

Psalm 85 is a vivid meditation on salvation and spiritual renewal. We pray this psalm as Nehemiah might have when he returned to the land of Israel with the exiles to reestablish Jerusalem and the people of God. We pray this psalm along with Mary, the mother of Jesus, who prepared her heart and mind for the coming of “the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32). We pray this psalm with Jesus who made our salvation possible by his obedient and atoning sacrifice on our behalf. We pray this psalm with all those who seek the salvation that only God can give.

Salvation is not a religious abstraction but the lived experience of the redeemed. Every goodness we can possibly imagine finds its source in God’s saving grace. Salvation encompasses deliverance from sin and death, despair of self and alienation from others, and the pressures of the world and a meaningless life.¹ Salvation changes us in every way, giving us an abiding relationship with God and a deep sense of hope and confidence. In Christ we live into a new reality, the old creation is gone and the new creation has come (2 Cor 5:17).

The psalmist remembers the Exodus as the epicenter of redemption. The pivotal event in Israel’s history when the Lord restored the fortunes of Jacob, forgave their iniquity, and covered all their sins. He remembers the Lord turning away his wrath (Ps 85:1-3). But now he prays for a restoration of that “first love” experience of God’s saving grace. Much is not said that could be said about Israel’s rebellion and apostasy, but the psalmist does not go there. He can safely assume that what caused God’s displeasure is common knowledge and does not need to be rehearsed here. What is important is that the psalmist’s plea for full restoration be heard. He entreats the Lord to put away his displeasure and “grant us your salvation” (Ps 85:4-7). In the final section, the psalmist highlights the shared experience of the fullness of salvation by elaborating on the attributes of the Lord: peace, purity, wisdom, righteousness, glory, love, and faithfulness (Ps 85:8-13).

Forgiveness Remembered

*You, Lord, showed favor to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
You forgave the iniquity of your people
and covered all their sins.
You set aside all your wrath
and turned from your fierce anger.*
Psalm 85:1-3

The historical background for this psalm is difficult to determine. It may have come after the Babylonian captivity in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah (450-440 B. C.) when the faithful remnant cried out to God for help to reclaim the land, rebuild Jerusalem and the temple, and restore the people of God to their past blessings. Psalm 85 is a postexilic appeal for revival based on remembering God’s blessing at Sinai and a full restoration of salvation. The pattern of

¹ White, “Salvation,” 968.

redemption, rebellion, and renewal, makes the psalm relevant in many situations where the forgiven faithful seek the joy of their salvation. It is easy to imagine Nehemiah identifying with this psalm. His prayer expresses many of these same themes: the Lord's covenant faithfulness, the acknowledgment of previous sin, the purpose of God's judgment, and the promise of restoration if the people return to him (Neh 1:5-11). Nor is it difficult to imagine Mary four hundred years later being drawn to this psalm when she sang in praise to the Lord, "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors" (Luke 1:54-55). The ebb and flow of faithful obedience has characterized the people of God from the days of Israel to the present age of the Church giving this psalm universal appeal.

The psalmist begins with the foundation of restoration, forgiveness. For the believer the epicenter of redemption has shifted from the Exodus to the cross of Jesus Christ. This is where our appeal for renewal begins. Christ has covered all our sins. The blood of the Passover lamb was a type pointing forward to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. We are redeemed by "the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Pet 1:19). Through "faith in his blood" we are able to draw near to the holy God (Rom 3:25; Eph 2:13). In Christ, we are "justified" (Rom 5:9), "redeemed" (Eph 1:7), and have "peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col 1:20). The apostles emphasize the cleansing power of Christ's blood. The blood of Christ cleanses our consciences (Heb 9:14) and "purifies us from all sin" (1 Jn 1:7). The power of Christ's forgiveness in our lives inspires us to "love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8; see James 5:20). This "covering" of sin, this community-building love depends absolutely on the atoning sacrificial love of Christ. The apostle Paul said, "Since we have been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" (Rom 5:9). The psalmist asks the Lord to "set aside" all his wrath and turn from his "fierce anger" (Ps 85:3) and the apostles declare that Jesus "rescues us from the coming wrath" (1 Thess 1:10).

