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Preacher: Guest Preacher

- [ 0 : 0 0 ] Well friends, can we open our Bibles please in Psalm 126? Let me just read the first few lines again.
- 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.
- Don't laugh in church. That was always drummed into me when I was a young boy. But there is a time to laugh and there is a time to cry.
- The Bible says that there is an appropriateness sometimes for laughter and there is an appropriateness for crying. This is a Psalm full of laughter, is it not? Look at verse 2.
- Then our mouth was filled with laughter. Again, we have that idea. In the last verse, we shall come home with shouts of joy. And so it's a Psalm about joy.
- [ 1 : 0 5 ] It's not just happiness, it's more than that. It's a life that is satiated with God, anointed in God, filled joy. Now I wonder is our faith is our experience, not just in church, but also with God.
- One which has elements of joy. It's not joy all the day, it's not joy every single hour of the day. That would be totally beyond reality.
- But yet there are times in our experience when, as the Psalmist said, our mouths are filled with laughter. So it's a Psalm about joy.
- But it's a Psalm also about toughness. Those who saw in tears. Again, that shows the reality of our lives.
- And one of the things I love about the Psalms is that the Psalms speak of our own experience. We can relate to them. There's not unreality in them.
- [ 2 : 0 7 ] Rather, we see in there an experience that matches our experience. And many of us know what it is to sow with tears.
- That's what ministry is like often in the church, where life can be solitary, poor, nasty, British, and sometimes short. So we're seeing here it's a Psalm about joy.
- It's a Psalm about toughness. But it's a Psalm about God. That's really important. Where does our joy come from? It says there that our joy comes from the Lord.
- The Lord has done great things for them. Now, remember, the Bible is written for us, but the Bible is not written about us primarily.
- The main hero, if you like, in the Bible is not us and what we have done, but it's still Lord Jesus Christ. It's about God and His mercy.
- [ 3 : 1 0 ] And so this Psalm is, yes, it's speaking about us, but it is also clearly about God. He is the main character.
- Well, you'll see then if you look at the passage that it's called a song of a sense. Now, I'm sure you know better than I do that the songs of a sense were songs that were written as the people would up to worship to Jerusalem.

This was a very religious age and people went and pilgrimage used to the annual feast. And of course it was pre-motorcar and they would walk. Jerusalem was on a hill and the temple was in the highest point of that hill.

And so the songs of a sense were sung as they ascended up that hill. And what are they singing on here? Well, they're reflecting when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion.

It's reflecting probably on the Babylonian captivity. You all know the Bible or many of you do. The people of Israel were taken captive and spent a long time in the land of Babylon.

[ 4 : 24 ] And it was really, really tough there. And God brought them out suddenly. He used a wicked man, a man called Cyrus, to take them out of captivity in the land of Babylon.

So you see there great contrasts. It's a sample of contrasts. The past is contrasted with the future. God's work is contrasted with our work.

Tears are contrasted with joy. But then deliverance comes and God does amazing things. So it's a psalm that speaks about what God has done, but yet what God is still to do.

And that's a very important topic if you like. Not just in the Old Testament, but certainly in the New Testament. That we've got all things in Christ.

That our salvation is absolutely complete, but there is more to come. There is completion, if you like, of the work of God, but yet there is still more to come.

[ 5 : 33 ] The fancy way of talking about it is the kingdom is not yet fully inaugurated. We have it all, but yet we've got more to come. So this morning let's look at this passage and I want us to notice four things about restoration.

The theme, if you like, is restoration and revival. And I'm not just going to apply this to the church. I'm not just going to apply this to those of us who are believers, but I'm going to apply to every single one of us as we look at this theme of restoration and or revival.

Four things. The first thing we notice here is that restoration makes us laugh. Restoration makes us laugh.

We were like those who dream, then our mouth was filled with laughter. Now it wasn't easy in captivity. We know how it felt.

Psalms 137 tells us that by the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

[ 6 : 48 ] It says we hung our harps and willows, our captors required us a song. And so you can imagine the people of God behind the barbed wire fence.

They are in exile from their people. They are away from their God or the signs of God's presence away from the temple.

And their captors were mocking them. Sing as a song. Sing as a happy song. And they said, how can we sing the Lord's song in this strange land?

