



Celebrating The Transforming God

Christopher B. Harbin

Psalm 80:1-7, 19

We yearn for transformation, yet we don't like change. We earnestly desire change, even while we seek comfort, safety, and solace from the constant streams of life around us. Change is a good thing. That which is new catches our attention. That which is of an older age gets our attention. In so many ways, our very bodies yearn for change and transformation. To the biologist, change is a major ingredient in the definition of life, and yet change causes stress. It calls for response, for reaction, for growth, for understanding, for curiosity, imagination, and adjustment. Change invokes a response of fear and uncertainty. How can we celebrate the God of transformation, the God of all things new, the unchanging God of eternity, while we struggle with change as a threat to the security of the known?

The psalmist invoked the ear of the Almighty on the basis of all God had done for the people of Israel. He gave attention to God's character as shepherd and guardian of Israel. He recalled the majesty of God's sovereignty among the cherubim of heaven. He called for God's presence on earth among the people of Israel, the tribes facing difficulty in the face of their enemies, even enemies within the larger circle of Israelite tribes. He cried out for release from oppression. He called for a transformation in the reality of their national existence. He understood the greatest threat the nation faced to be from their political enemies. That's where the problems started.

Change would have been very good for Israel in the context they were experiencing. Their situation was difficult. They faced oppression from foreign powers. They faced opposition and political struggle within the bounds of Israel. They yearned for the struggle to end. They desperately sought a way out of the conflict all around. They cried out to God in the words of the psalmist for release.

God was listening. God was watching. God was well aware of all the issues confronting the tribes of Israel. The problem was not any lack of God's attention and understanding. The problem was that there was also some discrepancy between God's assessment of the issues and the assessment of the people struggling and yearning for release.

The people wanted change and release. They wanted transformation. The problem is that they were looking outward. They were looking at social, political, and institutional structures. God was interested in providing transformation, but God's methods and application looked at a different level of society. While they looked to resolution within the sphere of power and dominance, God sought resolution at the level of individual response and responsibility.

To a degree, it is like the voices in our society wanting to claim that gun control measures might single-handedly resolve the issues of mass shooting violence in our society. It is like those other voices wanting to claim that we can resolve the issues if we simply arm everyone to the teeth. Both responses look outward, as if the problems we face were somewhere "out there." Neither looks within to find how we participate in the issues we face. Neither accepts responsibility for owning part of the problem.

The various tribes shared responsibility for their political structure and rivalries. Their factions promoted competing issues and they drew weapons to push forward agendas. Brothers fought one another for control of a dynasty. They responded with violence toward neighboring peoples, as well as pressing for political and religious advantage within and without their boundaries. Oppression and lack of justice for the needy promoted growing rivalries, rifts, and responses of revenge.

When they cried out to God for change, resolution, and a transformation of their lives, they wanted God to intervene. They just wanted God to do it according to their plans and purposes. They did not really want God to usher in God's priorities. They wanted God to do battle with someone else and lead them into a paradise of their own imagining.

God was willing to answer, but not in the way they imagined or desired. We find God's answer in Mary's words in Luke 1, a similar message to Hannah's words in 1st Samuel 2. It is a message of change and transformation that comes from God. It is a message of reversal of fortunes. It is a message that God does indeed see the oppression felt by so many. It is a message that God cares for them amidst their anguish. It is a message that God's transformation of our situation is a looming reality, even if it does not always follow our patterns and priorities.

God is not so much interested in the transformation of our political realities, as evidenced in Jesus' ministry. God is not so much interested in our fingers pointing out the sins, failures, and shortcomings of others. God is not so much interested in becoming a tool to advance our personal interests, ambitions, and preferences. Rather, God is interested in bringing us back into community and dependence upon God's blessings and care.

Jesus did not enter the arena of Israelite life immediately upon the writing of Psalm 80. God did not work in chains to human timetables. Jesus did not come to lift Israel politically above the surrounding nations. Jesus did not come to the applause of multitudes, the fanfare of trumpets, or the opulence of splendid feasting and dance. Jesus did not come handing out economic prosperity to his followers and the whole of Jewish society. Jesus did not usher in a golden age of dynamic growth, or even peace enforced upon the enemies of the chosen nation.

God's response to the psalmist's cry for a transformation of the human situation had nothing to do with padded pews, beautiful music, eloquent preaching, or anesthesia for the pains of our grief and struggles. It had to do with a human release for control and submission to the will of God.

The change coming over Hannah and Mary had nothing to do with wealth and power, except that they had neither, either before or after God's intervention. God's transformation had to do with their relationship with God and their recognition of God's active blessing within their circumstances. Nothing external to themselves changed through God's action. Rather, they experienced God's care and blessing over their lives in a very intimate and personal way. It changed them from the inside.

When Jesus came into Mary's life, Rome held political power. At his death Rome still held sway. When God visited Hannah amid the desperation of her cries, Israel was still struggling with enemies within and without Israel. At Samuel's death that had not changed. If anything, circumstances were worse. Yet Hannah rejoiced with God's personal transformation in her life as did Mary in her day.

Both of these women were transformed by God's intervention. God worked to effect a change for their benefit, a change in their attitudes and their level of confidence in God's care and provision.

When we call on God for intervention and transformation, are we ready to be the ones whose lives are altered? The text of the Psalm may not tell us so, but the Hebrews sang Psalms of anguish in order to help them offer their lives to God in a greater degree of trust. While it may not have always been their intent, their cries for help were also cries of dependence and submission.

Are we ready to be the recipients of and the vehicles for God's transforming work? God might very well begin to work change and redemption within and through us. That is reason to celebrate!

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