

We come this evening to Psalm 85 and the Psalms of the Sons of Korah.

I preached on Psalm 84 a few years ago, so I will not repeat that here.

But for those whose memories do not reach back to January of 2007,  
I will mention here that Psalm 84 is driven by the vision of the Living God.  
“How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts.  
My soul longs – yes faints, for the courts of the LORD.  
My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God!”

Psalm 84 is a song of pilgrimage –  
encouraging and exhorting those who do *not* dwell in Zion  
to keep the highways to Zion in their hearts.

Psalm 84 ended

“For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor.  
No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.  
O LORD of Hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you.” (84:11-12)

Psalm 85 builds on this.

If this is true – if the one who trusts in you is blessed –  
if the LORD does not withhold good from those who walk uprightly –  
then let us come to God, asking him to do what he has promised!

As Psalm 85 concludes:

“Yes, the LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.  
Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way.”

Psalm 85 has four stanzas,  
which I have outlined in your bulletins as  
our motive to prayer,  
our hope in prayer  
our stance in prayer  
and our confidence in prayer.

But while I have outlined the sermon with these points,  
I would not want you to think that Psalm 85 is anything resembling a “lecture” on prayer.

Rather, Psalm 85 is a model of how to pray.

One tendency in modern studies of the Psalms is to ignore the question of structure.  
We are often told that we need to read Psalms in terms of their “genre” –  
and so we focus on laments, wisdom psalms, thanksgivings, etc.

But the structure of the Psalter is not some haphazard assortment of songs. There are often clues to the structure of the Psalms given in the headings.

The Songs of Ascent are the most obvious –

the songs sung by pilgrims as they ascended to Zion.

But various other collections also appear.

Psalms 85 is a “Psalm of the Sons of Korah.”

Psalms 42-49, 84-85, 87-88 are all said to be psalms “of the Sons of Korah” –

and it is possible that Psalm 89 (of Ethan the Ezrahite)

should be seen as belonging to the same corpus.

Psalms 42-49 are the opening songs of Book 2 of the Psalter.

Psalms 84-89 are the closing songs of Book 3 of the Psalter.

The first half of Book 3 (Psalms 73-83) were Psalms of Asaph –

and had a very strong connection with the Exile.

Psalms 84-89 (minus Psalm 86, which we will look at next week)

are Psalms of the Sons of Korah.

Why is this important?

These Psalms have a number of phrases that connect them:

The phrase “the living God” occurs only in Psalms 42 and 84.

The idea of “appearing before God” (or seeing God) in Psalms 42 and 84

is only found in these Psalms.

The phrase “your tabernacles” occurs only in Psalms 43, 46, 84, 87 (and 132).

(It’s other usage is found in Ezekiel 37).

The phrase “city of God” is found in Psalms 46, 48, and 87 (nowhere else in OT).

“LORD of hosts” is only used in the psalms in 24, 46, 48, 69, and 84,

and Korah always uses the phrase “God of Jacob” –

rather than “God of Israel.”

The Psalms of the Sons of Korah are mostly designed for public ritual:

Psalm 42 remembers leading the people in public procession to the house of God.

Psalm 44 is a national lament.

Psalm 45 is a royal wedding song.

Psalm 46 is the people’s “hymn of confidence”

Psalm 47 is their celebration of Yahweh’s kingship.

Psalm 48 is their celebration of Yahweh’s city.

Psalm 49 then addresses the nations

with a call to heed wisdom in the face of death.

Likewise, Psalm 84 parallels Psalm 42 with its longing for Zion.

Psalm 85 is a national lament.

Psalm 87 is a national celebration of God's city.  
Psalm 88, then, becomes the only Korahite Psalm that is intensely personal,  
without any clear public aspect.

There are interesting arguments out there  
suggesting that the Sons of Korah originally wrote these Psalms in the northern kingdom,  
and that they were only later taken over to the Jerusalem temple  
after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel.