Renewal

*Restore us again, God our Savior,
and put away your displeasure toward us.
Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger through all generations?
Will you not revive us again,
that your people may rejoice in you?
Show us your unfailing love, Lord,
and grant us your salvation.*

Psalm 85:4-7

There is an overriding communal cast to this renewal prayer that makes it hard for people steeped in western individualism to appreciate. We begin with the individual but the psalmist begins with the people. When he says, "Restore us again, God our Savior," he includes the history of the people of God who stand together through place and time. They are not a collection of networked

individuals but a faithful company who share a common salvation, even as they share together judgment, repentance, and restoration. Nehemiah is not a solitary figure who prays on behalf of himself. He is the Lord's servant praying for the people of Israel. He confesses his sins and the sins of his people (Neh 1:6-7). Mary's prayer is deeply personal, "My soul glorifies the Lord" (Luke 1:46), but also powerfully communal. She is in solidarity with Abraham and his descendants. The psalmist refuses to make this prayer for renewal and restoration about himself. It is about us, the people of God, and not about "me."

The author of Hebrews says we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus (Heb 10:19). But the psalmist is also bold and his confidence stems from the same source. The reason the believer can boldly enter into the presence of God is the same reason the psalmist can pray the way he does. This confidence is not about our self-confidence but about God's self-consistency. The reason the prayer gradually gathers strength is because all the petitions depend upon the promises of God.² The psalmist dares to beseech God for his "unfailing love," because he knows the character, promises, and actions of God his Savior.

This boldness is not to the credit of the psalmist but the to the mercy of God. Whatever is good and praiseworthy flows from the mercy of God and not what we deserve. This leads to a humble boldness. Augustine expressed it this way: seeing that we are not proud means that we are not lifted up. And if we are not lifted up, we will not fall. And if we don't fall, we will stand. And in standing we will cling fast and abide. And when we abide we will rejoice in the Lord our God. This is the path to confidence. Everything we have, our father, our country, our inheritance, our salvation comes from the mercy of God.³

Convergence

*I will listen to what God the Lord says;
he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants –
but let them not turn to folly.
Surely his salvation is near those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.
Love and faithfulness meet together;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.
Faithfulness springs forth from the earth,
and righteousness looks down from heaven.
The Lord will indeed give what is good,
and our land will yield its harvest.
Righteousness goes before him
and prepares the way for his steps.*

Psalm 85:8-13

The convergence of all that is good creates a beautiful picture of salvation. The psalmist's

² Kidner, Psalms, 308.

³ Augustine, Psalms 85, sec. 6, 406.

confident hope comes from listening to the Word of God. God promises an inner harmony and an ultimate convergence of righteousness and peace. The Divine purpose—bringing unity to all things in heaven and on earth in Christ, overcomes the great divorce between our fallenness and our fulfillment. The psalmist envisions the end goal and from our vantage point in salvation history we understand the means to that goal. Through the Incarnation, God descends into our suffering humanity, joins us on the ash heap, takes up this mean battle with Satan, and goes to the cross. The Lord of Glory is crucified, but the cross is not the last word and the resurrection is not a wild card played at the end. There is a beautiful coherence between the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the truth of the universe. The power of the resurrection fits with the wonder and meaning of life as we know it, from our understanding of the created order to the justice of the moral order.⁴ Christ makes possible the promise of peace to God’s faithful servants. Christ brings salvation near to those who fear him. In Christ love and faithfulness meet and righteousness and peace kiss.

The Hebrew poet has paired the blessings of salvation: peace and faithfulness, salvation and glory, love and faithfulness, righteousness and peace. These are not opposites that require reconciliation but blessings that prove reconciliation. Each attribute is a reflection of the Lord’s goodness and character, like a musical variation in the symphony of salvation beautifully orchestrated by the Chief Musician. Love and faithfulness are friends united in Christ. Righteousness and peace kiss each other because Christ Jesus who is our peace has made us righteous in him. We cannot have peace without righteousness nor righteousness without peace. Only in Christ do they come together. Augustine read the testimony of the Incarnate One in the faithfulness that springs from the earth and the Father’s acceptance of the atoning sacrifice in the righteousness that looks down from heaven.⁵ When Jesus prayed Psalm 85 he must have identified himself and his ministry with the promise of the abundant life and the fruitful harvest (John 10:10; Luke 10:2). He united righteousness and peace and love and faithfulness like no one else and who better than the Christ can it be said, “Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps” (Ps 85:13).

⁴ Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 32.

⁵ Augustine, Psalm 85, sec. 10, 408-409.