

Restore Our Fortunes O Lord

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[0 : 00] If you could turn in your Bibles to Psalm 126. I know Grant read to us in Mark chapter 4, a passage that's very familiar to us, very familiar to those that were in the prayer meeting on Thursday night.

But just to reassure you, I'm not going to go through Thomas' notes again. But I would like us to turn to Psalm 126.

As you go there in your Bibles, you'll see that it has a title, Restore Our Fortunes, O Lord, which will helpfully take as our title for this evening's sermon.

And you'll also note that there's a second subheading, A Song of Accents. And this is one of 15 songs of accents that are recorded in the Psalter between Psalm 120 and Psalm 134.

If you just quickly look at the six verses, if you've got them in your Bible, you'll see that they're very helpfully broken into two parts.

[1 : 09] Part one being verses one to three, where we see a recognition on how in the past, the Lord had restored the fortunes of Israel.

And there's a real sense of praise and joy in the first part of the Psalm. And then we move to part two, verses four to six, where we see a very different mood within the Psalm.

There's a real sense of pleading before God, again, for the restoration of fortunes. And there's a pleading for streams of refreshing, to break up the dry ground and to return to the days of joy that they once knew.

And there's a pleading in the end there, and we see a promise of a harvest and a return to shouts of joy. So as we go to the Psalm, let us just bow in prayer once again.

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you again for your word. We thank you that your word has been given to us to teach us, to direct us, and how we may glorify and enjoy you forever.

[2 : 18] And we pray that as we turn to your word this night, that we would indeed know what it is to be before you, to be still, and to know that you are God.

That the many things that we maybe had on our mind before we came here, that we can cast them aside and we can focus for this time that we have together on what you are saying to each and every one of us, hearer and speaker alike.

And that Heavenly Father, our lives would indeed be changed, changed and turned unto you. And we ask all this in Jesus' precious name. Amen. Psalm 126.

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. Then they said among the nations, the Lord has done great things for them.

The Lord has done great things for us. We are glad. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the desert. Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy.

[3 : 27] He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. As I said, the psalm's broken into two parts, and we'll have two points.

First point being praise for past restoration, and the second point, pleadings for future restoration and blessing. And if time allows, there may be a third point, if you listen quickly enough.

What is a song of ascent? I said at the beginning that there were 15 songs of ascent. And if you go to the commentators, there are various different explanations given as to who wrote these psalms, why they were written, and what they actually signified.

But while there are differences in understanding who wrote these psalms, and what incident triggered the writing of them, and where there is some agreement, is that they were sung by the priests when the children of Israel were going up to Jerusalem to celebrate their annual feasts,

singing, remembering God's goodness to them, and seeking God's continued blessing upon them. Spurgeon, who we're all aware of, referred to these 15 psalms as the Psalter, within the Psalter. And it's not hard for us to think of there being psalms for a specific season.

[5 : 04] In our own tradition, we sing hymns at Christmas, we sing hymns at Easter, we have baptismal hymns, we have particular hymns and psalms that we sing at the communion times, favourites that reflect the relevance and significance of each of these seasons.

So as we come and look at the psalm, we'll turn to verse 1. Depending on the version of the Bible that you have, it may be that if you've got the authorised version in front of you, it says, when the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like men that dreamed.

The metrical psalm that we sang said, when Zion's bondage, God turned back. The version that we have on the screen there says, when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion. And if we sang from the Sing Psalms version, it says, when Zion's fortunes, God restored.

The authorised version in the metrical psalm focus on a time when the people were in captivity or freed from bondage. The ESV and the Sing Psalms are more general.

They refer to a time when the fortunes of the people had been against them, but they were now restored. They don't make mention of a specific incident. It doesn't take us long if we were to trace back through the history of the people of Israel going through the Old Testament where we see a pattern in their lifetime of when they were in bondage, when they faced famine, when they were besieged, or they were oppressed!

