

Restoration - Past, Present and Future

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[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the book of Psalms, Psalm 126. And we may read at the beginning of the psalm.

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.

As we draw near the end of 2018, as with every year, very often there is a review conducted, particularly in the media, of some of the more memorable and notable events that occurred during the year.

And as you view these events as they are set before you, I don't know if you sometimes say to yourself, did that really take place during the year?

Sometimes we forget what has taken place. At a personal level, for some, coming to the end of this year and looking back, may be cause for pain and sadness.

[1 : 34] The year may have brought about the parting from loved ones, leaving you with a naked void in your life, an empty place in the family circle.

For others, it may have been a year in which, diagnosed with illness in some shape or form, may have been a time of acute trial, or a period of loss of work.

For others, it may have been a year of happiness, perhaps a wedding, perhaps a new member born into the family, perhaps job promotion or exam success, or even point, been successful at football, and so on.

I think if we were all to write down our recollections or review of the year 2018, there would be many varied responses on the piece of paper.

In some ways, that is exactly what the psalmist is engaging in in this psalm. He is conducting a review of the past, and his review of the past has a bearing on the present and the future.

[3 : 10] It's a short psalm, comes from the series of psalms called the Songs of Ascent. These psalms were sung, there are some 15 of them, sung by those who were going up to Jerusalem at times of three important major annual feasts or festivals.

I don't have any difficulty with accepting that, but what I do find difficult is that it is more difficult to be sure as to why the psalms appear in the order that they do in the Bible.

And the reason that I have difficulty with that is that I cannot find an answer in the Bible. But I think it is safe to say that these psalms reflect the experiences of the pilgrims as they traveled to Jerusalem.

And I'd like just to set three thoughts before you from this psalm. First of all, restoration in the past. Secondly, restoration in the present.

And thirdly, restoration in the future. restoration in the past. The psalmist is speaking of restoration in the past and he's really conducting a review of what took place in the past.

[4 : 53] In verse one, he not only tells us what took place, but he also tells us to whom what took place is attributed.

when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion. The fortunes of Zion were restored, he tells us.

He does not claim any credit for any person in this act of restoration. He directly attributes the restoration to the power of the Lord.

when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion. Of what does he speak? When did this restoration take place?

Well, most commentators believe the psalmist is speaking of the restoration from Babylonian exile. For 70 years, the Jewish people languished in exile in Babylon.

[6 : 03] Remember how the psalmist speaks of the experience of some. In another psalm, by the streams of Babylon, we remembered Zion's hill.

There we sat and wept in grief. On the trees, our hearts lay still. For our captors called for songs, our tormentors called for mirth.

Sing us one of Zion's songs from the land that gave you birth. How is their response? How can we sing to the Lord exiles in a foreign land?

And after 70 years of captivity, they are told they can return. Humanly speaking, if we had had media coverage, then the return would be attributed to the actions of King Cyrus of Persia.

But in the book of Ezra, you find the writer of the book of Ezra stating this. In the first year of Cyrus, King of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled.

[7 : 23] The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, King of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing.

The writer of these words in the book of Ezra is in no doubt as to whom this decree is ultimately directly attributable.

The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, King of Persia. He too sees it as the work of the Lord.

Seventy years in exile, seventy years from one point of view might seem a very long time. and it no doubt was from the perspective of those who may have lived through these years.

But from another perspective, let me tell you, from a personal viewpoint, seventy years can go past in a blink.

[8 : 33] It is difficult to grasp that these years have gone by so fleetingly and so quickly. For those who perhaps had given up all hope of return, the news that they could go back to their native land was as if but a dream.

When the Lord, they say, restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Maybe throughout that period of years, they even dared to dream.

But when the reality confronted them, they felt as if they were still in the dream. The psalmist tells of their reaction to the staggering news that they were being permitted to return to their native land.

And there are dreams and dreams, aren't there? sometimes you were really glad it was but a dream. When you wake up, other times perhaps you were deeply disappointed that it was just a dream.

Have you ever had these kinds of experiences? You've had times perhaps when your dreams were so vivid that you wondered if they were real.

[10 : 04] but this was a time when the reality was so staggering and stunning, so overwhelming, so that they began to think, was it just a dream?

Could it really be happening? Could the Lord have delivered in this way? and the psalmist is saying that the restoration was so surprising, so overwhelming, that they were like those who were dreaming.

They couldn't believe that it was true. It felt almost too good to be true. And then he says there was a second effect and you see this in verse two.

then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy. So, whereas before they had been felt oppressed, perhaps feeling that their situation was hopeless, in despair and bitterness, and now they are filled with laughter and joy.

