

A Song for Dark Times

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[0 : 00] Let's start with a question. What do we do when the darkness closes in? What do we do to find comfort when things are tough?! For many people, the answer is music. Music and singing help a lot of us be carried through periods of darkness.

That's why folks often like listening to sad songs when they're feeling down, or why we listen to break up songs when our relationship doesn't work out. More somberly, it's why the African-American spiritual developed. Slaves in the southern states sang as a community response to their shared suffering and the despair that marked their lives.

And these songs were rooted in something deep, rooted in a hope. A hope in Christ and a hope for a better world.

I think what's remarkable about the African-American spiritual is it displays a living faith in God in the throngs of the deepest suffering.

I think of the lyrics, swing low sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home. Those are words of hope in a better world to come. And really, that's not dissimilar and indeed very related to what we find in many of the Psalms in the Bible. In fact, it's what we find in this Psalm, in Psalm 85.

[1 : 24] Psalm 85 is a song that sings of the world to come from a place of darkness and despair. The book of Psalms is a collection of 150 Hebrew songs, and it can easily look like its composition is kind of random.

But there is in fact a shape to the collection. It's made up of five books, and Psalm 85 can be found in book three. And across these five books, the songs tell something of a story.

The first book is all about King David, how he's both God's chosen king, but also flawed and human and needy. The second book begins by emphasizing David's flaws and frailty, but it ends with this hope.

Hope in his son Solomon, an expectation of an eternal kingdom, just as God promised. But book three, book three is the low point of the Psalms.

The line of kings in Israel had failed. God's people were divided. And then they were defeated by other nations and exiled. And even when they returned from exile, they were without a king, without a temple, and without a clear sense of who they were or what God was doing.

[2 : 43] And that's the context in which Psalm 85 comes. Like many of the African-American spirituals, this is a song of hope in a world to come that cries out from a place of faith in the heart of the darkness.

And this afternoon, we'll all be coming from different places, but perhaps you too wonder where God is. Perhaps you wonder what his plan is or are struggling to have faith that he is good and kind and compassionate.

Well, this is a song for the broken. This is a song for the hurting. This is a song of hope in what God is doing and hope that he will restore these broken ruins and breathe life into these dry bones.

We've got two points as we work through Psalm 85. Firstly, singing in a broken world. And secondly, singing of the world to come. Why do we need to sing in the heart of darkness?

Forgive me if this sounds too simplistic, but it's because darkness exists. The world is full of beauty and light, but it's also full of ugliness and darkness.

[3 : 56] We live in a broken world. And before we get into the sound proper, we've got to address that fact because it's the underlying problem that Psalm 85 is wrestling with.

We live in a world that's broken. And what I mean by that is that there are echoes of the good world that God made. Genesis tells us that when God made the world, he looked at his work and it was good.

When he looked at humanity, he said, we were very good. And we see that goodness all the time, don't we? We see it in nature. We see it in every sunrise and sunset.

We smell it in the smell of trees and flowers after spring rain. We see it in the birds as they make wonderful shapes as they migrate and wheel about the sky.

We see it not just in nature, but we see it in humanity as well. In acts of kindness, one to another. In a piece of music that brings a tear to the eye.

[4 : 58] In the everyday miracle that is the birth of new life. And when we gather together as a family and community as one. But we also know, of course, that the world is not good.

We see that in nature too, in the fires of industry and progress that are consuming the world and all its natural resources. The dangers of natural disasters, floods, fires and hurricanes that wipe out whole histories in a flash.

The existence of so many illnesses that can just stop life in its tracks. And indeed, of course, in death itself.

We see it especially in humanity. In inequality that leads to poverty. In greed and in selfishness. In the ways people degrade others for their sex or their race or their status.

In acts of cruelty and desire. In violence, some that's seen, but most that's not. It's hidden behind closed doors. In war and in the abuse of power.

[6 : 00] In the secret compartments of every human heart. A darkness that is ever present. The world is broken. And we are broken too. And the Bible gives this a name.

And its name is sin. Sin is at the root of everything that is wrong with the world. It's like a virus that infects every part of the ecosystem.

And sometimes, as with a virus, we can look fine on the outside. But on the inside, everything's infected. Everything's decaying. That is sin.

Sin is decay. It's the degradation of all that we should be. The decay of true and beautiful humanity. It's what leads us to do things that we know are wrong.

And it's what leads us to do things that we think are good, but actually are in fact not. It's why we continue to hurt others and hurt ourselves. It's why we struggle to be the best version of ourselves, if you like.

