



Sermon Transcript December 20, 2015

Restore Us Again! Psalm 85

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on December 20, 2015, at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Psalm 85

To the choirmaster.
A Psalm of the Sons of Korah.

- 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.

Introduction

Last week, there was a fascinating conversation that broke out on the television talk show called *The View*. If you are not familiar with this show, it is five women who sit around daily and talk about a variety of issues. On this particular episode, Joy Behar, brought to their attention a billboard that was sponsored by a group called American Atheists. On this billboard is a picture of a smiling Santa Claus and the caption read, “Go ahead and skip Church! Just be good for goodness sake.”¹ It is basically saying that you don’t need the religious part of Christmas to celebrate the spirit of Christmas. I read an article this week talking about the growing number of atheists who love the festive and joyful aspect of Christmas and they celebrate it with family along with the tradition of exchanging gifts, but they do so minus the Jesus and religious element of the holiday.

And so Joy Behar, who is not very religious, wanted to know if this billboard was offensive to religious people. One of the five hosts of this show was a woman of strong Christian faith by the name of Candace Cameron Bure. She was the first to respond to Joy’s question and she said that she was not offended at all. What she liked about the billboard is that opened up conversation about the gospel. She said that the billboard tells us to “go be good,” and so she asks, “What is good? What is that standard of goodness. What is God’s standard of goodness?” So her response to the billboard was “Great! Let’s talk.” And they did. As a side note, Candace noted on her Facebook page that morning she had prayed that she would have an opportunity to share the gospel with someone that day. Little did she know how many she would be able to speak to.

Each of the women began to weigh in on this subject. A woman by the name of Raven-Symone jumped in and said that the billboard was not offensive because it encouraged people to be good. And so she said that it doesn’t really matter what you believe or what religion you espouse. What matters is that you try to be a good person. Then she concluded, “That is what all religions are about anyway.” Immediately, Candace and another woman by the name of Paula responded, “that is not true.” Taken back by this, Raven said, “You don’t think all religions are about being a good person?” “Not Christianity,” said Paula. “It is by grace through faith. . . . It’s by grace through faith you have been saved. It is nothing we can do.” All of a sudden, in this conversation you are getting to the heart of the gospel. Both Raven and Joy were stunned by this announcement of grace. So Joy breaks the tension and says, “I’m a good girl, I don’t know what they’re worried about.” And so Candace pushed back and brought up the Ten Commandments. At first, Joy said she was good with the commandments. But then when Candace asked if she had ever lied, Joy readily confessed to breaking that

commandment, though she thought slipping on one commandment out of ten isn't too bad. And then at the end of the conversation Joy also voluntarily confessed, "and what about coveting thy neighbor's goods? I am not good on that one either." That is where the conversation ended. But it raised a great question about Christianity. Is Christianity about us being good or is it about God being good?

Is the essence of Christmas about being "good for goodness sake" or is it about God's grace and God's goodness to us for our sake? Be careful you don't confuse the message of Jesus with the message of Santa. The message of Santa goes like this,

"You better watch out, you better not cry, Better not pout, I'm telling you
why: Santa Claus is coming to town.
He's making a list and checking it twice; Gonna find out who's naughty and
nice: Santa Claus is coming to town.
He knows when you're sleeping. He knows when you're awake.
He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake!"

That is not the message of Jesus or of Christmas, for that matter. The message of Christmas is found in the cry and the lament of Psalm 85. The cry of this psalm is found in verses 4-7. It is here where we find the cry that leads us to the joy of Christmas. *"Restore us again, O God of our salvation . . . Will you not revive us again that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation."* The joy of Christmas is not found in being "good for goodness sake." Rather the joy of Christmas is found in how God has been good to us for our sake.

Revive us Again!

Once again we find ourselves in a psalm of lament. Don't forget, the psalms we have been looking at this Advent season are psalms that are often read by the church this time of year. In the ESV study notes, it even says so much of our psalm this morning, Psalm 85. Here it says, "Many churches use this psalm at Christmastime."² These psalms are so associated with the season of Advent that the title for this sermon series is "Psalms of Christmas." And yet, three of the four supposedly "Psalms of Christmas" we have looked at this month have not been very festive at all. Instead, they have been very personal and communal cries of lament. I think the fact that so many of the psalms used by the church for the season of Advent are considered psalms of lament, tell us that Christmas has nothing to do with "being good for goodness sake." Rather, they tell us that the coming of Jesus into this world is the coming of God's goodness into a world

filled with sin and fear, a world filled with the presence of “lament.”

