

# *Praying about God's Anger*

Psalm 85

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Advent 2

<sup>1</sup>*Lord, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.*

<sup>2</sup>*You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you pardoned all their sin.*

<sup>3</sup>*You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.*

<sup>4</sup>*Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation towards us.*

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

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

<sup>7</sup>*Show us your steadfast love, O Lord,  
and grant us your salvation.*

<sup>8</sup>*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.*

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

<sup>10</sup>*Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.*

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

<sup>12</sup>*The Lord will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.*

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

This fall, I became very angry. During the presidential campaign in early October, some people who attended the rallies of Senator McCain and Governor Palin yelled despicable things about then-Senator Obama. One person even yelled "Off with his head!" I was appalled by this speech because it sounded to me like the kind of blatant racism that came out of the Ku Klux Klan for much of the twentieth century.

To understand my anger, you might like to know a couple of things. First, my brother and his children are African-American, so I am just a little sensitive about these things. Second, I have seen first-hand what racism and racial violence can do, because in the early 1980s, I witnessed race riots in Miami, Florida. I know how white-on-black or black-on-white killing can

wreck a city, and I shudder to imagine what would happen in this country if a white person assassinated an African-American president or presidential candidate. Third, I have also seen how racial violence can be prevented when political and community leaders publicly condemn racism and call for cooler heads to prevail. This happened in Columbus, Ohio, in the 1990s during a period of significant racial tensions; and the leadership from those political and community leaders successfully prevented that city from erupting into a riot.

This fall was just one of many times in my life when I've been really angry. But it's not just me who gets angry. I'm sure all of you have gotten angry too, because anger is a normal human emotion. I vividly remember listening to one of the most mild-mannered men I've ever known get hugely angry when he lost his job. In his view, the top executives in his company had grossly mismanaged corporate finances; and when the company went bankrupt and he lost his job, he was perfectly livid. I later talked to one of this man's relatives, who in private told me that never in her whole life had she seen him that angry.

When we acknowledge our own anger, then we may be ready to understand something about the anger of God. Yes: the anger of God. We don't talk much about God's anger. It seems to make us uncomfortable. We'd rather talk about God's love, God's forgiveness, or God's mercy. But God's anger? That feels a little scary. We squirm in our seats, probably because we'd rather not consider the possibility that God might actually become angry with us.

Many writers of the Bible, however, have no problems talking about God's anger. Nor do they flinch from the possibility that God could actually be angry with us. Such is the case in Psalm 85. Five times in verses 3, 4, and 5, the psalmist refers to God's wrath, anger, and indignation. That, in fact, seems to be why this psalm was written. The poet is convinced that God is angry with the people of Israel, probably because of some sin, though the text does not specify any sin in particular. The feeling of God's anger lies at the heart of the psalm, and the core question comes in verse 5: "Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations?"

When you and I suspect that God might be angry with us, our first inclination, probably, is to repent. If I sense that God is mad at me, my first thought is to kneel down and confess my sin in order to receive God's forgiveness. But notice that there is no confession of sin in this psalm; nowhere does the poet repent or talk about the people repenting. To be sure, the first three verses of Psalm 85 do speak of a time in the past when God "forgave" the people of Israel, "pardoned

all their sin,” “withdrew all . . . wrath,” and “turned from . . . [God’s] hot anger.” Still, there is no explicit reference anywhere in this psalm to repentance in human beings. Psalm 85 does not ask human beings to change.

Instead, this psalm asks God to change. The language is strong and bold. Verse 4: “put away your indignation towards us.” Verse 5: are you always going to be mad at us? Verse 6: do something to revive us and restore us. Verse 7: “show us your steadfast love, and grant us your salvation.” In essence, these amount to demands. God’s face is angry, and the psalmist wants God to show a different kind of face. The psalmist, in short, wants to see a change in God.

In verses 10-13, we discover the face this psalmist wants to see in God is the face of shalom.<sup>1</sup> What does the face of shalom look like? Well, shalom looks like steadfast love embracing faithfulness; it looks like righteousness and peace kissing each other on the mouth—all that’s in verse 10. In verse 11, shalom looks like faithfulness springing up from the ground, and righteousness looking down from the sky, until they join somewhere in the air in a kind of atmospheric hug. In verse 12, shalom looks like abundant crops, vast acres of farmland that grow basket after basket of wheat and barley, leeks and garlic; long rows of vineyards that produce grapes and wine; rolling grasslands that fatten sheep and goats; groves of trees that drip with olives and figs.

And then in verse 13, the final verse of the psalm, we find a truly audacious image of shalom: God and Righteousness, with a capital “R,” as it were, walking together on the earth, with Righteousness walking in the front and God striding along behind. Think of it: God not up in heaven, some light years away; but God here, now, striding purposefully and righteously, forging pathways across the face of the earth. Why is this audacious? Well, where else in the Bible did God walk on the face of the earth? It was in the book of Genesis, chapter 3, verse 8: God walked on the earth in the cool of the evening breeze, to commune with the man and the woman in the Garden of Eden. Except there’s a difference. In Genesis 3:8, God walked on the earth to judge Adam and Eve for eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which God had expressly told them not to eat. There God walked on the earth to announce that the consequences of sin were going to unfold.

Psalm 85, however, poetically summons God back to the earth, so that God can walk again in communion with human beings—this time not for the purpose of judgment, but for the purpose of shalom; not for the purpose of unleashing the consequences of sin, but for the purpose

of setting the consequences of sin aside. In other words, Psalm 85 indirectly asks God to reverse the judgment of Genesis 3. It asks God to restore humanity and creation to a new Garden of Eden. It asks God to turn away decisively from anger, and in place of anger, for God to embrace, and give, peace.

This is bold, bracing, breath-taking speech. In a sense, it asks God to undergo a kind of emotional conversion. Let go of your anger, God; and instead restore us. Sit no longer in the heavens, scowling; but walk with us here on earth, smiling. Withdraw your divine wrath; and send comfort, fecundity, and blessing upon us, our soil, our plants, and our animals.

When have you prayed like Psalm 85 prays? After sensing anger from God, how often have you gotten down on your knees and implored God to change? I have not prayed like this very often. But what new thing might happen if we did pray this way? How do you think our relationship with God would change? What shalom might come among us? What new pathways might Righteousness forge upon this earth, allowing God to embrace us and kiss us?

**Note**

1. The Hebrew word *šālôm* appears twice, in verses 8 and 10.