

Restoration For The People Of God

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- [0 : 0 0] Psalm 126. It's a poem that's brimful of deeply felt emotion. There's gladness and there's sadness. There's pains and there's shouts of joy.
- At its heart, in verse 4, is a very simple prayer. Restore our fortunes. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev.
- That is, make things better for us, God. Bring back happier times. Turn away our misfortunes.
- And then, picking up the idea of streams in the desert, the psalmist is saying, our lives are shriveled up and parched, and how we long for them to be refreshed.
- The Negev was the stretch of desert between Judah and the Arabian Peninsula, and it was for 10 months of the year without rain.
- [1 : 3 1] But if water fell on the hills, the wadis, the dry riverbeds, could become quickly awash with a small torrent.
- And the writer's saying, we want that kind of refreshment again and again and again.
- It's natural for us to think of refreshment in terms of personal refreshment, restoration. And that's right. David, in the 51st Psalm, asked God to restore the joy of his salvation.
- And when Job was at the end of his testing, his intense trial, we read that God restored his fortunes.
- So this is something that we can justifiably ask for from God personally. But Psalm 126 is not about the restoration of personal fortunes.
- [2 : 4 7] It's about the restoration of fortunes for Zion, as it says in verse 1. We come here and look at this psalm, and what we're doing is we're wanting God to do something new in his churches.
- Now, there's something very appropriate that we turn to this psalm a few days before our own day of prayer in the free church.
- And as we do so, we recognize that God is doing things amongst us for which we're truly grateful.
- But we also come with a sense of, Lord, do more. Do it again, what you've done in the past.
- Because you see, and this is especially true of those of us who are 40 and over, we've come through two decades of exceedingly fast decline in the number of people who declare themselves to be Christians in Scotland.
- [4 : 1 3] And in the UK, there are very few outsiders who are looking in on the church and saying with the writer, like what the writer of the psalm heard, people saying, God's done great things among them.
- And it's surely important to us that in the prayer sheets that we got for midweek this week, we're hearing that out of 100 or so congregations in the free church, 28 of them are coming to the mission board and saying, we would love to have some help to be revitalized.

And for ourselves here in Partick, we've got to acknowledge that there is a harvest field out there, and there's a harvest field being reaped, but it's actually happening very little amongst indigenous Western Scotland folk.

And we do well to come before God and say, Lord, restore our fortunes. Do something new among us.

Well, as we go into the wording of the psalm, I want to see that that prayer, Lord, restore our fortunes, is placed between two great truths, two important truths.

[6 : 02] The first is, in verses 1 to 3, the Lord does great things among us. Restoration, renewal, reformation, call it what you will, it's God's work.

The Lord does it. And secondly, I want to see from verses 5 to 6 that the Lord does great things working through us.

Well, now let's look at those in turn. The prayer of verse 4, restore our fortunes, is stimulated by what he has done in the past.

And the psalmist looks back on days, presumably this is referring to the coming back of people from exile in Babylon, and he says, when the Lord restored the fortunes, the literal meaning is, when the Lord turned the captivity.

We were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, our tongue with shouts of joy, and then they said among the nations, the Lord has done great things for us, for them.

[7 : 23] The Lord has done great things for us. And I hope you can see in that that there's this repeated emphasis on the Lord.

The Lord did the great things. It was the Lord who was the prime mover in it. He was the planner of the return of the exile.

He was the architect of bringing new things about. And that's how it always is. Jesus commissioned the apostles, and he said to Peter, you're the rock, but it's on you, I will build my church.

And all along, this restoring, reforming work of God is going to be done by him. He is the source of all development and growth.

Sometimes he'll do it in such an amazing way that we'll say, like the writer, it's as if I'm dreaming.

[8 : 33] Is this for real what God's doing? We were like those who dreamed, and we seem to be coming out of a sleepwalk to see what God is doing.

What happened in the restoration was that the Persian kings successively, their names were Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, they brought about the returning of exiled, imprisoned Jews.

And in Cyrus' case, he not only sent the enslaved people free, but he paid for their return journey.

We were like those who dream. And we need to have this mentality for Scotland, for our own congregations, that a group of ten pensioners meeting each Lord's Day in a drafty rural congregation, God is able to restore their fortunes.

And for us here, mixing amongst hardened atheists who don't even acknowledge the existence of God, Jesus is able to turn them around.

[10 : 04] And for the many friends we have who say, we're happy without God, it's God the Holy Spirit who's able to point them to Christ and show them that there's a happiness in him that they couldn't even have imagined.

You see, he can do it again and again. And so we pray it.

Now, two little applications of this before we move on. God's, when it comes to restoration, God's willingness is in answer to our helplessness.

God's willingness to act is in response to our utter helplessness. God's willingness to act and this especially becomes apparent in our readiness to pray.

We pray because we're helpless and helplessness is our best prayer. And it's only people who realize that they haven't got it in themselves that go to God and say, Lord, please restore us.

[11 : 44] You see, it's the same principle that we were hearing so helpfully this morning. Those who are well, they don't need a physician.

They don't need a doctor. It's the people who are sick and at the end of their tether that come to God and say, Father, Father, please restore us again.

Do you remember these words from the Apostle Paul? We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength, despaired of life itself.

We felt we'd received the sentence of death. that that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

So prayer, if we see that only God can restore us, then prayer is our obvious resort. But the second thing I want to come away from these first three verses with is that God's renewal must fill us with joy.

[13 : 06] Do you see that? Our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy. When he looked back and recalled what God has done, it was unforgettable pleasure.

