

Valparaiso University

ValpoScholar

---

Walter E. Keller's Devotional Studies of Psalms

University Archives & Special Collections

---

12-5-1999

## Psalm 85: To the choirmaster. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah.

Walter E. Keller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/kellerpsalms>

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives & Special Collections at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walter E. Keller's Devotional Studies of Psalms by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at [scholar@valpo.edu](mailto:scholar@valpo.edu).

**Psalm 85**  
**To the choirmaster. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah.**  
(LBW Lectionary, Revised Common Lectionary)

**Introduction to Psalm 85**

This is a tantalizing glimpse into the musical organization of the Temple. There apparently was a person, here called the Choirmaster, who was in charge of the Temple choir. The best guess of the scholars is that the Sons of Korah were a group of singers descended from someone named Korah, who himself was a descendant of Kohath, progeny of Levi. I would like to presume this is not the rebel so named in Numbers 16. (For a detailed list of men David appointed to the service of song in the tabernacle, see 1 Chronicles 6:16-47.)

The Psalm divides easily into two halves: verses 1-7 and verses 8-13. In the first half, the Psalmist recalls a time from the past when the LORD had ceased His anger and had restored Israel (verses 1-3). He then implores God in the present to restore us, His people, once again, and this time to do so more fully (verses 4-7). May the continuing sense of God's displeasure, the Psalmist prays, yield instead to the salvation of God. With verse 8 we enter the second half of the Psalm, in which an individual, perhaps a priest or perhaps the Psalmist himself, prophetically transmits the promises of the LORD to the distraught assembly.

This pattern of petitioning is common enough so that it is impossible on that basis alone to find a specific date for the Psalm. Likewise, the language is conventional and it could fit almost any time. It will help your understanding if you remember that for Israel any reversal, such as a military defeat, or any disaster, such as a drought, was a sign of God's wrath and displeasure. Such divine displeasure was always directed at idolatrous and disobedient behavior. Conversely, when Israel was rescued or saved from the misfortune, and things were looking up again, that was then a sign that God was once more smiling. So any reversal or catastrophe could occasion this Psalm, though presumably it would have been a major disaster. Then, once the Psalm had entered the repertoire, it could have been used as an appropriate intercession at every disaster.

**Vv. 1-3**

**<sup>1</sup> LORD, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes (brought back the wealth) of Jacob.**

The Psalmist may well have been thinking of a drought in the past that had been broken with long-awaited rain. Such a drought would have been received as a sign of the anger of God for the sins of the people. When they repented, they were forgiven and pardoned, and God again sent rain. That would have been good reason for thanking God who was once more being favorable to the land and restoring its fertility, and who was thereby also showing His divine favor for his People once again.

Notice that in the Hebrew parallelism, "your land" and "Jacob" are equivalent. In the Old Testament, the land and the people, the descendants of Jacob, the children of Israel, are always intimately associated. The land is a part of what God had promised them. With the work of Jesus in the New Testament, the People of God are no longer tied to physical descent from Jacob, nor to that particular piece of real estate. So when Christians pray this Psalm today, they should indeed think of their ancient forebears in Biblical faith, but then in addition also of that people of which we are a part, the People of God in Christ, the Church, wherever located.

**2 You forgave** (lifted away or removed as a burden) **the iniquity of your people;**  
**you pardoned** (covered) **all their sin.**

In verse 2a the picture is of God removing a heavy burden of sins. It would be well to think how our sinning weighs us down, to keep us from running along the path of God. God's mercy is shown in how he removes the burden from our shoulders.

Sin in verse 2b was covered so as to be shielded from the deserved punishment; it was not covered over as in a cover-up, or as in an effort to gloss over it.

**3 You withdrew all your wrath;**  
**you turned from your hot anger.**

These remarkable verses express the faith of the Israelites. Sin is a burden, an oppressive load, which God must remove. "We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves" (LBW and LW). Sin is also behavior that renders us culpable; we are guilty and deserve punishment. "We justly deserve your present and eternal punishment" (as in LW, unfortunately not in LBW). Christians who pray this Psalm will properly think of the atoning work of Jesus on the cross. Jesus' death on the cross is the place where God accomplished the reality of which the Psalmist speaks. The forgiveness and pardon of God includes setting aside His wrath, a divine attribute too easily ignored in our day, even among theologians who ought to know better.