And perhaps they had come to the conclusion that they didn't even think that they could laugh that way again. Perhaps there have been times in your own life when you thought that you couldn't even smile again.

[11 : 44] You didn't think that you have joy again. You thought that the past had been so solved and so trying.

Too much water under the bridge, too many straws that had broken on the camel's back. You couldn't have joy again. And then the Lord delivered and there was laughter and joy.

and it seems to me that this encapsulates largely what happens at a spiritual level. Yes, it happened at a natural level in the life of the people of Israel.

And the psalmist is looking back to those days. But it also happens at a spiritual level. When the Lord comes into your life and you are given the newfound joy of salvation that is so exhilarating and so uplifting, that is so totally unexpected to what you believed in the days of your unconverted state, that you could ever know such uplift and exhilaration in your life, and know the happiness of that newfound joy that God has placed in your heart.

Yes, perhaps, on the natural level, you felt when you had passed through trial and bitterness that you couldn't smile again, and perhaps you felt a pang of guilt about smiling again.

[13 : 32] Well, let me ask you today, has the Lord intervened in your life, and put a smile on your face, and laughter into your heart.

Because many can testify to this joy, this sense of joy, joy in going up to worship with the people of God.

Just as we sang in the first psalm, here today I joyed, when to the house of God, go up they said to me. It was an exhilarating experience.

You were filled with a sense of anticipation in joining with others in the worship of Almighty God. And you notice, it is the non-Christians in the psalm, who are the first to notice this in the lives of those who thought they were dreaming.

Where do we get that information from? From the second part of verse 2, then they said among the nations, the Lord has done great things for them. You see, the nations are testifying to the Lord's power in restoring his people.

[15 : 04] You know, when fellow believers have a deliverance, and unbelievers see it, and they wonder what's going on in the lives of those people who have experienced the power of divine grace in their hearts, and their lives have been transformed.

It reminds me of a man I never met, but I wish I had. He was from the other side of Broad Bay, a simple man.

His house used to be frequented by many. It was used as a type of Cayley house in the community. And when the Lord came into the life of this man, he was greatly anxious as to what he should do. Someone advised him, take out the Bible and have it read. And that solved the problem. Those who were not interested, they melted away.

On his deathbed, he mentioned to those who were in the room that the Lord had said to him, today, you will be with me in heaven.

[16 : 26] one old Christian lady who was present said, oh my dear, what the Bible says is, today you will be with me in paradise.

That's what the Bible says. And the simple man responded in his native tongue, glory, it was glory he said to me, today you will be with me in glory.

And before the day had ended, he had left this world, and he had received what he desired. And so, what an amazing response the world has given to the restoration that took place in the lives of those people.

It was an opportunity not to exalt themselves, but to exalt the Lord. And hasn't that been a source of encouragement for you?

And haven't you seen it happen in the lives of people in this congregation? You've seen that. hasn't it encouraged you? And however difficult life might have been, has it not been a source of encouragement that you belong to the people of God?

[18 : 02] He delivers. The nations say he has done great things for them, but then they themselves come forward with the acknowledgement the Lord has done great things for us.

Is that your own acknowledgement today? As you come to the end of the year, can you honestly say the Lord has done great things for me?

great things you know, it is one of the privileges when you're a member of a Kirk session to hear people tell of how the Lord came into their life.

It is thrilling and exhilarating. It used to give me great joy to hear new converts when I would question them at a Kirk session level and hear them tell how the Lord had come into their lives. Perhaps for some of them it was very difficult. Perhaps haltingly and brokenly they would tell how they saw it. But you know, when they tell it the first time, it is not polished.

[19 : 29] it is just as it is and as they read it. And I found it tremendously uplifting and exhilarating to see and to hear of the Lord's work in the lives of others.

And you know, we ought not to let these memories fade. We ought to retell these if you look at Paul's letters, how often does he tell?

Of how the Lord worked in his life. You look through the book of the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's again and again and again, he's retelling his experience of what the Lord has done for him.

How he brought him out of darkness into light, out of condemnation into pardon and acceptance and adoption and new life.

Well, every deliverance that is effected by the Lord ought to give us that kind of joy. Because the Bible reminds us that there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents.

[20 : 45] In the presence of the angels of God. Who's rejoicing? Well, initially it is God himself. God himself is rejoicing. and that joy spreads, radiates forth and a doubt certainly to be in the heart of the church militant in the world.

So, the psalmist says, we weren't going to let the nations be the ones alone to testify that the Lord has done great things.

they take up the chorus themselves. The Lord has done great things for us. We are glad. And so, the psalmist in looking back has these memories vividly imprinted in his mind.