There was an exuberance, there was laughter, and it stayed with him.

32 years ago, I have this vivid recollection on our television screens of a man walking out of Polesmoor Prison, Nelson Mandela, in South Africa.

And the euphoria amongst the people of Cape Town. And you know how Africans can celebrate. And it was just so, so exhilarating for us looking on.

Well now, we need to challenge ourselves. Do we have that kind of delight in hearing of people, maybe in Iran, coming in some numbers to fall at Jesus' feet and worship him?

[14 : 39] But never mind just Iran, down the road in part, will it bring us immense pleasure to hear of people being converted? And will we be rejoicing when we look at people who were immature in Christ and now they've come on?

And then they're now pushing on in the faith and they have a Christian maturity that is so beautiful. Will we rejoice in that? Will that be the sort of thing that makes us say our mouths were filled with laughter?

Do you remember how the lost son came home and the surly elder brother wouldn't go into the party?

And the father said to him, we had to celebrate because this brother of yours was lost and he's found. So it's a test for us.

Are we glad when people grow in grace? Well, that's the first section, the first three verses.

[16 : 03] The Lord does great things. It's the Lord who brings about revival and reformation in his church.

It's Jesus, the builder. But here's the wonderful second thing. Not only is God the architect of all restoration, but he invites us to join him in the work.

We become partners with the Holy Spirit. We cooperate with him. And so it says in verse three, those who sow in tears, if we could move on, Robert, to thank you.

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.

the Lord delights to work through us. He is the worker and we are working with him.

[17 : 37] Working together with him. Now, sometimes the Lord may take his people by surprise and do something incredibly suddenly.

And that's, I think, maybe what the psalmist was meaning when he said like streams in the desert because a flash flood in the mountains could indeed put the desert dry riverbeds into space and it just happened so quickly.

And that can be God's way wonderfully and we'd love it to happen here. But the norm, the norm in the work of the kingdom is that it comes through graft, through sweat and tears and getting on with the business of sowing the seed.

You see, it's the farming illustration that's so apt here, isn't it? Because a harvest matures in stages. There's the blade from the ground, then the ear of corn and then the full ripe fruit.

And the progress comes little by little and that's the normal pattern. And we who are co-workers, we have to see it as long-term work.

[19 : 26] It calls for steadfastness, constancy, especially in prayer. And so we've got to recognize that our unbelieving friends, as we were again thinking this morning, they're seldom drawn to Christ overnight.

And young Christians developing in the faith, which we long to see indeed all of us developing, it's as we are transformed from one degree of glory to another progressively.

And this all happens when we toil, when we're willing to roll up our sleeves. Paul used that extraordinary illustration in talking about his work amongst the Galatians.

Extraordinary for a man to say this, but he says, I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ be formed in you.

and what we're looking for amongst us, what each of us should say is that we're willing to get that involved emotionally and with our energy so that Christ may be formed in one another.

[20 : 59] Jesus, in our first reading, told the people, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone.

but if it dies, it bears much fruit. And that's the principle, that was how it was for him and it's how it is for us, that there's toil and graft and we roll up our sleeves in the kingdom and it's a privilege.

Can I say a little bit about tears? We have different personalities and this is even true about the way we feel things.

Some people shed tears readily, others very seldom. But the underlying thing is this, that the people who are serious with God will have this upsurge of deeply felt emotions that longs to see a harvest of people.

That's the thing. Now the tears will sometimes be tears of repentance.

[22 : 40] And I don't actually just mean individual repentance here, but I'm talking about collective repentance. We as the church, our congregation, our group of churches in the free church, our body of Christ in Scotland, we will come on Wednesday and we will do well to come in a spirit of repentance because we want to say to God, we grieve Lord for the way that we, your body has failed.

There'll be that kind of tears and that's only right. You remember how Daniel, Daniel of all people, Daniel the most righteous man, when he came to see that the Lord was going to return the exiles, he said, I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.

I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession. Oh Lord, great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled.

So there is this collective repentance amongst the people of God. These are our tears. But there's also, I suggest, tears of compassion for the lost, tears of longing for people to be saved.

Jesus came in to the city on his way to the cross and he wept over Jerusalem. Would that you'd known, he said, the things that make for peace.

[24 : 53] Would that you Jerusalem people had known how to find peace with God. But you would not. winners of souls must first be weepers for souls.

Tears of earnestness in us bring about tears of repentance in others.

No birth without travail. That was Spurgeon. But then the last thing on these final two verses.

Jesus is the Lord of the harvest. And he makes sure there is a harvest.

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.

[26 : 23] you see, he guarantees the harvest. And we could always take that promise into our thinking as we long for loved ones in our families to turn.

and as we plead with God to convert the friends who come in amongst us and visit us, brought perhaps by some of us or simply looking in.

And he will bring a harvest. Isaiah picks this up in a similar kind of passage.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus, shall blossom abundantly.

The ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy will be upon their heads.

[27 : 43] They shall obtain gladness and joy and sorrow and sighing will flee away. The harvest is guaranteed because Jesus is the Lord of the harvest.

harvest. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the privilege of working with you.

Could there, in our wildest imaginations, ever be a better leader, a better gaffer in our workmanship, a better one to take us out into the fields and labour.

And we thank you, Lord, that you bring about a harvest and we simply plead with you to do that amongst us. Help us on Wednesday as we've prayed already.

Help us to come together with all the congregations and seek your face and ask you, Lord, restore our fortunes for Jesus' sake.

[29 : 11] Amen. Amen.