**Vv. 4-7**

**4 Restore us again, O God of our salvation,**  
**and put away your indignation toward us!**

Note again that when the God of our salvation restores us, he puts away His indignation, not just toward our sins, but toward us!

**5 Will you be angry with us forever?**  
**Will you prolong your anger to all generations?**

This is a rhetorical question to which the believer will answer with a resounding "NO."

**6 Will you not revive us again,**  
**so that your people may rejoice in you?**

This is a rhetorical question to which the believer will answer with a resounding "YES."

**7 Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,**  
**and grant us your salvation.**

Here the prayer ends, and with verse 8 begins the response to the prayer, announced by someone who listens for the word of God for this situation. We may perhaps think of a temple priest, or better, of the Psalmist himself who switches from the role of praying on behalf of all the people to the role of preaching to all the people the assurance of God's salvation.

## **Vv. 8-13**

- 8 a. Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,  
b. for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful,  
c. to those who turn to him in their hearts.** (NRSV translation)

- a. I will listen to what God the LORD will say;  
b. He promises peace to his people, his saints –  
c. But let them not return to folly** (NIV translation)

The People of God are those who are faithful to God (New Revised Standard Version) or the saints of God (New International Version), whose defining characteristic is that they appeal to God the LORD. Recall that the LORD (Yahweh) is the Name of the God who reveals Himself by bringing Israel out of bondage in Egypt, by calling them to be His own, by giving them His Law and Promises, and by sending His prophets. In the New Testament He is finally revealed as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and the God of the “Our Father.” We are those who seek to be faithful to, and therefore are saints of, that God. He is as specific as that.

We are encouraged to pledge our faithfulness to this God, because He has promised peace to His people. Peace is not simply the cessation of any hostilities. Peace means a more comprehensive well-being of both body and soul; it is a condition of health and soundness in every way. Peace translates the Hebrew word *Shalom*; Shalom is “having it all together.”

The reason for the differing translations of verse 8c is that the two versions follow slightly different texts. The NRSV follows the reading of the Septuagint, which is the translation of the ancient Hebrew text into Greek from around the year 200 B.C. The Septuagint text of the Old Testament gives us an idea of what Jewish scholars in Alexandria, Egypt, at that time thought the Hebrew text meant. The NIV follows the reading of the standard Hebrew text. The NRSV translation would then accentuate a further defining characteristic of the faithful; they are those who turn to the LORD with full sincerity, with all their hearts. The NIV translation is an exhortation to God’s people to not return to their earlier folly. These respective meanings comes out to be roughly the same, if you bear in mind that for the Old Testament, the supreme folly is idolatry, the worship of a false god, or in any way neglecting the LORD their God.

- 9 Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.**

Salvation is final victory and ultimate deliverance from anything or anyone that holds us captive. The Psalmist is speaking for all those who have at one time tasted the salvation of God, but who nevertheless still experience a sense of incompleteness or lack of fulfillment. God is the Savior, yes; but then why do I (we) still feel so unsaved, so guilty, so unfulfilled, so lacking in full faith, in ardent love, in confident hope? Here the Psalmist wants to assure us that that final salvation, though admittedly not yet complete, is nevertheless close at hand.

This verse makes Psalm 85 an admirable Advent Psalm, because Advent takes note of the fact that our salvation is in one sense already complete and accomplished in what Jesus has done for us in his first coming. But in another sense it still lies in a future that is close at hand.

- 10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.**

If salvation may be understood as the comprehensive term for all that God still has in store, then its several facets may be identified in the quartet of attributes which appear in this verse:

**Steadfast love** is that uncaused love which God has for His creation, which wells up from within God, which is expressed in His entering into a covenant with Israel, and from which God will not be deterred even by His People's sins.