So it was very, very difficult. For 70 years they were there. For 70 years it seemed to be an absolute mess.

I wonder can that word mess be described of your situation this morning or this afternoon? I know hardly any of you.

[ 7 : 46 ] I don't know what's going on in your lives. But the sum of you feel almost in that Babylonian captivity, your life is in a mess and God seems to be absent.

There are times in our lives when we felt the presence of God, but now we feel the absence of God. So that's what's happening here.

That's the background. They're miserable. They're in alienation. They're in captivity. And then suddenly they are released. That's how I'm saying here, restoration makes us laugh.

The release was so unexpected, the release, their salvation was so sudden that their response was to be filled with laughter and their tongue was shouts of joy.

It was like a dream as they sang salvation's song. If that was true of this captivity, how much more is it true if we read it through the lens of Calvin?

[ 8 : 53 ] The lens of Calvary and the lens of Jesus. That the gospel is that which releases us from the captivity of our sin, from the captivity of Satan that drags us down, down, down and down.

And in the Lord Jesus Christ comes in and redeems us. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The gospel says that all our sins are forgiven that though they are a scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.

That every single sin that we have ever committed from the beginning of our lives is eradicated because Jesus has taken our sins upon himself.

That is good news. That is deliverance. So if they were filled with joy at this restoration, so ought we also have that sense of palpable joy in our lives.

But notice it had an effect. It says there, look at verse 2, Then they said among the nations, the Lord has done great things for them.

[ 10 : 07 ] The nations were of course the Gentile people, the non-Jewish people, the non-believing people, the folk who were cynical about Jehovah, the folk who didn't believe in Jehovah.

And yet even the nations said, the Lord has done great things for them. So when gospel people are gathered, there's a collective astonishment there.

The community took notice. The community said, God has done great things for them. For we are in this church and in every other gospel church.

It's a gathering of men and women, boys and girls who have been redeemed, those who trust us in Christ. And that is something that is not done in a corner. That is something that the community notices.

One of my favourite writers is Matthew Parris. Matthew Parris writes for The Times every Saturday. And some years ago he went to a project in Malawi.

[ 11 : 16 ] He was born and bred in Malawi. His parents were ex-part professionals. And Matthew Parris was involved in something called Pump Paid. The Pump Paid was an extension of a Christian mission who supplied fresh water into Malawi.

And Matthew Parris says, when I saw their work, it inspired me. My flagging faith in charities. He said, now a confirmed atheist.

Matthew Parris is a confirmed atheist. And now I become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa.

He says interestingly enough, it's not just the social ministry that I'm concerned about.

It's not just the fact that they bring fresh water. The interesting thing is that he says here, these alone will not do. Education and training alone will not do. In Africa, Christianity changes people's hearts.

[ 12 : 24 ] It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good. Folks, when God changes a heart, the change is good.

And so we're not just talking about an empty, formal religion. We're not just talking about keeping the traditions of the fathers going. We're not just talking about keeping the doors of his building open.

We're talking about a gospel that changes hearts and lives as revolutionary and it changes community. We are not just worried about a building. We are consumed with a God who changes lives in such an extraordinary way that restoration.

Remember, it brings us joy. So restoration brings us joy. But the second thing I want us to notice in the passage here is that restoration reminds us of God's power.

So you're following me. Restoration brings us joy. But number two, restoration reminds us of God's power. Number two, verse four, restore our fortunes of Lord like streams in the negah.

[ 13 : 42 ] Now there's a stark realism there in verse four. The rapture of verse one faded very, very quickly. Isn't this realistic?

The other day, you know, I went to, I had a bad morning. I woke up. There was a puncture in my car. And so I changed the tire. I was in Edinburgh at the time.

It took me forever to go through the city. People were blowing their horns at me. Everybody in Edinburgh was out to get me. I was in a really bad mood.

And I went to buy a sandwich and the girl said, are you having a good day? I says, I'm having an awful day. And, you know, our lives can change. And then the next hour life changed. Something really nice happened.

Our moods changed. Well, here it was the other way. They were filled with joy. But then there's a hinge there in verse three.

