

“There and Back Again”
Psalm 85
(Preached at Trinity, October 30, 2011)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. In 1937 J.R.R. Tolkien published a book titled, *There and Back Again*, which became better known by the abbreviated title, *The Hobbit*. It was an account of the quest of Hobbit Bilbo Baggins to win a share of a treasure guarded by a fierce dragon.
2. Tonight I want to borrow the title, *There and Back Again* to describe a different journey. Psalm 85 speaks of Israel's return from their exile in Babylon, although this interpretation is not universal. Spurgeon believed David is the author and he is simply speaking of oppression from the Philistines. It would seem, however, that the psalmist is surely speaking of Israel's return from exile. This is the position of past theologians such as Calvin, Delitzsch, Matthew Henry and Dickson and modern expositors such as James Montgomery Boice.
3. Israel had spent 70 years in captivity in Babylon. A whole generation lived and died there. They thought God had forgotten them. Jerusalem was but a memory. They longed for the days of their forefathers—days when they could delight in the presence of God in His holy Temple.
Psalm 80:4-5 KJV - "O LORD God of hosts, how long wilt thou be angry against the prayer of thy people? ⁵ Thou feedest them with the bread of tears; and givest them tears to drink in great measure."
4. Then their long sought after desire came true. God stirred the heart of King Cyrus who then issued the decree:
Ezra 1:2 KJV - "Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which *is* in Judah."
5. God demonstrated His great mercy and delivered them from their bondage.
Psalm 85:1 KJV - "LORD, thou hast been favourable unto thy land: thou hast brought back the captivity of Jacob."
6. In 458, under the leadership of Ezra a group of Jews returned. Soon the foundation of the Temple had been laid and the people erupted with a shout of great praise and joy.
Ezra 3:10-11 KJV - "And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the LORD, after the ordinance of David king of Israel. ¹¹ And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because *he is good*, for his mercy *endureth* for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid."
7. It was a wonderful period of revival and recommitment to God. As we read in **Verses 1-2** there was a sense that they had been restored to favor with God and that He had forgiven their sins

8. At some point they began work on the wall surrounding the city but the work was grueling. When Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylon the great stones of the wall had been completely torn down. As the decades passed by grass and trees had grown covering many of the stones. The work of rebuilding was tremendously difficult.
9. In addition, they were continually discouraged by the Samaritans surrounding Jerusalem. We can read of this in both Ezra and Nehemiah
Ezra 4:4 KJV - "Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building,"
Nehemiah 4:1-2 NAU - "Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews. ² He spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy *men* of Samaria and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore *it* for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?"
10. So the work stopped. Perhaps apathy and sluggishness set in. When this happens sin inevitably begins to creep in.
 From the heights of rejoicing they fell into what Bunyan called the "slough of despond." And so I title tonight's sermon, "There and Back Again," the journey of the believer on the mountain top, who falls into sin, and then rises again to the joy of his salvation.
Psalm 85:6 KJV - "Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee?"
Psalm 51:12 KJV - "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation"
11. Perhaps this describes you. You remember better times in your Christian life; times when you felt nearer to God; times when you had great joy in the things of God. But you've lost this. Perhaps through sin and neglect you have fallen into a great season of spiritual emptiness. Perhaps this Psalm will speak to your heart tonight.
11. We'll divide **Psalm 85** into three sections:
- I. Looking to the past – **Verses 1-3**
 - II. Confession in the present – **Verses 4-7**
 - III. Resting on the promises – **Verses 8-13**
- I. Looking to the past – **Verses 1-3**
- A. The Psalmist looked back to the fall of Jerusalem and God's mercy in redeeming them from their captivity
Psalm 85:1 KJV - "LORD, thou hast been favourable unto thy land: thou hast brought back the captivity of Jacob."¹
 1. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC and languished under their captivity
 2. Asaph described the terror they experienced in **Psalm 79**
Psalm 79:3 KJV - "Their blood have they shed like water round about Jerusalem; and *there was none to bury them.*"
 Multitudes were killed. The corpses were left to rot or be eaten by animals. The Babylonians did not bury the dead and there were not enough Israelites left behind to carry out the gruesome task.

3. Yet, all their their suffering was self-inflicted. It took place after years of sin and after years of warning by the prophets.

Notice **Verse 2**

Psalms 85:2 KJV - "Thou hast forgiven the iniquity of thy people, thou hast covered all their sin."

- B. Yet, God demonstrated great mercy

"thou hast brought back the captivity of Jacob."

1. Babylon fell to the Persians under King Cyrus in 539 BC. Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem in 538 under Zerubbabel. This is recorded in Ezra 1-6. Cyrus became the instrument of God's mercy

Isaiah 44:28 KJV - "He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid."

In **Isaiah 45** God even refers to Cyrus as His anointed.

2. The children of Israel return and the Temple was completed during the reign of Darius between 520-515 BC.
3. When the Jews returned there was an air of excitement and great joy – at least for a season. They were home; they were together – and they were rebuilding the temple, the very essence of God's presence in their midst.
4. But, the reality of the difficulty of their life soon came crushing down. The difficulty of rebuilding was great. It took them 15 years to rebuild the Temple. The abiding presence of the Samaritans opposing their work weighed upon them. Their efforts in rebuilding the wall proved overwhelming.

