
Reviving the Church

Psalm 85

Introduction

If the gospel is not real in our walk the gospel will not seem real in our talk. What could perhaps increase our desire for and efforts in evangelism will be the topic for tonight.

It is my conviction that what weakens our efforts in outreach is mainly found in our neglect to rehearse the gospel to ourselves daily. If we are not sharing the gospel, could it be that we are wavering in doubt over the precious truth of the gospel? And the flipside is no less true. *Each of us proclaims the gospel when the gospel reclaims each of us.* So what do we need from God to awaken us again to gospel glories – to stun us into submission – to jolt us into joy – to wow us into worship?

I wonder if this type of thinking wasn't what prompted Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones to say: *"The greatest problem confronting us in the Church today is that the vast majority of professing Christians are not convinced of the reality and the desirableness of revival"*.

His observation makes me wonder whether our expectations of God have become too small and our desires of His glory too flat. If we are experiencing a plateau in gospel growth at Clearcreek Chapel, Psalm 85 can be a cure. Biblical revival is a good topic to discuss for a Church desiring to grow in evangelism.

Remembering what it was like

Vv.1-3

Psalm 85 is organized in a past, present and future structure. In vv.1-3 we find out what it was like. In v.4-7 we hear what they want it to be like. And in vv.8-12 we see what it will be like.

A tension is sensed between past joy and present misery. The Psalm's development shows us how *God gives His delight to those under His discipline.*

This process (of God giving delight to those under discipline) begins with remembering "what it was like". We see this in vv.1-3.

There is an assumed context in this Psalm. In vv.1-3 we see the people of God remembering past joys. It appears that these verses talk about God's miraculous deliverance of the Israelites from Babylon.

After 70 years of adverse consequences as a result of their sin, God led his people back to the land in 538 BC. They were to rebuild the Temple and reinstitute their worship practices. In Ezra we get a snap shot of this joy. “And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy” (Ezra 6:16; cf. context, 6:14-22)

Restored Fortunes

v.1

The first memory they took pleasure in was about their “restored fortunes”. This references the return from captivity. When their Sovereign God moved upon the heart of a pagan king; King Cyrus (cf. Ezra 1:1), they were allowed to go back to the Promised Land. Much celebration occurred over this event. They were liberated from the enemy. They were set free to worship their God. They were given new life. This was the starting of their enjoyable reminiscence.

Look with me further at vv.1-3 and notice a couple other things they enjoyed from the past.

Forgave Iniquity

v.2

“You forgave the iniquity of our people; you covered all their sin”. Through their sacrificial system, God reminded His people that He forgives all sin on the basis of a substitute offering. David, in Ps.32 said of this joy, “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered”.

The people in Ps.85 savored this memory. They recalled the fresh joy of forgiveness. Happiness flooded their minds as they believed that God laid their sin upon something (or Someone) other than themselves. All their sins were covered by the blood of a sacrifice. The recollection of forgiveness was pleasant for them. But, as we will notice in a moment, this memory stirred up dissatisfaction. They remembered a joy in the past. And they wanted it back.

Withdrew Wrath

v.3

Having noticed the past joys of how God brought them back from captivity and how God forgave all their sin we now come to another factor to their past joys. “You withdrew your entire wrath; you turned from your hot anger”. Oh, how the Psalmist remembers what it was like to be out from under the heated and heavy discipline of the Lord. Peace and joy welled up in their hearts. Closeness to God was their delight. The smile of God was their celebration. This was truly a memory savored.

Therefore, verses 1-3 serve to make clear what God did for the Israelites in the past. The Psalmist had sweet memories of God's actions. He savored God's work in their lives. God brought them out of captivity and back into the land. God forgave all their iniquity. God withdrew His wrath from them.

But these memories also troubled him. As we move into vv.4-7, we do not sense rest, satisfaction and a stable joy. Actually, it is just the opposite.

You can sense the writer's anguish and urgency in the transition from vv.1-3 to vv.4-7. He is pleading with God. One gets the impression that memories savored spurred the writer to want something.

In the absence of joy, past joy prompted him to pray for present joy. Savoring the memories of God's work caused him to seek the mercies of God's present work. The "remember when..." only stirred up prayer for revival. This is what we see when we turn our attention to vv.4-7

Requesting what they want it to be like

vv.4-7

Restore us again

v.4

This paragraph is the heart of the Psalm. The poet wants what they had in the past. He urgently requests God for fresh grace. This plea starts off with asking God to "Restore us again". His recollection of the past prompted him to desire restoration for the present. The word "Again" tells us that the thoughts of vv.1-3 stirred him up to pray for what he had in the past. He did not want to be under the discipline of the Lord any longer. The heavy hand of God was not desired.

