

Psalm 126

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[0 : 00] Steak and chips, strawberries and cream, Batman and Superman.! Some things in life just belong together.

! Growing up, I remember my granddad laughing aloud, watching Laurel and Hardy. Do you remember them?! If you're too young, then your homework is to YouTube them later. Comedy gold. The hapless pair were always getting into trouble, but it was impossible to imagine one without the other.

Psalm 126 is different. It's full of things we don't normally see together. Unlikely duos.

In this song, there is laughter and longing, triumph and tears, praise and pain.

[1 : 03] Such apparent contradictions are normal for believers. When the Apostle Paul summed up his ministry, he said he was sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. And that is the tone of this psalm.

It's a song that introduces us to the tensions of the Christian life. It's a song for when life is good, and a song for when life is bad.

It's a song we could sing in the major and the minor key at exactly the same time. Just picture the 6'6", 18 stone rugby player belting out the national anthem on his debut, bursting with pride, with tears streaming down his face.

That is what this psalm feels like. Your Bible might highlight that it's one of the psalms of ascent. And that makes it one of a special collection, which was sung by the Israelites as they travelled to Jerusalem.

They made the journey several times a year. And like many families, they had songs for the road. Like many of us who have CDs that skip because they've been played so often, God's people were no different.

[2 : 39] Psalms 120 to 134 were always on repeat for the Israelites. They never stopped singing this album of 15 songs.

It reminded them that they were pilgrims on their way to glory. And the lyrics have been popular ever since.

One writer calls them an old dog-eared songbook that Christians keep rediscovering. Psalm 126 is a song from that book.

You may have been a believer for decades. You may have just got going on the Christian way. You may be examining it from a distance.

But whoever you are, this is a song for you. Notice, first of all, in verses 1 to 3, the rescue Christians celebrate.

[3 : 41] The rescue Christians celebrate. The psalm begins with joyful praise. The writer looks back to a time when God's people experienced his rescue in a dramatic, powerful, wonderful way.

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.

It was an experience that almost seemed too good to be true. They could hardly believe it. God's rescue made them feel like they were walking on air.

It left them in a kind of trance-like state. Life was like a dream. It's not 100% clear what event the psalmist was referring to.

It may have been the exodus. It may have been the return from exile. It may have been another dramatic victory. And in one sense, it doesn't really matter.

[4 : 48] Whatever it was, it had had a dramatic effect on God's people. Just look at the way it impacted their emotions.

This great big rescue resulted in laughter and singing and joy. There was celebration. Their chains fell off.

Their hearts were free. They had lived with huge burdens on their backs. But now those burdens had been lifted.

They felt 10 feet tall. They were so happy that they thought their hearts would explode. One of the things I've loved about being at IPC is saying a creed together each week.

I've got a really good friend who used to go to a church that said the Apostles' Creed at each service. And my friend said there was one line in the creed that used to make his heart skip a beat. [5 : 58] He said there was one line in the creed that used to make his heart skip a beat. I believe in the forgiveness of sins. He told me that when he said that every single week with brothers and sisters, it made him want to punch the air.

It reminded him that God was gracious. That however much he'd slipped or stumbled over the past seven days, his guilt had been atoned for. I believe in the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus had died for him. And it filled him with joy. God's people often feel like that. They know what it's like to feel huge relief at his rescue.

Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven. That is why they sing. God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness, says Paul.

And brought us into the kingdom of the son he loves. In whom we have redemption. The forgiveness of sins. So many of the stories that we love have echoes of this great redemption.

[7 : 10] Think of Jean Valjean in Les Mis. Or Andy the Frame in the Shawshank Redemption. The reason we love those films is because rescue like that is good and true and beautiful.

To see somebody experience deliverance is one of the most wonderful things in the world. When miners escape.

When hostages are freed. When children are pulled from the rubble. When you see that. When you experience that. You want to share it with others. You tweet. You text.

You talk about it. And it's the same with this psalm. The restoration. The rescue. Of God's people was not.

Some kind of private event. No. It was a public rescue. Do you see that in verse 2? Then they said among the nations. The Lord has done great things for them.

[8 : 13] People were looking on. The Lord has done great things for them. The Lord has done great things for us. We are glad. See it wasn't enough.

For Israel to experience this rescue on their own. It had a Christmas feel. Good news. Of great joy for all people.

