

God & Sinners Reconciled

The Advent of God's Dwelling in Our Midst

Psalm 85

David Sunday

December 15, 2013

Advent means “appearing” and it’s a time when the church cultivates an eager expectation for the appearing of God’s glory in our midst. To cultivate the expectancy during this advent season we’ve been turning to the Psalms. I am a great lover of the Book of Psalms. They are so rich and diverse.

Turn to Psalm 85 in your Bible. Most of us wouldn’t immediately pick Psalm 85 as a Psalm for Advent or for Christmas. However the ESV Study Bible, which was edited by one of our elders, Justin Taylor, says, “Many churches use this psalm at Christmastime, the supreme occasion when God was favorable to His land and spoke peace to His saints.” I hope by the end of this message you will see how this psalm serves as a stirring prelude for our celebration of Christmas.

I’ve been thinking about how this psalm relates to the other three psalms in this series. I would say

- Psalm 88 is the most sobering and poignant of the four
- Psalm 130 is the sweetest and most tender
- Psalm 85—today’s text—is the most jubilant and lively

Psalm 85 is probably the most convincing and also most “mouthwatering” of the four psalms. That’s the word Ray Ortlund, Jr. uses to describe Psalm 85. I want to acknowledge my indebtedness to him for his teaching because his influence is throughout this sermon. I remember being in a classroom with Dr. Ortlund at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in 1997. I remember him teaching on Psalm 85 and how it impacted me at that time. Since then he’s written and preached about Psalm 85. So much of what I’m going to say is echoing back what I have learned from Dr. Ortlund.

In one chapter on this Psalm in his book, [When God Comes to Church: A Biblical Model for Revival Today](#) (Baker Books, 2000), he ends by asking this question: “If Psalm 85 doesn’t make your mouth water spiritually, is Christ your Savior at all?” I think that is a good question to ask.

Let's read God's mouthwatering Word from this Psalm of the sons of Korah. If you remember their history in the Old Testament and the great sin and judgment that came upon Korah (Numbers 16), it is a wonderful testimony of God's grace that He preserves sons of Korah who became worship leaders among the people of God. God's Word says:

- 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.*
- 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.*
- 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.*
- ¹⁰ *Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.*
- ¹¹ *Faithfulness springs up from the ground,
and righteousness looks down from the sky.*
- ¹² *Yes, the LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.*
- ¹³ *Righteousness will go before him
and make his footsteps a way.*

Thanks be to God for His living and abiding Word. Amen.

All I want for Christmas is contained right here in this psalm. Don't worry, I'm not asking you for a gift. The thing that I want is not a gift you can give me but I am asking you to join me in praying for a gift this Christmas season. What do I want for Christmas? What do I long for in 2014? It is all right here in verse six. "*Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?*" Think about it. If God were to grant us this blessing here in our church—our region of the Fox Valley—what more could we ask for? "*Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?*"

I am hoping this psalm will be like a palate cleanser for us. That it will make our mouths water for God's reinvigorating presence in our church and in our region this coming New Year.

I feel like Charles Spurgeon did when he began preaching on this psalm by saying:

Brethren, if you will pray this prayer, it will be better than my preaching from it! And my only motive in preaching from it is that you may pray it. Oh, that at once, before I have uttered more than a few sentences, we might begin by crying, yes, *groaning* deep down in our souls, "Will You not revive us again that Your people may rejoice in You?"

(A Prayer for Revival, by Charles Spurgeon 1895)

That's the heartbeat of this psalm. It is a prayer for God's reinvigorating, reviving, enlivening presence among His people. I would love to hear us offering this prayer to God with deep yearning in one accord as a church so we are going to probe underneath the surface of this prayer with four questions:

- Who needs to pray for revival?
- When do we need to pray for revival?
- What are we praying for when we pray for revival?
- How eager is God to answer prayers for revival?

Let's look at the first question.

