



## Psalm 85 - Prayer for the Restoration of God's Favour

To the leader. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.

### Introduction

This is a community lament, at a time when God has shown his displeasure over his people's unfaithfulness, perhaps by withholding fruitfulness from the land. The people singing this are seeking forgiveness for the whole people, asking God to show the steadfast love and faithfulness he proclaimed in Exodus 34:6; and because God is righteous – that is, reliable about his promises – the psalm closes with confidence.

Exodus 34:6-7 provides the background to this psalm, particularly in the terms steadfast love and faithfulness and to forgive iniquity. The Lord explained his 'name' to Moses by emphasising his benevolence, which is where the people's hope lies. Many churches use the psalm at Christmas time, the supreme occasion when God was favourable to his land and spoke peace to his saints.

Like several psalms, this in some ways seems to fit the period of Israel's return from exile, in other ways it does not. Alexander MacLaren noted, "The book of Nehemiah supplies precisely such a background as fits the psalm. A part of the nation had returned indeed, but to a ruined city, a fallen Temple, and a mourning land, where they were surrounded by jealous and powerful enemies." Even if it belongs to an earlier period (such as the end of Saul's reign), God's people find themselves in this place from time to time, and this beautiful psalm is appropriate.

### Psalm 85:1-3 - Lord, Once You Showed Us Favour and Forgave Us.

The verbs in this section are all past tense, looking back to what God has done for the people before: he was favourable to the land, i.e. he made it produce

abundant crops to sustain his people; he restored the fortunes of Jacob after he had disciplined his people for their unfaithfulness; he forgave their iniquity, covered all their sin, withdrew all his wrath, and turned from his hot anger.

As mentioned in the introduction above, to forgive iniquity evokes Exodus 34:7, as well as Psalm 32:1 for pardoned or covered sin. The expression that God turned from his hot anger is seen in Moses plea to God in Exodus 32:12, is part of the same context as Exodus 34:6-7 that describes God's characteristics, and can be seen in practice against Israel for the sins of Achan in Joshua 7:26; it implies that God forgave his people after they repented of serious unfaithfulness and apostasy. God has done this in the past for his people because he is boundlessly gracious and merciful.

- 1 Lord, you were favourable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
- 2 You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you pardoned all their sin. Selah

### Psalm 85:1-2

Lord, you were favourable to your land. The psalmist finds relief in God's care for his land. Notably, the territory of Israel is called your land. The Bible understands that all the earth belongs to the Lord: <<*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it*>> (Psalm 24:1), yet there is an undeniable way in which Israel is his special possession, with God having a special regard for his land.

You restored the fortunes of Jacob. Many think this phrase means this psalm was written after the Babylonian captivity. This is possible, and some psalms, such as Psalm 79, clearly date to this period. Yet the idea of Israel being in some kind of captivity also suits some other periods, such as the period of Philistine domination in the later years of Saul's reign; refer to 1 Samuel Chapters 28-31.

You forgave the iniquity of your people. The psalmist was not only interested in the aspect of the land, but more importantly in the aspect of relationship with God. The iniquity that once hindered relationship was now taken away. The idea was so important and precious to the psalmist that he repeats it in different words according to the style of Hebrew poetry.

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect.

- <sup>3</sup> You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.

### Psalm 85:3

You withdrew all your wrath. The Sons of Korah found satisfaction in the satisfaction of God's wrath. Once they were the righteous subjects of God's judgement and now they were delivered from it. There is special beauty in the words all your wrath, speaking of a complete work. As with the previous verse <<*pardoned all their sin*>>, this looks forward to the complete work of Jesus on the Cross, where he satisfied God's righteous requirement to the full with a once for all sacrifice: <<*Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself*>> (Hebrews 7:27), <<*But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption*>> (Hebrews 9:11-12), <<*And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all*>> (Hebrews 10:10).

You turned from your hot anger. There is great gratitude in knowing God's anger has passed. This is especially true when considering the fierceness of his anger.

### Psalm 85:4-7 - Restore and Forgive Us Again.

The next section appeals to the benevolence God has claimed and shown, asking him to restore his people again, i.e. <<*put away your indignation toward us*>>. For God to be angry with his people forever would be contrary to his revealed character; therefore the people pray <<*show us your steadfast love*>> (as proclaimed in Exodus 34:6), and <<*grant us your salvation*>>.

