

When God's people are restored

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Date: 08 February 2015

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[0 : 00] Well, I think it's probably no secret, the theme of this psalm, as you read that repeated! It had turned dark and tarnished.

You wouldn't want to drink out of it, the state it was in. But Elise got hold of the silver polish, polished away at it, and now it's restored shiny again. You'd think, yes, I'd like to drink out of that once again.

It's restored back to what its purpose was for. But when it comes to God's people, we might ask, is it right to pray for revival? Is it right to pray for restoration of God's people?

I guess on one hand, we've got stories of great periods of revival in the history of the church. We were reminded there in Acts, weren't we? How wonderful it would have been to be there at Acts while these amazing things were happening as the Word of God was proclaimed.

Maybe more recently, I come from South Wales, might have stories of the Welsh revival of the early 1900s, when there were people in society who were really regarded as misfits and outcasts who were coming into church, flocking into the churches to hear the Word of God.

[1 : 38] What would it have been like to be part of those times? Or the Great Awakening in North America in the 1800s, when preachers like Jonathan Edwards were preaching the Word of God, and they were met with ecstatic emotional outbursts of joy as people heard the Word of God and responded to it.

What would it have been like to be present in times like that? Then maybe there was the Methodist revival under Wesley and Whitefield in this country, open air preaching, suddenly people responding in great numbers to the Word of God preached and coming back to God.

Maybe some of you would remember the Billy Graham Crusades, mass conversions, football stadia filled in the 50s and 60s. Great times, we might think, of what we might associate with revival.

But I guess, on the other hand, we realize that there are periods often, aren't there, where those periods of revival often spawn times when God's people are maybe overly focused on praying for God to act in exactly the same way.

Maybe that can lead to uncontrolled expressions of emotion that are not helpful and linked to God's Word. Maybe it can lead to all sorts of disappointments as God doesn't act in the way that maybe he's chosen to act in the past.

[2 : 58] I think if we stop to consider the state of the church nationally, I think we'd agree our church is in need of restoration, isn't it? Our church is in need of revival.

We live in a society where church is now on the margins and is being increasingly marginalized within our society where before perhaps we were central to the moral and ethical framework of our culture.

We're finding a church that facing moral compromise, is responding with moral compromise to the withering attacks of our culture, which says there can be no such thing as an absolute morality.

Does he know it must all be relative? We see declines in church numbers that we'd probably describe as reversal rather than revival. And we see an indifference among swathes of congregations in churches who maybe just seem to consider church more as a social club rather than a place that you come to meet with a living God.

It seems that as a church we do need restoration. We need an act of God to bring power and passion back, to make us the people that we should be, to do the tasks that he's given us to do.

[4 : 15] And I wonder, how should we pray for that revival? How should we pray for God's work of restoration? And indeed, how should a biblical understanding of what restoration is inform those prayers so that we can avoid many of the pitfalls of praying for revival that we've seen in our country before?

So I want to take a look at this psalm. What does it tell us about what biblical revival is? And how does it help us to think about how we should be praying for restoration and revival in our church today?

So firstly, from this psalm, restoration involves a desire for the presence of God. Restoration involves a desire for the presence of God.

Right at the start of this psalm, verse 1, we see the psalmist crying out, Hear us, O shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.

He's evoking there an image of a shepherd. Interesting, we had the animals earlier on and the sheep. But being a shepherd in this time, 700 years perhaps before Jesus Christ came in the Middle East, was very different from modern farming techniques today.

[5 : 27] You see, sheep had to be led through a wilderness. They had to be led through open areas of great danger. And sheep are prone to wander. They want to go their own way, but they often lead themselves straight into trouble.

The image of a shepherd in those times was someone who would lead the sheep. He was there with them, present with them. He would lead them towards pastures where they could find food and water.

He would lead them away from dangerous paths to paths of safety. He'd be there to defend them when wild animals came and attacked. Sometimes that leadership was not where the sheep wanted to go, but it was the place that would be best for them.

Here's the psalmist is praying to God who he knew as the shepherd of Israel, the one who guided and led his people to places of safety, even where they may choose not to go.

He prays not just to the shepherd of Israel who leads Joseph like a flock. He prays to him who sits enthroned between the cherubim. The picture here is of the Ark of the Covenant, this very special box that had been built at the time of the Exodus that God had instructed be built.

[6 : 40] It was placed at the very center of the tabernacle, the forerunner to the temple, the most holy place in the community of Israel as they wandered around. Right in the center was this box, and this box, specially built just above it, had something called the mercy seat.

It was actually a throne. It was the symbolic throne of God in the midst, God the king in the midst of his people. Either side of that were two angels.

They were bowed down because they couldn't look upon the holiness of the God who was symbolically sitting upon his throne as king of his people in their midst. This powerful image reminded them of the God who was their king.