The cry and the lament of this psalm, “*Restore us again*” and “*Will you not revive us again*” tells us something about the source of the lament in this psalm. The cause of the cry of this psalm is not something that is external to us. It is not a lament that is produced because of some natural disaster that has occurred or because they are being pursued by their enemies. Rather, the source of this lament comes from something inside of us. It is a cry that reads like a very personal confession.

Can you not relate to the cry and the confession of this lament? “*Restore us again, O God of our salvation?*” “*Will you not revive us again?*” That word “*again*” is quite telling, isn’t it? It speaks to our propensity to stray and to wander. “God, here I am again!” “I messed up again.” “I did it again.” In fact, this word “*again*” betrays any notion that Christmas is about “being good for goodness sake.” I wish Joy Behar was right and that my problem with sin was an occasional slip up with one or two of the commandments. Recently, I have thought about doing a series on the Ten Commandments. But if I do, you need to brace yourself. It is not going to be a pretty picture. An honest look at the Ten Commandments is going to shed light on your heart and it will dispel any notion of self righteousness and the common goodness of our heart. With each passing commandment you will find yourself “*again*” and “*again*” crying out for the mercy of God. That is what the “hammer” of the law does, it sends you running to Jesus. If Christmas were about “being good for goodness sake” there would be no hope in that. There would be no song to sing.

Part of what causes this confessional lament in Psalm 85, is not just our sin and our failure. But this lament also acknowledges what our sin does. It separates us from God. Listen to the cry of the psalmist that emerges out of his confession. He cries to God in verses 4-5, “*put away your indignation toward us! Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations?*” These questions that are asked of God, on one hand reveal the severity of our sin. There is nothing casual about our rebellion against God. At the same time, these questions also reveal that the solution to our problem does not rest in us, but in God. Our hope does not rest in our “goodness” to put right what has become so wrong. These questions, rather, are directed to God? Will God remain angry towards us? And even when it comes to this question of personal “revival” there is dependence upon God to move. “*Will you not revive us again?*” This reveals a complete inability on our part to address our problem. We are dependent upon the sheer goodness and love of God to move towards us. That is the message of Christmas. God has moved towards us with his mercy and his love.

This confessional lament ends in verse 7 with a prayer of hope based on the character of God. “*Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation.*” There is that word “*steadfast love*” again. It comes from the Hebrew word that speaks to God’s covenantal love. It speaks to the fact that God has made promise to save us. God’s promise is anchored in God’s character as revealed to Moses in Exodus 34, “*The LORD, 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, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.*” In other words, this God who is not to be trifled with, is a God who loves us and has come to rescue us from our sin.

Trevin Wax was reflecting on this conversation that took place last week on *The View*. His prayer was that there would be more conversations like this during this Christmas season. He said, “Here is hoping that, this Christmas, thousands of people will hear true ‘tidings of comfort and joy’ and discover that salvation isn’t because we’ve been good for God, but because God’s been good to us.”³

I want to spend the rest of our time looking at how this psalm affirms the love and the goodness of God to us. This is why this psalm is associated with Christmas. The ultimate expression of the love of God for us is found in that familiar verse, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.*” Perhaps you are here this morning and you need a “restoring” of your faith or a “reviving” of your heart and you wonder if God will receive you with his grace because you find yourself here . . . “*again.*” Would you take note that the confidence we have in crying out to God rests in the covenant love of God? He has bound himself to us through his promise. And so for the repentant heart, there is no end to the number of “*agains*” you find in your life. Trevin Wax calls it “the scandalous flood of God’s grace in Christ.”⁴ God’s love and mercy is new everyday, and so you can come with confidence in God’s goodness . . . *again!*

God’s Restoring Love: God’s Character

First of all, the confidence we have in the restoring love of God for us is found in the character of God. The request, “*Restore us again*” is anchored in what God has done in the past. The first three verses that set up the request in verse 4, look back to what God has done in the past. “*LORD, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people; you covered all their sin. Selah You withdrew all your wrath; you turned from your hot anger.*” So the fact that God restored

them in the past . . . and God forgave them in the past . . . and God turned from his anger in the past, gives them confidence to ask God to do it again. This request of God to “*restore*” them and to “*revive*” them is in keeping with the character of God. It is what he does. He is compassionate and he forgives the repentant heart.

