

The One who Speaks Peace

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray as we turn to God's word. Holy God we thank you that you speak to us through your word. We thank you that the scriptures are living and active and we pray that you would speak into our hearts, that you would refresh our minds, that you would just complete our vision and our understanding of who you are so that we may see you more and love you more and respond to you more fully.

And this we ask in the name of your son and by your spirit. Amen. So we're thinking again celebration. That's why we're here. Celebration. We're looking towards Easter Sunday. We're in some senses looking past the cross to everything that the cross secures for us.

And so that's why I thought it would be good for us to look at Psalm 85 which is probably one of the most powerful expressions of forgiveness that we come across in the Bible.

And of course the irony is that Psalm 85 is of course in the Old Testament and not in the New. This is the forgiveness that the psalmist could celebrate even although he hadn't seen the work of Christ.

Even although he hadn't seen that finished once and for all work of the Lord Jesus. Can we have slides by any chance? Can I ask? Oh, lovely. And what I want to think about is this idea of God is the one who speaks peace into our hearts.

[1 : 4 1] God is the one who speaks peace into our hearts. And we'll come to explore that a little bit more as we go on. Can you get the next step of slides in?

Perfect. I think there's an image to go with that. Is there? No, there isn't. Ah. There you go. The joys of tech, eh?

My images have been censored. And I'm not sure why. They were very wholesome, I assure you. But they have disappeared somewhere in the transition.

Which is a shame. But, because, you know, if you get bored of listening to me, you can always look at the pictures. But unfortunately, you're just going to get bored listening to me, I'm afraid. So, sorry about that.

So, Psalm 85 is an unusual sound. It focuses on the kind of conflicted reality of the life of faith.

[2 : 4 0] So, again, I don't need to tell a Highland congregation of how the Psalms normally work. The Psalms, the movement of the Psalms is normally from negative to positive, isn't it?

So, it's normally from lament to praise. That's the normal movement that we get in the Psalms. And I could probably, I could probably, well, there's about 70 laments, 72 laments in the Book of Psalms.

And all of them but two go in that direction from lament to praise. Now, Psalm 85 is unusual.

It's one of the only two Psalms where it starts with a strong voice of praise. And then moves to the more difficult experiences of life.

And I think it does so because it shows just the kind of conflicted reality that we all experience in our day-to-day lives.

[3 : 47] If your walk of faith is always sunshine and flowers and robins tweeting on your shoulder, then I would like to know your secret.

Because that's not my experience of the life of faith. Yes, there are high points and there are joys and there are positive experiences.

But there is darkness and there is difficulty and there is challenge. And that's true kind of on the experiential level. And I know that that's also true of my heart.

There are days when it seems easy to walk the walk of faith. And there are days when I'm fully aware that I'm not doing a very good job of walking the walk of faith.

And I think we see. So that's kind of the conflicted reality that we all face, isn't it? We know that we are forgiven. And yet we are fully aware that we are in need of forgiveness.

[4 : 57] Is that not true? We know that we are all, once and for all, forgiven in the Lord Jesus Christ. And yet we are also aware that day by day we are in need of forgiveness.

And I do apologise for the loss of images here. And that's really what we see in this psalm. So it breaks down into three parts, which is always helpful.

It means that I don't have to artificially break it down into three parts in order to get three points. But the psalmist focuses firstly on the complete forgiveness that we have in relationship with God.

He then focuses in on that kind of conflicted reality, which we'll come back to. And then the third point is grace again.

So we start with grace. We have the reality of day-to-day life. And we finish with grace. That's the way that the psalmist goes here. And the imagery is really powerful.

[5 : 59] I think we miss a lot of the imagery simply because of translation. We fail to see some of the pictures that are contained within the word in the original languages here.

You showed favour to your land, O Lord. You restored the fortunes of Jacob. So that you restored the fortunes of Israel, of the people of God.

And this is technically called an intrat. This first verse.

It's called an intrat. I'm sure you all really wanted to know that. I call it a heads-up. Most psalms give you a heads-up. The first verse is kind of focusing you in on the theme.

The first verse often, very often, not always, but the first verse of a psalm, often tells you what we're talking about. And the theme that we get here from verse 1 is the theme of restoration.

[7 : 01] The God whom we worship is a God who restores. The God whom we worship is a God of restoration. And then he unpacks that with two statements about forgiveness in verses 2 and 3.

You forgave the iniquity of your people. You covered all their sins. You set aside your wrath. And you turned from your fierce anger.

Now these are word pictures. And I'll explain the word pictures in just a second. But they're word pictures which really get to the very heart of the doctrine of forgiveness.

Now if you were to read any of the systematic theology books. Now I don't know why you would want to. But were you to read any of the systematic theology books.

They will talk about two aspects of God's forgiveness. One is expiation and the other is propitiation. Expiation and propitiation.

[8 : 01] I hasten to add that theologians are no better than lawyers. Are there any lawyers in our midst? No, are we safe here? Theologians are no better than lawyers. I say this as both a lawyer and a theologian.