[7 : 00] And most importantly, it's what separates us from God. And keeps us from having a relationship with our Creator. And so, in this world of broken people, what we need is a solution.

Not a surface-level solution, but something that goes to the root of the problem. Something that deals with our sin, our decay, and our distance from God.

And this is what God does. This is what God always does. And the writer of this psalm, who was part of a group called the Sons of Korah, he recalls that God comes to his people and addresses the problem of sin.

So let's read the first three verses again. You, Lord, showed favour to your land. You restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins.

You set aside all your wrath and turned from your fierce anger. So this psalmist, coming from a place of darkness, addresses God and recalls what God has done in the past.

[8 : 09] In the past, God showed favour to the land where his people live. And he restored the fortunes of Jacob. It's another name for God's Old Testament people. God's presented here is like a father who delights in his child.

That's the sense that accompanies that word favour in verse one. And the way in which God showed favour was by forgiving the sins of his people.

That's the root problem. And God dealt with it. Taking verse two more literally, God carried the iniquity of his people and made atonement for their sins.

The psalmist is making the point that God dealt with the sin problem himself and bore the cost himself. And so, therefore, was able to turn from his anger and wrath.

And let's be clear. God's anger at sin is justified. Because sin is the reason that his good world and his very good humanity are subject to decay.

[9 : 13] God hates sin because it ruins everything and brings pain and suffering to the people he has made. The same way we have an instinctive and visceral response to injustice when we see it.

Well, God has that, but so much more, so much deeper. Because he is perfect. And he is the one who has made it all. But he makes every effort to deal with sin and forgive it at his own cost.

And that's the story of the Old Testament. That's what the psalmist here is remembering. The story of the Old Testament is long, but it can be summarised as a cycle.

God saves his people from their various oppressors. Egypt, the Philistines, the Assyrians, the Babylonians. And in saving them, calls them to be his people.

Calls them to follow him. Calls them to worship him. And part of that worship are rituals which dealt with the sin problem and atoned for them. Atoned for their sins.

[10:19] The cyclical nature of the Old Testament, though, is that the people once saved always return to rejecting God. But then they cry out for deliverance again.

And he always responds. And that's the truth which the psalmist is articulating here. God is a God who saves. And the psalmist needs God to save again.

The psalmist needs God to deal with the sin of the people again and restore them. The psalmist is desperate for revival. And so this is the prayer that comes in verses four to six.

Restore us again, God our Savior, and put away your displeasure towards us. Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger through all generations?

Will you not revive us again that your people may rejoice in you? Will you continue? And so if decay is the problem, then restoration is what we need.

[11:16] And if the story of the Old Testament is one of cycles, well, the story of the New Testament is a little different. The New Testament is God's answer to this prayer and the root problem of sin.

The New Testament is a promise of restoration and revival for all people in all the world. It's the answer to the problem of a broken world.

And the answer is found in a person. It's found in God's Son, Jesus. Look at the end of the prayer in verse seven. Show us your unfailing love, Lord, and grant us your salvation.

Now, the psalmist might not have known it, but what he was asking to see and what he was asking to receive is Jesus. For he is the fullest and most perfect expression.

He is the expression of God's unfailing love to his people and to his world. He is the salvation of the world. And Peter says in the New Testament, salvation is found in no one else.

[12:26] For there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved. The early church father, Augustine, he paraphrased this verse, verse seven like this.

Grant us your Christ. Let us know your Christ. Let us see your Christ. And he paraphrased it like that because Jesus is the permanent answer that God gives to the problem of sin and the problem of a broken world.

No more cycles. A firm and solid hope in sins forgiven and the world restored. But here's the crucial point.

Why does it sometimes feel like this isn't true in our experience of the world? It's all well and good saying that Jesus is the answer. But why is the world still in terrible shape?

Why does sin and injustice still thrive? Why do we ourselves still struggle and experience pain and grief? How is Jesus the answer?

[13:35] How is Jesus the answer to the psalmist prayers? How is it that he's brought restoration to a broken world? Because let's be frank, it often doesn't look like it. Well, we can enter into the words of these psalms, can't we?

Because in a sense, we still cry out for revival and restoration. We cry out for personal revival and restoration. We know that even if we're following Jesus, we're not what we should be.

And we want to be better people. We want to be holier people. And in times of grief and in times of illness, we pray for restoration. Because we're experiencing the horrors of a broken world in our lives and in our bodies.

And we cry out for revival and restoration in the world. Surely all of us have been watching the situation in Ukraine. And in a world where war and injustice thrive, we feel that need, don't we?