[6 : 45] by an enemy army. We can think of David and Goliath, exile in Babylon, Haman scheming to kill the Jewish people in the book of Esther, Sennacherib's attack on Judah, are a few of these incidents where we see things are stacked against the children of Israel.

And as we identify this pattern, we notice that this pattern is linked to something significant in the life of the children of Israel.

It's linked to their worship of God as the one true God. Time and again, we read in the book of Kings and Chronicles and depending on who was on the throne, starting with Solomon, we can read in 1 Kings 11 and 9 and 10, and the Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart has turned away from the Lord, turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods, that he did not keep what the Lord commanded.

And this turning away from the Lord meant difficult times for the people of Israel. And as we've reflected, sadly, this was a pattern that was repeated time and time again.

We repeatedly can read if we carry on through reading in the book of Kings and in the book of Chronicles, the different kings that then followed after David and after Solomon.

[8 : 27] And we see, and he did evil in the eyes of the Lord. Or, he did right in the eyes of the Lord, but he didn't remove the high places.

He didn't cut down the Asherah poles. But then, we meet Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18. And I'll just paraphrase the verses 1 to 6.

Hezekiah began to reign and he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah.

He held fast to the Lord. And what do we read in verse 7? And the Lord was with him. Wherever he went out, he prospered.

He returned the people to the worship of God. He got rid of every obstacle that was there in the way. And the Lord prospered him. In each of the situations that we mention above, when the children of Israel turned from the worship of God, their fortunes changed.

[9 : 41] Their fortunes changed for the worse. Linked to that, when they returned to the worship of God as the one true God, their fortunes were restored.

We see on each and every occasion the divine hand of God intervening and releasing them from the bondage, from the famine, from the siege that they were under, restoring their fortunes.

what the psalmist points us to here, irrespective of which translation we may be looking at, that it was when the Lord. It wasn't something that any one person did.

It was when the Lord. And if we pause there, a couple of things just for us to consider and what we've thought about already in the psalm here.

What's the pattern of your life? If you were to be asked, what is the pattern in your life? Have you turned away from God?

[10:52] Are you still wandering far from Him? Do you find that you're facing challenges in life? You may say, well, I'm not like the children of Israel. I'm not worshipping false gods.

The reality is as we saw there, there was kings that did right in the eyes of the Lord. But they didn't get rid of the other gods that people were worshipping.

And while we may think that we are living our lives in a right way, if we are not worshipping God with our whole heart, we're giving our time to something else.

Secondly, have you something that you've got to thank God for? We see here that the psalmist points us to remember that it was God that freed the children of Israel.

Do we have something that we have to thank God for that we haven't done so? And I ask myself that question as well. have we been praying whether in private or in public within our own hearts asking God to do something?

[12:12] Something you thought was completely impossible and it happened. And the only way it could have happened was by God intervening.

have you remembered to stop and give thanks or even acknowledged what God has done in His will and taken the time to thank Him?

The psalmist teaches us that we have to give thanks to God. Now whatever the people were rescued from here whether it be from captivity siege or something else what we do understand is that it was something that they had longed for something that they had hoped for something that when it actually happened they couldn't believe it.

They felt that it was like a dream. It was too good to be true. But the other thing that we see here is that while it was too good to be true they were overcome with joy.

A joy that they couldn't contain themselves with. Their mouths were filled with laughter and their tongues with shouts of joy. They had been freed and they couldn't contain their joy.

[13:33] The joy was so evident as we see there in the psalm that even the neighbouring nations recognised that it was God that had been with them.

The Lord has done great things for them the neighbouring nations said. The acknowledgement by their neighbours caused them to reflect and acknowledge further that the Lord has done great things for us and we are glad.

And again as we stop and as we pause does the joy that we have in the Lord overflow in such a way that it's evident to those round about us?

Do we start every day as the psalmist records in Psalm 118 saying this is the day that the Lord has made let us rejoice and be glad in it.