[ 14 : 44 ] The Lord has done great things for us. Restore our fortunes of Lord. The joy had kind of evaporated. It hadn't lasted for long. The joy of salvation had faded.

And now the Psalms is saying, remember what it was like. We were like men that dreamed, please Lord, restore our fortunes again.

God is saying that to our church. God is saying that to us. Restore our fortunes. What we have here is a prayer and then an observation.

What is the prayer? The prayer is restore our fortunes of Lord like streams in the Negev. Let me tell you about streams in the Negev.

In those days, deserts had dry riverbeds. If you go out east, you see exactly the same. But when the floods come, these riverbeds can fill up so quickly.

[ 15 : 44 ] In fact, I didn't quite believe this. However, I went on to YouTube and I put in rivers filling up quickly. And sure enough, you put it in YouTube, rivers filling up quickly.

And you can see dry riverbeds. The rains come and they fill up in seconds. Unbelievable. And so the Psalms is saying, Lord, restore our fortunes like the streams in the Negev filled up very, very quickly.

God can do that. There are Negev times. There are times of spiritual dryness and there are times of spiritual power and it can change just like that.

And don't we pray the same prayer as Sam has prayed for this area of currently? We store our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev.

Do it again, Lord. Fill it up quickly, just like that. Our lives can change just like that. Someone can come in here this morning, disillusioned, cynical, determined not to listen to a word I or anyone else has said and God moves in.

[ 17 : 04 ] And the spiritual change is quick, palpable and immediate. And so God can do this very, very quickly. God is God and he can come in a flood just as he can come in a stream.

Now, there seems to me years ago when I was growing up there was an obsession about revival. Folk were obsessed with the Welsh revival.

Folk were obsessed with the Lewis revival. Folk would kind of just talk about revivals all the time. But it seems to me now that we have got, we've swung to the opposite extreme.

We've got a kind of revival amnesia. God says here, I can do this very, very quickly. I was reading a story a few weeks ago.

There was an extremely well-known church of Scotland minister last century. He was called the Reverend Alexander Fraser. He was known as Fraser of Tain.

[ 18 : 07 ] Now Fraser of Tain, when he was a student, he was a student in New College in Edinburgh. And he went in a placement just like Ian is doing just now.

And he went in a placement to Campbellton in Argyllshire. And in those days the kind of student placement was given all the really tough jobs.

And the congregation there had a little mission hall in a place called Drumlemble. Now Drumlemble is about six miles outside of Campbellton.

So it was a usual story, a kind of afternoon place that wasn't really very, very big. Well Fraser of Tain went to Drumlemble. And the congregation just grew and grew and grew.

He was there for eight weeks. And within that eight week period, the congregation grew from 40 to eventually 3,000. They were sending buses in.

[ 19 : 12 ] Now here's a little inside bit of information. Divinity students don't have an awful lot of sermons.

Normally they've maybe got, I don't know, four or five sermons that do them. And they do them all the time. So Fraser of Tain found himself in Drumlemble.

It's a revival situation. And he has to preach every single night. And he's only got four sermons. So he went back to New College and the student said, How on earth did you cope?

And he wrote this. I told him that when fishermen come up from England in the south to fish in their northern rivers for trout and salmon, they bring their fine rods and their newest flies, their gear and their gaffes and all the rest.

They flail away and flog our rivers and catch little enough. Then the rain comes. And a wee fellow from a village with a rod that's little more than a stick and a line that he has found somewhere, a hook if he is fortunate and a pin if he is not, comes along and does as well as any of them.

[ 20 : 33 ] The truth is, you can do an awful lot with very little when the spate comes. That's what God means there in revival.

When his spirit moves in power, you can do an awful lot with very little when God is in the situation. And so that was the prayer Lord. Lord restore our fortunes like streams in the negative.

Is that the pleading of the prayer meeting here? Is that the pleading of your heart? Flourishing churches are marked by God sweeping through.

So we see that revival is marked by joy. Restoration reminds us of God's power. Only God can do this. But thirdly, restoration drives us to work and tears.

I love the way the metaphor changes here. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams of negatives. That's God working suddenly, powerfully, sovereignly, amazingly quickly.

[ 21 : 37 ] It's a God thing. The river just flows. In verse 5, the metaphor changes to the exact opposite. Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy.

