

PSALMS

Chapter 85

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.

Ps 85 A communal prayer for the renewal of God’s mercies to his people at a time when they are once more suffering distress. Many believe that vv. 1–3 refer to the return from exile and that the troubles experienced are those alluded to by Nehemiah and Malachi. Verse 12 suggests that a drought has ravaged the land and may reflect the drought with which the Lord chastened his people in the time of Haggai (see Hag 1:5–11). Christian liturgical usage has often employed this psalm in the Christmas season. (CSB)

The psalm has two main divisions of seven (Hebrew) lines each: (1) the prayer (vv. 1–7); (2) a reassuring word (vv. 8–13). Each division contains a three-line stanza followed by a four-line stanza, with the corresponding stanzas of the second half answering to those of the first: Verses 1–3 speak of mercies granted, while vv. 8–9 speak of mercies soon to come; vv. 4–7 voice the prayer, and vv. 10–13 offer the blessed reassurance that the prayer will be heard. Each of the four stanzas contains one reference to the “LORD.” (CSB)

This psalm has the same blend of joy and sorrow as Psalm 84. It rejoices in God’s past goodness to his people, but it implies that this goodness is not being fully experienced in the present. (PBC)

Possibly written soon after the return of the exiles from Babylon (vv 1–3), this psalm expresses the psalmist’s feelings of distress and exposure to danger (cf the opposition to rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls after the return, Ne 4:16–23). (TLSB)

Format: Vv 1–3, restoration; vv 4–7, plea to restore again; vv 8–9, God will speak peace; vv 10–13, the Lord gives what is good. (TLSB)

85:1–7 Prayer for the renewal of God’s favor. (CSB)

85:1–3 Israel begins her prayer by appealing to the Lord’s past mercies, recalling how he has forgiven and restored them before (perhaps a reference to the restoration from exile). (CSB)

The psalmist recognized that Israel’s past troubles had been a result of their sin. Their restoration, therefore, was an assurance that their sins had been forgiven. (PBC)

85:1 *restored the fortunes of Jacob.* Or “brought Jacob back from exile.” (CSB)

God returned to His people what they lost in the Babylonian exile. (TLSB)

Jacob. A synonym for Israel (see Ge 32:28). (CSB)

85:2 *covered all their sins* – Explains the first half of this verse. God does not forgive by dismissing sin, but by covering it, or atoning for it. Later, God the Son would atone for the world’s sin in the same way—by covering it with His blood. (TLSB)

Selah – Hebrew; untranslatable. Mainly in the first two books of Psalms. Probably refers to the accompaniment of the harps during the psalm. (TLSB p. 993)

This often occurs in the middle of a psalm and which apparently signals an interlude. “The Sela indicates that one must be still and quickly think through the words of the psalm; for they demand a quiet and restful soul, which can grasp and hold to that which the Holy Spirit there presents and offers” (Luther). (Psalms – The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer p. 23)

Selah may be a musical notation. It could also be a point where a pause is desirable for the singer or reader of the psalm in order that the statement last made or the thought as a whole just developed may be reflected upon before the next turn of the thought appears. (Leupold)

85:3 The point of the verse is that the judgment is over because forgiveness has been given. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

85:4–7 The prayer acknowledges that the present troubles are indicative of God’s displeasure. No confession of sin is expressed, but in the light of v. 3 (and possibly v. 8; see below) it is probably implicit. (CSB)

Since God does not operate on whims, but according to the unchangeable principle of grace expressed in the gospel, the psalmist is confident that Israel will again experience the same mercy they had experienced so often in the past. (PBC)

85:4 *restore us again* – First restoration of vv 1–2 may refer to the return from Babylonian exile; the second restoration mentioned here may be a reference to the hard labor of rebuilding Israel after the return. (TLSB)

85:5 *be angry forever* – He was lamenting the fact that they had long endured God’s wrath and were desperate for it to end. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

85:7 *steadfast love.* The Hebrew for this phrase denotes befriending. Appeal to God’s “(unfailing) love, kindness, mercy” is frequent in the OT since it summarizes all that the Lord covenanted to show to Israel (see Dt 7:9, 12) as well as to David and his dynasty (see 89:24, 28, 33; 2Sa 7:15; Isa 55:3). (CSB)

Whether God disciplines harshly or tenderly speaks to His people, both arise out of His unchanging love. (TLSB)

Note from TLSB p. 843 – *mercy.* Translates various Hbr terms (see *steadfast love* and *gracious*). Hbr *rachamim*, “tender mercy,” “compassion” from the term for “womb,” it pictures the tender love a mother has for her children.