His ark was a throne. He was a king who ruled and lead as a king, not as some kind of advisor whose advice maybe you take, maybe you don't. He was the king to be obeyed.

But the ark was also at the center of the community of Israel. It symbolized a king who was very much present right at the center of his people to lead and to guide them, not by some remote rule from miles away, but from right in their very midst.

[7 : 54] It would, of course, have evoked images of those wilderness years as God guided his people in those 40 years in the desert towards the promised land. By day, he was a cloud guiding them on their way.

By night, a pillar of fire. God very much there with them, leading and guiding, and they followed. And so we come to the first refrain again, having called out to this God that they knew as a shepherd king, as a king amongst them.

They cry out, Restore, O God, make your face shine upon us that we may be saved. What a lovely example. Thank you for that reading early on of the face of someone turned towards.

It's a tension, isn't it? It's a devotion. It's an importance. God's face turned towards his people. The example I thought of was the sun shining. The sun is out there, isn't it?

And very often we can forget that it's there. Not this morning, because, of course, it's daytime now, isn't it? The clouds have parted. The sun is so clearly shining. We know it. We can feel its warmth upon our face as we shine.

[8 : 58] It's such an evident shining and presence. Here this prayer is, Restore us, O God, so that your face can so evidently shine upon us that we may know that experience of you with us, shining your face upon us.

Restore us, O God. You see, right at the start of this prayer of restoration is a longing for the presence of this shepherd king God right in their midst.

That's what they long for, a return of this God, his presence in their midst. I wonder, when we think of restoration of the church, when we think of, you know, what should the church be? What will we pray for the church in our nation? Do we start with a deep longing that the presence of God in the midst of his people would be experienced as right at the start of that prayer for restoration?

As we read the Psalms, the psalmist is unashamed in that, isn't he? In Psalm 42, he cries out, Oh, how I long to be with the Lord. Oh, how a deer pants for the water.

[10:08] That's how my soul longs after your presence. In Psalm 84, he cries out, Better would be one day in your courts, one day in the presence of God, than a thousand days elsewhere.

Is that our heart, when we pray for restoration of the church? Or if we're honest, do we sometimes fall into the trap of treating God as the cosmic slot machine, the one who achieves the means to achieve our real ends and our goals?

Are our goals really our ends for the church to grow in numbers, for our children to have the life we desire for them, for trials to go away, for more people to come in?

Or actually, right at the heart of our prayers, is there a longing for the presence of this shepherd king in the midst of his people, so evidently present and leading us and giving us direction in our lives and where we should go?

Restoration, firstly, involves a desire for the presence of God in the midst of his people. Well, the psalm moves on. We get a bit of context, actually, in verse two, where he refers to before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh.

[11:26] These are the names for the northern tribes of Israel. It points us towards the time, probably about 700 BC, when God's people were just about to go into exile. The Lord had raised up a couple of superpowers around Israel in the Middle East, really huge nations, really mighty, powerful military might, and they were pursuing war, not with precision bombing, but with some of the horrors that maybe you would associate with the so-called Islamic state in the Middle East today, even worse.

These superpowers would come along and they would besiege whole cities. They would surround them, if necessary, for years, nothing going in, nothing coming out. Imagine what's happening inside a city where there's no water coming in, no food coming in, the desperation.

It would even turn to horrible things like cannibalism. And even if they then decided to capitulate, which was inevitable, they would face the inevitable genocide and atrocities, the utter destruction of a conquered city.

Read the desperation in these words, O Lord God Almighty, how long will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people? You have fed them with the bread of tears. You have made them drink tears by the bowlful.

You have made us a source of contention to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us. They're experiencing the horror of God's absence as they experience these horrible things and the fear of them around them.

[13:00] There's no response when they call out to their savior of last resort. There's no food, just tears. There's no water, just bowlfuls of tears.

Maybe most shockingly here in these verses, God's absence they're describing is described as an anger at their prayers.

And as we read the Old Testament prophecies around this time and the arrival of these terrifying superpowers, we find that the prophecies are saying this is a consequence of Israel's rejection of God who is in their midst.

It seems that the bitter experience of these circumstances they were facing was the light that enabled these people to see how serious their rejection of God was.

You see, a holy God cannot just be indifferent in the face of his people's rebellion. Sin is so serious that it means that anger characterizes the attitude of a holy God towards his people.

[14:08] I wonder as we pray for restoration, as we pray for revival in our midst and in our church nationally. At the heart of our prayers for revival, is there a conviction of how serious sin is, how serious our rejection of God's rule is?

Are we praying for revival and yet at the same time diminishing the importance of sin in the church? Are we leaving sin undealt with at the same time as we pray for revival?

Are we treating sin as if it has no impact on our relationship with God? Or actually, are we realizing the seriousness of our sin as we come to pray for restoration?

