern Iraq.

These names can be located roughly on a modern map, but they belonged to the ancient world, so we should be careful not to flatten them into exact modern nation-state labels.

1. “Edom” — roughly southern Jordan, especially the area between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba.
2. “Ishmaelites” — in modern terms, something like northwestern Saudi Arabia and adjacent desert regions.
3. “Moab” — west-central Jordan, east of the Dead Sea.
4. “Hagarenes” — generally placed east of Gilead, likely in the region of modern Jordan.
5. “Gebal” — this one is one of the less certain names. It is most commonly associated with Byblos in the coastal region of central Jordan.

6. "Ammon" — northern Jordan
7. "Amalek" — the Negev and adjoining desert, so roughly southern Israel.
8. "Philistia" — southern coastal plain, especially around Gaza. Today, corresponds most closely with the Gasa Strip and nearby southern coastal Israel.
9. "Tyre" — southern Lebanon on the Mediterranean coast.
10. "Assur" (Assyria) — primarily northern Iraq.

➤ One thing worth noting is that Persia—modern-day Iran—is not mentioned in this psalm. The nations listed here are primarily the immediate neighbors surrounding Israel. Persia appears in other prophetic passages, such as Ezekiel 38, but not here. We should be careful not to insert it into Psalm 83 when the text itself does not include it.

## **B. The variety of the enemies**

They do not all have the same background, history, or strength, but they share the same common goal — God and His people.

## **C. The strengthening of the coalition (v. 8)**

"They have holpen the children of Lot. Selah."

That is, these larger or stronger powers have lent support to Moab and Ammon, the descendants of Lot.

## **D. The seriousness of the threat**

1. The naming of these nations does more than

identify enemies. It magnifies the danger.

2. The psalmist wants the hearer to feel the weight of this. This isn't imagined danger or exaggerated fear. This is a real and organized confederacy gathered against God's people.

- NOTE: Because this psalm names a confederacy of nations surrounding Israel, some in our day view this as a direct prophecy of current Middle East events or of a future war still to come. And since Asaph is elsewhere called a seer, we should not treat that suggestion carelessly. But in the psalm itself, this is presented first as a prayer in the face of a real hostile alliance, not as a detailed prophetic timetable. So, while the psalm may certainly have relevance whenever nations gather against Israel and against the Lord, we should be careful not to claim more than the text itself clearly says.

Whether one sees an additional future prophecy here or not, the plain meaning is that God's people were facing a real confederated threat, and Asaph cried to the Lord to make His name known.

#### IV. THE SUPPLICATION FOR JUDGMENT (vv. 9–15)

After naming the confederated enemies, Asaph turns to God's past acts and asks Him to do again what He has done before.

##### A. A plea based on former victories (vv. 9–12)

1. "Do unto them as unto the Midianites..." (v. 9)

a) Midian — defeated in the days of Gideon (Judges 6–8).

b) Sisera and Jabin — defeated in the days of

Deborah and Barak (Judges 4–5).

- Asaph doesn't begin by describing what the people can do. He begins by remembering what God has done.

2. "Which perished at Endor..." (v. 10)

Those who rose proudly against God before were brought utterly low.

3. "Make their nobles like Oreb and like Zeeb..." (vv. 11–12)

- a) Oreb, Zeeb, Zebah, and Zalmunna were rulers defeated in Gideon's day.
- b) The prayer targets not just armies, but their leaders.
- c) God brings down both the power and pride of the enemy.
- d) V. 12 — their aim wasn't just land, but what belongs to God.

**B. A prayer for present intervention (vv. 13–15)**

1. "O God make them like a wheel..." (v. 13)

- a) "Like a wheel"

(1) The word for "wheel" (גִּלְגָּל) is one that primarily means an object circling or rotating around and around.

(2) The imagery emphasizes instability and helplessness. The idea is often understood as something driven and whirled away by the wind — light, rootless, unable to stand.

- b) "As the stubble before the wind" — Asaph asks God to make His enemies like chaff that blows away without resistance.
2. "As the fire burneth a wood..." (v. 14) — the image here is that of swift, irresistible, and destructive judgment.
  3. "So persecute them with thy tempest..." (v. 15) — in this conclusion of the appeal by the psalmist for God to destroy the enemy, we see that when God arises, the enemy is no more able to stand than stubble before the wind or a forest before fire.
- In imprecatory prayers like this one, the psalmist is not praying for personal revenge, but for divine justice against those who have set themselves against God and His people.

## V. THE SUPREME PURPOSE REVEALED (VV. 16–18)

Up to this point, Asaph has spoken of the silence of God, the scheme of the enemies, the confederacy of nations, and the supplication for judgment. But now he shows us why he has prayed the way he has.

The goal is not judgment as an end in itself — the goal is that men may know the Most High.

### A. Shame with a redemptive end (v. 16)

This is a very striking verse. The prayer as been for judgment upon the enemy, but the ultimate goal of Asaph (and of the Lord) is that they would come to acknowledge the Lord. That is a remarkable note of mercy in the midst of an imprecatory psalm.

### B. Judgment with a final end (v. 17)

If verse 16 shows the possibility of repentance, verse 17 shows the certainty of judgment upon those who remain hardened.

### C. Revelation as the highest goal (v. 18)

1. "That men may know" — the burden of the psalmist is that God be known. This is the highest concern of true prayer.
2. "Whose name alone is JEHOVAH" — the enemies had united against Israel, but Asaph reminds us that there is only one sovereign Lord over them all.
3. "Art the most high over all the earth" — that means these nations are under His rule; their plotting is under His rule; their rise is under His rule; and their downfall will also be under His rule.

#### Conclusion:

The enemies in this psalm sought to erase the name of Israel from remembrance — but Asaph prayed that the name of the Lord be known.

And that is always the greater issue. Not who rises; not who falls; but Who is revealed.

When God answers — whether in mercy or in judgment — it is always for this end: That men may know that He alone is the Most High over all the earth.