The Psalmist requests mercy. And this mercy can be seen in three ways.

The first mercy sought was restoration. This phrase is to be understood by noticing the parallelism found in v.4 "Restore us again" corresponds with the second part of v.4; "put away your indignation". In short, what we are to understand is that when God's indignation is put away, God's restoration is brought about. He is asking, in effect, for God to lift His discipline from them.

Lift the discipline

v.5

This interpretation is consistent with what follows. In v.5 we sense the poet's urgency. The second mercy sought can be summarized as "Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations? The use of the words "forever" and "prolong" tell us that they have been under God's discipline for some time. By considering

verse 6, we can surmise that the reason for the discipline is their spiritual complacency. The Israelites enjoyed God's blessings at the end of the captivity. There was much joy and celebration. But following this restoration came a time in which the Israelites coasted. They were not seeking the Kingdom of God first (cf. Mt.6:33). They had lost their first love (cf. Rev.2:4). "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your strength, with all your soul, with all your mind & love your neighbor as yourself" wasn't their motto. They had lost their fervency for God's glory to be known in a dark world (Hag.1; Mal.1). Therefore, they were under the discipline of the Lord. The request from the psalmist was for the LORD to lift the discipline. And the result of answering this prayer request would be seen in v.6.

Rejoice in You

v.6

The sweetness of the past was memories precious to them precisely because they are not currently experiencing them. The joy of the Lord had shriveled. Rejoicing in God was but a faint echo of their past. They had grown complacent. Finally, under God's discipline, this became unacceptable.

In v.6 we arrive at the epicenter of the Psalm. Here we come to the heart of the heart of the Psalm. This is the sum total of what the poet was after. "Will you not revive us again that your people may rejoice in you"? Present mercies sought because of pleasurable memories thought brought the Psalmist to this climax. He longed for joy in God. He had it in the past. He is under the discipline of God now. And so, he yearns for a revival.

When His people have awakened to the fact that they want God above all else, He delights to give new life to the thirsty (quote Ps.63:1-3 to whet thirst for God).

And notice one other thing about this key verse. It's all about God. The One who gives this joy is God. And the ones who receive it are "Your people". Do you see the highlight of this verse? God delights far more to give grace to the seeking than He does giving discipline to the complacent. God delights to see His people rejoicing under His grace rather than to hear them groaning under His discipline. As Matthew Henry (one of those God-besotted puritans of the past) once said, "The happiness of the subjects is the glory of the Sovereign".

See steadfast love

v.7

The last way the poet states his request is in the phrase "Show us your steadfast love". He not only wants to know about God's covenant love, he wants God to demonstrate it in visible ways. To see the discipline lifted and see the aftermath of grace was the yearning of this prayer.

Recap

The point of this Psalm is clear. Those under God's discipline due to drifting must be revived. Hardships, dried-up joy and thoughts of bygone grace must prompt prayer for fresh joy; joy in God. As people under discipline do this, God's propensity is to restore the joy shriveled. Revival occurs when God does this.

And what does revival look like?

Recognizing what it will be like

vv.8-13

This takes us to the third and final paragraph of Ps.85. In vv.1-3 we found what it was like. (Can you remember what it was like? Can you look in the rearview mirror and see gladness in God? Happiness in holiness? Joy in Jesus? See Rev.2:1ff to notice that "good churches need revival") In v.4-7 we heard what they wanted it to be like. And now vv.8-12 we see what it will be like.

These verses carry the picture of the end times. An eschatological impression is given when one reads vv.8-13. But these verses do not describe only the End. They answer the cry of vv.4-7. God promises to speak peace and cause His glory to dwell in the land and to renew covenant intimacy and to cause faithfulness to grow and to give goodness and to walk among His people! In Isa.45:8 we read "Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit; let the earth cause them both to sprout; I the Lord have created it".

Could it be that the poet was using Isaiah's theology to describe foretastes of the end times' joy to depict present-day revivals? Let's take these promises and simply scroll down them to whet our appetite to pray for revival.

