

“Restore Us Again, O God of Our Salvation”

Psalm 85:1-13; Matthew 1:18-23

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loved Congregation of Christ: Some Christians long for the “good old days” when the churches were full of people, a few miles from their homes, and whole families were happily in church every Sunday. Many others think that the first few centuries of the early church was a “golden age.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Even when the apostles were still around, there was so much confusion, straying members, and false teachers. The church never had a “golden age” in its 2,000-year history.

When we think of the past, we feel nostalgic of those “happy days.” Sometimes, we feel sad that we can never recover the past when all our children were with us. We even long to relive the TV shows “Little House on the Prairie” or “Happy Days.” When I look at the state of our economy today, I remember when I first arrived from the Philippines in 1976: a Big Mac was 75 cents, a postage stamp was 13 cents, a gallon of gas was 59 cents, a dozen eggs was 84 cents and the median price of a home in California was \$48,000. I can make it to work in downtown San Francisco from Walnut Creek in 30 minutes. There were not many homeless people. Once we left our garage door open all night, and nothing happened. But it’s all past, and it seems that we can’t do anything to reverse the present situation. So we look to that day when our Lord Jesus Christ comes again and restores all justice, righteousness and peace.

And our text has all these aspects of life: past, present and future. Psalm 85 is another psalm of lament, but it is also a historical psalm. In verses 1-3, the psalmist looks at God’s mercy to Israel in the past. Then in verses 4-9, he laments the condition of the nation in the present and pleads to God to restore them. Finally, in verses 10-13, he looks at a future filled with God’s righteousness, peace and prosperity.

God’s Past Mercy

The psalmist opens with a remembrance of the past. Yahweh, the God of Israel was *“favorable to his land, restored their fortunes.”* How was God favorable to and pleased with his people Israel?

Although the historical setting of this psalm is unknown, these verses most likely refers to the restoration of Israel from their oppressive exile in Babylon for 70 years. This also recalls God setting them free from slavery in the land of Egypt for 400 years. So in light of this freedom and restoration, the psalmist lists two ways in which God was pleased with Israel.

First, God *“forgave their iniquity”* and *“covered all their sin.”* This is God’s mercy at work. “Iniquity” means guilt because of sin, and “sin” means coming up short of the holy requirements of God’s law. If we read Isaiah 40:1-2, we see parallels in these first three verses, *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.*

We can only have comfort when our hostility against God and God’s hostility against us cease. Before we were saved, Paul says we were enemies of God. But because of faith resulting from the preaching of the gospel, we were reconciled to God. Then our guilt is pardoned by God. Reconciliation and forgiveness of sins is one of the reasons why Jesus was born as a man and sacrificed himself on the cross.

Second, notice also that God “covers” our sins. Why do we cover up our mistakes? Why do politicians cover up their crimes? Because God has etched his law permanently into the human mind. This is called “conscience.” Every single human being knows in his being that he has offended God when he sins. Remember what Adam and Eve did after they sinned? They sewed fig leaves to try to cover their nakedness and shame, and then they hid themselves. Who told them to do this, and who were they hiding from? God himself. But fig leaves were not acceptable to God to cover their sin. God instead slaughtered an animal and covered them with animal skins.

This is another meaning of the atonement: covering sin with a bloody sacrifice. That is why we read in Hebrews 9:23, *“without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins.”* But did the bloody sacrifices in the Old Testament – from Adam to Abraham to Moses to David and to all the prophets – cover sins? Not in themselves. Those sacrifices were effective only as they looked to the once-for-all sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Lamb of God *“who takes away the sin of the world”* (John 1:29).

Second, God *“withdrew all his wrath, turned from his hot anger.”* God could have destroyed Adam and Eve immediately after they sinned, as he warned them, but he did not. God could have destroyed Israel after they worshiped the golden calf at Mount Sinai, but he did not. He could have destroyed Israel many times from the time of the judges, kings and prophets, but he did not. And he could have wiped them off the face of the earth completely when the Babylonians invaded, but he did not. All of these point us to the truth of Exodus 34:6–7, *“The LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.”*

This is why David could proclaim in Psalm 32:1-2, after he committed heinous sins of adultery and murder, *“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity.”* Before you were forgiven, you were *“children of wrath”* (Eph 2:1).

But God turned his wrath away from you, and turned his wrath to Jesus on the cross as he bore all your sins. John says, *“he is the propitiation for our sins”* (1 John 2:2). This means that Jesus turned God’s wrath against you into his favor and pleasure toward you. Therefore, you are truly blessed when God, in the past, sent Jesus into the world to save you from your sins!

