

Evening Service | 2nd Jan | Psalm 126: 3

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Date: 02 January 2022

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[0 : 00] It is a great pleasure to be here with you all this evening to bring you the word.

Please turn with me, if you would, in the word of God to Psalm 126. Our text this evening is particularly verse 3, but we will look at and read the whole psalm.

Psalm 126, let us hear God's own word. A song of ascents. 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 Negev. Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy.

[1 : 09] He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. So far, the reading of God's word.

Psalm 126 is one of 15 psalms that all bear the title Songs of Ascents. Or we might translate that as Songs of Going Up.

Or maybe even Songs of Climbing Stairs. And scholars are somewhat divided as to exactly what that title means. But it seems related to the annual pilgrimages that God had said to ancient Israel. The people were to make three times a year to Jerusalem. Three times in the year. Faithful Israelites, at least men with their older sons representing their families, though women and other children could come too.

They were to go to Jerusalem to worship God. And that must have been quite a burden on a lot of people. Three times in the year to leave behind family and work.

[2 : 24] Many would have been farmers. They would have been concerned about the farm. Many would have lived far from Jerusalem, near border areas. They would have been concerned about enemies coming in to attack, perhaps, while they were gone.

Many would have had to make difficult journeys. They couldn't just pile the family in the car and drive there in an hour. And so we may wonder, why did God impose such a difficult burden on his people?

At Passover, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, they were to go up to Jerusalem to worship. But God tells his people why he has laid this requirement upon them.

In Exodus 34, verse 24, where he says, For I will cast out nations before you and enlarge your borders. No one shall covet your land when you go up to appear before the Lord your God three times in the year.

And what God is saying here is, When you go up three times a year, you will remember that I gave you the land. And as I gave it to you, so will I preserve it for you.

[3 : 42] This is an exercise in which you can remember the blessings of the Lord, in which you can call to mind again that it is not by the skill of your farming, that it is not by the strength you have to protect your border, that you have what you have and you are what you are.

But it is because the Lord has given it to you. And one of the things that is striking about these 15 psalms, that may well have been sung when the pilgrims went up to Jerusalem, or that may well have been sung when the pilgrims arrived in Jerusalem, is how they celebrate different ways in which the Lord comes to his people to deliver them.

We can summarize them if we wanted to in short lines. Psalm 120 is about how the Lord delivers. Psalm 121, how the Lord keeps or guards. We could go on through the songs of ascents, how the Lord helps, how the Lord surrounds, how the Lord builds, how the Lord blesses, how the Lord forgives, how the Lord remembers.

And you see, these relatively brief songs are all intended to draw the mind of God's people back to the Lord and to the various ways in which he remembers and blesses and provides for his people. [5 : 14] And this particular psalm, we might well say, could be summarized as the Lord restores. Verse 1, we read, When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion.

God restores blessings to his people. That's part of the character of our God. And the first half of this psalm looks backward, reflecting on the ways in which God restored his people in times past. And the second half of this psalm looks forward to how the Lord is going to restore the fortunes of his people in the future. So it seemed to me a good psalm to think about at this time of year, the beginning of a new year, when we're prone to look back at the year past and to look forward to the year to come, that we might also reflect on what God has done and what God promises that he will do.

And I'd like to suggest tonight that we can take a text from this psalm for the new year of 2022. A text that can direct us, inspire us, encourage us, at least for the rest of the evening.

And it can be a verse, I think, to have in our mind to encourage us as we live for the Lord in this year. And that verse is Psalm 126, verse 3.

[6 : 41] The Lord has done great things for us. We are glad. The Lord has done great things for us. We are glad. This verse declares to us that we should know something.

And it's an important thing for us to know because there are many in this world, sadly, who do not know it or are those who are prone to forget it.

You and I are prone to forget the truth of this verse amid the trouble and the difficulty and the struggle of this life. But this verse calls upon us to know, to acknowledge, to embrace that unique relationship that exists with our covenant God.

Know that the Lord, Yahweh, the covenant God of his people, He has done great things for us. This is a verse about God's grace, about his provision, about his mercy for his people.

Know that the Lord has done great things for you if you are among his people. And that should be a great encouragement for all of us in the new year.

[7 : 53] That should help guide and direct us in our living. We are those for whom the Lord has done great things. And we need to know that. We need to remember that.

We need to be reminded of that so that when we find ourselves in need, when we find ourselves discouraged, when we find ourselves depleted, tired, angry, anxious, feeling losses in this life, we can be assured that our God is a restoring God.