For restoration. And when people look to the future in light of the climate crisis, it's understandable why a lot of folks say they won't have children. Because they don't want to bring them into a world where the future is so bleak and uncertain.

[14:48] If they knew that God cared, well, they would be crying out for revival and restoration of the planet. So when we cry like the psalmist and ask God for revival and restoration, when we ask to see his love and experience his salvation, well, what are we asking for?

And when God says Jesus is the answer, what does he mean? Well, that's all addressed in the second half of the psalm and our second point, singing of the world to come. So the second half of the psalm is a response and a reflection.

If the first half of the psalm is a prayer and a cry directed towards God, the second half is a response to that prayer. And the psalmist says in verse 8, I will listen to what the Lord says, God the Lord says.

He promises peace to his people, his faithful servants, but let them not turn to folly. Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

So the psalmist says that he's going to listen to what God says. And what does God say? Well, he promises peace to his people who follow him and who trust in him.

[16:02] And the word for peace here is the Hebrew word shalom. The basic meaning of shalom is wholeness. It's completeness, like a smooth stone or a wall without cracks.

And the Old Testament uses this word because we're broken people in a broken world who need shalom, who need healing and restoration.

Wholeness. Peace comes when cracks and divisions and brokenness are healed and made whole. And that's what God promises to his people.

He promises peace and wholeness if they follow him. You'll notice, of course, that just below that, then there's a warning here not to turn to folly. In warnings like these, I often can't help myself but think of a quote from the US version of *The Office*.

Dwight, one of the characters, says, whenever I'm about to do something, I think, would an idiot do that? And if they would, I do not do that thing. To be fair, it's not bad advice.

[17:06] Not being an idiot in this case is failing to trust God's promises and to look elsewhere for the peace and wholeness that God offers. And we can put our hope in politicians and in movements.

Think of Trump's consistent promise to make America great again. That's a promise of peace and wholeness which won't come to pass. Or think of the promise in every self-help book on the shelves in Waterstones.

Take Jordan Peterson's book, *12 Rules for Life*, for example, which calls itself an antidote to chaos. That's a promise of peace and wholeness. And the same promise is, of course, made by other religions.

Generally, the pattern is if you live a certain way, you will receive peace and wholeness. It's a promise that's made in darker hues by addictive substances, by pornography, and by affairs. It's a promise made even by Disney movies. Think of Elsa in *Frozen* proclaiming, no right, no wrong, no rules for me. I'm free. Let it go. That, more than anything, is the modern dogma of how to find wholeness.

[18:13] And none of it works. It doesn't heal the brokenness we feel. It doesn't answer the ache in our heart for something better.

It doesn't give us lasting peace. And that's why the psalm says, don't be an idiot. Don't fall for the false promises. But God promises that salvation is near those who fear him.

That his glory may dwell in our land. What does that mean? Well, it means that God comes to those who fear him. That is, revere him and respect his holiness.

And he comes to them through Jesus. And Jesus brings salvation because he deals with the problem of our broken selves. That is, he deals with our sin.

And he promises also to deal with that problem of the broken world. And that's what's anticipated when the psalmist says, God's glory will dwell in our land.

[19:14] Peace comes through God's salvation. The temptation for us, and this is displayed in all of the ways we just mentioned about where we can so often look elsewhere for peace and wholeness.

The temptation is to find peace within ourselves or to find it in following a set of rules. But if we're broken, well, we're never going to find peace within ourselves.

And we're never going to find peace in someone else. And we're never going to find peace in following rules because we're never going to be able to keep them well enough. But we can find peace in the one who had no sin.

And we can find peace in someone who kept God's rules perfectly. And we can find peace in someone who dealt with our sin by taking the cost of it upon himself when he died on the cross.

Paul tells us in Colossians, when you were dead in your sins, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us.

[20 : 21] He has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And in Ephesians, Paul says that Christ himself is our peace.

That he comes and preaches to all who believe. And in Philippians, we have a promise that the peace of God that transcends understanding will guard our hearts and our minds.

And Jesus, well, he himself said, peace, I leave with you. My peace, I give you. I do not give you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

The point I'm making is that peace comes through knowing Jesus and having him take on the burden of our sin. In Jesus, our sins are paid for.

In Jesus, we're then equipped to live a life that is free from the power of sin. And in Jesus, we have a peace that follows us through all of our life. Now, that doesn't mean that we never feel anxious or worried or burdened.