Restoration here, beloved, drives us to work and to tears. There are two pictures of the work of God. In verse 4, what only God can do.

And in verse 5, what only we can do. Only we can sow. God calls us to sow in tears. And you know, that's what ministry is like.

That's what the church is like sometimes. Sowing in tears. Rural Lewis is no longer a place where the streets are black with people walking to church.

Ministry is no longer just sitting in your man's and turning up and opening the doors and the place fills. That's not the story anymore.

[ 22 : 40 ] We're sowing and we're sowing in tears. We're pleading with people. We're out there among the community. We're persuading people in a secular age.

God is working here. But if there's no sowing, there will be no reaping. And here we see the point that no sowing is ever wasted, ever wasted.

And as we sow, we're part of something big and part of something glorious. Folk this morning, we are in the middle of something big. We are in the middle of a church.

And I don't mean the free church of Scotland, but the church of Jesus Christ that's huge. And we're sowing for the kingdom. And then, in verse 3, our time is going.

But in verse 4, we notice here that restoration brings us joy. There's parallels here. The beginning of verse 6, parallels verse 1. He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy.

[ 23 : 47 ] Now, there's an honesty here. He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing. A church is not all sweetness in line. There's weeping.

Someone said here, I love the sheep, but the sheep bite. That's what you see there. Weeping. People rejecting the gospel.

People getting upset over all sorts of nonsense. People who really are part of the awkward squad. It's everywhere, isn't it?

And so there's weeping. Those who are just trying to spread the gospel. Those who are thinking of others of the community. It's hard work, blood, sweat and tears.

John Stott said, the discouragement is the occupational hazard of Christian ministry. But it says here, in the tough times, when we are sowing the seed weeping, when it's really tough, he says, you shall come home with sheaves and shouts of joy.

[ 24 : 56 ] Let's capture the joy of sowing here. We believe in the harvest. We believe that nothing is wasted. We believe that God is doing a new thing.

Farming is one of the most faith demanding occupations. My last congregation was partly suburban, but on the out of the edge was part rural.

And the farmers there would sow potatoes. They would put thousands of pounds into the ground in potatoes. And then what did you see the next week?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. You would wait for months and months and months. And it was a very difficult time. You would sowing, you would see nothing for return.

And then eventually it would break forth and harvest. And God would do an amazing thing. It really was quite wonderful.

[ 25 : 55 ] It is right to read this, but as I conclude, who was the primary singer of this song? It's not us.

The primary singer of this song is the Lord Jesus Christ, surely? Doesn't this psalm say here, it says, they said among the nations, the Lord has done great things.

That reminds me of those who were the Gentiles and those who were the pagans. They looked at Jesus and they said, who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him.

Who is this? The amazing nature of the Lord Jesus Christ. And when it talks here of sowing in tears, who was the ultimate sower in tears?

Didn't the Lord Jesus Christ cry over Jerusalem? Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered you under my wings as a hen, gathered for chickens and you would not?

[ 26 : 55 ] Didn't He weep over the death of Lazarus? The Lord Jesus Christ sowed in tears. And Calvary is the ultimate sowing in tears as he was there in agony crying, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me sowing in tears?

And the Lord Jesus Christ didn't just sow in tears. The Lord Jesus Christ didn't just sow the seed. The wonder of the gospel is that the Lord Jesus Christ was the seed because he died in Calvary and he was buried like a seed was buried.

And after three days he came alive. I love that great Easter hymn. Up from the grave he arose with a mighty triumph for his foes.

He rose a victor from a dark domain and he lives forever with his saints terrain. He arose, he arose, he arose.

And so yes, there are times of sowing in tears. There are experiences of death and despondency, but that is not the end.

[ 28 : 20 ] We are resurrection people. We are people who will see the reaping with joy. The seed of God is never wasted.

Beloved, this morning there are only two categories of people in this church. Sometimes life is complex. Sometimes life is paradoxical, but there are only two groups of people.

Ultimately this afternoon you are either a missionary or you are a mission field.

I wonder what you are. Well this morning will your life change with the rapidity of the negative streams?

God can do it. Maybe God is doing it. May you see personal revival.

[ 29 : 27 ] May this church see similar revival. Let's pray.