- <sup>4</sup> Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation towards us.
- <sup>5</sup> Will you be angry with us for ever?  
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?

### Psalm 85:4-5

Restore us again, O God of our salvation. The psalm began thanking God for return and restoration. In light of that past goodness, the psalmist now prayed for continued and present restoration.

The specific salvation is for God to turn away his anger, to forgive his people corporately (refer to the comments made on Numbers 14:13-19 and 14:20-35), and to revive them, i.e. to renew their genuine hold on the covenant and make the land fruitful.

David wrote: <<*There is no help for you in God*>> (Psalm 3:2b). Help or salvation for David, as generally in the OT, refers to both physical and spiritual deliverance from danger. The fact that they are saying this of his soul indicates that the enemies are taunting him: his sins are so bad, they imply, that even God cannot save him. Shimei, who cursed David in 2 Samuel 16:5, was an example of someone who said that God was against David and he was just getting what he deserved: <<*Shimei shouted while he cursed, 'Out! Out! Murderer! Scoundrel! The Lord has avenged on all of you the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, disaster has overtaken you; for you are a man of blood'*>> (2 Samuel 16:7-8). This thought was most painful of all for David - the thought that God might be against him and that <<*there is no help for him in God*>>, a claim made by the Assyrians as they besieged Jerusalem: <<*Do not let Hezekiah make you rely on the Lord by saying, The Lord will surely deliver us*>> (Isaiah 36:15a). The Sons of Korah felt that same need for restoration in the eyes of God.

Will you be angry with us for ever? Verse 3 thanked God for the turning of his fierce anger. That work in the past was the basis of this prayer, 'Lord do it again.'

- 6 Will you not revive us again,  
so that your people may rejoice in you?
- 7 Show us your steadfast love, O Lord,  
and grant us your salvation.

### Psalm 85:6-7

Will you not revive us again. This is a simple and wonderful prayer for revival. It recognises that revival is not manmade, but given by God. Yet it also recognises that one may and should pray for revival, and pray with godly expectation of faith.

The context shows Christians when to pray for revival:

- They should pray for revival when they remember the great things God has done in the past (as in vv.1-3).
- They should pray for revival when they sense they are under a cloud of divine displeasure or an evident lack of blessing (as in vv.4-5).

So that your people may rejoice in you. Praying for revival means praying that God's work among his people would cause them to find their joy in nothing else than in him. So Christians pray:

- Full of confidence, knowing that God can revive.
- Full of boldness, pleading with God for revival.
- Full of humility, desiring God's glory and praise.

Charles Spurgeon commented, "The words before us teach us that gratitude has an eye to the giver, even beyond the gift – 'thy people may rejoice in thee.' Those who were revived would rejoice not only in the new life but in the Lord who was the author of it."

Show us your steadfast love, O Lord. This recognises that revival is a work of God's steadfast love or mercy, which is also the meaning of the Hebrew *hesed*. It is not earned or deserved. God graciously grants true revival.

Grant us your salvation. True revival demonstrates that salvation is God's work. Jonah saw a great work of revival in Nineveh, flowing from his embrace of the great principle: salvation is of the Lord: <<***Deliverance belongs to the Lord!***>> (Jonah 2:9b).

#### Psalm 85:8-9 - I Will Listen to Hear His Word of Peace.

Now the members of the congregation declare their patience in watching for God to act on their prayer. The song has shifted from the plural 'we' to the singular 'I': <<***let me hear***>>. Each member is thus making this pledge.

There is confidence that God will speak peace to his people, i.e. he will agree to the reconciliation they have asked for in vv.4-7. At the same time, the psalmist prays, let them not turn back to folly; i.e. the people who are appealing to God's benevolence should make sure that their repentance is genuine, and that they really do aim for faithfulness and really intend not to repeat the folly or moral stupidity that provoked God's anger. The word translated 'his faithful' (Hebrew *khasid*), literally saints, reinforces this, since it refers to members of the covenant people who take the covenant to heart and walk in obedience before God. Therefore the force of this is, 'to his people, especially to his saints.' Likewise God's salvation, which they had requested in v.7, is near to those who fear him, i.e. again to those who lay hold of the promises of God's covenant by genuine faith and obedience. The people should never presume upon God's gracious response to their prayers, as if it comes 'automatically.' Thus, as the Israelites wait for God to speak, they can evaluate their own sincerity.