1. Who needs to pray for revival? Psalm 85:1-3

Answer: God's people do! God's people need to pray for God's on-going reviving mercies in their lives and in their midst. In verses one through three, God's people are looking into the past at the mercies God has performed for them.

God was favorable to their land. In the covenant God made with Abraham (Genesis 17), land was one of the chief aspects of that covenant. God would dwell with His people in the land, show His glory in their midst and bless them with prosperity in the land. Though sin had barred Adam and Eve from God's presence in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), God graciously and mercifully made to Abraham a promise that His people would live in a land of blessing. They had tasted of that blessing.

The word "favor" in verse one is not just "look kindly upon." It's a word that Derek Kidner, a commentator, says speaks of "deeming someone or something to be acceptable, often in the context of atonement." Sacrifices have been made for the sins of the people. The people have experienced God's favor in their land because of the atonement God has made through His mercy.

However at the time of writing this psalm, they were not experiencing God's favor. It is because of what we read about in verse two that their present experience is different from their

past experience. The greatest need of the people—their greatest problem—was not physical or geographical. It was spiritual. It was their sin.

The psalmist looks back in the past and remembers God's mercy in regards to the people's sin. He says words like, "*You forgave the iniquity of your people; you covered all their sin.*" So it could no longer be seen or held against them.

This wonderful word in verse three, "*You withdrew all your wrath* [your punitive judgment upon our sins]; *you turned from your hot anger.*" They could have been thinking back to times in their history like the:

- Golden Calf—Exodus 32
- Baal of Peor—Numbers 25

God made atonement for the sins of His people and He withdrew His wrath. There were times when the offended holiness of God became like a raging, consuming fire burning against His people but then God, in mercy, forgave the iniquities of His people through atoning for their sins. Whoever sought His forgiveness could experience reconciliation, the renewal of a right relationship with Him.

The point of verses one through three is that people have a history with Him. They have known His covenant love and tasted His mercies. There are snapshots in the photo-journal of their lives of a warm, tender and intimate relationship with God. They have experienced seasons of comfort, joy, peace and blessing. It's all been because of God's grace to them.

Notice Who is the subject of every verb in verses one through three. God is! God is the One Who has done these things for His people. God has given His sinful people new life. God has turned aside His wrath from His people. The God Who has done this in the past is a God Who is able to do it again. That is why Psalm 85 is here.

This prayer for revival is for people who have a memory of God's mercy in their lives—for people who have experienced His grace, forgiveness and nearness—but now something has changed. Their relationship with God isn't what it *used* to be. It's not what it *ought* to be. It's not what it *could* be. The sins that God has forgiven in the past have resurfaced. Like dogs, they've gone back to their vomit (Proverbs 26:11). Spiritual adulterers have become repeat offenders. Now what do we do? God's people need to pray for revival.

2. When do we need to pray for revival? Psalm 85:4-5, 7

We see the answer to this question in the middle stanza as we move from the past of God's people to the present situation.

Answer: Whenever our experience of God's salvation becomes more past tense than present tense, we need to pray for revival. Whenever the mercies we've experienced in the past painfully accentuate the barrenness of the present, we need to pray for revival.

True or False: Unbelievers are the only ones who need salvation. When you think of people who need salvation, who comes to your mind? Unbelievers? Are they the only ones who need salvation?

That statement is false! We—believers—need to experience salvation in fresh, vital, ongoing ways throughout our lifetime. God has designed His work of grace, mercy and salvation to His people so that it keeps us continually depending on His grace and mercy.

We continually depend on the intervention of His grace and mercy in our lives. That's what the psalmist is praying for in this middle stanza. Look at verse four, he calls God, "...O God of our salvation..." and verse seven, "*Show us your steadfast love, O LORD...*" It's the word, "*hesed*" we've been seeing a lot in the psalms. "Show us your covenant love, faithfulness, mercy and loving kindness. Show it to us afresh O Lord." And do what? Verse seven, "...grant us your salvation" now in our present experience. Intervene on our behalf now.

