



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Lent 3

March 20, 2022

The Sons of Korah Psalm 85

¹ LORD, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. ² You forgave the iniquity of your people; you covered 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, 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 saints; but let them not turn back to folly. ⁹ Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him, that glory may dwell in our land.

¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other. ¹¹ Faithfulness springs up from the ground, and righteousness looks down from the sky. ¹² Yes, the LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. ¹³ Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way.

Korah was the great-grandson of Levi, the third son of Jacob. His grandfather was Kohath, and his uncle was Aaron, the Priest. Though he was part of the Levitical family of servants in and to God's House, he was not part of the Aaronic priestly line, and, therefore, was destined to more menial tasks, of which he and his sons grew increasingly dissatisfied. Korah, along with Reubenite malcontents Dathan and Abiram, and 250 other men, was swallowed by the earth in Numbers 16 for rebellion against God's appointed leader, Moses. It was a humiliating disgrace for Korah and his descendants, adding insult to the superlatively supernatural loss of life.

But God is the Author of grace, not disgrace, and would not condemn all of Korah's family for the sinful actions of some. Korah's line would be restored by our merciful God. Seven generations later, God raised up Samuel to be a mighty prophet and the one He would send to anoint David as the quintessential King of Israel.

David's relationship with the Sons of Korah would be an important one. One group of Korahites (1 Chronicles 12:6) joined him in various military exploits and won the reputation of being expert warriors.

The most remarkable thing about the Sons of Korah, however, is that they became great leaders in choral and orchestral music in the tabernacle. Heman, Asaph, and others played a vital role in the thanksgiving services when the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Jerusalem. David formed an elaborate organization for song, instrumental music, and prophesying through these men.



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Of all the Psalms, eleven are attributed to the Sons of Korah. They are quite beautiful and express a spirit of gratitude and humility toward God. Luther observes that the psalms of the Sons of Korah almost always sing of Christ's incarnation and marriage to the Church. They are joyful and filled with merriment. David's psalms, on the other hand, deal more with Christ's Passion and Resurrection. God speaks through him of weighty subjects, while through the Sons of Korah He communicates with levity and cheer. Such is the spirit of our Psalm appointed for today: Psalm 85.

In keeping with Luther's observation, there's a strong message of reconciliation here. God's people have been restored by Him and they desire that He does so again. From what has He restored them? It's likely that this psalm can be dated after the return of the Children of Israel from decades of exile in Babylon (Neh. 4). But, as we'll see in the wording of this psalm, the Sons of Korah have more than that in mind. Let's hear from them:

¹ LORD, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

² You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you covered all their sin. *Selah*

³ You withdrew all your wrath;
you turned from your hot anger.

At first, it sounds like it's all about the holdings of the Children of Israel, their land and other possessions. So, you could conclude that what was topmost in their thoughts was regaining their ancestral homeland and returning to their homes after generations of living in bondage to a foreign power. But then, suddenly, everything shifts. Why were they exiles? Why had God allowed them to be carted off to Babylon for 70 years?

It was their own sin. The prophets had warned them. Jeremiah, especially, had foretold:

⁸ "Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, ⁹ behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the LORD, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. ¹⁰ Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp. ¹¹ This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years" (Jer. 25:8-1).

The Children of Israel had rebelled against God. They were worshiping false gods and idols. God sent prophet after prophet to them to turn their hearts back to Him, but they



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refused. Finally, He had had enough. And, since they insisted on allowing foreign gods into their nation and their hearts, He allowed them to be carried off, body and soul, into a foreign land. The Sons of Korah recognized that their captivity was not merely to the Babylonians, but to their own sinful behavior, their own thoughts, words, and deeds which were not in harmony with the expressed Will of God.

But, now they were home. God had turned away His hot anger, forgiven their sin, and restored them to their land. Happy ending? Not in this world; not for long.

Have you ever had this experience? You have small children. They make a mess. You clean up the mess. Two minutes later, there's a new mess. God deals with the same kind of thing with us *all the time*. The messes we make don't stay cleaned up; we keep making new ones over and over again.

In fact, even though the Children of Israel had just returned from Babylon, the mess may already have started again. Now they had the task of rebuilding. Can you imagine? You've been held captive in a foreign country for three generations. You finally get to come home to your family's homestead. It's been 70 years. What kind of shape do you think it'll be in? It's a mess! And you have the job, now, of cleaning it up. I've seen my granddaughters cleaning up their own messes; they're not happy to be doing it. And the bickering rises to new heights: "I didn't make that part of the mess, *you* did." "I did not!" "Yes, you did!" The Sons of Korah could see it happening again right before their eyes. And so they pray:

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,

that your people may rejoice in you?

⁷ Show us your mercy, LORD, and grant us your salvation.