**Faithfulness** is that determination of God that wills fidelity to His Word of promise. He will not renege on His promises.

**Righteousness** is that characteristic of the sovereign God that what He does is always the right thing. And what He does must be acknowledged by us to be right. This is the case even and especially when what He does is to make right what is amiss. God is both the One who is Himself the Right-eous One and the One who is also the Right-ifier. He both is and makes righteous.

**Peace** is "the tranquillity that comes from order," that condition in which everything is whole and harmonious. Peace is the Shalom of Eden Restored. It is the promise of Jesus' birth: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth shalom peace to the human targets of God's good will.

All of these divine attributes are also designed to be human attributes. Because God displays steadfast love, He works to make also the created-in-his-image human beings to display steadfast, instead of fickle, love. Because God is faithful, we too are to be faithful. Because God is righteous, He is also the one to declare, and by declaring, to make us righteous. If God speaks peace (verse 8) we too should speak peace.

**<sup>11</sup> Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.**

This verse speaks of the anticipated harmony between heaven and earth. As the faces of sunflowers are always turned to the light of the sun, so our human faithfulness rises up from the earth to respond to the warm face of the sun of righteousness.

**<sup>12</sup> Yea, the LORD will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.**

This reference to the land, coupled with the reference to the land in verse 1, leads some scholars to conjecture that a drought was the occasion for this Psalm.

**<sup>13</sup> Righteousness will go before him,  
and will make a path for his steps.**

Righteousness is pictured here as the Way-preparer for the LORD. This is a good place to remember that Jesus described John the Baptist as the one who came to his generation "in the way of righteousness" (Matthew 21:32). Jesus recognized John as the fore-runner of the Lord (or himself!). This is another reason why Psalm 85 is a good choice of Psalms for the season of Advent.

**The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 85:**

God of love and faithfulness, you so loved the world that you gave your only Son to be our Savior. Help us to receive him as both Lord and brother and freely celebrate him as our gracious Redeemer now and forever. Amen.

This strikes me as a rather bland prayer. You can do better. Perhaps that is related to an observation with which I strongly resonated, which I found in an article in the *Christian Century*, Nov. 17-24, 1999, by Fleming Rutledge:

“The lectionary designers omitted the vital center of Psalm 85 (namely, verses 3-7) ... A failure of imagination was at work in this excision. Jettisoning the references to God’s wrath deprives us of the good news that his wrath has been turned away. The omissions have robbed us of an opportunity to understand that righteousness and peace cannot kiss until the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.”

Nugget

**Advent Hymn** Based on Isaiah 35:3-6 (may be sung to the tune of “With the Lord Begin Your Task,” LBW #444, LW #483)

1. When the King shall come again All his pow’r revealing,  
Splendor shall announce his reign, Life and joy and healing;  
Earth no longer in decay, Hope no more frustrated;  
This is God’s redemption day Longingly awaited.
  
2. Strengthen feeble hands and knees, Fainting hearts, be cheerful!  
God who comes for such as these Seeks and saves the fearful;  
Now the deaf can hear the dumb Sing away their weeping, (I love this line and the next one)  
Blind eyes see the injured come Walking, running, leaping!

To the religiously untutored layman in modern culture, dominated as his thinking is by the causal order and worldly values of modern commercial and secular society, the Bible seems a strange, unbelievable, and largely irrelevant piece of writing. In the “real” world of commercial and technological life all happens by natural law, values are created by human effort, and he who looks after himself usually prospers. In the biblical world, on the contrary, most events seem to be the work of supernatural powers, man is portrayed as in desperate need of an invisible and intangible grace, and he who seeks his life will surely lose it. What then is modern man, conservative or liberal, honestly to make of this document, which seems so incompatible with what he knows of natural causality, and opposite to all he values. How can he simply regard it as “true”? ... What is needed here – and desperately, if the Bible is to be any sort of authority – is theological mediation.

Langdon Gilkey, as quoted in Douglas John Hall, *Confessing the Faith*

*Walter E. Keller*

December 5, 1999 – **The Second Sunday in Advent**