See tonight. Christians. We are people who celebrate. What God has done. Christians are not afraid of emotion.

Sometimes we think the Christian life is just about thinking. But feelings matter too. God wants to win the hearts and minds of his people.

Now this is not to say that we all need to become extroverts. Or South Americans. Carlos and Clara here. I don't know if I see them. But stuffy.

[9 : 19] Buttoned up religion. Is a million miles away. From the Christianity of the New Testament. The journalist.

H.L. Mencken. Once said. There was. A kind of. Super. Uber. Religious person. Whose greatest. I love this. Whose greatest. Most haunting fear. Was that someone.

Somewhere was enjoying themselves. It can never be so with us. We have. A father. Who sprints. After prodigals. A father.

Who kills. The fattened calf. Puts a ring on her finger. A cloak. Around her neck. And says. Let's have a party. Christians. Christians. Are joyful.

Attractive people. They love. To remember. God's rescue. They know. From personal experience. That Jesus. Their savior.

[10 : 19] Has been. Very. Very. Kind. To them. They have a kind of. I can hardly believe. I'm a Christian.

Attitude. They're stunned. That Jesus. Would love them. And give himself. In their place.

And can it be. That I should gain. An interest. In the savior's blood. Died he for me. Who caused his pain.

For me. Who him to death pursued. Amazing love. How can it be. That thou my God. Should die for me. See.

It's so easy. To forget. So easy. To become. Negative. So easy. To become cynical. Just slowly. Over time. What has happened.

[11:20] To all your joy. Paul asked. The religious Galatians. So easy. To lose. Maybe tonight.

You're someone. Who's. Just got used. To disappointment. Who's been let down. So many times. That you think. Somehow. Life with God.

Is going to turn out. The same. Maybe you've been beaten up. By painful circumstances. Is your heart shrinking.

Have you forgotten. That the Bible ends. With the ultimate. Happily ever after. A day of such glory. And wonder. That it will be almost impossible.

To take in. To sin. Christians are people with more reason to laugh and sing than anyone else in the world they glory in God's rescue they love him for his cross joy is the serious business of heaven said Lewis joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian said Chesterton joy in God joy in his goodness and faithfulness and love the rescue Christians celebrate secondly the renewal Christians crave the renewal Christians crave verses 4 to 6 as I was preparing this sermon there was one phrase from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address that I couldn't get out of my head can you tell I'm training as a history teacher what a geek address is one of the most revered speeches of all time

[13:16] America which had been conceived in liberty was engaged in a great civil war the nation was in danger of the nation and Lincoln said that what was needed was a new birth of freedom the psalmist knew that feeling look at his cry in verse 4 restore our fortunes oh lord one translation puts it like this and now God do it again bring rain to our drought stricken lives see the psalmist see the psalmist knew what it was like to long for God's renewal even after he had experienced God's rescue he was a real believer he had so much to give thanks for but there was still this tension in his life and he prays he asks God to restore the fortunes of his people isn't it just so true to life so true to real Christian experience great moments of deliverance are so often followed by times of great difficulty even after God has taken us out of the pit and put a new song in our mouth well there can still be problems to face as we move forward even when my sins have been forgiven and my citizenship is in heaven life can still be hard this was true after the return from exile

God's people came back to the land but the book of Haggai if you read it it makes it clear that there was still real apathy and indifference amongst the Israelites for a considerable amount of time life with God well it seemed extremely low key and every new Christian experiences this after the honeymoon period they quickly discover that their new relationship with Jesus doesn't keep them from the troubles of living in a broken world they haven't been teleported to the new creation they still live with the fallout from the fall there can be much that makes them feel very weak and tearful and fearful life can feel more like a desert than a garden they start to long for renewal in their life and in the life of God's people this longing for renewal is one of the hallmarks of genuine faith one of the signs that we are converted is that we start to care about the fortunes of Zion in bible language

Zion is simply shorthand for the people of God and after we trust in Jesus the state of his church it starts to become important to us we find ourselves praying about things we would never have prayed about before we don't just want restoration for ourselves no we long for the restoration of God's people the psalmist gives us two pictures to show us what this restoration this renewal looks like streams in a desert and sheaves at a harvest streams in a desert and sheaves at a harvest the commentators point out that one of these things is quick but the other is slow the Negev which is mentioned in verse 4 was a huge desert with ditches cut into the ground for most of the year the soil was baked by the sun but a sudden rain could make it teem with life almost overnight and sometimes