That's a slight exaggeration. I say this as somebody who has a law degree. And also is a theologian. You know how lawyers, they create a language that nobody understands.

So that you have to employ them to explain the language that they have created. And it's a good way to make money. What can I tell you? Theologians are no different.

We create a language that nobody understands. So that's why you pay me the big bucks. To come along on a Sunday morning. And to explain to you the doctrine of forgiveness. Expiation and propitiation.

The two aspects of forgiveness. Expiation is simply that God removes our sin and our guilt from us. Remove from us completely. And propitiation is the fact that God has a right to be angry with us.

[9 : 05] But he has chosen not to be angry anymore. So God creates humanity in his image. He is a holy God. We're meant to be a holy people.

What's the problem? We're not very good at that, are we? And so by right, God should be angry with us. But because of his good character, he chooses not to be.

He chooses to turn from that anger. So expiation, the removal of our sins. Propitiation. God is not angry with you anymore.

And we see both of these in the images of Psalm 85 here. You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins. And what the Hebrew actually says there is, you lifted the iniquity of your people.

And you buried it. You covered it. So that it is seen no more. It's quite interesting, you know. Or at least if you're kind of a, if you're a bit of a theology geek, it's quite interesting.

[10 : 17] In the New Testament, sin, the active image of sin is as a power that binds us. And of course, it's the power of the cross that breaks the power of cancer and sin.

And all of these images that we're so familiar with. You know, a power that binds us has been broken through the work of Jesus. In the Old Testament, by and large, the dominant image for sin is as a weight.

A weight or a burden pressing down on us. And that's what we see here. You know, God works his forgiveness. He lifts that weight.

He lifts that burden from us. And he buries it. So it is seen no more. Much like the Coke can. It's exactly the same image that's used in Micah 7.

That God lifts the burden of our sin off our back. He crushes it underfoot. And he hurls it into the depths of the sea.

[11 : 29] And so we get these rich images of God lifting that guilt from us. Removing it from us. So that it's covered over. He doesn't see it anymore. He buries it. He sees it no more.

We sometimes have this false image of God, don't we? That yes, he forgives, but he forgives reluctantly. Yes, he forgives, but he's just waiting to throw it back into our faces.

It's not true. It's not biblical. It's an absolutely false narrative. When God forgives, he forgives completely.

That sin is lifted from us, crushed underfoot, and removed from us as far as it can be. And then verse 3. You set aside your wrath.

You turn. This is something that God simply chose to do. He chose to do. And as we saw in these verses from Micah 7, he chose to do it.

[12 : 26] And he made promises to our forefathers. To Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. And because he made promises to them, he has still been faithful to those promises to us.

Because all of these centuries later, we experience his forgiveness. He sent his son. Why? Because he made promises to Abraham.

And we are the beneficiaries. We are the beneficiaries of those promises today. He has set aside his wrath. And he has turned from his fierce anger.

So anything in you that might be inclined to think otherwise is simply not true. The voice of the Bible is singular.

When God forgives, he forgives completely. And that is something that we celebrate. And that leads us on to the second point that we have here.

[13 : 26] This conflicted reality. So quite unusually here, we start with this positive celebration of the complete forgiveness. You know, God is a God of restoration. And then we turn to prayer.

It's normally the other way around. Prayer leading to praise. Here we have praise leading to prayer. Restore us again, O God of our salvation. And put away your displeasure towards us.

And so you've got this slightly unusual twist. Which I think simply reflects the conflicted reality that is our norm. We know that we are forgiven.

But we're also aware of our weakness. We know that we are restored. And yet we're also aware that we need to be restored each and every day.

And this is the place where the psalmist dwells. Just as it's the place where we dwell. And then he goes on into these rhetorical questions.

[14 : 27] Rhetorical questions are really powerful. Because they're not giving you the answer. They're forcing you to think about the answer.

And in thinking about the answer, it becomes your lesson. And your learning. Rather than something that, you know, some random bloke stood up there.

And told you that you have to think. These are conclusions that you draw for yourself. Will you be angry with us forever? Implied answer, no.

Because that is simply not the nature of God. We see that as God reveals himself to Moses in Exodus 34. Will you be angry with us forever?

No. Will you prolong your anger through all generations? No, of course not. Because that is simply not in the nature of God.

[15 : 25] Will you not revive us again that your people may rejoice in you? Yes, he will. Implied answer, he will revive us again.

So that his people may rejoice in him. Why? Because he is the God of restoration. That's where we started again. Simply inherent to his nature. And his being.

Show us your unfailing love. And grant us your salvation. A couple of questions for you.

One question and a comment. What's the thing about unfailing love? It's unfailing. It's unfailing. Isn't it?

That's the thing about unfailing love. When we think about it, we're tempted to limit God's grace because we're aware of our human weakness, aren't we?

[16 : 24] We know that we love, but we love incompletely. We know that we forgive, but we forgive incompletely in a very human way. And we tend to apply our understandings of love and forgiveness to God.

And yet, our experiences of these things are but a pale shadow of the reality that we find in God. Show us your unfailing love.