The psalmist is praying for God to renew his miracle of salvation in their present just as He had done in their past. As he describes the present experience of God's people in verse four, we see that they feel as if they are living under God's indignation and anger. They are not feeling God's pleasure with them at the moment. They are asking in verse five, "*Will You be angry with us forever? Will You prolong your anger to all generations?*"

This is not God's punitive anger—His wrath against sinners. This is His Fatherly anger—chastisement. If you have a dad who loves you and one whom you long to please, you know it is a horrible thing to feel his displeasure; to feel that he is angry with you for the way your behavior is affecting the relationship. These people are experiencing God's chastisement, His hand of discipline, a sense of God's annoyance that leaves them feeling estranged and at a distance; lackluster in their relationship with God.

When do we need to pray for revival? We pray for revival when our experience of God's salvation becomes more in the past than the present and when the mercies we've experienced in the past accentuate the barrenness of our present. Some indications in our lives when we know it is time to pray for God's reinvigorating grace—for God's renewing mercies to be put on display in our lives—is when:

- Spiritual mediocrity becomes the norm.
- Full-throttled joy seems like a dream from the past.
- Worship feels like a religious role-play.
- Love for God has grown cold.

- The closeness and nearness of prayer has turned into a chilled formality.
- Our vision of Christ is dimmed. We've lost sight of His beauty; the savor of His presence is anemic; our pursuit of Him is sluggish; we cannot stir ourselves up to lay hold of Him; things of the present—fleeting and temporal—have a much stronger grip over our affections than things of where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.
- Experiences of the Holy Spirit feel less like springs of living water and more like a bare trickle.
- Corruption from indwelling sin is strong and grace is very weak.
- Love fades for our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- United prayer and opportunity to pray with other brothers and sisters are routinely forsaken.
- Gathering with God's "little flock" in church no longer appears beautiful or desirable.
- Compassion for the lost is cold and low.
- Sin is ignored; we easily "turn a blind eye and a deaf ear" to evidences of sin in our lives.
- Christ is not regularly confessed before men.
- We think we've exhausted the possibilities of the Christian life.
- We've settled into a familiar routine, not expecting anything new.
- The familiar becomes predictable and everything from here on out seems like it's going to be more of the same.
- We are content to dip our teaspoon in the vast ocean of the living God and then hold the teaspoon in our hand and say, "This is God." We are not diving into the vast ocean and experiencing more of His on-going glory in our lives.

That's when it is time to pray, "*Will You not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in You?*"

A statement from Martyn Lloyd-Jones became very definitive for me going into the year 2009. I think it would be very helpful to us as we go into a new year.

Possibly one of the most devastating things that can happen to us as Christians is that we cease to expect anything to happen.

When that expectation ceases, it's devastating. That's when we need to be praying, "*Will You not revive us again...*"

Lloyd-Jones continues,

I am not sure but that this is not one of our greatest troubles today. We come to our services and they are orderly, they are nice—we come, we go—and sometimes they are timed almost to the minute, and there it is. But that is not Christianity, my friend. Where is the Lord of glory? Where is the One sitting by the well? Are we expecting Him? Do we anticipate this? Are we open to it? Are we aware that we are ever facing this glorious possibility of having the greatest surprise of our life?

Why? Because He is a living God Who has an on-going dynamic relationship with His people; a God Who continues to show His steadfast love and grant His salvation to His people. This is a living reality that invites us to expect dynamism and even an element of surprise. Think about when Christ came into the world, the amazement, astonishment and surprise of it all.

Again, Lloyd-Jones writes,

Or let me put it like this. You may feel and say—as many do—'I was converted and became a Christian. I've grown—yes, I've grown in knowledge, I've been reading books, I've been listening to sermons, but I've arrived now at a sort of peak and all I do is maintain that. For the rest of my life I will just go on like this.'

