

“RESTORE US AGAIN”

**I. Introduction**

- A. The entire history of God’s redeemed people, from the first announcement of the gospel in Genesis 3:15 all the way up to the present day, is a history that is marked by many ups and downs.
1. While there have certainly been a number of high points, there have also been plenty of low points.
  2. This is true for the church in a collective sense, and it is also reflective of the experience of individual believers.
  3. Even if we do not fall into especially grievous sins, we all need forgiveness and renewal on a regular basis.
  4. As theologian Michael Horton puts it, “Our whole life as Christians is a process of sailing confidently into the open seas, dying down in exhaustion, and having our sails filled again with God’s precious promises.” [*God of Promise*, 193]
  5. This is what Psalm 85 is about.
  6. It is a plea for renewal, a plea that is emboldened by God’s past faithfulness and by the reliability of God’s promises.
- B. We cannot be certain of the exact circumstances behind the composition of this psalm.
1. It is generally thought that it was written sometime after the southern kingdom’s restoration from the Babylonian exile.
  2. If this is correct, the psalm begins by recalling Israel’s return from captivity and then pleads for deliverance in the face of one of the many crises that confronted God’s people after they came back to the Promised Land.

3. One commentator aptly describes this psalm as “a chastened prayer (4-7), nourished by recollection. (1-3)” [Kidner, 307]

## II. Recalling Past Restoration (1-3)

- A. We begin our study of Psalm 85 by considering the first three verses, which is a recollection of past restorations.
  1. This is not an exercise in nostalgia.
  2. It is not a matter of pining for the supposed glory days of the past.
  3. The psalmist’s focus is on God and the unmerited favor that he extended to previous generations of Israelites.
  4. He is remembering the mercies that the Lord showed to his people in days gone by.
  5. This is a helpful way of approaching God in prayer.
  6. As John Calvin points out, “nothing contributes more effectively to encourage us to come to the throne of grace, than the remembrance of God’s former benefits.”
  7. When we bring these things to mind, we are presenting ourselves with evidence that God is rich in mercy towards those who draw near to him through Christ’s merits and mediation.
  8. If the Lord has shown us his favor in the past, if he has restored us in the past, then we can be confident that he will do so again.
  9. After all, it was not anything in us that caused him to extend his mercy to us in the first place.
  10. Our faith rests upon the foundation of God’s promise, and that promise cannot be voided.
  11. This is what assures us that the Lord hears our prayers with compassion and that he will provide the help we need in times of

trouble.

- B. As the psalmist describes the Lord's past restorations, he uses language that reminds us of the serious nature of our sin.
1. We should never think lightly of sin.
  2. If you ever find yourself doing that, just recall what had to happen in order for God to be able to forgive sin.
  3. This psalm directs our attention to this when it says that God "covered" his people's sin.
  4. Sin needs to be covered because it makes us liable to divine judgment.
  5. As the Scripture says, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them."
  6. The only way for us to be set free from that curse is through God's gracious provision of atonement through a sacrificial substitute.
  7. Only when our sins are covered by the blood of Christ is the curse removed.
- C. The psalmist also speaks of the removal of God's wrath.
1. This points to another aspect of Christ's atoning work.
  2. Elsewhere the Bible uses the term "propitiation" to describe this.
  3. This word focuses on the necessity of satisfying the demands of God's justice.
  4. God cannot simply overlook our offenses.
  5. Sin evokes his holy displeasure.

6. In the words of John Murray, "The wrath of God is the inevitable reaction of the divine holiness against sin." [*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 32]
7. Because of this, if God left us to ourselves, we would all be doomed.
8. But the gospel announces that God has provided a way for his wrath to be placated.
9. He caused his wrath to fall upon Christ on the cross.
10. This is the only way God can withdraw his wrath from guilty sinners, which is why there is no possibility of salvation apart from faith in Jesus Christ.
11. It also explains why we should never think that God's wrath is incompatible with his love.
12. Whenever the Bible speaks of the removal of God's wrath, it is reminding us of the cost of God's redemptive love.