And we're actually starting our prayers with a deep repentance for the seriousness of our sin and what it has done to our relationship with the Lord. Restoration involves a deep conviction of sin. And thirdly, restoration involves realizing how important God's people are. It would be easy to just write them off, wouldn't it, at this stage? The situation they're in, their sin has caused it, they're being overpowered.

[15:20] It would be easy to write them off, but no. In verse 8 to 13, we have a big image here in this psalm, a second big image of the vine. You brought a vine, in verse 8, out of Egypt.

The vine was an Old Testament image of God's people. I don't know if you like gardening, you've ever planted something, a grapevine or a bean in a garden when the weather's conducive to growth.

Go away for a couple of weeks, what happens when you come back? It's everywhere, isn't it? It's kind of taken over the garden, it's multiplied, it's grown beyond belief and at great speed. The vine was an image of God's people.

He used the vine to show how great they would grow. And as you look at verse 8, we find you brought a vine out of Egypt, you drove the nations and planted it. They're looking back in their history to that miraculous time when God rescued them from Israel and took them on towards the promised land.

In verse 9, you see there, you cleared the ground for it, it took root and it filled the land. What land? That was the promised land. They're looking back to mighty victories under Joshua, under King David, when enemies, more powerful than they, were defeated and thrown out of the land because God had promised that land to them.

[16:38] In verse 10, the mountains are covered with the shade of this vine of this people, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sends out its boughs to the sea and its shoots as far as the river.

It's an amazing picture of the flourishing of the people of God, of how they would provide blessings even to the mightiest of mountains providing shade from that Middle Eastern sun. It pictures them being regarded as the greatest nation on earth at the time, that story of the Queen of Sheba, of what was thought of as the greatest nation coming to the people of Israel and the King of Israel. Such was their greatness and their wisdom and their blessing to the nations. The extent of the nation so great that it is like this image, isn't it?

Of a mighty vine giving shade even to mountains and mighty trees. A time when God's people were secure with roots deep in the ground and the source of life-giving water.

It's a man's picture of God blessing the human race through the people that He has chosen. And it's a theme we find repeated in the New Testament, God's great purpose for His people in the New Testament, the church.

[17:55] In Ephesians 3.10, we find God's intent, He says, is that now through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

Do you get a picture of how important the church is and God's people are in God's plan? I wonder, when we pray for revival for the church and restoration for the church, are we really praying that the church would be a benefit to the local community around here, first in Brighton, but also nationally? What does it just seem impossible now to us that the few of us gathered here could possibly be of any influence or benefit even on a city of Brighton?

Can I urge you, don't become indifferent with what the church or God can achieve through His people. Don't be indifferent or satisfied with just a comfortable church life. When God restores His people, He fulfills His salvation role for us.

Let's not limit our prayers because we see our own frailties. Let's remember the awesome plan of God to work salvation plan through His people and that will be His plan to save humanity.

[19:16] Let's think about how great God's plan is as we pray big for God's work of restoration in the church. So three things there.

We can see God's restoration involves the desire for the presence of the shepherd king.

Restoration in its heart realizes the seriousness of sin and restoration involves realizing how important God's people really are despite the presence of sin and maybe the state we see the church in at the moment.

And as we move on, we move on to verse 14 and we get a kind of repeat of the refrain but notice it's a little bit different. The refrain in verse 14 is return to us, O Lord God Almighty.

You see this word restoration in Hebrew has a sense of turning around but have you noticed that the refrains so far have been the people turning, turn us, O Lord. Here in verse 14 there's a subtle shift.

Who's doing the turning? It's a prayer to God to turn back. Return back to us, your people, despite all this that we've observed and recognized, despite the state of the people now that we've rejected you.

[20 : 30] Return back, O Lord. You see, prayers for restoration realize that restoration is impossible for man. God must first turn back to his people before restoration is possible.

And so, this is the basis on which the people call out and the psalmist calls out to God here. Look as he progresses to verse 17 what he's crying out for. He says, let your hand rest upon the man at your right hand.

A son of man you have raised up for yourself. Who could that have been? Who is this man that God was going to raise up? It's likely that the psalmist here at the time he was writing would have in mind some of the great rescuers of old of Israel, the Moses, the Joshuas, mighty Samson maybe, with all his strength, Gideon, David.

But of course, their rescuers didn't last, you know where I'm going. Their rescuers didn't last, did they? Their rescuers brought rescue for a time but then the people turned away again.

We see it in the history of the Old Testament. How could a holy God turn? Well, of course, as we read the New Testament, we find that God turned by sending not Joshua or David but by sending Jesus Christ.

[21 : 52] He sent his perfect son. God sent his perfect son to represent his rebellious people. He knew the full seriousness of our sin.

Jesus knew the full seriousness of our sin and yet willingly he came to represent us by dying on the cross, taking our place for God's righteous anger at our sin.