Now, my friend, you must get rid of that attitude; you must get rid of it once and forever. That is 'religion'; it is not Christianity. This is Christianity: the Lord appears! Suddenly, in the midst of the drudgery and the routine and the sameness and the dullness and the drabness, unexpectedly, surprisingly, He meets with you and He says something to you that changes the whole of your life and your outlook and lifts you to a level that you had never conceived could be possible for you. Oh, if we get nothing else from this story, I hope we will get this. Do not let the devil persuade you that you have got all you are going to get, still less that you received all you were ever going to receive when you were converted. That has been a popular teaching, even among evangelicals. You get everything at your conversion, it is said, including baptism with the Spirit, and nothing further, ever. Oh, do not believe it; it is not true. It is not true to the teaching of the Scriptures; it is not true in the experience of the saints running down the centuries. There is always this glorious possibility of meeting with Him in a new and a dynamic way.

(Martyn Lloyd-Jones; excerpts from Living Water: Studies in John 4)

When that glorious possibility is way off the radar—not even in our frame of reference, not anticipated, not prayed for, not desired—that's when it is time to pray, *"Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?"*

Ray Ortlund says there are three stages to every church's rise and decline:

- **Movement:** A movement of the Holy Spirit working through the beauty and power of the gospel. The gospel explodes with new life, vitality and energy; it's alive!
- **Monument:** Then slowly, imperceptible over time, that movement starts to become a monument—a memory to something in the past. Things keep moving fine but it's more like machinery now.
- **Mausoleum:** "If this trend is not arrested, the church will decline and become a mausoleum, a place of death. The church as an institution may have enough social

momentum and financial resources to keep churning on. But as a force for newness of life, it no longer counts. Think of steep decline—indeed, a death spiral.”

(Ray Ortlund, Jr.; Gospel Coalition blog, 02/11/12)

When do we need to earnestly pray, “*Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?*” Whenever the movement of the Holy Spirit and the beauty and power of the gospel is starting to level off as a monument. When we are starting to go into automatic pilot. When we are starting to change from hunger to self-satisfaction, from eagerness to routine, from daring new steps of faith to maintaining the status quo, from outward to ingrown.

I’m not suggesting that this describes our church. In fact our church began as a movement of the Holy Spirit. I am calling us, as God’s people, as we reflect on the coming of God to dwell in our midst, to be praying actively that we not become a monument to these things, nor a mausoleum. This is an on-going reality in our lives. A conscience, explicit dependence on the on-going work of God’s Spirit in our midst is necessary for every church.

3. What are we praying for when we pray for revival? Psalm 85:6

Let me give you a few definitions to stir your minds. I think these are good statements of what good, biblical revival consist of:

- “God’s quickening visitation of His people, touching their hearts and deepening His work of grace in their lives.” (J.I. Packer)
- It’s like God hitting the fast-forward button and accelerating the work of the gospel so that what in normal times might take 50 years to accomplish is done in five weeks. As God deepens His work of grace, He accelerates and quickens His people.
- “An extraordinary movement of the Holy Spirit producing extraordinary results.” (Richard Owen Roberts)
- “The sovereign act of God, in which He restores His own backsliding people to repentance, faith and obedience.” (Stephen Olford)
- “Revival is when God gets so sick and tired of being misrepresented that He shows up Himself.” (Leonard Ravenhill)
- And the best definition of all: “*That times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord...*” (Acts 3:20).