### III. Pleading for New Restoration (4-7)

- A. We turn now to verses 4 through 7, where the psalmist pleads for new restoration.
  1. Notice that he again speaks of God's indignation and anger.
  2. This indicates that the people had once again incited God's wrath against them.
  3. They either rebelled against the Lord or failed to put their trust in him.
  4. Of course, those among them who were true believers would not have come under God's wrath in a condemnatory sense.

5. Believers are never subject to God's condemnation.
  6. That being said, our sin does provoke God's fatherly displeasure.
  7. The Lord responds to his children's sin by using trials and troubles to chastise us.
  8. God would not be a loving Father if he treated us otherwise.
  9. As Calvin explains, "As our corrupt nature is ever relapsing into the wanton indulgence of its native propensities, manifold corrections are indispensably necessary to subdue it thoroughly." [Calvin]
- B. We might wonder why God let Israel keep falling into sin.
1. Why did he bring them out of Egypt when he knew that their unfaithfulness would eventually cause him to hand them over to the Babylonians?
  2. Why did he bring them back from Babylon when he knew that their refusal to accept Christ would cause him to send the Romans to destroy the temple?
  3. The same question arises when we think about the Lord's dealings with any of his children.
  4. Why does God bring us to saving faith in Christ when he knows that we are going to keep struggling with sin?
  5. Our Confession of Faith provides a helpful answer to this in its chapter on providence, where it says, "The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave, for a season, his own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and

for sundry other just and holy ends." [WCF 5.5]

6. The Lord was clearly working in this manner in the situation that prompted the psalmist to write this psalm.
7. The people's sin resulted in divine chastisement.
8. But the psalmist, speaking on behalf of the people, responds to the Lord's discipline by humbling himself and crying out for deliverance.
9. If you ever sense that the Lord is frowning upon you because of your sin, do what the psalmist does here.
10. Humble yourself before the Lord.
11. Ask him to put away his indignation and show you his steadfast love once more.

C. The psalmist asks the Lord to restore his people.

1. The Hebrew term translated as "Restore" here is literally "Turn."
2. This term appears four times in Psalm 85.
3. It is the word that is used to refer to repentance.
4. The psalmist is asking God to work repentance in the hearts of his people, that they might turn back to him.
5. This shows us that repentance is a saving grace.
6. It is not something that we can produce by our own power.
7. Left to ourselves, we would never turn away from our sins and look to God for mercy and deliverance.
8. Repentance has to be granted by God.

- D. The psalmist also asks the Lord to revive his people.
1. Here we are reminded that the real problem is not the adverse circumstances that afflict us, but the condition of our hearts.
  2. This is a plea for God to renew his people's hearts.
  3. Revival takes place when established trends of spiritual rebelliousness and apathy are reversed and true piety is reinvigorated.
  4. As J.I. Packer explains, "To envisage God reviving his church is to presuppose that the church has previously grown moribund and gone to sleep." [*A Quest for Godliness*, 318-319]
  5. This is what happens when we are spiritually careless.
  6. We become apathetic toward God.
  7. But when a believer's heart is revived, his joy in the Lord is renewed.
  8. If you ever sense that your love for the Lord is growing cold, do what the psalmist does here.
  9. Plead with God to turn you back to himself.
  10. Ask him to revive you.

#### IV. Trusting in the Promise of Restoration (8-13)

- A. This brings us to the last part of our psalm, where the main idea is trusting in the promise of restoration.
1. The psalmist begins by exhorting himself to wait for the Lord in the face of the present crisis, saying, "Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints."