If your next door neighbour your work colleague was being interviewed and asked to give testimony about you as an individual would they be saying it's evident in the life of that individual that the Lord has done a great work in their life.

[14:55] They come to work full of joy everything that they do exudes something that shows that God is with them. Do we live our lives in such a way that we share the joy of the Lord the way that the Israelites celebrated here and their neighbours were able to see it?

We can understand why these verses would have been sung by the people as they headed up to the feast at Jerusalem celebrating and remembering what God had done for them and we see how these words could have been a short chorus which would have been sung by the people and we'll sing a modern version of the psalm towards the end where we see that is the very case.

the Lord had done great things for them and they were glad which takes us to the second part of the psalm pleading for future restoration and blessing.

Verses 1 to 3 had been the first part of a play recounting the restoration of the fortunes of Israel. It finishes in such an upbeat way.

We would expect the curtain to come up on the second half with a party in full swing. The chorus line singing I've got joy, joy, joy down in my heart. I'm not going to dance across the stage don't worry.

[16:32] Followed by a chorus of my God is so big so strong and so mighty. But it's not the case. Instead as the curtain comes up there's no lights.

A stage hand comes across the stage dressed in black, stands in the middle of the stage and holds up a white card with the words 20 years later and then exits stage left.

A dim light starts to appear. The psalmist who we'd seen in the first part of the play had been there leading the praise is now in a corner on his knees his arms leaning on a chair his head bowed and

we hear the microphone click on and the psalmist crying out restore our fortunes oh lord like streams in the negev a complete change in mood of the psalm it's not just a slight change in tempo because there's no music the voices have gone quiet only the psalmist is heard restore our fortunes oh lord like streams in the negev lights start to come on at the back of the stage people are on their knees sobbing as they try and break the hard ground to try and plant a crop but the ground is hard and the ground is dry the lord had done great things but now the need was even greater greater than it was before the previous restoration of fortunes a dim and distant memory it's not a stretch of our imagination to recognize that even in the lifetime of some of the people here within the congregation that there had been a real time of blessing and an outpouring of the spirit in times of revival within the villages here in the surrounding district there's plenty of stories of joy and laughter that was experienced as many came to find the lord it's hard for the impact of the revival not to be noticed and much has been written about revivals here on the island across Scotland in England Ireland Wales and in other countries around the world and while some experience these days others of us can only read about them many still have a desire to see these days again lamenting how things have changed how hard hearts how the people's hearts are now hardened and as the psalmist pleads for streams in the Negev we are pleading or are we pleading for a fresh outpouring of the spirit to soften hearts unblock ears and to make people receptive to the word of God as we reflected in verses one to three it looks like a pattern that has repeated itself as we start verse four there is a restoring of fortunes being looked for whether it be a new king that has come a fresh turning away from the worship of God their fortunes have changed the psalmist is in despair longing for a return to better days and comes and he pleads before God 2nd Chronicles 7:14 may well have been on his lips and on his mind as he came to pray if my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land streams of water flowing in the Negev would not only have brought healing to the land but it would have allowed the people to cultivate the ground it would have given them water to drink and to bathe in streams of refreshing bringing restoration and healing the agricultural imagery of verses 5 to 6 is not one that's lost on us here the land still bears witness to how difficult it was for past generations to find enough ground to plant their crops it was hard graft creating and managing lazy beds wherever ground was there that had the depths of soil that could be found and added to disappointments at failed crops but perseverance as without it there was no food for the table when the harvest was taken home there would have been much rejoicing villager helping villager celebration would have been had shouts of joy would have been heard as they brought in the harvest before the winter verse 5 also creates a picture of those maybe too old or too young to go and help with planting they're at home praying in anguish every seed that goes into the ground praying over it they can't see it but they're praying in the hope that there would be a good yield when the harvest is taken in a harvest that would sustain the family through the winter a real sense of joy would have been in every home when the harvest was taken in particularly if it was a harvest beyond what could have been expected hoped for which takes us to

