

The Pilgrim's Hope

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[0 : 00] If you would take your Bible and turn to Psalm 126, we are looking at the Pilgrim Psalms. This is the second week that we are doing that and it's great to be with you in this service.

I'm not often here in this earlier service. Thank you for your welcome. Psalm 126 tells us that the Christian life is not a middling life.

It's not a life that is an average medium between sorrow and joy. It's more like an Australian bowls ball.

In Australia, we play lawn bowls. I don't. Many do. And the balls are heavily weighted on one side. And so you cleverly bowl the ball in semicircles.

Well, the same is true for the Pilgrim Life. There's grief and there's glory and there's weakness and wonder. But it's heavily weighted toward the wonder.

[1 : 08] And you can see this from the shape of the Psalm. So if you open up to Psalm 126, I have page 517. It begins with overwhelming joy and happiness at what God has done in the past.

Verse 1. So he's looking back to a time of great restoration.

And then in verse 4, he says, Restore our fortunes, O Lord. There's one prayer in the Psalm. Restore our fortunes, O Lord.

So he's looking back to a great joyful restoration that God has worked in the past. And in the middle, there is a prayer that God would restore the fortunes again.

And that means that things right now for the Psalm is tough. Circumstances overwhelming beyond his capacities. And one of the problems for us is I think that when we remember back to the great things that God has done in the past, it can make very clear the great distance between where we are now and where we could be if God should act in a restoring and renewing way.

[2 : 38] It's a good Psalm for us today. Because I think this describes each of us and all of us together. I think this is a difficult time for churches in Vancouver, for example.

But God has restored the fortunes of Zion in the past. If you go back to the first verse, this idea of Zion, in this Psalm, it's not one particular city.

If you slide your eyes back to the previous Psalm, Psalm 125. Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved but abides forever.

I think Zion in Psalm 126 is speaking about all those who trust in the Lord. It's a prayer that God would restore our fortunes. For us today, Zion might be Christianity or the cause of Christ.

And the Psalm is written in the most general terms. It is true for churches and individuals when things become distressing or difficult or dry. So for a church that might have lost its property or individually if you feel stuck or there's something happening for your children or for your family or you're praying to God and he doesn't seem to be coming through.

[3 : 57] But when he looks back and sees what God has done in the past, it's not to make us feel bad or to say, you know, we're worse now than we were or it's not to look back in nostalgia and say, oh, they were the good old days.

The reason he looks back is to feed hope and direct our hearts to pray for the restoration and revival of the future. And when God does that, we are like those who dream.

God acts in such grace and in such a way that it's very clear that only he could do it. He fills our mouths with laughter. You know, when those things happen that are just so good and wonderful that you can only laugh.

And their laughing is so strong, it's filled their mouths and shouts of joy follow. The Lord has done great things for us, say the people round about.

That's a sign that God really hasn't been at work. And the psalmist in verse 3 has the humility to say, yes, we didn't deserve it, but God, the Lord has done great things for us.

[5 : 06] But now all that is past. Individually, it may be you have experienced great times of special blessing from the Lord. You know, times of growth and delight where you felt you could just see what God was doing.

But for many of us, that's in the past. I was born in East Africa and we were at the tail end of the East African revival. And by revival, I mean a widespread over several countries.

A time when people came under the conviction of sin and many turned to Christ and there was a pursuit of holiness and change. There have been several in Canada, I understand.

But that's in the past. And it feels, the psalmist, as for many of us, life feels more like a spiritual desert.

You can look back with thanks, but in verse 4, now we live in the Negev. The Negev is that big triangle of wasteland and barren desert at the bottom of Israel. Soil and rock.

[6 : 13] And the life now is sowing in tears and weeping. So this is a very important psalm for us. And I want to just point out that there are two pictures of restoration.

There are two ways in which God brings renewal and restoration that are pointed to in this psalm. And two things that mark our pilgrimage, both as individuals and as a church. Just two points. The first picture is rivers in the desert.

And this comes by prayer. So the whole psalm is a prayer which comes to its head in verse 4. And the reason I think this is so important is that the reality is that it's only in the desert where we learn to pray.

It's in the desert we recognize we can't generate our own restoration. We need something impossible humanly. We need a miracle. Look back at verse 4, please.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the desert. The word streams is the word for ravines. I don't think it's a little trickle of rain.

[7 : 23] I think he's talking about a sudden rush where God fills the space, the waste and weary place with fresh water. And the psalmist is saying, please God, do it again.

You've done it in the past, do it again. A supernatural work. Something new, something we cannot do. We're facing something that is completely beyond us.

We're overwhelmed by it. We're hitting a wall and nothing is going to take place unless you act. You see, it's in the desert we learn to pray. It's in the desert we learn we cannot lean on our own resources.

I've been reading a great book recently by Paul Miller called The Praying Life. And he says this, God customizes deserts for each of us.

I think he's right. I don't know if you ever thought about it, but every character in the Bible, except for one, lives with a gap. And the gap is between what God promises and their current reality.

[8 : 31] So think of Abraham. God comes to Abraham and promises to give him children. He's 75. His son arrives when he's 100.

It's 25 years of living just based on the promise. 25 years in the desert. God promised Joseph that he would be a great leader and his brothers betrayed him and sold him into slavery.

