

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 85

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Psalms 85 is a communal lament and petition structured in three movements. The psalm opens with a confident recollection of past divine favor: the LORD restored the fortunes of Jacob, forgave iniquity, covered sin, and withdrew His fierce anger (vv. 1–3). This is not wishful thinking but stated history — the people remember what God has done. The second movement pivots sharply into present distress: despite that remembered grace, something has gone wrong again, and the congregation cries out for restoration, for the withdrawal of God’s anger, for revival, and for renewed salvation (vv. 4–7). The third movement is the psalm’s resolution — not through the circumstances changing but through a prophetic listening posture: the psalmist declares he will hear what God speaks, receives the divine word of peace to His people, and then paints a stunning vision of covenant virtues reconciled and harmonized — steadfast love and faithfulness meeting, righteousness and peace kissing — culminating in the LORD giving what is good and the land yielding its harvest (vv. 8–13). The psalm thus moves from memory to lament to hope, and the hope is not speculative but grounded in both who God is and what He has done.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to reorient a discouraged, spiritually depleted people toward the one thing that can revive them: the memory of His covenant faithfulness as the ground for present petition and future hope. The intent is not merely to comfort but to produce active, expectant faith — the kind that waits and listens for God’s word rather than collapsing under present distress. God is calling His people to pray with historical memory as their foundation, to petition with covenant boldness, and to live in expectant orientation toward the LORD’s salvation — a salvation the psalm’s climax renders in almost eschatological colors.

Subject Sentence: The LORD’s covenant faithfulness — remembered, petitioned, and expectantly awaited — is the sole ground of Israel’s revival and hope.

Primary Claim: God is calling His discouraged people to ground their petition and their hope not in their circumstances but in His unbreakable covenant faithfulness — and to posture themselves to receive the peace, righteousness, and salvation only He can give.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Nature of the “Restoration of Fortunes” (v. 1)

The phrase *shûb shebût* (translated “restored the fortunes” or “brought back the captivity”) has generated debate. Some interpreters read it as a direct reference to the return from Babylonian exile, which would date the psalm post-exilic and give it a specific historical setting. Others argue it is a standard idiom for divine reversal of adverse circumstance, not necessarily exile-specific, and can apply to any period of national affliction and restoration. The latter reading is to be preferred for several reasons: the phrase appears in clearly pre-exilic contexts (Job 42:10; Deuteronomy 30:3), and the psalm does not require the Babylonian exile as its backdrop. More importantly for exposition, treating it as exile-specific risks narrowing what the text offers as a universal covenantal pattern: God’s people experience discipline, cry out, and receive restoration through covenant grace. The Reformed reading retains the covenantal breadth without eliminating the historical particularity.

The “Vision” of vv. 10–13 — Present Reality or Eschatological Hope?

Verses 10–13 present the most significant interpretive question: is the psalmist describing a present experience of reconciled covenant virtues, an eschatological vision of what God will ultimately accomplish, or a prophetic confidence about imminent restoration? Three positions present themselves. A purely realized reading treats vv. 10–13 as describing what is already true of the covenant community when it lives in fidelity. A purely futuristic/eschatological reading sees this as the messianic age projected forward. A mediating Reformed reading — to be preferred — holds that these verses function as prophetic anticipation grounded in the character of God: the psalmist is confident that the God who has acted will act again, and the vision of steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace converging is both a covenant description and a messianic trajectory. The New Testament reader rightly sees in these verses the shape of what Christ accomplishes — the reconciliation of God’s holiness and His love at the cross. This reading is not an imposition but the canonical fulfillment of what the psalmist anticipates.

Lutheran Acknowledgment

Lutheran Law/Gospel readings of the lament sections (vv. 4–7) helpfully emphasize that the genuine anguish of God’s people under His displeasure is real and must not be spiritualized away. The psalmist is not performing distress — he feels the weight of divine withdrawal acutely. This insight is worth retaining even where the Reformed reading presses further into covenant assurance as the ground for petition.

Key Canonical Support

- **Lamentations 3:19–33** — Jeremiah’s great pivot from lament to hope on the ground of covenant mercies that “never come to an end” — the same move Psalm 85

makes from vv. 4–7 to vv. 8–13; “great is your faithfulness” is the ground of confident petition.

- **Romans 5:1–2** — “Peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” — the New Testament fulfillment of what v. 8 promises; “peace to His people” is no longer anticipated but declared accomplished through Christ’s propitiation.
- **Isaiah 45:8** — “Let righteousness rain down... let salvation and righteousness spring up together” — near-identical imagery to vv. 11–12; righteousness and salvation as paired gifts of divine intervention, grounding the Psalm’s climax in the broader prophetic witness.
- **2 Corinthians 5:18–21** — The “ministry of reconciliation” — God’s righteousness and His love meeting in the atonement; the psalmist’s vision of righteousness and peace kissing (v. 10) receives its fullest explanation in the cross as the place where God is both just and the justifier.
- **Habakkuk 3:17–19** — The prophet’s posture of waiting and rejoicing in the LORD despite present desolation — the same orientation Psalm 85 calls its readers to in the listening posture of v. 8; genuine faith waits for God’s word.