That the grace of our God surrounds us as his people to restore us. So how does this psalm draw us to that truth that God is a restoring God?

Well, the first half of this psalm really invites us to remember. To remember what God has done for us in the past. The Israelites, as they walked to Jerusalem, had many things to think back on, didn't they?

That God had done for them. How God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt through his servant Moses. How God had established a kingdom and a holy city for them through his servant David.

[9 : 11] How God had brought them back out of exile and given them once more a land, even after their sin and disobedience. Perhaps the particular focus of this psalm.

How God again and again and again restored his people. And we can look back at the history of the church, can't we? And think of times of restoration.

Times amid chaos and controversy when God restored his church. In the ancient church. We might think especially of the time of the Reformation. God throughout the history of his people comes from time to time in remarkable power and blessing to restore our fortunes.

Fortunes there not meaning riches, but restoring the well-being of his people. And it is good for us to think back on those times of blessing from the hand of the Lord.

As he builds up his church, as he restores the life of his people. But it's not just the blessings that the Lord brings into the people of God as a whole, on a grand scale in view here.

[10 : 23] This psalm, I think, invites us to consider more personally, more individually, about those times of blessing and restoration and renewal that the Lord brings into our own lives.

In fact, we might notice that the next psalm is a celebration of family. The psalm after that is a celebration of prosperity, even in this life.

And I think that's not accidental. So this psalm encourages us, and certainly this time of year encourages us to look back and think, how many are the blessings that I've received from the hands of the Lord, even in my own personal life.

Maybe I wasn't at the Exodus, or at the establishment of Jerusalem at the capital city, or even at the Reformation. None of us here are that old, I think.

But I see, nevertheless, in my own family life, in the life of my friends, in the life of my work, the hand of the Lord's blessing, how he has been with me in the past, how he has restored and done so in so many wonderful ways.

[11:43] And of course, above all, when we think of the restoration of our God, of his mercies in the past, we must think of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's why we've read from Acts chapter 3, the wonderful sermon of Peter, as he had healed the lame man.

But Peter did not want anyone to think that this wonderful work of God came from him, or from anyone else. It was a wonderful work of God that should draw attention only to Jesus Christ, and the times of refreshing, as he wrote.

The times of refreshment that come from the hand of our Savior. Times of refreshment. It's a phrase we find only there in Acts 3 in the New Testament.

Times of refreshment. Times of restoration. But that captures, I think, the spirit of the first half of Psalm 126. That the Lord comes to his people with times of restoration, with times of refreshment. And I hope for every one of us here, at the end of 2021, however difficult this year may have been, a year that has been filled with real difficulty for many of us, that we can also look back and think, the refreshment of the Lord, the restoration of the Lord, the grace of the Lord, the mercy of the Lord, has been with me.

[13:10] And this psalm is a very happy psalm. You might just go through some time and underline the number of times the word joy appears in this psalm.

When the psalmist, or when the pilgrims, perhaps, as they're heading towards Jerusalem, think about what the Lord has done for them, they say, we were like men who dreamed.

Have you ever had that experience? Something happened to you that's so good that you can hardly believe it. That's what the psalmist here is saying.

When we contemplate those times of restoring from the hand of the Lord, sometimes we just have to step back and say, how can this be? Am I dreaming that the Lord would be so good, so kind, so merciful to me?

How could I have ever deserved this? Am I dreaming? Our mouth, the text says, was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.

[14:21] Mouths filled with laughter. It's a beautiful picture, isn't it? Laughter, I think, may not always be our greatest strength, especially as Presbyterians sitting in church, but this psalm encourages us to think about that joy bubbling up in the heart, so profound that we can't hold it back.

Songs of joy, such blessings that the psalmist says, even the nations, even the Gentiles have to stand back and say, the Lord has done great things for them.

Great things. Great things for them. Do you know that in your own heart that the Lord has done great things for you? It is one thing to say with the nations, the Lord has done great things for them. The nations watched while Pharaoh and his armies were plunged into the sea. A great thing of God. And they shuddered. But it's another thing to say with the people of God, the Lord has done great things for us.

Moses and the Israelites crossed through on dry ground. A great thing of God. And they smiled. And of course, in the coming of our Lord Jesus, the nations, the Gentiles, don't only stand back and observe great things of God or only wonder at the power of our Lord as he comes in great judgment against them.

[15:54] But the Lord is now doing great things for them too. Praise God for that or probably none of us would be here tonight. We're included in the restoration, in the times of refreshing, so that we too can say with Israel of old, the Lord has done great things for us.

And we are filled with joy. Do you know that? Do you feel that? It's okay to feel things.