Because his love is unfailing and grants us your salvation. So, the thing about unfailing love is that it's unfailing. And the thing about salvation is that that word doesn't always mean what you think it means.

Okay? If I were to ask you, don't worry, I'm not going to ask anyone. Because that would be awkward. But if I were to ask you what the word salvation means, I'll bet you would tell me.

It's about life transformation, isn't it? Forgiveness of sins. It's about being renewed and restored in Christ. Very much the kind of language that we see in Paul's epistles when he talks about salvation.

[17 : 35] He's talking about that life transformation where we turn to Christ and we find hope. And we find the way forward. Let me just say to you, when you come across that word in an Old Testament, particularly in an Old Testament poetic text, that's not what this word means at all.

The verb that's used here, show us your unfailing love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation. The verb that's used there is the Hebrew verb, yasha.

Yasha, from which we get Yeshua, Joshua, Jesus. They're all rooted in this verb.

And when you come across that verb. And when you come across that verb, it's speaking to a God who comes alongside to help. It's speaking about God's practical help.

God's practical assistance. The God who gets his hands dirty to come alongside to help you in the daily reality of your experiences. Your struggles with family, your struggles at work, your struggles, whatever else it may be.

[18 : 42] It's an image of a God who comes alongside. So when you come across that salvation term in the Psalms, it's not talking about the change of our worldview. It's talking about a God who comes into your daily reality to help.

It's about practical help. God's practical help in your daily norms. And so the image that we get here is about God whose love for us is unfailing and whose involvement in our lives is unchanging.

He does come alongside. He comes alongside to help. Show us your unfailing love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.

And here we come really to the crux of the Psalm in verse 8. I will listen to what God the Lord will say. He promises peace to his people. Thank you.

You're ahead of me. He promises peace to his people, his saints. But let them not return to follow.

[19 : 50] I need to watch my time, don't I? Let them not return to follow. So, again, our translations don't particularly help us here.

I will listen to what God the Lord will say. He promises peace is what the NIV says. That kind of makes sense. What it actually says in the Hebrew is that he speaks peace to his people, to his saints.

Now, why is that difference significant? So, you know, God speaks, God promises. Is it not the same thing? How was the world created? God spoke, didn't he?

God spoke and it came into being. God said, let there be light and there was light. He said, let there be, you know, stars and an orb in which we live.

And it walks. So, do you see this dynamic? God's speech is always created. God's speech always creates a new reality.

[21 : 04] And what we told here in Psalm 84, God speaks peace. He speaks shalom into the hearts of his people.

Yes, we are flawed, failing, fallible people. But God forgives. And he speaks peace into our hearts.

He speaks. He creates a new reality into our hearts, in our inner beings. It is a reality of peace. It is a reality of wholeness that is entirely not dependent on us.

And it's completely dependent on the will and the purpose and the actions of God. That is what he has done for us through his son.

And that is what he continues to do for us by his spirit. And that is the reality that we celebrate today.

[22 : 16] And just one final thought. It's more that I'd like to say about the son. But one final thought. Let's skip to the end. We've got this, the covenant language of verses 10 and 11. And love and faithfulness meeting together.

Righteousness and peace kissing each other. This idea that God is the God of the covenant. And God is the God who keeps the covenant on our behalf. Which is effectively what verse 11 is saying.

The Lord will give what is good. And our land will yield its harvest. Because that's the nature of who he is. But then verse 13. And righteousness goes before him.

And prepares the way for his steps. And of course the image that we finish with there. Is simply this image. That we as the people of God.

As the people who are restored. As a people who are forgiven. A people who have their sins removed from them. That is the reality of our status.

[23 : 16] And so we become agents of his peace. So we become agents of his restoration. In this world in which he has placed us.

Righteousness goes before them. And prepares a way for his steps. That righteousness is created by God. In the hearts of his people. And we go before him.

Echoing. Shining. His forgiveness. His love. His peace. In the various situations. Where he has placed us.

We prepare a way for his steps. As we receive his grace. And as we bring this grace. Into a world. That is so greatly in need.

Of it. So what's my application today? My application today is. If you remember. I was here. I was here. I was here during Advent. And my application was.

[24 : 18] Look to Jesus. And guess what my application is going to be. Now. In Lent. Look to Jesus. Remember his work of forgiveness.

Remember his work of restoration. Never limit it. Never limit it. Because God. Never does. Rejoice. Rejoice. In that salvation.

Rejoice. In that forgiveness. Celebrate. The peace. That he has spoken into our hearts. And look to be agents.

Of that peace. Whatever God has placed you. So. With the psalmist. We will listen. To what God. The Lord. Has said.

He speaks peace. To his people. To his saints. Amen. Let's pray. Together. Holy God.

[25 : 16] And King. Righteous. One. We thank you. That in your son. Jesus. We know. A righteousness.

That is not our own. We experience. A forgiveness. Beyond all imagination. We're grateful. To you Lord. We are grateful. To you. Speak peace.

Into our hearts. And help us. To be agents. Of your wholeness. In this. Your world. And this. We pray. In Jesus name. Amen.