God works like that his renewal comes suddenly in a way that kind of takes our breath away think of some of the great revivals in church history or maybe seasons of growth in your own Christian life maybe a camp or a move or a new beginning that just opens you up to God in a fresh way God often works like that but it's not the only way is it do you see the second illustration the psalmist says that renewal also comes like a harvest what is rule 101 with the harvest it takes time psalmist says something very moving about it he says the people who reap are the people who weep verse 5 those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy he who goes out weeping bearing the seed for sowing shall come home with joy bringing his sheaves with him it's a beautiful picture isn't it the psalmist knows that joy and tears go side by side in the life of faith they're friends they're twins in the life of believers the psalmist knows there are plenty reasons in this world for

Christians to cry isn't that right we are not immune from sorrow we cry when we suffer we cry when we sin we cry when we're sick Christians cry when relationships break down they cry for loved ones who don't know the Lord they cry when longed for children die and God knows and sees and understands it all elsewhere in the psalms we're told that he stores all our tears in a bottle that every single one of them is precious to him like perfume that may be all you need to hear tonight there are so many times when our Christian service feels weak and small we feel like we're sowing tears sometimes we wonder if we've ever achieved anything at all for Jesus do you ever feel like that

[20 : 58] I think being a Christian in Britain today is to live in a day of small things and slow progress so think of a Christian faithfully attending a church meeting after a long draining day at work think of a parent pointing their children to Jesus and saying a simple prayer before bedtime think of a Christian reaching out to a colleague at work who's going through a hard time the card sent to encourage a friend the arm on the shoulder the verse sent by text hundreds of small seemingly insignificant moments but all of them part of the sowing that comes before an incredible harvest see the imagery at the end is so joyful isn't it it's all here to say none of your

Christian service is ever in vain none of it there will be a harvest and God never wastes pain each strand of sorrow has a place within his tapestry of grace some of the most joyful people I know are people who have endured incredible suffering when I read this psalm I thought of Naomi and I thought of Job both of them experienced God's renewal didn't they after times of great hardship and then I thought of two other people two living examples of psalm 126 one is a woman from the church that I grew up in on the isle of sky the phrase a breath of fresh air was invented for her she was one of those people that you heard before you saw and her

English accent and infectious laugh echoed round the church building every week we love to go to her big old falling down rambling house for Sunday lunch when I saw her recently she was exactly the same hair that was blonde is now grey but she still has an incredible smile she has endured a lot her husband and two of her grown up children some of the healthiest outdoor loving people you could ever imagine are now living with a debilitating genetic disease their muscles just wasting away life is very hard but she is still full of joy still encouraging others still active in her church still looking to the future the other is the man who led camps

I attended as a teenager his daughter a student at Aberdeen University went missing in India over 30 years ago and she has never been found it is almost impossible to try and imagine suffering like that it would be no surprise if he had become consumed with bitterness but he's not he has eyes that have shed many tears but they still twinkle with joy as someone said to me recently love just shines out of him that's what I want to be like when I grow up don't you young people children let me tell you a secret

I've not been here long but I know that this church is full of people like that people who have kept going as Christians despite lots of suffering people who have kept following Jesus after big changes or illness or after someone they love very much died people like that people like that are my heroes and I hope they'll be your heroes too you see they are people who wait for God's harvest suffering has woken them up to the fact that they are pilgrims it's helped them see what really matters in life they're people who long for

[26 : 45] God's renewal they know that God's great day of future joy will make up for all the disappointments of this age and while they wait while they wait they take great comfort from the fact that Jesus was a man of sorrows you see the path laid out in Psalm 126 is a path that Jesus walked joy and pain suffering and glory these are the realities that Jesus has tasted!

God said that Jesus the cross as he went to Calvary as he carried our sins on his shoulders Jesus knew he was redeeming men and women boys and girls a great multitude that no one can count for God the thought of that harvest which you are a part of if you are a Christian tonight the thought of that harvest filled his heart with joy he plunged right in to a world of sin and sorrow he wept and suffered and bled and died to bring many sons to glory one day we will see his scars one day we will see his face the kindest face we have ever seen and we will laugh and cry and dance and sing Amen