

Psalm 85:1 <To the leader. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.> LORD, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. ² You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned 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, so 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 faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. ⁹ Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. ¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. ¹¹ Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. ¹² The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. ¹³ Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.

“Surely, His Salvation Is Near”

One of William’s favourite playtime activities is smashing the block towers that Dana builds with his little wooden blocks. He thinks it is enormously funny. Dana will build some elaborate tower and say, “William” and he will turn to her and see the tower and laugh. Then, he charges and with one swoop of the arm he destroys the tower and laughs some more. Then, Dana builds again and the cycle repeats itself. Sometimes, if he is right there with her, he’ll knock them over before she can even get three blocks stacked. Over and over this little game goes on for about a minute or so and William is on to something else.

Dana likes building with William’s blocks. She says it’s therapeutic. William likes smashing what she builds. Apparently, it’s fun. But here lately, something a little different has begun. He’s learning how to stack the blocks himself. He’ll grab some blocks and leave behind a little pile on the coffee table stacked three high. Oddly, he doesn’t smash it. I guess his mind hasn’t made the connection between his own building and the fun of smashing. Smashing is the game he plays when somebody else is building. Build and smash and build and smash and then, suddenly, he’s building. It’s amazing how children learn.

Well, Psalm 85 brought to mind for me this building and smashing game. Actually, that’s the picture the Old Testament paints of the relationship the LORD has with his people. They are continually going through a similar pattern of building and smashing; except, it is no game. It is the reality of the LORD trying and trying to build his kingdom within his creation in and through his people only to have his own people smash it time and again.

In Psalm 85, which is technically called a Psalm of lament, the Psalmist is making note that God’s people have once again smashed what the LORD has built. So, prays that God will build yet again. “You, O LORD, in times before have showed favour to your land; brought your people back from captivity. So many times you have withdrawn your anger from us, taken away our iniquity, and covered over our sin. Do it again. But this time, turn to us your very self and

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revive us that we might rejoice with you in sharing your work of kingdom building. Show us your loving kindness. Give us your salvation.”

We have here the final version of this Psalm reflecting a day when the Babylonian exile was over and the remnant of the faithful had come back to Jerusalem. If we read the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah which reflect this time period, we see that things did not go as expected. They expected the age of shalom - of peace, prosperity, health, well-being, and continual rejoicing – upon returning to Jerusalem. But, that was not what they had. Instead God seemed so distant. They had to labour at the hard work of rebuilding the temple. Inevitably, as they were doing the LORD’s work, there arose conflict with the people of the land. Several years go by and the men folk begin to intermarry with the people of the land and forget the LORD, their God, who had removed his anger from them, forgiven their sins, and brought them back from the land of Babylon. The Psalmist acknowledges that, yet again, the people of God had invoked the LORD’s anger?

The Psalmist pleads the true need of his people. They need the LORD himself to come and be with them because they are beginning to return to the folly of yet again smashing what the LORD was rebuilding. The LORD’s presence with them is the only thing that will revive the people of God. The Psalmist is praying for a new creative word from the LORD. This is evident in verse 8 where the Psalmist moves from praying for the people to making a very personal request: “Let me hear what God the LORD is speaking, for he speaks shalom to his people, to his godly ones.” Let my ears hear and my life be made obedient to this new creative act that God is speaking into existence and that new creative act is shalom. In essence let my life be revived by the LORD himself coming into my life and speaking the new creative act of shalom, of salvation, into me. He wants God to touch him personally with his loving-kindness so that he will know and live shalom and at least in and through him the glory of the LORD would be in the land.

I’ve mentioned the Hebrew word shalom, so I guess I should define it. It basically means peace, yet an all encompassing peace. It is inner peace. It is peace with neighbour. It is the peace that comes from prosperity, health, and emotional well-being. It is life filled with rejoicing in the LORD because the LORD is with us. It is to know the steadfast love and faithfulness of God and be able finally to show the same faithfulness and love back to God. That’s what righteousness is. Shalom and righteousness go hand in hand. There is no shalom without righteousness nor righteousness without shalom. And basically, peace on this earth will only come through righteousness, righteousness that springs forth as the direct result of the LORD being in the midst of his people.

The Psalmist says something else that is interesting. “Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him.” I saw something new this week. I have always read the word “near” as having to do with time as if this verse read, “Surely his salvation is soon to come to those who fear him.” Well, near doesn’t have anything to do with time. It has to do with proximity so that the verse reads, “Surely his salvation is in the proximity of those who fear him.” This means that if one wants to know the LORD, to know salvation, to experience shalom, then one

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can find it in the proximity of those who know and revere the LORD. This means is that salvation is not something we receive after we die. It means that God's salvation is actively present in this world right now in our midst. God is assembling the building blocks of his kingdom in the midst of his creation through his people. Time and again we his people have torn it down.

But, wait a minute...something new has begun to happen. In, through, and as Jesus Christ something new has begun to happen. Human beings have begun to build with those very same blocks. Something new has happened in us. Jesus Christ, God the LORD himself has come to humanity and revived us, made us live a new. Salvation has come. God has spoken the word of New Creation and by the gift of his very self, the Holy Spirit, we each can hear, know, and experience shalom as it is coming to be and having heard it we can build upon it. God's salvation is in the proximity of Christian community, indeed us. In, through, and as Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit God the Father in his loving kindness has spoken shalom into **us** and through **us** he demonstrates it to humanity. He has spoken the New Creation that began with Jesus' resurrection into us and by the power of the Holy Spirit it is at work in us so that through us God is beginning to bring New Creation about until he renders it in its fullness when Jesus returns. Our works may only be like William's little three block stacks. Yet, God is using us to build something that will endure.

The love of God present in and that revives humanity to be Christian community - community that we share and extend to others at work, at school, at home, in the checkout line at Wal-Mart, and even on the 401 - is like John the Baptist in the wilderness proclaiming that as Jesus Christ the LORD, God himself, has come and is coming with shalom for humanity. The Holy Spirit filled fellowship that we share is, as the Psalmist said, faithfulness or Truth springing up from the land. People are hungry for faithfulness for the Truth. We need to open our eyes to see that shalom is not going to be found nor come to fruition through institutions like governments or economies. That's not where the Truth is. The Truth, faithfulness is here in the midst of you and me in the Christian fellowship that we share.

Reality is that for a lot of people times are going to be hard for the next little bit. I know personally that you folks are very generous and hospitable. The LORD in an act of New Creation has made you to be so. It may be that the generosity and hospitality that God has been carefully moulding in you is going to be the means by which many people within our proximity are going to say, “Surely, his salvation is near.” It may be that in these pews people will come and sit with us and with us find shalom and be revived. For, you see, the LORD is here with us. Indeed, his salvation is near. It's in our midst. Amen.