Oh, dear God, don't let us go back down that road already! Please don't let us lock ourselves into a pattern we can never get out of! Restore us now, before we're too far gone. Have mercy, O Lord. *kyrie eleison!*

And He does have mercy:

⁸ Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints;
but let them not turn back to folly.

⁹ Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,
that glory may dwell in our land.

Not just that we will dwell in our land, but that glory would dwell in our land. And not just



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our own glory. After having suffered the humiliation of succumbing to a foreign power, they weren't likely feeling very confident about their own glory. Ah, but let the glory of God dwell in our land! God – the God who has saved us – let His glory dwell here!

The salvation of God is near to those who fear Him, but far from those who do not. The Sons of Korah had it in their own family history, didn't they. They knew of their ancestor who rebelled against God and was swallowed alive by the earth. They learned a long time ago that God is not to be trifled with. The arrogance of mankind is not only appalling; it's astounding. Only a fool would poke a sleeping gorilla and yet we poke a stick in God's eye all the time. We yell at Him. We blame Him. We accuse Him. We criticize Him. We curse Him. And His mercy and grace, which are meant to draw us close to Him sometimes only make us more brave to insult Him. It's a wonder the earth hasn't swallowed us! But there's also a reason.

¹⁰ Mercy and truth meet;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.
¹¹ Truth springs up from the ground,
and righteousness looks down from the sky.

Here four characters are presented allegorically interacting with each other. What does it mean that mercy and truth meet, that righteousness and peace kiss each other? It means that these characters are intimately familiar with one another. Strangers may kiss, but they're not strangers afterward. No, there is a close connection between mercy (the ESV calls it "steadfast love"), truth (which the ESV translates as "faithfulness"), righteousness, and peace, because they're all the same character!

Jesus is the embodiment of God's *mercy*, who left His throne in glory to wallow in the mire of earth. For what purpose? To pay the penalty of mankind's sin. It wasn't even a debt He owed! In fact, He was the Creditor. We owed *Him!* And yet, in compassion, He gave His life to balance the ledger, erasing our insurmountable debt incurred against Him.

Jesus says in John 14:6: "I am the way, the *truth*, and the life." When He stood before Pilate, He was asked, "So you are a king?" To which He answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37). Pilate then asked Him, "What is truth?" Jesus could well have said, "I am!" After He had been put to death, He sprang up from the ground, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (have died).

Jesus is our *righteousness* who makes us righteous before God. He looked down from the sky and saw our need. He spent His righteousness making us righteous. We are justified – declared to be in right relationship with God – on account of the righteousness of Christ.

Jesus is also our *peace*. Paul writes to the Romans: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1).



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Isaiah wrote of Him, that He would be called the “Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6).

The Sons of Korah knew reconciliation from their own family history. They knew what Korah had done and what had happened to him; they also knew how they had been restored in the eyes of God, and how God had used them mightily, both in defense of David and in sharing with him in the worship of God in His house. They loved being restored. They loved that their people had been restored. And they knew they would need it again – over and over again.

There are many ways in which our contemporary culture can be compared to ancient Israel. We are stiff-necked, stubborn, rebellious. We take God for granted, or don’t take Him at all. One thing we do not have in common with them, however, is that we have never fallen under the control of a foreign power. We ought not make the mistake of presuming that will never happen. Can God continue to bless our waywardness? You may be thinking that you are not wayward. I pray that’s true, but it may not matter. Jeremiah, who had called God’s people to repentance year after year, went with them to exile in Babylon. The faithful in Israel were not spared. We may not be, either. Let us pray for our nation, our neighbors, and our families, that God would lead us to repentance, that He may turn us from our current course, that He may withdraw His wrath, forgive our iniquities, and restore our fortunes – not merely the possessions and property we enjoy here, but, more importantly, our right relationship with Him, for that, in any case, is what will matter at the last.

And here’s the thing: God is happy to do so.

¹² Yes, the LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

¹³ Righteousness will go before him
and make his footsteps a way.

Beloved, not only has the Lord given what is good, He’s given what is best: His own Son. In the end, the land will yield its increase: the earth will give up its dead. The bodies of those who sleep in Jesus will spring forth, as He did, and will ascend to meet Him in the air. Christ has gone before us. Christ has prepared our way. Regardless of what happens in this world, His footsteps have beaten down the path to heaven and His righteous sacrifice for us has unlocked the gates. Because of Christ, God has forgiven our iniquity and covered our sin. Because of Christ, He has withdrawn His wrath and turned away His anger. Because of Christ, we are restored daily in His mercy. Let us be glad and rejoice. We pray:

Remember not, O God, our transgressions against us, and record not our sins in Your book, but cast them into the depth of the sea, and remember them no more forever. Impute to us the obedience of Your Son, Jesus Christ, who fulfilled all righteousness for



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us and gave Himself as a sacrifice for our sins. Let us live for His sake and enable us to walk worthy of our calling. Amen.