

Psalms 126

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[0 : 00] Do be seated and turn back to Psalm 126.! The Clash.

London has got plenty to sing about, hasn't there? Lots of material to go off. But what would you sing if you lived in Zion? In Jerusalem.

This evening we come to one of a collection of psalms called the Songs of Ascent. There are 15 of them from Psalm 120 to 134.

And many of the Songs of Ascent focus on the city, the city of Zion. They are city songs, which makes sense because of why and when they were used.

They were used on festival days amongst God's people as they came to the city of Jerusalem. Like at the Passover, for example.

[1 : 23] There would have been an influx of people going up to Jerusalem. Going up to Mount Zion in Jerusalem where the temple would have been.

And singing as they went to the focal point of worship of Israel. But sometimes it is not easy to sing about Zion.

About God's city. About God's place with his people. I wonder how you would feel about singing about the church in public.

There are lots of songs written about the church, aren't there? I dare say that we would sing those songs in public with a slight tinge of embarrassment. Maybe blushing slightly.

God's city, God's place can look pretty pathetic, can't it? It can be a little bit cringey. What seems clear as well in this Song of Ascent is there is a similar feeling, if you look at verse 4, that the situation as they sing this song, Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev.

[2 : 43] Let me take you by the hand and lead you through the streets of Zion. And the vibe is not good. We are dry and dusty people, living in a dry place.

Lifeless people, Lord. Singing about Zion as it appears to the world outside can be quite difficult.

I read this story in the news just this week. You know Hull, the city of Hull has been voted the city of culture for 2017, hasn't it?

Believe it or not. But the day after it was voted in as the city of culture, fans of Hull AFC bellowed a new song to fans of Crystal Palace Football Club.

They sung this song. It's a simple song. Here for the culture. You're only here for the culture. Here for the culture. It was ironic, wasn't it?

[3 : 55] It was a self-deprecating slant on their own city. It was sarcastic. Hull do not play cultured football. Neither do you travel from London to Hull for the culture.

And I suspect that is sometimes how we feel about Zion. Or the church. God's place with God's people. It feels dry, doesn't it, often?

It feels insignificant. But I want us to see the mood shift in this song. Because what the world sees as an ironic joke becomes a triumphant prayer in Psalm 126.

God's people realise that the past of God's redemption has a way of repeating itself. And what God has done before in Zion is a sign of what will come after in Zion.

So three things to think about tonight. Firstly, remembering the dream days of Zion. Remembering the dream days of Zion. The song begins.

[5 : 09] Imagine them going up to Zion singing this. And it begins, doesn't it, with the theme of remembering. Verse 1. When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion.

We were like those who dream. They look back, don't they, and reminisce. Do you remember the dream days, they say. When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion.

And it's a lovely image, isn't it, if you flick over to verse 2. Mouths filled with laughter. Tongues with shouts of joy. There's a difference of opinion about what event they're actually talking about here.

It could be the return from exile of Israel. It could be when David brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem for the first time.

Both of those events had plenty of shouting and singing though, didn't they? Back in 2 Samuel 6. You can read the party atmosphere there. David dances before the Ark as they go up to Jerusalem. [6:19] Or in Ezra and Nehemiah, they rejoice after the return from exile. But either way, this memory is in the national consciousness. When Zion was restored.

And it was dreamy. There was something uncanny about it. It seemed unreal. It was so wonderful. It was a time when words just weren't enough.

Joy. Joy. Joy. It was a time we just let ourselves go. Our mouths were filled with laughter. Our tongues couldn't even speak words.

It was just shouts. It was spontaneous. It was spontaneous. And it's not whipped up emotion, is it? It is a response to what God has done.

Verse 1. The Lord restored. Verse 3. The Lord has done great things. So the point for them is, don't forget that Zion has not always seemed the way it might seem to us now.

[7:30] We have felt this exceeding joy, have we not? There was a time when it seemed better. When Zion was restored.

It's perhaps easy in a crowd, isn't it, to pretend to be happy. Do you feel like that at parties sometimes?

I feel like that. I think I've just hit middle age. Because that's how I feel sometimes at parties.

Laughter and joyous shouting can just feel pretty surface, can't it?

It can feel engineered. We're good at pretending to do joy. They say that if you eat some cheese and then you say 20 times what it is you want to dream of, you will dream about it.

I want to dream about candy floss. I want to dream about candy floss. I want to dream about candy floss. But this is not engineered joy. This is not an engineered dream.

[8:32] This is the joy of God's restoration. It is real. And it's deep laughter. It is mouths filled with laughter.

And the shouts of joy are so different from the world's kind of frantic party time. So much so that the world sees the difference, don't they?