As usual, I will leave aside any speculation of this sort –  
because God has not given us the answer to these questions.

He has given us the text!  
Whoever this person was –  
and for whatever reason he may have written –  
the resulting text was inspired by God and included in the Psalter  
for the use of the praise of God by his people in all ages.

### **1. Our Motive to Prayer: God's Past Faithfulness (1-3)**

*85:1 Lord, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.  
2 You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you covered all their sin. Selah  
3 You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.*

The major question in the first half of the Psalm  
is how to relate the “you restored the fortunes of Jacob” in verse 1,  
with the “Restore us again” of verse 4.

Too often people have tried to figure out the “original context” –  
forgetting that the original context would only be useful once!

Verses 1-3 are not referring to a particular restoration,  
but rather to the fact that “in times past” you were favorable.  
In the past you restored the fortunes of Jacob.  
You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sin.  
That was true once.

And because that was once true,  
that motivates us to come before God now.  
Because you were faithful in the past,

we have confidence to come before you now.

But this statement of the past faithfulness of God sets up the present problem.

Because things are not *now* as they once were,

and so

## 2. Our Hope in Prayer: That God Will Revive Us (4-7)

*4 Restore us again, O God of our salvation,*

*and put away your indignation toward us!*

*5 Will you be angry with us forever?*

*Will you prolong your anger to all generations?*

*6 Will you not revive us again,*

*that your people may rejoice in you?*

*7 Show us your steadfast love, O Lord,*

*and grant us your salvation.*

It seems as though everyone throughout history  
has insisted that the present is an age of declension  
from the former glory of “better days.”

And this has always been true!

Speaking in general terms,  
there is always *something* going wrong.

And speaking theologically,  
this makes perfect sense!

There is always a reason for God to be angry!

Because – as James 2:10 puts it –

if you keep the whole law, but break one commandment,  
you are counted a lawbreaker, because you have broken the law!

Again, Psalm 85 does not provide specifics.

Is this referring to God’s anger against the northern kingdom for the sins of Ahab?

Is this referring to God’s anger against Judah for the idolatry of Ahaz?

Is this referring to the exile, and asking God to bring back the captives?

We don’t know.

But Psalm 85 was written precisely so that it could be sung at any such occasion –  
or, for that matter,  
at any occasion since!

While we may not be able to recreate the setting for when it was written,

it is worth pointing out that the Psalms were used in the liturgy of the temple.

And if Psalm 84 was a pilgrimage song –  
well suited for the approach to God as the people of God came to God’s dwelling place –  
Psalm 85 fits well in the context of a national lament,  
a corporate prayer for God to restore and revive his people.

As such, Psalm 85 could easily have been sung towards the beginning of the feasts,  
when the people gathered and asked God to have mercy upon them.

Think of Mary and Joseph coming to the temple to offer the sacrifices in Luke’s gospel,  
after the birth of Jesus.

Psalm 85 could have been sung as the people brought their prayers to the temple:

“Will you prolong your anger to all generations?  
Will you not revive us again,  
that your people may rejoice in you?”

It was certainly songs like this that had sustained Anna all those years,  
as she fasted and prayed, waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

“Show us your steadfast love, O Yahweh,  
and grant us your salvation.”

I don’t know if it was that day –  
but Psalm 85 would certainly have been sung during Jesus’ youth –  
and when Mary heard those word,  
“grant us your *yeshā* (your “salvation”)”  
how could she not have glanced at the child beside her –

whose name was “Yeshua”

and she would remember the words of the angel,  
“he will save his people from their sins.”

Psalm 85 would have been sung by our Lord Jesus Christ  
when he came to Jerusalem for the feasts in his day.

“Will you prolong your anger to all generations?”  
Our Lord knew that the reason why he had come  
was to take away God’s anger,  
and revive the people of God.

And now for us, the act of God’s favor  
is the resurrection of Jesus.