Aim: To lead the reader from present discouragement and spiritual depletion into active, expectant, historically-grounded prayer — so that hope is no longer contingent on circumstances but anchored in the covenant faithfulness of God who has acted, who hears, and who will restore.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	The LORD restored the fortunes of Jacob	Historical affirmation; <i>shûb shebût</i> — covenantal reversal of fortunes
2	He forgave iniquity and covered all sin	Covenant forgiveness as the basis of past restoration
3	He withdrew all His wrath; turned from His hot anger	Divine anger is real but not permanent — it yields to mercy in the covenant
4	“Restore us again, O God of our salvation”	Petition begins; pivot from memory to present distress
5	“Will you be angry with us forever?”	The lament question — the fear that divine withdrawal is permanent
6	“Will you not revive us again?”	Petition for spiritual renewal; <i>revive</i> (חַיֵּה, <i>ḥāyâ</i>) — to make

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		alive again
7	“Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation”	Summary petition: <i>hesed</i> and <i>yeshû ‘â</i> (steadfast love and salvation) together
8	“I will hear what God the LORD will speak”	Posture shift — from crying out to listening; the prophetic listening stance
8b	“He will speak peace to His people, to His saints”	The content of God’s word: <i>shālôm</i> — peace to the covenant community
8c	“But let them not turn back to folly”	Covenant warning embedded in the promise — peace requires fidelity
9	“Surely His salvation is near to those who fear Him”	Confidence: salvation is proximate for those in covenant posture
9b	“That glory may dwell in our land”	The goal of salvation is the manifestation of God’s glory in His people’s midst
10	“Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other”	The great convergence: divine covenant attributes reconciled and harmonized
11	“Faithfulness springs up from the ground; righteousness looks down from the sky”	Heaven and earth aligned in covenant harmony
12	“Yes, the LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase”	Material blessing as sign and fruit of covenant restoration
13	“Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way”	Righteousness as the herald of God’s coming — the path prepared for the LORD

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–3	The God Who Has Acted: Covenant Grace Remembered
2	4–7	The God Who Seems Absent: Covenant Grace Petitioned

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD’s covenant faithfulness — remembered, petitioned, and expectantly awaited — is the sole ground of Israel’s revival and hope.

Primary Claim: God is calling His discouraged people to ground their petition and their hope not in their circumstances but in His unbreakable covenant faithfulness — and to posture themselves to receive the peace, righteousness, and salvation only He can give.

Applications (Five)

1. When spiritual depletion sets in, begin with what God has done — not with how you feel. (*Mind/belief*) The psalmist does not open with his petition — he opens with memory. He recites the acts of God before he voices his need. This is not liturgical warm-up; it is theological method. When you cannot feel your way to faith, you rehearse your way there. Before you bring your present discouragement to God, spend time naming specifically what He has done — in Scripture, in your own history, in your community’s life. The request “revive us again” (v. 6) is built on the foundation of “You restored the fortunes of Jacob” (v. 1). You cannot pray “again” if you haven’t first remembered the “first time.”

2. The fear that God’s anger is permanent is a lie that covenant prayer directly contradicts. (*Affections/worship*) The anguished question of verse 5 — “Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations?” — is a real fear, not a rhetorical device. Many believers live in chronic low-grade spiritual fear that God’s displeasure with them is settled and final, that they have used up their grace. Psalm 85 does not dismiss this fear — it answers it with the character of the covenant God. The same God who “forgave the iniquity of His people” and “withdrew all His wrath” (vv. 2–3) has not changed. The fear that God’s anger is final is a failure of covenant memory, and covenant prayer — prayer that brings the character of God back into the conversation — is the antidote. Let your prayer say back to God what He has declared about Himself.

3. Train yourself to listen for God’s word before you determine what His silence means. (*Will/behavior*) The psalmist’s declaration in verse 8 — “I will hear what God the LORD will speak” — is a deliberate act of the will, not a passive state. He chooses to orient himself toward God’s speaking rather than interpret God’s apparent silence as abandonment. The practical application is concrete: where in your life have you filled in God’s silence with your own fearful narrative? The psalmist’s posture is to stop, wait, and listen — and the content of what he expects to hear is peace (v. 8b). Establish practices of listening — unhurried Scripture reading, prayer without an agenda, silence — so that when distress comes, your default movement is toward God’s word, not away from it.

4. The convergence of God's righteousness and His love is not a theological abstraction — it is the cross, and it changes what you expect from God. (*Mind/belief*)

Verses 10–11 — steadfast love and faithfulness meeting, righteousness and peace kissing — are not poetic decoration. They describe the theological problem at the heart of redemption: how can a holy God extend peace to a sinful people without compromising His righteousness? The psalmist sees this convergence as the mark of full covenant restoration. The New Testament reader knows where that convergence actually occurred: at the cross, where God was both just and the justifier (Romans 3:26). If you are in Christ, the meeting of righteousness and peace is not a future hope — it is your present reality. You are not waiting for God to figure out how to be good to you without violating His holiness. He already has. Let that truth reshape the way you come to God in prayer.