2. This is a picture of patient faith, of waiting upon the Lord to send help.
  3. We don't like to wait for anything, but we especially dislike waiting for God to lift us up when we are mired in adversity.
  4. What we need to remember is that the Lord is infinitely wiser than we are.
  5. John Calvin explains why God sometimes delays the communications of his grace by likening God to a physician treating a convalescing patient.
  6. Though the patient may want his recovery to move along at a quicker pace, the doctor knows that this would be injurious rather than helpful.
  7. As Calvin puts it, "God, perceiving that we are not completely recovered from our vices to spiritual health in one day, prolongs his chastisements: without which we would be in danger of a speedy relapse. Accordingly, the [psalmist], to assuage the grief with which the protracted duration of calamities would oppress the faithful, applies this remedy and solace, That God purposely continues his corrections for a longer period than they would wish, that they may be brought in good earnest to repent, and excited to be more on guard in future."
- B. After offering this exhortation to patience, the psalmist then warns his fellow Israelites not to turn back to their folly.
1. While this might appear to be self-evident, it still needs to be said.
  2. When you are waiting for new grace from the Lord, do not turn back to old patterns of sin.
  3. To do that is to miss the point of the Lord's discipline.



4. We need to learn from God's chastisements and exercise a stricter vigilance over ourselves in the future.
- C. The psalmist also expresses his confidence that the Lord will speak peace and send his salvation to his saints.
1. The basis of this confidence is not anything that he sees in the saints.
  2. Rather, it is grounded upon God's free grace.
  3. We can trust that God will fulfill the good purposes that he has for us because the church is the object of his electing love.
  4. He will not fail to give regard to his promises.
  5. This is what gives faith its certainty, even when our circumstances rage against it.
  6. In the words of the great Scottish preacher Robert Murray M'Cheyne, "Faith is believing the word of God, not because we see it to be true, or feel it to be true, but because God has said it." [*Sermons*, 44]
- D. The psalm concludes with a beautiful description of the restoration that lies in store for God's people.
1. Verse 10 sets this forth in two couplets, saying, "Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other."
  2. The terms "steadfast love" and "faithfulness" can also be translated as "mercy" and "truth," and that translation probably gives a better sense of what is being communicated here.
  3. The idea conveyed by these two pairs of words has to do with how the gospel reconciles divine attributes that seem to be at odds with each other when it comes to God's dealings with sinners.

4. How can God show mercy without compromising his truth?
  5. How can God grant peace without failing to uphold his righteousness?
  6. God has dealt with these questions by sending his Son to satisfy the demands of his justice, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.
- E. We see in verses 11 through 13 that this glorious gospel causes truth and righteousness to spring up in the lives of his redeemed people, ultimately resulting in our glorification at the consummation of Christ's kingdom.
1. The fact that our salvation will not be made complete until the dawning of the world to come should not make us spiritually complacent.
  2. On the contrary, our lives should be characterized by a sort of holy dissatisfaction with our walk with the Lord.
  3. But this does not mean that we should fall into despair.
  4. As we see in this psalm, we are called to seek the Lord's renewing grace day by day.
  5. John Calvin provides good counsel in the section of his *Institutes* where he addresses the Christian life, saying, "Of course, none of us is capable of running swiftly on the right course while we remain in the earthly confinement of our bodies. Indeed, most of us are so oppressed with weakness that we make little progress—staggering, limping, and crawling on the ground. But let us move forward according to the measure of our resources and pursue the path we have begun to walk. None of us will move forward with so little success that we will not make some daily progress in the way. Therefore, let us keep trying so that we might continually make some gains in the way of the Lord, and neither let us despair over how small our successes are. For however much our successes fall short of our desire, our efforts aren't in vain when we are farther along today than yesterday. So let us fix our eyes on the

goal with sincerity and simplicity, aspiring to that end—neither foolishly congratulating ourselves, nor excusing our evil deeds. Let us press on with continual striving toward that goal so that we might surpass ourselves—until we have finally arrived at perfection itself. This, indeed, is what we follow after and pursue all our lives, but we will only possess it when we have escaped the weakness of the flesh and have been received into His perfect fellowship.” [Calvin, *A Little Book on the Christian Life*, ]