Whether it was coming out of Babylon at the time of captivity. Whether it was deliverance effected in another way by the power of God.

Whether it was deliverance from going after other gods and serving idols. There was deliverance. And the psalmist is reflecting on the God who has delivered and has transformed lives.

[22 : 11] And if you are here today and you know what it is to be delivered, then you have cause gratitude to the Most High.

That brings me to the second point. Restoration in the past, restoration in the present. Now, the danger often in reviewing the past is that we tend to wallow in nostalgia.

Just as maybe I was doing a moment ago in telling you the anecdote about the man from back. Because we tend to adopt a those-were-the-days attitude, as if such times could never come again.

But you notice the psalmist doesn't do that. The joyous days of the past become a strong hope for the present. And that is based on the unchanging nature of the character of God.

God is good. He is unchanging in his goodness. He has granted wonderful joys in the past. He can do so again in the present. And so the psalmist is asking for the good times again.

[23 : 31] He is praying for what is good and desirable and glorifying to God. And the memory of the past or the review of the past has become the basis of prayer.

And the prayer is very simple. And it comes with a very powerful illustration. Look on the prayer. Restore all fortunes, O Lord. Now, look at the language that is used there.

Go back up to verse one. Right after the title of the psalm is given, the psalm of ascents, these people are singing. This on the way to Jerusalem. when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion.

And that memory has been absorbed into the heart of the sand. And he blurts out, restore all fortunes, O Lord.

It's the basis of prayer in the present on what God has done in the past. In other words, he is saying to God, do it again, Lord. Lord. Lord. Oh, perhaps you're saying that the current situation is so hard, you wonder if it could ever happen again like it did in the past.

[24 : 49] past. You can remember the old deliverance. And perhaps you are silently crying out, do it again, Lord, do it again.

Because you need it as much now as you needed it then. perhaps even more.

And I believe that is implied in this psalm. You can remember many deliverances and sometimes you could hardly speak.

But these deliverances in the past don't mean that you don't need to be delivered again in the present. And so as he reviews the past, it gives him a prayer for the present.

Do it again, Lord. Do it again. Oh, wouldn't you love to see him do it again? Wouldn't you love to see him working again?

[26 : 03] So that you are overwhelmed with the grace of God and executing deliverance. Having your eyes filled with tears again.

Your heart filled with laughter. Your mouth filled with praise. And your days filled with joy. Let me ask you, friend, when did you have such experience?

you see, in the captivity, in the days of exile, you might say that Israel was in the far country.

That's where the prodigal son went when he left the father's house. And in many ways we too are like the prodigal son. It was true geographically of Israel.

They were in a far country. And you may be here today and you may be spiritually in the far country because the parable of the prodigal son, we often interpret it as conversant, could be understood as restoration of the backslidden believer.

[27 : 32] Might be understood in that way. And it may be that you're in the far country today. And you need to be brought back.

And only God can do that. Only God can do that. You know, you can share a home with the brought back.

and still be in the far country like the elder brother. He could not understand the time of laughter and of feasting.

Ah, but those who have been brought back can. They can understand why there is joy and laughter and feasting. And so the psalmist does a picture in his mind of what he wants the Lord to do.

Look at verse 4. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev. The Negev, the south country, was a narrowed, parched, desert area.

[28 : 43] And in the summer months, it was completely dry. where the winter streams ran, there were just culverts.

There was no water, just cracked seams on the floor of the desert. And the psalmist is praying, that's what I am, he says in the present.

I'm in the summer, I'm in the dry season in the Negev, and it's dry as a bone. And there's not a green branch in sight, there's no growth, no sign of life.

But O Lord, if you restore the fortunes, do it like in the Negev, when the culverts are filled with water, and when there is ample growth again.

You remember the prophet Isaiah has grasped a similar picture. The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus, it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.

[29 : 52] And perhaps you've seen it happen. I remember once seeing a TV program of a dry arid dust ball, and then the rains came. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

The difference, the vegetation that sprung up immediately, the life that was visible, the place was throbbing with life. And so it is in the spiritual realm when God responds to this prayer.

The psalmist is saying, Lord, would you do that in my life? Because I feel like I'm in the Negev in the summer. I need those spiritual waves to come down.

love. And you remember the psalmist was no stranger to this. He pleads elsewhere, another psalm, O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you.

My soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. water. And maybe you're saying, oh, but you don't know where I am, minister.

[31 : 01] The place I'm in at the moment is so hard, so dry. I don't know if it could ever be like that again. Oh, have you prayed to the one who executed deliverance first of all?