[22 : 58] Mark chapter 4 where we read of another agricultural illustration and I don't think it's too big a jump for us to think of what it says in verse 14 the sower sows the word I ask this of yourselves I ask it of myself as the word of God is preached are you weeping that as the word falls that it falls on good soil that it falls on hearts that are open and receptive are you weeping daily over those standing on the path those that are struggling with life in general those that in the past have shown signs of life but are falling away are we weeping for the lost round about us that as the word is opened as the word is spoken as it is thrown out that it falls in places where people's hearts are receptive to it we mentioned the

Lewis revival many of you will know the stories of Peggy and Chrissy Smith both in their 80s one blind the other suffering from severe arthritis unable to attend church on a regular basis they were concerned at the lack of young people coming out to church and they prayed and they prayed and they prayed and as they say the rest is history do we long for these days of the outpouring of God's spirit what about the sower verse 6 he who goes out weeping bearing the seed for sowing shall come home with shouts of joy bringing the sheaves with him you're only hearing this message this evening

I have to be honest I've been wrestling with this all week convicted by what it says responsibility to not only pray over the seed but to pray over the ground the hearts that will hear it and the

responsibility for that weighs heavy the responsibility to weep over a congregation over a community there's a story told that many years ago a young minister concerned that his ministry wasn't bearing the fruit that he had hoped for was visiting in Dundee decided to visit the scene of the church where Robert Murray McShane had ministered with the evident power of the spirit of God he went and he spoke to the church officer at the church in St.

Peter's in Dundee he asked him can you tell me the secret of how McShane had such an amazing influence as he preached the man led the young minister into the vestry sit down there he says now put your elbows on the table he did as he was told yep that's the way McShane used to do it said the old man now put your head in your hands and weep weep for the people let the tears flow that was the way McShane would do it said the old man he who goes out weeping bearing the seed the precious seed as we sang what is promised the promise is that he'll come with shouts of joy bringing in the sheaves Noel Shaw wrote a song or a hymn in the 1800s and the third verse of it goes like this going forth with weeping sowing for the master though the loss sustained our spirit often grieves

When our weeping's over he will bid us welcome we will come rejoicing bringing in the sheaves and then the chorus goes on bringing in the sheaves bringing in the sheaves we will come rejoicing bringing in the sheaves for the harvest to be brought in the ground had to first be prepared the seed then had to be sown and then it had to be watered there was labour required even when the ground was hard the people still needed to eat so the labour was hard why would we expect the labour for the Lord to be any different for us now we've spoken on many occasions of wanting to see 25% growth in our congregation the Lord has done great things in these islands in this community in the times past are we pleading in tears before him now to see these great things done again we see there at the end of the psalm there's a promise a promise of a harvest and each one of us knows there's a day coming when there'll be a great harvest when Jesus who was the word made flesh when he was here on earth warned us encouraged us to follow him encouraged us to believe in him said that he was going ahead but he was coming back and he was coming back to take those who had believed in him who had been faithful to him he was taking them to be with him on that great harvest day will you be there bringing in the sheaves he was are you pleading for those round about you that they'll be with you that they'll accept the word of god for all that it has to say to them that they would not be lost will you come rejoicing bringing in the sheaves it's another hymn that says when the trumpet of the lord shall sound and time shall be no more when the morning breaks eternal bright and fair when the saved on earth shall gather over on the other side that I'll be there we sang this morning just as I am without one plea but that my life sorry just as I am without one plea we sang this morning and that last line says

[30 : 31] O Lamb of God I come I come I don't know your hearts this evening but if you haven't come there is a harvest time coming and my prayer would be that each one of you would be taken home with the sheaves when there is rejoicing that you will be part of that rejoicing and you will not turn away and harden your hearts let us pray you