In verse 2, they said among the nations, the Lord has done great things for them. This is no engineered laughter. This is not the world's laughter.

This is the Lord's laughter. Because there is something truly wonderful about restoration, isn't there? I saw a video online the other day of a son who tracks down his dad's old car from when he was a teenager.

A 1965 Chevy Impala. It's a classic American car. And he found this car on the other side of the United States.

[9:38] Tracked it down to a garage where it was rotting away. And worked on it secretly. Restored it to factory conditions.

A certain member of our congregation did something similar with a motorbike, seems to remember. And he brings the father out onto the drive. And there is this car that he knew when he was a teenager.

And his reaction at restoration is just overwhelming. It's the same. It's the same, he keeps saying. I just don't believe what I'm seeing.

Is this real? Restoration. Spurgeon said, the bitterness adds to the sweetness.

To be restored, we need it to have been low. We need it to have been rotting in the grave. But the bitterness of that adds to the sweetness in restoration.

[10:47] And it's dreaming, this memory. And this has been Zion's story in the past. There have been times where Zion has let itself go a bit.

Where it's been spontaneously joyful. We have corporately, historically, as God's people, rejoiced. There have been times of great rejoicing in Zion.

Great celebration there. Remember David's rule in Zion. The return from exile in Zion. The incarnation in Zion.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly. The resurrection in Zion. So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy.

Pentecost in Zion. The disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. Zion has certainly seen its joy in days of old, hasn't it?

[11 : 53] There's certainly been some joy in Zion over the years. And these dreams of restoration have been experienced over and over again in Zion.

It's been our collective recurring dream. It's in our national consciousness. There's been some joy in Zion and it's happened again and again and again.

That is what they, and that is what we, remember. But maybe we are asking, well, what then has happened to the dream?

What then has happened to our joy? Maybe we are just pretending to do joy. They remember the dream days of Zion.

But secondly, they are now living in what feels like the dry days. The dry days. If there was one day that you could relive from your memory, I wonder what it would be.

[13 : 01] It's easy for me, this one, because it was a holiday. A few friends of ours, a few years ago, we went on holiday to France.

And we stopped off in Paris. And there was a friend we had there who lived there. He had a good job. And he had a sports car, which we'd never seen.

And we were hassling him. Can we go out in the sports car? Eventually he said, yes, let's go out.

And he opened the garage door and there was a bright red Ferrari.

I don't know what kind of Ferrari it was, but it had light leather seats. And he said, let's go out. So we went out. The top was down. It was a warm summer evening, driving through the streets of Paris.

The smell of the summer air. The deep sound of the V12 engine. And the exhilarating acceleration. And then I woke up.

[14 : 05] There is nothing more disappointing, is there, than waking up from a good dream. And the cold light of day hits you. Monday morning.

And that is something of the sense of this psalm. We remember the dream days. We know about the dream days. But it feels like we've opened our eyes.

The picture in the prayer of verse 4 are like streams in the Negev. Negev was a region in the south of Judah, which was notoriously dry.

It was a barren desert. And once you wake up from a dream, you can't go back, can you? Once you awake, it feels like the dream is lost.

And it's like they are suffering from spiritual insomnia. They are in dry and restless places. And there is no sleep.

[15 : 06] The dream feels as though it's over. They are glad. It says in verse 3, doesn't it? Because they remember what's been done in the past.

But there is this sense that, what about now, Lord? Now it's the cold light of day. And they feel detached from the yesterday, the joy of yesterday.

What has happened to our joy? Mouths are not filled with laughter. There is no shouting for joy. And as they remember, of course, nostalgia can be a dangerous thing, can't it?

When we look back to, maybe some of us, when we look back and wish we were a bit younger, back to the good old days. There's an unhelpful way of doing that in the church, isn't there?

But I don't think as they look back, this is just nostalgia. They are not just trying to whip up the dream days of old. The prayer in verse 4 is interesting.

[16 : 15] The Negev was this dust bowl. But once a year, something amazing would happen there. It was a kind of meteorological phenomenon. Whereby once a year, a monsoon-style rain would fill and flood the area.

There would be a sudden downpour of a few days of rain. And it would flood the region and bring life. It would quench this thirsty land.

So they are kind of clutching at the old photographs of yesterday, wistfully hoping. But they aren't defeated.

They are looking at the past and saying, because the past has a way of repeating itself in God's redemption, like it does in the Negev every year, although it looks unlikely, just as God predictably sends rain in that place every year, and it happens again and again, they believe that he will flood their hearts again.

That he will restore them again. Going up to Jerusalem. And so this is not just a dream that is lost.

[17 : 45] They know that it is a recurring dream. And they are asking for the Lord to bring it back again. As they remember it, it's not a nostalgic fantasy, but a sure hope.