That’s what we are praying for when we pray for revival. Who wouldn’t want to pray for that? “*Times of refreshing...from the presence of the Lord...*” Isn’t that beautiful to consider? Can you think of anything you want for Christmas more than that? “*Times of refreshing...from the presence of the Lord...*”

When we pray for revival we are praying:

- For a work that only God can do: “*Will **you** not revive us again...*” When you see announcements for revivals that say, “Revival this week, Monday through Friday at 7:00 p.m.” the question you should ask is, “How do you know that God is going to meet you with reviving power in those meetings?” It is not something we can schedule, manage or manipulate. It is the work of God.
- For God to do again what He has so graciously done in the past: “*Will you not revive us **again**...*” We sin again and again but praise God His mercy and grace are active again and again.
- That God would change us and turn us in a new direction: There is a verb that’s repeated five times in this psalm. It’s a Hebrew verb that means “to turn”:
 - Verse one — “Restore” Verse three — “Turn”
 - Verse four — “Restore” Verse eight — “Turn back”
 - Verse six — “Revive again” Psalm 85:6

The idea in the psalm is that God is a God Who is constantly, actively working, producing change in people. He’s not, as someone said, “A Chaplain of the status-quo.” He is the “...*same yesterday today and forever*” (Hebrews 13:8). Praise God for that! However He is not the same old, same old. He’s a God Who is constantly restoring, renewing, turning things upside down and around; pointing us in, a new and a better direction. He’s not a God stuck in neutral. He’s not a God Who says, “Sorry, you can’t change.” He’s a God Who takes sinful, exhausted, discouraged, weary people and invades our lives with fresh wind and fire, new energy and power to serve Him with a cleansing that is on-going and that makes forgiveness feel sweet and refreshing again with a hope that propels us forward in new initiatives of faith. We are praying that God would change us, turn us in a new direction.

- That God would restore the joy of our salvation: “*Will you not revive us again...*” Why? “...*That your people may rejoice in **you**.*” That our hearts would thrill at the very Being of God; there would be movement and a new spring in our steps in His pathways and His direction; there would be a new clarity of purpose that is all centered on God; that we would rejoice and say to Him as the psalmist says, “*Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever*” (Psalm 73:25-26).
- That the effects of God’s reviving presence are immense and far-reaching: Back in 2010 Justin Taylor put on his blog some of the things that we should pray for when we

are seeking an awakening in the church and the effect of God's reviving presence in our midst. These requests are immense and far-reaching. Just think of some of the things that happen when God's people are rejoicing in Him in new and vital and powerful ways. Some of the things we pray for when praying for revival are:

- Hundreds of people coming to faith in Christ
- Old animosities being removed
- Marriages reconciled and renewed
- Wayward children coming home
- Long-standing slavery to sin being conquered
- Consciences made tender and hearts made humble before a holy God
- Spiritual dullness being replaced by vibrant joy
- Weak faith being replaced by bold witness
- Disinterest in prayer being replaced by fervent intercession
- Boring Bible reading being replaced by passion for the Word
- Disinterest in global missions being replaced by energy for Christ's name among the nations
- Lukewarm worship being replaced by zeal for the greatness of God's glory

These are some of the effects of God's people rejoicing in Him with revived interest, newly invigorated life and power. Who wouldn't want to be praying for revival?

4. How eager is God to answer prayers for revival? Psalm 85:8-13

Answer: God is more than eager. He is more than determined to revive His church again and again. He will not let His church die. He will not let His church languish forever because Christ said, *"I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it"* (Matthew 16:18). God is more eager to revive His people than His people are to be revived. Sometimes we don't want the change that comes along with God's reinvigorating presence in our lives.

The most emphatic word in verse six is the word "You!" *"Will **You** not revive us again..."* A positive answer is expected to this prayer. It's a prayer of great expectancy. It's not like sending someone an email whom you know is busy so you write at the end, "No need to reply." I don't know if you ever pray like that, "God, no need to reply. I'm not really expecting much." Those kinds of prayers do not honor God. This is a prayer that is brimming with expectation.

The psalmist is confident because of Who God is: the God of life; the God Who has been so gracious to His people in the past; the God Who is full of steadfast love in the present. He will not leave His people languishing in a comatose state.