[21 : 29] But it does mean that when life throws everything at us, well, we know we have God himself with us through the storm. And we know that there is an eternal hope when the storms of life are all over.

That is, we have hope in the world to come. So we can have peace now, but it's a deposit, if you like, of the fuller peace to come in the world to come.

What is that world to come going to look like? What is it that God is promising to us? The Bible has got lots of images for it. This is how Psalm 85 does it.

From verse 9, These are slightly odd verses.

When I was learning Hebrew, I had to translate these verses in an exam. And though I did know the vocabulary, I found translating the phrase really quite hard. Because the idea of righteousness and peace, kissing each other, it just seemed so odd.

[22 : 54] It wasn't what I was expecting to find. It's quite unique imagery. The four things that are mentioned here, they're all attributes of God. Love, in particular, is steadfast covenant love.

The word is hesed. We're learning a lot of Hebrew today. I mentioned the words. It's a helpful one to know. And it conveys the never ending, never failing love that God has for his people.

Faithfulness is mentioned. That is, God in his faithfulness is always true. He's always faithful to his promises and to his people.

Righteousness. Well, God is always good. He's always perfect. He's always holy. And peace.

Shalom, as we mentioned earlier. God is the God of peace and wholeness.

He himself is our peace. God's glory will dwell in the world when he remakes this broken world and fills it with his love and faithfulness, his righteousness and his peace.

[23 : 57] In the new worlds that the gospel promises, the whole creation will reflect the perfections of God. Faithfulness will spring forth from the earth and righteousness will look down from the heavens.

The psalmist is saying that every square inch will be perfect, will be how it was meant to be and more. And for the psalmist in a land ravaged by war and exile, the promise of harvest then would we see and God's good gifts.

That's a potent one. This is a world without want, without scarcity, without inequalities that mean the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. A world without poverty, a world without greed.

And most importantly, a world where God is with his people forever. As we said, the whole sin problem has distanced us from God.

That's the issue that's at stake. And why the world is such a mess. Why we're such a mess. But God will be with us forever in the world to come.

[25 : 06] No more distance. Only the closeness of a father's embrace. Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps. And that's the psalmist saying that God is coming.

He's coming. The New Testament portrays this wonderfully visually in Revelation with this picture of the new world. This is John's vision of the world to come.

And in symbolic language, but it captures just the beauty of what we can expect. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.

And there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them.

[26 : 09] They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away.

That is the future hope of Christianity. The world remade, the world perfected, God dwelling with his people.

No more tears, no more death. The world as it should be. This is the world to come that we long for. Even if you don't know Jesus, this is what you deep down desire.

Ashton recently bought me a record by my favorite musician at the moment, a singer called Johnny Flynn. And this album, which is a collaboration between him and a travel writer called Robert McFarlane.

There's a song in it called the world to come. They've even turned it into a picture book for children. So I've been reading it to Eden, which has been quite nice. It's a beautiful song. It's a beautiful book. And the refrain in this song goes like this.

[27 : 21] There's a blackbird perched in the branches of the silver birch, growing from my chambered heart, singing through the rising dark, singing of the world to come.

It's a song which walks us through nature and pictures this blackbird singing through the ages like nature's constant refrain. And in its song, it sings of a world to come.

Now, I don't think Flynn and McFarlane have the hope that the psalmist does, but their song captures a hope that I think is innate within all of us.

And it speaks a lot more truth than I think even they know. Because Paul even says that creation groans for this new world, just as the blackbird in the song sings for it.

And the song illustrates that deep down we all know that the only hope for the world is that it be remade. Our only hope in a broken world is a better world to come.

[28 : 24] It's why the African-American spirituals are so powerful. They were rooted in a hope of God's promises of the world to come. A world where the chains are broken, injustices are paid for, and peace and wholeness, shalom, reigns.

As we close, I want to address one final question. Is all this just wishful thinking, or is this real hope? Well, it is a real hope, and I'll tell you why.

It's because Christ has proved that there is a life to come. He died, and he was raised. Paul says if Christ has not been raised, well, your faith is futile.

You're still in your sins. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. And Paul also says, therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come.

The old has gone. The new is here. Because Christ has been raised, Christians throughout the ages have sung with hope in this broken world that there is a better world to come.

[29 : 41] And so that's what we're going to do. We're going to finish our time together with singing. Because that is our expectation in Christ. We sing of a glimpse of the good.

Singing of the hope that grows as we follow him. Singing through the rising dark. Singing in the broken world. Singing of the world to come. Singing to Christ, our King.

Let's pray.