Don't overdo it. But it is okay to feel things. And this is what should well up within us when we think of the Lord Jesus Christ and his saving work for us.

When we think of God's faithfulness to his people through the centuries. When we think how he overcame again and again the sin and rebellion of his people, we should be filled with joy. We should be filled with thanksgiving that the Lord has done such things, that the Lord has done great things for us. It's interesting to note just a couple of psalms over.

[17:08] In Psalm 131, David, in another song of ascents, writes, O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high, I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.

With things too great, with great things. It's the same phrase. David the king is saying, you know, great things aren't really for me.

Why does he say that? Not to deny that he has responsibilities that are serious, but to confess before the Lord that even though he is king, great things ultimately, always, only belong to God. It is God who is always the one doing great things for his people. And that's why we rejoice. That's why we are filled with joy. That's the truth of our past as the people of God.

But this psalm goes on to say that's the truth of our future as the people of God as well. Verse 4, restore our fortunes, O Lord. This implies that in the present things are somewhat problematic for the people of God.

[18:27] They look back to a great day of blessing. They look forward to a great day of blessing, but they're praying for that blessing because the present is difficult.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev, like streams in the wilderness, like water in the desert.

What is the picture of water in the desert? It's unexpected, isn't it? Because water is so often unexpected in the desert. But it's also delightful.

It's powerful. The delightfulness of suddenly seeing the desert overflowing, even blooming in all of its beauty. That's the image we're given for when God restores the fortunes of his people.

Unexpected, delightful, glorious, wonderful times of refreshing from the hand of the Lord. Lord. And we should look forward to that. We should anticipate that.

[19:35] We should be confident in that. But there's also a kind of hard realism in this psalm, isn't there? The psalmist is never sentimental, but is always honest.

Verses 5 and 6. 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 shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. This is, of course, the picture of a farmer, isn't it? A farmer who begins by sowing the seed and then only months later is able to reap the harvest. And the picture drawn here is of a farmer who finds it hard to do that work, knowing that there will be fruit to it only months later, and then only should the Lord bless his labor.

So the sowing is seen as this hard struggle of weeping. But the promise is that out of that hard struggle will come blessing and fruit and joy.

And that's a description of the Christian life, isn't it? First comes suffering and then comes glory. First comes suffering and then comes glory.

[20:59] It's the picture of David's life as he suffered under Saul and only later enjoyed the fruits of kingship. It's certainly the picture of our Lord Jesus Christ who suffered in this world only later to enjoy the fruits of resurrection, the glory of resurrection.

And the psalmist says to us, you know, this may well be the picture of your life too. It may well be that in the present it is not so clearly good.

It is not so obviously joyful. It is not so evidently wonderful that this life is and often can be a life of weeping.

I often think about this sometimes at baptism recalling the words of one of the old Reformation era forms for baptism. Some of you may know it.

The prayer that God in his mercy would be pleased to call out of this life this one baptized out of this life which is nothing but a constant death. I've wondered is that too strong?

[22:07] does that too much deny the blessings of this life? The joys of this life? I think it's right to say that this life even amidst blessing and joy is filled so often with suffering from sin that it can be a veil of tears if not only at least really and truly.

But there is a promise here isn't there? There is a promise of laughter of shouts of joy there's a promise of times of refreshment even here in this life.

But Acts chapter 3 not only promises times of refreshment in this life but also it calls us to look forward doesn't it? To a time of restoration of everything.

Acts chapter 3 verse 20 Pray that he may send the Christ appointed for you Jesus who must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything.

And at the beginning of a new year it's good for us to remember that a time is coming when God will restore everything when Jesus Christ returns in glory.

[23 : 31] That's our ultimate hope isn't it? God that no matter how good the harvest of 2022 will be, no matter how glad we are to turn the page of the calendar, to move on from difficult times for so many of us of isolation, of illness, of the needs we have as sinful creatures in a sinful world, that this is not a restoration of everything, but a restoration is promised to us one day in the glorious appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And whatever the weeping of this life has been, the joy of that great day will be unimaginable to everyone who is in Christ.

We will be like those who dream. Then there will be laughter and shouts of joy among the righteous. So as we remember God's restoring grace in the past and as we look forward to God's restoring grace in the future, what are we to do in the present?

Well, this psalm would say to us we're to pray. Verse 4 is a prayer. Restore our fortunes, O Lord.

In this life, one of the great privileges and one of the great tasks to which we are called is the task of prayer. Many of you will know one of John Calvin's more profound statements that prayer is the chief exercise of our faith.