Most of the Old Testament scholars believe that this prayer is a “post-exilic” prayer of lament. Do you know what that means? It is a prayer that takes place after the exiles have returned to the land. That means that this is written near the end of the story we have recorded for us in the Old Testament. In other words, by the time this cry is expressed and written, there is “a lot of water under the bridge” when it comes to Israel’s relationship with God. And yet, here they are, by God’s grace, back in the land “*again*” after the destruction of Jerusalem and after being carted off into captivity in Babylon. We do know from Ezra and Nehemiah that after they returned to Jerusalem, it didn’t take them long to repeat some of the sins that led them into captivity. In fact, at the end of Nehemiah, you find this leader of Israel to be somewhat exasperated at seeing the returning exiles repeating some of the sins of their fathers. And so, here they stand again in need of God’s restoring work. When the psalmist cries out for God to once again *restore* and *revive* them, he does so based on what God had done for them in the past. Whether in his prayer he is thinking about the recent past or the distant past, it is the same gracious and compassionate God, who is “*slow to anger*” to the one who is crying out for God’s restoring and reviving work to be done once again.

Has this not been their repeated story time and time again? This is long after the incident with the golden calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai. This is long after their wandering in the wilderness for forty years because they refused to trust God and enter into the promised land. This is long after the period of the judges where the repeated cycle of rebellion was followed by some kind of judgment. But in their despair, they cried out to God and each time he delivered them, only to go through the same cycle and pattern time and time again. This cry in Psalm 85 comes long after King Saul and King David and King Solomon. It is a cry that comes many years after the kingdom of Israel became a divided kingdom with ten tribes to the north and two to the south. In fact it is even a cry that comes well after both the northern and southern tribes were being carted off into captivity because of their rejection of God. It is a cry that comes from a remnant who has returned from exile and once again find themselves in need of God’s grace and forgiveness.

If there is anything we learn from Israel’s history it is this; the story of Christmas is far from, “be good for goodness sake.” Does not the testimony from Israel’s history verify

for us that there is no one who is good? In Romans 3, Paul comes to this conclusion after laying out evidence of the sinfulness of both the Gentile and the Jew. His conclusion is that *“None is righteous, no, not one.”* He is quoting here from Psalm 14 where it says, *“The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.”* Israel’s history clearly maps out for us that it is God who has been good to his people. It is based on the goodness of God that this psalmist cries out once again for restoring and reviving work of God to be made known in the land. In Romans 2:4 we are told that *“God’s kindness is meant to lead us to repentance.”* And it does.

God’s Restoring Love: Our Confidence

There is a pattern that tends to emerge with psalms of lament. Obviously, early in the psalm you hear the cry of lament. We see that in our psalm this morning as well. In verse 4 we hear the cry, *“Restore us again . . . Will you not revive us again?”* As we have just noted, this cry was anchored in how God had been repeatedly gracious to them in the past. But then after the lament is given, often in these kinds of psalms they transition to a posture of waiting. You see that transition take place in verse 8. After issuing his lament, the psalmist says, *“Let me hear what the LORD will speak.”* In other words, how is God going to respond to this cry, *“Restore us . . . ?”*

You have heard me say over the past few weeks that the word that has settled in my heart this Advent season is the word “wait.” That is what Advent is all about. As we light each candle around the Advent wreath each Sunday of the month, we do so with the anticipation that we will be lighting that white candle on Christmas Eve. The promise of God will come. And that is what it means to wait. Look what it says in verse 8, *“Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints.”* There is no question whether God will come through or that God will keep his promise. Our confidence rests in the goodness of God.

The word *“salvation”* is laced all throughout this psalm and often when we see that word we think of our personal salvation. That is part of it. But God is doing something far bigger than what he is doing in me and for me. He is restoring this entire fallen world. All of creation is groaning, that is waiting, for that day to come. That is part of our lament. We live in a fallen world. I am fallen and so is all that is around me. So my struggles and temptations are both inside of me and outside of me. It is a daily battle and we all know the battle that rages inside of us and the challenges that come from

outside of us. It is not just me that is broken. I live in a broken world.