The forgiveness of our iniquities was prefigured in the Exodus and Tabernacle –

but it has been fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus,  
as he passed from death to life,  
and made atonement for us in the heavenly holy of holies – made without hands!

And therefore, our *hope* is stronger and more certain –  
because our hope that God would revive *us* is based on the resurrection of Jesus!

God *has* shown us his steadfast love –  
because while we were yet sinners,  
Christ died for us.

### **3. Our Stance in Prayer: Hearing and Fearing (8-9)**

But the context for the singing of Psalm 85 in the temple  
would also include the hearing of the Law.

The priests would read from the book of the law –  
both recounting the mighty deeds of old,  
as they reminded the people of God’s faithfulness,  
and also reading God’s commands,  
as they reminded the people of what God expected of them.

(We have examples of this in Joshua, as well as Chronicles)

And so the third section of Psalm 85 turns to our stance in prayer:  
hearing what God says,  
and fearing him.

*8 Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints;  
but let them not turn back to folly.  
9 Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,  
that glory may dwell in our land.*

When we come before God in worship –  
whether individually or corporately –  
we need to come with open ears.

Literally:  
“Let me hear what the god Yahweh will speak.”

Because God will speak peace – he will speak *shalom* – to his people,  
who are here further defined as “his saints” –  
his holy ones.

You need to hear this because God's message of shalom –  
his message of peace and fellowship with him –  
is not for just anyone!

It is for "his people" – his "saints" –  
which excludes two groups of people:  
1) it excludes his enemies – those who are "not" his people  
2) and explicitly in verse 8 it excludes those who "turn back to folly."

You don't need to know exactly when Psalm 85 was written to know what this means!

If it was written in David's day,  
then the folly would be the idolatry during the time of the Judges.  
If it was written in the northern kingdom before the fall of Samaria,  
then the folly would be the idolatry of Ahab.  
If it was written in Judah before the fall of Jerusalem,  
then the folly would be the idolatry of Ahaz or Manasseh.  
If it was written after the exile,  
then the folly would be all of the above!!

Don't return to folly.  
Don't go back to the very thing that caused God's anger to burn against us in the first place!

You could summarize the whole point here very briefly:  
So God's peace is on his people – his saints –  
those who worship him.  
It is not on idolaters (whether foreign or domestic!).

God's people long to hear to the voice of the LORD –  
because when the LORD speaks to those who fear him,  
the LORD's voice speaks peace!

"Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,  
that glory may dwell in our land."

Glory dwelling in the land is the result when God's salvation comes –  
and God speaks peace to his people.

As we saw this morning,  
Zechariah spoke of this message of peace  
as he prophesied regarding his son John.  
Glory, salvation and peace are the dominant themes in the songs of Luke 1-2.  
Mary rejoices in God "my Savior" (1:47)

and while she does not use the word peace,  
her description of what God will do  
(casting down the proud, exalting the humble, etc.)  
is precisely what Shalom is.

Likewise Zechariah speaks of God raising up a horn of “salvation” for us,  
“that we should be saved from our enemies,”  
and concludes that he will “guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Likewise the angels sing “Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (2:14)

And Simeon summarizes all this by saying,  
“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,  
according to your word;  
for my eyes have seen your salvation  
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and for glory to your people Israel.” (2:29-32)

God speaks peace to his people in Jesus Christ.  
Simeon has seen “your salvation” – your “yeshua” –  
and therefore he sees with the eyes of faith  
the glory that will come to “your people” – “your Israel.”

But just as in Psalm 85,  
the “Israel” will not include Israelites who return to “folly” –  
who refuse to see the salvation – the yeshua –  
who now comes to bring peace and glory to his land.

#### **4. Our Confidence in Prayer: the LORD Will Do What He Has Promised (10-13)**

*10 Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;*

Hesed and emet (“Steadfast love and faithfulness”)  
come together in Jesus Christ.

As John put it, “the law came by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.”

*righteousness and peace kiss each other.*

Tsedeq and shalom (“righteousness and peace”)  
kiss each other.