[25 : 11] How do we build up our faith? It's by praying. Because prayer is a turning to God with an acknowledgement that he is in charge.

God that he is the one who can do what we cannot do for ourselves. That he is the one who undergirds us with the loving arms of a father.

That he is the one who has given us the gift of his own son to save us and to preserve us. That he is the one who sends his spirit into our midst to refresh us.

So it is good for us to call upon him, to plead with him, that he might restore us when we are in need of times of refreshing, times of restoration.

But we should be praying, shouldn't we, also for one another. We should be praying for the difficult times that some of us face. We should be praying for the church around the world, some of our brothers and sisters who are persecuted, or living in parts of the world where the church has become so old and weak or impressed more with itself than with the Savior that it seems hardly to function.

[26 : 30] We should be praying with the psalmist, restore our fortunes, O Lord. But as we pray, we should remember, too, that our Lord Jesus Christ is still praying for us.

He still knows our needs. He still sees us in our difficulties. He prays to the Father for us that we might be guarded and protected.

Hebrews 7.25 tells us He always intercedes for His people. Hebrews 4.14 reminds us He is still the great high priest.

Hebrews 9.24 tells us He appears in God's presence for us. Isaiah 53.13 reminds us He made intercession for transgressors.

And that's a critical part of the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ that is still going on to this day. Does that encourage you in your own praying?

[27 : 38] that we have a Savior who also prays for us that when we struggle we can know as our Lord Jesus Christ said to Peter I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.

I have prayed for you so go and strengthen the brothers in the faith. Often it seems we pray just thinking that if only we could pray hard enough or long enough or loud enough then perhaps then God would hear us.

But we need to remember that Jesus stands there next to us and for us praying with us as well as for us carrying our prayers to the Father standing before the Father as the sacrifice with his wounds yet there present in heaven caring for us guarding us always ready to restore us.

Romans 8.34 says Christ is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. He's there as the glorified Savior.

He's there as the Son seated at the place of honor but he's also there interceding still providing still praying still ready to restore us in our need.

[29 : 01] And what an encouragement is that we have such a Savior and such a mediator who always cares for us who never forgets us who never lets us go who never ceases to provide so that when we plead to God to restore our fortunes we can have confidence when we look back in joy at God's restoring grace and when we look forward in joy with anticipation of God's restoring grace we look ultimately at our Savior and then in Christ we can say my God goes before me my God goes with me my God surrounds me my God provides for me even water in the desert even water in the desert whether this is a year of great blessing or a year of much weeping the promise of the

Lord stands strong weeping may last for a night but joy comes in the morning sowing may be tough in the springtime but oh it is sweet in the autumn when the sheaves are gathered and that's the promise that God will restore all things one day that there is a future for the people of God but even in the meantime even now in the meantime God promises that he will season our lives with refreshment that he will use his gracious power to sustain us that in our need he provides that in our weakness he is strong that in our hunger and in our thirst he prepares a table for us in the wilderness before the presence of our enemies that he feeds us with himself that our cup overflows even as we come to hear the word preached to us on the

Lord's day when we see the eternal word made visible in baptism in the Lord's supper those signs and seals of the covenant of grace we are nourished and we can marvel in great confidence with the psalmist and say God has restored my soul and we can say with the psalmist surely surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life for the Lord has done great things for us the Lord has done great things for us we are glad let's pray to that end for the year 2022 amen let us pray oh Lord how rich and encouraging is your word and how precious is the promise that in Jesus

Christ you have done great things for us and how thankful we are that beyond what we could hope beyond what we could do you are our righteousness and you are our refuge and you are our rest and we pray that out of that great saving work that you have done for us in Jesus Christ that we might be a people who knows how great a God we have that knows the greatness of our sin and misery in our guilt that knows how great a deliverer you are in your grace and that knows how we are to be thankful to you for such a deliverance and such a restoration and gratitude but Lord we would also be bold to pray that often in the new year we might be able to say with joy the Lord has done great things for us but we would pray that even in the times of weeping that must come we would still say the Lord has done great things for us and we pray that in this coming year our hearts over and over again would be filled with praise and prayer for you are great and good beyond our imagining and we would also pray oh Lord come quickly come quickly

Lord Jesus and restore everything and fill our hearts and our mouths with laughter and with songs of joy forevermore hear us for we pray in Jesus name Amen excuse me would you please stand for our final item of praise this morning we sang Psalm 23 in the Sing Psalms version so I thought tonight we would sing it in the superior version of the old Scottish Psalter so let us sing the words of the Psalm together