Speaks peace

v.8

Verse 8 is calculated to awaken in all loyal hearts a sense of expectancy. As the God of the Universe approaches His people, what is his greeting? Peace (cf. Eph.2:17)! Shalom falls from His lips to all who yearn for His filling. And who is Peace? The Prince of Peace; Jesus Christ! God approaches His saints with the Name Jesus. But once peace is heard and enjoyed, don't turn back to folly (preach a bit on how perseverance happens).

Glory dwells

v.9

The next miracle promised is seen in v.9. Glory is to dwell in our midst. And who is this glory? Jesus Christ! According to Jn.1:14, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory...” According to Jn.16:14, the Spirit who resides in all believes glorifies Jesus. Revival will magnify the glory of Jesus so that He will be conspicuous amid His people (Hab.2:14 – “For the earth will be filled...”).

Covenant intimacy

v.10

Verse 10 is a tender promise. All the covenant promises made to God’s people in Jesus will not be abstract. There is nothing theoretical about theology. Rather, theology is fuel for doxology. God’s people will not merely be able to recite content of the covenant. His promises will meet and greet and kiss one another. I take this to mean that there will be sweet communion in His steadfast love and faithfulness and righteousness and peace. We will not merely know about these promises. They will be kissing in front of us and all around us and upon us.

Faithfulness grows

v.11

Verse 11 suggests that when God grants revival, God’s people sprout in faithfulness. That there will be qualitative growth from a revival is witnessed in this verse. Authenticity of God’s people will be seen. Hypocrisy will be rooted. Truthfulness will be the norm.

Goodness given

v.12

No need to fear the revival sought in v.6; for all of it is good according to v.12. This goodness will be enjoyed and it will be effectual. When God gives goodness through revival God’s people yield much fruit. This verse shows that when the Lord gives the land gives back. The fruit of the Spirit will be the great harvest.

God walks among us

v.13

Finally, when God grants the revival of v.6, God promises to walk among His people. This is thrilling to imagine. “Righteousness will go before [God] and make his footsteps a way”. Things in God’s people’s lives which are contrary to God’s character will not stop His stride. Obstructions will be dealt with by his righteousness. God’s changes, in other words, will make a way for God to move freely amongst his people. This is what revival looks like.

In conclusion, allow me to draw out four principles from the teaching of Ps.85.

Conclusion

► **Forgiveness of all sin is found in the crucified Christ.**

WE MUST SEE JESUS when we read vv.1-3 and hear about “you covered all their sin, You withdrew all your wrath”. The shadow lands of the Psalms are pointing us to the noonday brightness of the N.T. and Jesus Christ our propitiation. We hear the reality of 1Jn.4:10 in Ps.85:2,3 don’t we? “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins”. God’s wrath removed and God’s satisfaction accomplished is a truth beyond words. Enjoy no condemnation in Christ and Christ alone.

► **Losng fervency for God invites discipline from God.**

God is jealous for His people’s devotion. He will not stand back when His people stand aloof. He will give us what we need in order for us to give Him what He desires. And that is fervent loyalty As the writer of Heb. said, “The Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons...[He] disciplines us for our good that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

► **Sweet thoughts of past salvation must prompt current prayers for revitalization.**

Jesus gives us a means by which God restores His people when we have “lost our first love”. He says “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the works you did at first” (cf. Rev.2:4-5). If rejoicing in God is not seen in the present but only witnessed in the past, take this Ps. as a model and first think upon the days when your joy was God. Allow these sweet memories to quicken your desire for God this day. Don’t settle for “cruise control Christianity”. Go hard for God by using sweet thoughts of past salvation for current prayers for revitalization.

► **God’s propensity is to revive his people.**

God delights far more in the joy of His people restored rather than the groans of His people under discipline. He will keep us under His hand only long enough for us to want His face. Know God’s inclination. Know that He leans toward His people.

There is a story told by Tim Keller of Alexander the Great.

“Alexander had a general whose daughter was getting married. Alexander valued this soldier greatly and offered to pay for the wedding. When the general gave Alexander’s steward the bill, it was absolutely enormous. The steward came to Alexander and named the sum. To his surprise Alexander smiled and said, “Pay it! Don’t you see – by asking me for such an enormous sum he does me great honor. He shows that he believes I am both rich and generous”.

“Thou art coming to a King, large petitions with thee bring
For His grace and power are such, none can ever ask too
much”¹

Thank you John Newton.

¹ John Newton, “come, My Soul, Thy Suit Prepare” (1779)