God’s Present Judgment

When the psalmist wrote this, the people were suffering from tyranny, oppression and hardship that slaves and exiles suffer. It was 70 years, so he asks God, *“Will you be angry with us forever . . . to all generations?”* God was not pleased or favorable to them. God’s anger burned against them. He prays to God to “restore” and “revive” them. Give them back their life as God’s favored, chosen people. How is he able to plead to God for restoration? Because he knows that the LORD is the *“God of our salvation,”* and the God who *“shows steadfast love,”* an unfailing love.

When God restores his people, whom he calls “saints,” he knows that he will give them peace. When the angels praised God at Jesus’ birth, they sang, *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”* (Luke 2:14) What peace? Peace between nations? Peace between family members or friends? No, he restores peace between him and his people. This is what Paul was saying in Romans 5:1, *“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* When the Spirit gives you faith, God is pleased with you, and he turns you from his enemy into his friend. In the Old Testament, only Abraham and Moses were called “friends of God” (2 Chr 20:7; Isa 41:8; Exo 33:11). But when Jesus came, all of you are privileged to be called “friends” by him, *“You are my friends if you do what I command you”* (John 15:14).

This promise of peace and friendship is followed by another petition, *“let them not turn back to folly.”* God’s people must not return to their foolish ways of disobedience and sins. Sometimes we think that we can “sin a little, since God forgives anyway.” But we are warned not to presume God’s grace and mercy, because he is also a holy God who disciplines us when we go astray. We are to always have a godly “fear” of God, respecting, honoring and obeying his Word. This is what salvation does to us.

And salvation is as near as the Word of God being proclaimed in the church, and wherever it is read, studied and meditated upon. And when the church gathers to worship the true God of the Bible, he dwells, he is present among his people. The psalmist knew God’s promise to Moses and to Israel in Exodus 33:14, *“My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”* And we also have this promise from Jesus in John 14:3, *“if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”* Again, in the promise of the new heavens and new earth when Jesus returns, Revelation 21:3 says, *“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”*

As in the tabernacle in the wilderness and in the temple in Jerusalem, God dwelt with his people Israel and showed his glory to them. When Jesus was born, he brought the glory of salvation to us, *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the*

only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). He is not present with us now, for he dwells in heaven. But through the Holy Spirit, he dwells with us and shows us his glory.

God’s Future Peace

Therefore, the fullness of God’s salvation is still future. God’s attributes of love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace and goodness are with us now, but we do not yet enjoy the fullness of these attributes. In verses 10-13, the psalmist describes the certainty of this fullness.

These attributes of God are personified: *“steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other.”* They are friends who meet and kiss each other. And these attributes are to be found in the whole universe, on earth and in heaven. All of these characteristics of God are in him from everlasting to everlasting. His unfailing love for his people results in his faithfulness to his promises. Forgiveness of sins flow from his righteousness given to his people through the righteousness of Jesus. In turn, peace or “wholeness” of every believer, and peace between God and his people spring from this righteousness.

The last two verses sound like an epilogue to the whole chapter. Those who fear God are blessed by God through his love faithfulness, righteousness and peace. The psalmist knew these blessings, the most important of which is a good harvest. For us today, our perception of God’s blessings come in the form of family and friends, house, car, financial security, even church community. These are good things in life that God gives us in this age, in his present kingdom on earth.

But what about good things in life in the age to come, in his future kingdom in heaven?

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Dear Friends: Earthly blessings are a sign of God’s favor toward his people. But the psalmist and all Scriptures do not sing about the health and wealth gospel we hear on TV. We Christians seem to suffer more than blessed, especially in our older years. On a Sunday morning worship service in a Methodist church in Pakistan, packed with 400 of our brothers and sisters in Christ, Islamic terrorists killed eight people. God’s enemies will never stop their hatred of Christians. Therefore, in this age, blessings and sufferings are both present.

More importantly, God restores us from our hopeless and helpless misery and sin. He orders the footsteps of your life. He goes before you in all your ways, so that when temptations, sickness, financial difficulties, and troubled relationships come, you are preserved in your faith. He keeps us persistent in prayer and in meditating on his Word to restore us. This is what Christmas is all about. It's about God's promise of restoring his people in the new heavens and new earth, when there will be perfect and final restoration of God's love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace and goodness. There will be no more sin, death and the devil's tyranny over us.

In the midst of a dark, grim world, we sing of Jesus who came to "set thy people free." He "releases us from our fears and sins." He "lets us find our rest" in him. Only by his "sufficient merit," his perfect righteousness, he will "raise us to his glorious throne" in his heavenly kingdom. The peace, the shalom, that we long for, that he sent us in the birth of his Son, our long-expected Savior Jesus Christ, will finally and fully come. So let us always pray, "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!"