The revival of their joy soon decayed. By the time Nehemiah became involved all remnants of their revival of joy had vanished.

Nehemiah 1:3 KJV - "The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach"

- C. God has accomplished a mighty work in your life.

1. There is strong salvation language in this passage
"thou hast covered all their sin" describes atonement
"Thou hast taken away all thy wrath" describes propitiation
2. Do you remember the joy you felt in being reconciled to God?
3. Do you remember the joy of adoption, of having your sins forgiven, of the power of the cross, the hope of eternity? Can you remember the time when you had a new song in your heart?
4. Has this joy faded with the reality of the Christian warfare – our unceasing battle against sin, the struggle we have living in a world that hates God. Have you found the demands of your labors too difficult?
5. Have you grown weary and departed from the means of grace God has provided to refresh you and increase your love for Him?
Does your former joy seem but a memory.

6. How do you overcome such times of discouragement?
 The Psalmist begins by looking to the past – to see from which they have fallen
Revelation 2:5 KJV - "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent."

II. Confession in the present – **Verses 4-7**

- A. Between **Verses 1-3** and **Verse 4** there appears to be a terrible change
1. There are no details given but there is no doubt that sin is at the heart of the issue
Psalm 85:4 KJV - "Turn us, O God of our salvation, and cause thine anger toward us to cease."
 2. Nehemiah confirms that they had fallen into sin
Nehemiah 1:6-7 KJV - "Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. ⁷ We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses."
 3. It could be the revelation of the sin they had committed while in Babylon. Not only did their sin cause the destruction of their nation and captivity in Babylon. Many of them still had not consecrated themselves while in Babylon.
 When Ezra the priest arrived he charged Israel with their sins that they had committed while in Babylon including the taking of foreign wives.
Ezra 9:1 KJV - "The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, *doing* according to their abominations"
Ezra 10:3 KJV - " Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law."
 4. It could refer to their fall into apathy after their return. They had gone from great zeal to lukewarm laziness.
 5. The great plea was for God to turn them from their sin and restore them to the joy they had before
Psalm 85:7 KJV - "Shew us thy mercy, O LORD"
Psalm 85:6 KJV - "Wilt thou not revive us again"
 6. The psalmist knew restoration demanded two things: prayer and confession
 - a. He sought the face of God – "Turn us, O God of our salvation"
 - b. He confessed their sin
 6. He sought the unfailing love of God – **Verse 8** - רַחֲמֶיךָ

- B. The path for restoration for us is exactly the same
1. We must pray – most likely the decay in our joy in Christ began with a decay in prayer.
 2. We must pray for revival in our own lives and the life of our church
 3. We must confess our sins – Confession is one of the great means of grace that God uses in drawing us nigh unto Him
 4. We too seek the unfailing love of God
 - a. Too often we look at God as though we were His enemy. We maintain harsh thoughts and come before Him in fear.
 - b. We must remember His unfailing love for us.

III. Resting on the promises – **Verses 8-13**

- A. The Psalmist turns his heart to the promises of God. God’s promises are unfailing
Psalm 85:8 KJV - "I will hear what God the LORD will speak"
1. God has promised peace to His people
Psalm 85:8 KJV - "for he will speak peace unto his people"
 - a. This is one of the fruits of salvation – reconciliation
 - b. The lost man knows no peace – notice God speaks peace to “His people.” And notice that these people are identified as the “godly ones.”
 - c. Even when you feel most downcast, God is speaking peace to you. You **HAVE** been reconciled through the unfailing blood of Christ
 2. Notice how he describes our peace in **Verse 10**
Psalm 85:10 KJV - "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed *each other*."
 - a. The word for “mercy” is רַחֲמִים
 - b. Perfect harmony is found in Christ and in Him we will find our way into eternity
- B. But notice those who have been brought to peace with God must be on guard against sin.
Psalm 85:8 NAS - "But let them not turn back to folly."
1. While God will never cast off His people through sin we can lose all peace of conscience
 2. The meaning of “folly” is stupidity. If sin brought them to their present state of misery would it not be the height of folly and stupidity to turn your back on God to follow sin
 3. Those who follow Christ find his perfect salvation
Psalm 85:9 KJV - "Surely his salvation *is* nigh them that fear him"
- C. God promises all good things for His people
Psalm 85:12 KJV - "Yea, the LORD shall give *that which is good*"
1. God’s greatest good is conforming us to the image of His Son
 This is the essence of **Romans 8:28**
Romans 8:28-29 KJV - "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to *his* purpose. ²⁹ For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate *to be* conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren."

2. **Verse 13** also affirms this
Psalm 85:13 KJV - " Righteousness shall go before him; and shall set *us* in the way of his steps."

Conclusion:

1. When we find the fires of our zeal for Christ becoming cold we must remember from which we have fallen and pray, turning from our sin, and fleeing hard towards Christ.
2. "There and back again" – May this be the condition of our life. And may the seasons between the "there" and the "back again" be of brief duration.