<sup>8</sup> Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people,

to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

- <sup>9</sup> Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.

### Psalm 85:8-9

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak. In the last section of this psalm the Sons of Korah express surrender and submission to God. The proper attitude of the believer praying for revival is to surrender to the authority of God's Word. Spurgeon once said, "I will be silent. I have spoken to him; now I will hear what his answer is. I will hold my ear attentive to listen to his voice.' O my dear hearers, when you are willing to hear God, there are good times coming to you!"

For he will speak peace to his people. The psalmist was confident in the goodness of God, and that God would speak peace to his humble, surrendered people and to his faithful, his saints. Again Spurgeon, "He that will not hear the gospel of peace, shall never know the peace of the gospel. If you will not hear the Holy Spirit when he warns you of your sin, neither shall you hear him revealing peace through pardon."

Those who turn to him in their hearts. The humility and surrender proper to God's people also means that they should turn to him in true repentance.

His salvation is at hand for those who fear him. The humble and surrendered people of God enjoy the nearness of his salvation. As God moves among his people this way, glory may dwell in the land.

His glory may dwell in our land. The 'glory' is God's special presence with his people; refer to the comment made on Psalm 63:1-2 and Exodus 24:16 for the same expression. From the verb 'dwell' (Hebrew *shakan*) is derived a noun, 'dwelling, that which dwells' (Hebrew *shekinah*), which is why the glory that dwells with God's people in the sanctuary is called the *Shekinah*. This dwelling of the glory is a gift to God's people, whose aim is to foster true piety.

### Psalm 85:10-13 - The Lord Will Give What Is Good.

The psalm closes with the confident expectation that God will hear their prayer and give what they ask. Steadfast love and faithfulness meet, i.e. in God they are in harmony. God's righteousness here is his character of reliably keeping his promises (especially to his chosen people), and therefore it guarantees the peace (v.8); they kiss each other like the affectionate greeting of relatives, as seen in Genesis 29:13 and 45:15. Verse 11 keeps the image of greeting, with its picture of faithfulness springing up and righteousness looking down. Because God has this character, they can be sure that he will honour his promises; therefore the Lord will give what is good, namely, their land will yield its increase of abundant crops.

Such confidence is based on God's own righteousness (v.13): the God of Israel keeps his promises to his people, and forgives and renews them when they earnestly seek him.

- 10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
- 11 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.
- 12 The Lord will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.
- 13 Righteousness will go before him,  
and will make a path for his steps

### Psalm 85:10-13

**Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet.** In beautiful terms the psalmist describes the salvation God brings to his people. It might seem that mercy and truth are set against each other with mercy looking to grant pardon and truth determined to condemn. In God's great work of salvation through Jesus grace and truth have met together. The word here translated steadfast love or mercy is the great Hebrew word *hesed*, which often has the idea of grace or loyal love. The whole concept of grace is suggestive of and may have been the inspiration for what John later wrote: *<<And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."') From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ>>* (John 1:14-17).

**Righteousness and peace will kiss each other.** Even as mercy and truth meet, so righteousness and peace greet each other warmly. It might seem that righteousness would condemn them and prevent God's shalom; his peace, from ever reaching them. In God's great work of salvation, his righteousness and peace are the best of friends.

**Paul later expressed this idea:** *<<it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus>>* (Romans 3:26). On the Cross, God demonstrated his righteousness by offering man justification (a legal verdict of 'not guilty'), while remaining completely just because the righteous penalty of sin had been paid on the Cross. It is easy to see how God could be only just; simply send every guilty sinner to hell, as a

just judge would do. Only God could find a way to be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. God pours out his truth and righteousness. They seem to spring forth from creation itself. Prophetically, it might be said that this refers not only to the reconciliation started on the Cross, but also has in view its completion at the end of the age, when *<<the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God>>* (Romans 8:21).

Righteousness will go before him. Righteousness so marks God that it goes before him, as the tail of a comet goes behind the comet. God's righteousness is so rich that it also makes his footsteps a pathway - the pathway of his people. Spurgeon observed, "God's march of right will leave a track wherein his people will joyfully follow."