Seeing the seriousness of sin doesn't leave a Christian in the pit. It leaves us realizing in awe and wonder that God, even while we were still sinful and rejecting him, would turn back to us, send his son Jesus to take the punishment for our sins that our relationship with God could be restored despite all the seriousness of our sin.

Jesus, of course, when he came, picked up on two main images of this psalm. Have you noticed the two main images of being a shepherd and the vine?

In John chapter 10, 11, Jesus said, I am the good shepherd. Jesus is that image of the shepherd, if you like. He's God with his people, leading and guiding his people present through his words.

[23 : 08] And when he ascended, of course, he sent his Holy Spirit to be with his people, didn't he? Intimately with us, so closely with us, the Holy Spirit is described as dwelling within us. Jesus is with us by his word and by his spirit.

And in John chapter 15, he picked up on that second great image there, I am the true vine. Jesus is the true Israel. He is the one who never turned away from God.

He is the one who has secured the eternal blessings of God and in him, those blessings are ours. You see, the answers to prayers of restoration are found ultimately in the Lord Jesus Christ.

If we're praying prayers for restoration and revival of our churches that don't have Jesus' work on the cross as their focal point, then they're not biblical prayers for restoration.

Restoration. Restoration is the work of God and he has sent Jesus. And thirdly and finally, the fruit of restoration.

[24 : 15] The fruit of restoration is a people who live by faith. What will happen or what does the psalmist have in mind will happen when God sends this special rescuer as he turns back to his people who will turn his people's hearts back.

What will happen in verse 18? Well, then God's people will not turn away from you. They will not turn away from you, oh God. Revive us and we will call upon your name.

That is the test, isn't it, of true revival and restoration. We might think, actually, true revival and restoration might be full buildings and full churches. It might be signs and wonders.

It might be amazing outpourings of delight and joy. Well, of course, they could involve all of those things, but those aren't the test here. The test of genuineness here is that in response to this restoration, God's people will not turn from him again.

How does this Jesus, this shepherd king, lead and guide us? How does he lead and guide us today in the New Testament church? Well, primarily through the preaching and the proclaiming of his words in the Bible and through the work of the Holy Spirit who helps us not just to hear these words but convict our hearts that these words are true.

[25 : 36] This is truth that sets our hearts on fire. Jesus leads and guides and the Holy Spirit leads and guides through words that offer relief to weary sinners.

The offer of repentance and forgiveness is there no matter how great our sin. You see, there's no need to turn away from a holy God in the face of our sin now, is there?

There's now no fear. If we trust in the truth of the Bible and the words of the Holy Spirit through the Bible, then we know we can turn to Christ for forgiveness of any sin and every sin.

God's anger is turned away whatever we have done. Why would we seek to deal with our failings by dealing with our inner strength?

I can get over this myself. Why do we look to things like money or success? More power? If I just had more power or if we just had more bigger reputation or if we just had this or that, then it would be okay.

[26 : 36] Then we'd be able to restore and have an influence on the world. No. Why don't we just call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ? And no, our sins are forgiven.

Our relationship is right with this living God. His face shines upon us because of what Jesus has done. How much more powerful is it to know God's presence and God's face shining upon us than these insipid other things?

Maybe numbers or money or influence. How much greater to know the presence of the God? Jesus speaks, leads and guides with words that offer relief to weary sinners He offers words that come with the power of the Holy Spirit to bring life change.

What are the promise of the fruit of the Holy Spirit? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, self-control. You see, the words come with the power of the Holy Spirit, the words of the present Jesus with us to bring new life, life-changing impact, to bring these fruits of the Holy Spirit, to bring the ability to obey commands even like loving your enemies.

what power is it that comes with the words of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to us, His people? You see, Jesus' words, because He is present amongst us, a living truth, so compelling that they demand our life, our soul, and our very being.

[28 : 20] These are the signs of a genuine work of restoration by God. These are the signs of true revival and they are realities that are within the grasp of every Christian, of every Christian community because we're not alone.

Jesus Christ is here with us by His Word and His Spirit. God is looking on us. His face is shining upon us in Christ to lead, to guide, and to restore.

Indeed, we might exclaim with this psalmist, mightn't we, that final refrain there, restore us, O Lord God Almighty. Make Your face shine upon us in this way that we may truly be saved.

As I close, hopefully we've seen from this psalm it is right we should pray for restoration and revival in our church and our church nationally. But let's make sure as we do we don't have a wrong biblical view of revival.

Let's long for God and His presence more than we long for His blessings. Let's be deeply convicted of our sin facing up to our sin and repentant of it so that we may be in awe of the Christ who deals with our sin for us.

[29 : 42] And let's be bold in how we pray for the church, for the work of the Word and the Holy Spirit amongst us. And then who knows the amazing things that we might see God do in our very midst.

Let's bow our heads and pray.