This is what helps define Christmas for us. It is not “be good for goodness sake.” Rather, it is that God has been good to us. He has sent his salvation into the world and has kept his promise. Upon reflecting on the news that she would give birth to the Messiah, Mary sang, “*He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our father, to Abraham and his offspring.*” Christmas is the confidence that God has spoken peace to his people through the sending of Jesus.

Therefore, based on this promise, we commit to live humbly as people of faith. In verse 8 it says, “*let them not turn back to folly. Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him.*” As we rest in the promise of God to bring his goodness to us in Jesus, we “wait” by living out our faith and by putting our trust in God. And so with great confidence we can say, “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin.*” Why? Because God is good. Our confidence is in God! Christmas is the message that God has been good to us for our sake.

God’s Restoring Love: God’s Righteousness

This brings us to the final stanza of the psalm and this wonderful verse, Psalm 85:10. It is a verse that puts all of the goodness of Christmas in God. It says, “*Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other.*” Keep in mind here that these four characteristics listed here are all in reference to God. This is God’s *steadfast love* we are talking about. This is God’s *faithfulness* we are talking about. This is God’s *righteousness* we are talking about. This is God’s *peace* we are talking about. This is why this psalm is a “Psalm of Christmas.” Our hope is in the goodness of God!

Notice how these four characteristics are paired off in twos. *Steadfast love* and *faithfulness* go together. *Righteousness* and *peace* go together. When we talk about the *steadfast love* of God we are talking about that word that refers to the covenant promise of God. He promised that he would bring blessing to this world through Israel. He promised that a descendant of David would bring about the kingdom of God in this world. He promised that through the blood of Jesus on the cross, there would be atonement for our sin. And so, out of covenant, God is faithful. This is why we can come *again* and *again* confessing our sins. Our faith rests in the goodness of God’s promise to us in Jesus. Is not the testimony of God’s recurring love on the people of Israel our comfort? We see over and over again his grace being poured out on this undeserving people. That is your story and my story too. I think that is why Joy Behar

and Raven-Symone were taken back when the other two ladies said that Christianity is not about being good. It is about “grace through faith.” Why is that? It is because this goodness is not in us. It is in God.

That brings us to the second pairing of words, *righteousness* and *peace*. Can you not see the cross all over these words? You can not be at peace with God unless you are righteous. A simple word for *righteous* is “good.” This whole sermon has reminded us that we are not “good” in and of ourselves. So where will this “goodness” come from that will enable me to receive the smile of God and the peace of God? It comes from Jesus! It comes from the humble child lying in the manger. Unlike you and me, Jesus was fully obedient to God. When he went to the cross, he was able to pay for our sin and so through faith, God places the righteousness of Jesus on us and God sees us as those without fault. Jesus is our peace. Jesus is our righteousness. It is through Jesus that we experience the joy of Christmas.

Conclusion

I wonder, do you need spiritual restoration this morning? Do you need to experience the reviving work of God in your life this morning? The message is simply, humbly turn to him in faith. Are you frustrated that you find yourself here *again*? Well to some degree, we all find ourselves here *again*. Confession of sin is a daily posture we all must take. But the joy of Christmas does not rest in a God who is “making a list and checking it twice to find out if we are naughty or nice.” The joy of Christmas is that when we take a humble posture by repenting of our sin and turning to Jesus, the righteousness and goodness of Jesus is placed on us and God sees us as though we are without sin. Trevin Wax is right when he uses the word “scandalous” to describe the grace of God. But because of Jesus, God is just, sin has been paid for with the cross. And at the same time, God is the one who justifies. He declares us righteous through Jesus.

In the meantime . . . as people of faith, we wait with confidence. We know, that because Jesus has come, that God’s salvation will someday come in full. This is the joy of Christmas. It is not me being “good for goodness sake” so that I can get gifts from God. Rather, Christmas is found in the sheer wonder and the sheer joy over the scandalous grace that God has extended to us in Jesus. It is the story of how God has been good to us for our sake. And so we dance with delight over the joy that awaits us. It is sure! May this hope do its restoring work in you and fill you with joy!

¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqd5xoqazAU>

²*ESV Study Bible notes* - Psalm 85

³Trevin Wax “The View on “Being Good” vs. The Gospel Dec. 15, 2015 www.thegospelcoalition

⁴*ibid*

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