He is the God Who revealed Himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7 as *"...The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousand, forgiving iniquity and transgressions and sin..."*

All of these ideas and concepts come up in this psalm. The psalmist is saying, "This is Who You are God. It's impossible for You to be angry with Your people forever." It's impossible that God will prolong His anger to all generations. He will not allow His church to be extinguished. He is committed to reviving His church with fresh life and power from generation to generation because He is a God of life. He is a God of steadfast love, not erratic mood swings but of faithfulness, grace and truth. *"Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation."*

The prayer of verse six is so confident that one translation by the Jewish Publication Society translates it like this, "Surely You will revive us again!"

How do we know this is true? Look at Christmas and the song "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, Glory to the newborn King." We sing about God and sinners reconciled.

Look at Psalms 85:8-13 and think about all the connections to the coming of Christ into the world. The biblical and theological connections in these verses are just astounding. It's a picture of everything that was forfeited in the Garden of Eden being redeemed, renewed and restored in a new creation that is brimming with life, light and vitality. This is the future that God promises to His people. If the future is this bright and the past was this full of grace, surely God is willing to work in the lives of His people in the present.

Psalm 85:8, *"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."* What did the angel say when Jesus was born? *"...On earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"* (Luke 2:14).

Psalm 85:9, *"Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him..."* What is His name? Immanuel; God with us; God near us. His salvation is near. Why? That glory may dwell in our land. *"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).

Psalm 85:10, *"Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other."* I think of Christ when I read verse ten. I also think of these hymn lyrics:

On the mount of crucifixion,
Fountains open deep and wide;
Through the floodgates of God's mercy
Flowed a vast and gracious tide.
Grace and love, like mighty rivers,
Poured incessant from above,

And Heav'n's peace and perfect justice
Kissed a guilty world in love.

(Here is Love by William Rees, 1802-1883)

Psalm 85:11, *"Faithfulness springs up from the ground..."* I also think of Christ when I read verse eleven. Who is He? He is a Root out of dry ground. Isaiah 11:1 says, *"There shall come forth a shoot from stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit."*

Psalm 85:11, *"...and righteousness looks down from the sky."* As the heavens open and the angels appear singing *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"* (Luke 2:14). Heaven and nature sing with joy at the work of our Redeemer. That is what we read in verse 12.

Psalm 85:12, *"Yes, the LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase."* The psalm ends with the people following the Champion of our salvation in purity, fruitfulness and lively, active service.

Psalm 85:13, *"Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way."* This psalm finds its fulfillment in Jesus. The future in Christ is bright and the sins of the past are covered. Surely He is with us in the present to reinvigorate us. He is speaking peace to His people, His saints.

What's our response? Don't turn back to folly, apathy, complacency; to being sterile, predictable, sluggish, anemic, lukewarm, half-hearted, mediocre. Don't turn back to low-expectancy living.

"Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?" God's answer is Yes! There is no better Christmas than that. "I will reinvigorate My people with My presence." He Who gave us life in Christ is ready to keep that life vibrant, bright, fruitful and vigorous. Are our mouths watering for it enough to open up our Bibles, get down on our knees and ask Him to revive us?

Let's pray.

Thank You God, that You are committed to keeping Your church vibrant and alive. Thank You that You gave Jesus our Savior to us that we might have life and have it more abundantly. Thank You that God and sinners are reconciled in Christ through the life and death of Your Son. Now having been reconciled, how much more are You willing to give us life and joy and vitality through Christ, the beauty and power of His gospel, as Your Spirit continues His work in our lives.

We humble ourselves before You as a church. We confess that we don't want to become a monument and definitely don't want to be a mausoleum. We pray for the on-going movement of

Your Spirit in our midst. We pray that this Christmas season and throughout this New Year You would surprise us with manifestations of Your grace and glory in our midst; that You would stir us up to walk in Your way with vigor and vitality. For the glory of Your Son Jesus we pray.
Amen.

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