God has done it before. Now do it again, they pray. Remembering the dream days. Living in the dry days.

Thirdly and lastly, reaping the best days. Notice that the prayer is for a speedy, dramatic quenching, isn't it?

Restore our fortunes like streams in the Negev. They want floods, don't they? They want floods of restoration like before. We want revival.

We want unadulterated joy again. We want the party atmosphere. And we want it quickly and suddenly. But then we get this strange shift in the metaphor, don't we?

[18 : 55] And the image of the psalm goes from urban restoration, from Zion, to agricultural language.

Of restoring a city to sowing seeds. Do you see that in verse 5? The floods will be floods, but they will be floods of tears.

Sowing seeds of tears. God's restoration will come again. But it will come through tears.

Not in spite of tears. Not in spite of suffering. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

It is through sowing tears and through suffering that they will be restored. And so the very weakness of Zion that they feel in this moment, the restless waking hours of suffering, the very tears cried in Zion will be seeds for its future joy.

[20 : 12] When you think about it, it is an odd thing planting seeds, isn't it? Especially at this point in history, your seeds are your life. This is an agricultural society.

They are your only means of sustenance. And so it is bizarre, isn't it, how God sets up the world so that in order to live, you have to throw away the one thing that keeps you alive.

It's strange, isn't it? You throw seeds away. It is a world where throwing life into the ground brings back abundance.

When a seed goes into the ground, it dies. Jesus teaches that, doesn't he, in John 12. I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone.

But if it dies, it bears much fruit. And so this real joy cannot come first without tears. This is God's farming plan.

[21 : 22] It cannot come without suffering. It cannot come without death. And then a harvest of joy will return. The bitterness adds to the sweetness of God's restoration.

For some reason, God knows it is better for us that the laughter will be deeper, that the shout of joy will be louder when he restores through suffering, through death.

And he brings us up from that, rather than just sort of clicking his fingers before Genesis 3 and whipping us all up into heaven, happily ever after.

God works by restoring. The bitterness of suffering adds to the sweetness. And this is the way of Christian restoration.

Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. Laying life down. Shedding tears in the Christian life.

[22 : 34] Weeping in the Christian life is to sow for future joy. That is how God runs this operation of farming.

And whilst that is a general rule for every Christian, notice how the psalm switches from the plural to the singular. Verse 5.

Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy. It's sort of proverbial, isn't it? This is the rule of how God does things. But then verse 6.

He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy. There is still a sense that this is any individual Christian, isn't it?

Any individual person who is trusting in the Lord. But that he figure is throughout the psalms, isn't it? Blessed is the man.

[23 : 35] Psalm 1 begins. Hebrews 5. He. It singles out one man. One man who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing.

It singles out one farmer who went out sowing, sowing with tears, sowing in suffering. Hebrews 5 speaks of the Lord Jesus weeping tears of anguish.

He is sorrowful even to death in the garden, isn't he? And you wonder whether his tears, perhaps in the garden, are mingled with the blood that he sweats in Mark's Gospel.

His tears are weighty, aren't they? His suffering is clean and meritorious and substitutionary.

His tears are pregnant with life. His suffering is laden with fruit. His tears shed in Zion are loaded.
[25 : 00] And he went out weeping. And one day he will return with his sheaves under his arm. Us.
His harvest. And he will return with shouts of joy. And all of his tears and all of his bitterness will add to the sweetness that he will enjoy.

And we will share in his joy. And even though we've seen the dream days in God's redemption in history, these will be the best days.

There will be greater days of joy to come in Zion. In the new Jerusalem. Because Jesus has sown great tears.

And he will reap his harvest. Samuel Taylor Coleridge once said, If men could learn from history what lessons it might teach us.

[26 : 09] But passion and party blind our eyes. And the light which experience gives us is a lantern on the stern which shines only on the waves behind.

That's his poetic way of saying we've got to learn from history. The history of God's redemption in Zion in the past sheds light.

And so we are not hopelessly optimistic as God's people. We remember his past restorations.

And we see that this is a recurring theme. That this is not a nostalgic fantasy. Because what God has done before, he will do again.

And we know this especially now because the Lord Jesus, will reap joy from his tears. He will reap laughter from weeping.

[27 : 12] He will reap shouts of joy. The harvest of the Lord Jesus is coming. And we from our tears in the Christian life will reap joy there with him.

So we may feel dry. But the floods are coming. Again. And so this is Zion's song. This is our song. You're only here for the culture. It's not an ironic joke for us, this song, is it? Because we will be like those who dream again. With mouths filled with laughter.

With shouts of joy. And they will say among the nations, The Lord has done great things for them.

And the bitterness will add, it will add all the more to the sweetness.

Let's pray.