The kiss of peace – the kiss of greeting – that all is well between you.

When tsedeq and shalom kiss – then truly, all is right with the world.  
When the righteous reign of God is established,



then there will truly be peace on earth!

Okay back to reality!

Who are we kidding?

In our world, righteousness and peace are nowhere near to kissing!  
In the city of man you have justice – righteousness – on one side,  
and peace on the other!

If you needed convincing, the WikiLeaks fiasco should have fixed that!  
I haven't heard anything surprising come out of the documents yet.  
Was anyone surprised to hear that every nation on earth  
is suspicious of every other nation on earth?!  
What passes for righteousness in this age is "lesser of two evils"!  
And as for peace!  
We call it peace when no one is shooting at each other!

Fangs bared and spies peering into each other's closets –  
that's peace in the city of man!

Do you remember what righteousness is?

We saw this in Genesis 18, when God asked if Abraham would  
"command his children and his household after him  
to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice,  
so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him."  
We saw that righteousness has to do with how you order your household.  
Righteousness has to do with the way that you structure society.

And justice has to do with how you implement that order.

You may have righteous laws and statutes –  
but if you have corrupt judges, then justice will go out the window!

Augustine rightly pointed out that you will *never* get true justice in this age.

True righteousness belongs only to the Kingdom of Christ.

Augustine pointed out that the goal of the city of man –  
the goal for nations in this age –  
is "peace."

And even that is only the shadowy peace of a cessation of hostilities!

Because true peace – the sort of "shalom" that Psalm 85 speaks of –  
comes only when righteousness and peace kiss.

And that is why true righteousness and peace can only be found together in the church.  
Because the church is where peace reigns.  
The righteous rule of Jesus governs the church.  
It may be unjustly administered by his servants.  
(This is why the elders must always remember that we are servants of Christ!)

But this is where righteousness and peace come together.

Brothers and sisters,  
many people claim that it would be easier to do this if only we were persecuted!  
Or maybe if we faced material deprivation.

Hogwash!

The same Spirit that filled the apostles on the day of Pentecost fills us!  
The only thing that keeps us from living in righteousness and peace  
is folly – namely, idolatry!

Verse 10 serves as the foundation for the conclusion of Psalm 85,  
as it speaks of how *God himself* will do what he has promised.

Having spoken of steadfast love and faithfulness,  
righteousness and peace,  
the Psalmist chooses faithfulness and righteousness as his watchwords to conclude:

*11 Faithfulness springs up from the ground,  
and righteousness looks down from the sky.*

Notice that righteousness looks down.  
Righteousness is the heavenly gift.

Faithfulness springs up –  
faithfulness comes from below.  
And this is confirmed by verses 12-13:

*12 Yes, the Lord will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.*

Remember Psalm 84:11 – “no good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly”  
Now Psalm 85 confirms it:  
Truly, the LORD *will* give what is good.

*13 Righteousness will go before him  
and make his footsteps a way.*

Righteousness will not come through human effort.  
Righteousness does not rise up from the earth.

Rather, righteousness goes before the LORD in making a way for his footsteps.

And this is what he has done in Jesus Christ.

The law came through Moses,  
but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.  
Another way of saying this  
is that righteousness and peace have met in Jesus Christ.

Paul says in Romans 14:17

that the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking  
“but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

Likewise, Paul adds in 2 Timothy 2:22

“So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace,  
along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”

Here Paul uses the same idea of righteousness – a properly ordered society:  
not here speaking of civil society,  
but ecclesiastical society.

The church is to be a place characterized by righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

And the church *will be* such a place  
when we “flee youthful passions  
and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace” together.

What does that look like?

We’ll know when our prayers become more like Psalm 85;  
when we long to hear what God the LORD says;  
when we “flee youthful passions” (when we flee folly, instead of pursuing her)  
when we are more concerned with making disciples  
than with making money –  
in short, when we become more of who we already *are* in Christ Jesus.