Is. 49:15 Note – *I will not forget you*. Even if the unthinkable happened, like a mother forgetting her child, God will never forget His own. (TLSB)

Isaiah 49:15-16 ¹⁵“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!

¹⁶See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.”

85:8–13 God’s reassuring answer to the prayer, conveyed through a priest or Levite, perhaps one of the Korahite. (CSB)

This section is noteworthy for its picturesque language. The blessings the Lord provides are portrayed as the people who meet with a kiss and as crops which spring up and flourish. Although this promise was fulfilled in a limited way when God restored Israel from captivity, this section is best understood as a description of the blessings of the Messianic era. (PBC)

85:8–9 The assurance that God will again bless his people. (CSB)

85:8 *let me hear*. The speaker awaits the word from the Lord. (CSB)

Lord will speak – Possibly a reference to Ne 8:2–3.

Nehemiah 8:2-3, ²“And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. ³And he read therein before the street that *was* before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people *were attentive* unto the book of the law. (TLSB)

speak peace. The word from the Lord perhaps takes the form of the priestly benediction (see Nu 6:22–26). (CSB)

saints. All of God’s holy people; in the same way, “communion of saints” is used in the Apostles’ Creed. (TLSB)

not return to folly. And so provoke God’s displeasure again. But it is also possible to translate the clause: “and to those who turn from folly.” (CSB)

folly. This reminds us that the free blessing of the gospel should never be misused as an excuse for sinning. (PBC)

85:9 *fear* – Hbr *yare*’, as in “fear the Lord” and “fear God”—common expressions in the Psalms. They mean to “trust in the Lord.” (TLSB)

glory. Wherever God’s saving power is displayed, his glory is revealed (see 57:5, 11; 72:18–19; Ex 14:4, 17–18; Nu 14:22; Isa 40:5; 44:23; 66:19; Eze 39:21). (CSB)

This is not political. The in-gathering of people into Israel made up all who believe. (PBC)

85:10–13 God’s sure mercies to his people spring from his covenant love, to which in his faithfulness and righteousness he remains true, and that assures his people’s welfare (peace). (CSB)

Through His steadfast love, God gives us faith and makes us righteous so we may live in peace. (TLSB)

85:10 *steadfast love and faithfulness ... righteousness and peace.* These expressions of God’s favor toward his people are here personified, and the vivid portrayal of their meeting and embracing offers one of the most beautiful images in all Scripture of God’s gracious dealings with his covenant people. (CSB)

85:11 *Faithfulness springs up.* As new growth springs from the earth to bless mankind with plenty. (CSB)

righteousness looks down. It shines down benevolently. (With “disaster” as subject, the Hebrew for “looks down” indicates the opposite effect: Jer 6:1, “looms.”) From heaven and from earth, God’s covenant blessings will abound till Israel’s cup overflows. (CSB)

85:12 *land will yield* – Even the earth rejoices in God’s goodness. (TLSB)

85:13 *Righteousness will go before.* Again the psalmist personifies. Acting either as herald or guide, righteousness leads the way and marks the course for God’s engagement in his people’s behalf—and righteousness is God’s perfect faithfulness to all his covenant commitments. (CSB)

footsteps a way – Personification of righteousness similar to that in Pr 14:34. Here God’s righteousness creates a pathway for His saints to follow. (TLSB)

Ps 85 The psalmist feels distress and fear at his exposure to his enemies. Many people, even Christians, suffer from deep fears and insecurities. Rightly heeded, these fears chase us to Jesus. When we are overcome by fears, though, they threaten us with despair and unbelief. When God forgave your iniquity and covered your sin (v 2) through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, He destroyed your enemies of sin, death, and hell. Having defeated these great enemies for you, He will surely protect you from all other enemies. • Help me, Lord, in the midst of my fears, to trust solely in You. Amen. (TLSB)