5. Expect God's restoration to be visible — covenant blessing has a this-world dimension. (*Affections/worship*) Verse 12 — “the LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase” — resists the temptation to spiritualize God's restoration into a purely interior affair. The psalmist expects that when God restores His people, creation responds: the land yields, the harvest comes, righteousness walks ahead of God as His herald (v. 13). This is not prosperity theology — it is covenant theology. God's restoration of His people has a concrete, visible, communal, and even material dimension. Application: don't settle for a purely interior faith that never expects anything to change in the world around you. Pray for revival that is visible — in your community, your family, your church. Expect righteousness to walk ahead of God's coming in ways that others can see.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 85 teaches that God's covenant faithfulness is not contingent on Israel's fidelity — He restores the people precisely when they have no claim on His restoration except the covenant itself. The psalm holds together without resolving the full tension: God's anger is real (vv. 3, 5), His forgiveness is real (v. 2), His patience is real (v. 8b warns against returning to folly), and His salvation is near (v. 9). This is not contradiction but covenant realism. The remarkable climax of vv. 10–13 teaches that the deepest theological problem — how a righteous God can be at peace with a sinful people — is answered only by the convergence of His own covenant attributes, not by human merit or moral improvement. The psalm thus teaches divine sovereignty, covenant faithfulness, the seriousness of sin (which genuinely provokes God's anger), the graciousness of forgiveness, and the eschatological shape of full restoration — all in thirteen verses.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 85 is a paradigmatic covenant psalm for Reformed theology because it anchors every petition in God's prior act and character

rather than human initiative or worthiness. The structure of the psalm — past grace as the ground of present petition as the basis of future expectation — is the structure of Reformed prayer itself. The convergence of steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace in vv. 10–11 is one of the Old Testament’s clearest anticipations of the doctrine of justification: the problem of God’s righteousness and the sinner’s need for peace is resolved not by lowering God’s standard but by a divine act that satisfies both simultaneously. Reformed theology names this act the atonement of Christ. Furthermore, the psalm’s emphasis on corporate petition — “restore us,” “revive us,” “show us your steadfast love” — reflects the covenant community dimension of Reformed ecclesiology: this is not individual bargaining with God but the congregation crying out together on the basis of covenant promises made to a people, not merely to isolated individuals.

Main Takeaway

God has acted in covenant grace before, and He has not changed — which means your discouragement, however real, does not have the last word. Stop interpreting God’s silence through your circumstances and start petitioning Him through His character. The God who forgave, restored, and withdrew His wrath will speak peace to His people again — and that peace, fully accomplished at the cross, is already yours in Christ. Come back to the covenant. Pray with your history, not against it.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Treating vv. 10–13 as purely poetic decoration rather than theological substance.** The “steadfast love and faithfulness meet” language is among the most theologically dense in the Psalter. Preachers who treat it as inspirational imagery and move on miss the psalm’s climactic claim: that God’s own attributes converge to solve the problem the psalm has raised. The passage deserves careful unpacking, not affectionate admiration.
- **Flattening the lament into a speed bump before the good part.** Verses 4–7 are not liturgical filler — they represent genuine anguish and genuine theological danger. The fear that God’s anger might be permanent is a real spiritual crisis. Rushing through it to get to the hope of vv. 8–13 cheats the congregation out of the very experience the psalm is validating. Sit in the lament before you preach the resolution.
- **Preaching vv. 8–13 as a vision for national or cultural renewal without grounding it in covenant.** The psalm’s vision of righteousness, peace, and blessing is embedded in specific covenant categories — this is about the LORD’s dealings with

His covenant people, not a generic promise of societal improvement. Applying it to national politics or cultural optimism without covenant grounding distorts both the text and the application.

- **Missing the New Testament fulfillment of vv. 10–11.** The convergence of righteousness and peace is not merely anticipated in this psalm — it is accomplished at the cross. A preacher who treats this passage without noting its fulfillment in Christ’s atoning work leaves the congregation at the doorstep of the gospel without opening the door. Romans 3:25–26 and 2 Corinthians 5:21 are the exegetical payoff of the psalm’s climax.
- **Neglecting the listening posture of v. 8 as a distinct and practical call.** “I will hear what God the LORD will speak” is a specific, willed act — not a feeling but a practice. Preachers who move through it as a transition miss an opportunity to call the congregation to a concrete spiritual discipline: orienting toward God’s word in the middle of distress rather than filling silence with anxiety.
- **Individualizing what is structurally corporate.** The psalm is communal throughout — the “us,” “our,” and “we” language is not incidental. Preaching it as a private devotional resource strips it of its ecclesial and covenantal character. The congregation cries out together, petitions together, and receives covenant restoration together. Applications should reflect this communal dimension alongside the personal.