Have you prayed, do it again, Lord? Do it again, Lord? I need you as much now as I needed you then.

I needed this deliverance now as much as I needed it then. Because it seems to me that the Christian never gets to the stage where you don't have to cry out in this way to the Lord.

It doesn't matter how far along the Christian path you have gone. Five years, ten years, twenty years, thirty years, forty years, fifty years, sixty years, perhaps there are some here, seventy, or eight, you never get to the point where you don't have to cry out.

Do it again, Lord. It's what he fills you with laughter and joy when you least expect it. you know, sometimes you crave the laughter and the joy that you knew in the first days of conversion.

[32 : 38] Remember how the hymn writer spoke? Where is it? Where is the joy that first I knew when first I saw the Lord?

I can remember 51 years ago, it's as vivid as yesterday, walking from this village to Babel village on a Sunday evening of communion to a fellowship.

Rejoicing, glad at heart, it's the same God who worked then, who can do it again.

But then thirdly, restoration in the past, restoration in the present, restoration in the future, because you notice the imagery switches again. And you see it in verses 5 and repeated in verse 6 or elaborated in verse 6.

The psalmist is using an agricultural illustration. He depicts for us a sower throwing away the seed.

[33 : 55] You know, I don't know if you saw, there was a series of programs on the Alaba network just recently, Haasanul, it's in the blood.

And it focused on crofting practices in South Houston. And it spoke about, they spoke about a special seed that grew well in the masher soil.

The care they took to harvest that seed, to protect it and to dry it in preparation for the next sowing. it. And if you think about it, how carefully the seed is protected and kept, and here's the sower, as it were, throwing it away.

After all that process, and he's throwing it away. To the casual observer, it might seem as if the sower is just merely throwing the seed away, that it be carefully harvested.

And in many ways, the sower has no control over what happens after he's sown the seed.

[35 : 14] Maybe too little rain, too much rain. No rain at what might be considered the right time, rain at the wrong time, and so on.

And here he's spoken not just about sowing, but sowing in tears. You know, it's an arduous work, sowing.

It can often seem to be so unrewarding. It can be the cause of many tears shed for those who are engaged in sowing.

But God promises that there shall be reaping. Harvest time in times past, we're not so familiar with it now, but it was a time of joy, time of laughter.

Perhaps some of you may remember as children when the cornstooks were taken in, and when they were piled up, and you played amongst them, as children was a time of laughter, a time of happiness.

[36 : 37] And the adults grateful that they are able to gather in the harvest. harvest. And here, he is picturing the sword going out, tearfully, but promising that there shall be shouts of joy.

And then he says, he who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy. he who goes out weeping, does that refer just to anybody who goes out sowing?

Well, in my own mind, and perhaps you might disagree with this, it's my conviction that this refers to the Lord himself.

He who goes out weeping. If you think of the Lord during his earthly ministry, he's coming towards the end of his public ministry prior to the crucifixion, he gazed out over Jerusalem, and remember how he lamented over the state of the city, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.

He went out weeping, and remember his teaching, truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

[38 : 21] It bears much fruit. He himself had to die, and his dying bore much fruit.

But just to confine it to this, if you read into the book of Acts, in Acts chapter 4, it speaks of 5,000 men who are brought to faith in Jerusalem.

Now, remember how Jesus lamented over Jerusalem. man. And the book of Acts tells us, shortly afterwards, there are 5,000 men.

And if that is not just confined to males, then you would have to factor in women and children too. In a city whose population was not really large then, so that a large percentage of the population of the city come to faith.

How do you explain it? He had gone out weeping, bearing the seed of his life, and planted in the souls of men, women, and children.

[39 : 44] And there was rejoicing. There was rejoicing. And there is a peculiar sense in which he will bring his sheaves with and present them all before the throne above.

Oh, to be in that harvest, in the harvest that is going to be reaped by the great source.

And all those who are the fruit of his labor, are presented before the throne. What a time that will be.

There was an elder in Kinloch, he had died before I went there, but didn't have a singing voice. But he used to croon, when the royal is called up yonder, I'll be there.

well, this was such a powerful, evocative memory for the psalmist that he prays, do it again, Lord.

[41 : 10] And as he looks to the future, he is not dismayed, because he is looking for God to do it in the future as well. Oh, the psalm doesn't promise that you won't face trials and tribulation in life, but it does promise that you will not face them without the prospect of a joy that comes from a source that cannot be suppressed.

It's not my word, it's God's word. And if you believe it, pray it. Oh, my friend, may God grant that as you close this year, and look forward to another year, that it may be one of outpouring from above. Let us pray.