God promised David he'd be a king and yet he was hunted like an animal. They live in this hope, this gap between what God has promised, the hope and their present reality. And I think the same is true for us.

God makes high promises to us and then takes us into the desert.

So think about it this way. If you put hope up here and reality down there, there is a gap between the two. And in that gap is the desert. And we desperately want to close the gap.

[9 : 34] And we keep taking things into our own hands and saying, we're going to do this ourselves. So some of us close the gap by, or will annihilate the gap, by just denying reality and how difficult things are.

I'm going to pretend that everything's okay. Just so long as nobody really asks me and knows how weak and sinful I am, everything will be fine. I don't need to change so long as I look okay.

I'm sure that's not true for any of you, but that is a temptation. And the only way to do that is to ignore reality. It's living in make-believe. Another way to do it is to deny the hope.

That is to be a bit too sophisticated and wary to really believe the promises of God. And I become an observer.

And I'm able to critique things. And I don't engage or care or love. And I think it's an understandable way to protect ourselves.

[10:38] But if you stand off and don't live on the promises, yes, you'll never get hurt. But you're ignoring what God has for you. Others of us, I think, try to resolve the gap by our own great effort.

We're going to bring reality up to the promises by sheer determination. And that'll end in despair. Because in the end, only God can restore our fortunes.

But you see, it's only in that gap, it's only in the desert place that we learn to know our need for God. And that all the other things in our lives that are so alluring, that promise life, they gradually die for lack of food and water.

It's in the desert we learn of our own sense of helplessness. And we begin to pray. It's in the desert where God faces us with our own weakness and inability and the deceptiveness and hollowness of our idols.

It's in the desert we learn our true thirst. Not for stuff or for things, for a good marriage, but for God. And when we cry to God in the desert, he gives himself to us.

[11:55] And the first picture of restoration is of a sudden river of water reviving and restoring. But in the meantime, I want to say, waiting is an essential part of faith.

Because it gives room for relationship. If God instantly answers prayer and gives us everything we want, he becomes, because of our own sinfulness, he becomes a kind of heavenly automatic teller machine.

But in the desert, we come to know that God is God and we value him for who he is. And this only comes through prayer. So the first picture of restoration is rivers in the desert.

Sudden blessing from God. Lord, restore our fortunes like rivers in the desert. The second picture is one of restoration. I've asked a number of people how long to preach at this service.

And I've received conflicting advice. And somebody this morning said, go as long as you like. So I'm not going to take that advice. We're more than halfway through.

[13:08] Second picture of restoration is not sudden or swift, but slow and difficult and progressive. It's the picture of overwhelming harvest.

We're still in the desert, notice. But in verses 5 and 6, we're farming. Let me read those verses again. Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy.

He who goes out weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. This is a brilliant picture.

Imagine you're a farmer. But your farm is in the middle of the desert. There's no irrigation. And you plant because you've received a promise of water and growth and harvest and food.

And you know that if you don't sow, there's going to be no reaping. What do you do? You sow in tears. You go out weeping, bearing seed for sowing, because it seems like such a waste.

[14:14] You know, those precious seeds you're taking out of the mouths of your children. You're putting them in the hard and barren ground. The only water they're going to get are your tears.

And this is the slow, ongoing reality in our own lives and in all churches. But the wonderful thing is that what we sow is not, you know, money or...

I don't think this is the New Testament picture of sowing the Word of God. What we sow is ourselves. Do you remember Jesus said, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone.

But if it dies, it bears much fruit. The seed has to go into the ground. It has to die. And for Jesus, it was literally true. He laid down his life.

And the fruit, the harvest, is astonishing resurrection for all of us. But we also die like seeds. And through Christ, our lives become fruitful as well.

[15:15] When we plant the seed of our lives in the ground, God bears fruit, not just in us, but through us in others' lives. But there's a wonderful realism about this, isn't it?

This is the normal Christian life and work. It means it's no good asking God for restoration unless we're willing to give ourselves patiently and prayerfully. When you see God at work, it's because people are working, because God is working, I'm sorry, through his people.

It's not work without prayer. It's not prayer without work. It's prayer for supernatural restoration together with the persistent activity in our lives for God, sowing our lives in tears.

Because what is slow and gradual is just as much God given as what is sudden and spectacular. I can't tell you how many meetings and conferences I've been to that have called themselves historic, tipping points, momentous, crucial, decisive.

It's usually on the advertising. But you know, the day the conference is over, the slow work of seed sowing starts up. The normal way that God works is through small actions soaked in prayer.

[16 : 38] When a group of people in a church begin to pray, the seed is planted. The action looks small, but God promises that there's going to be wads and wads of joy.

And the reality is that even when God brings sudden and great blessing and restoration to a church or to an area or to our lives, very soon afterwards it's followed by new problems and new difficulties and new temptations.

There is no single action God is going to take in this life that's going to solve all our problems and make things perfect. That's going to wait till heaven. I mean, one of the greatest revivals took place in the United States in the early 1700s under Jonathan Edwards, who was a preacher and a very large brain.

He used to preach like this. He used to write notes and then he would read them like this, not looking at the congregation. I've always been tempted to do that. What he said was terrific.

And in 1733 in his parish in Massachusetts, there was a great outpouring. Great outpouring. It's hard to describe the phenomena. Almost everyone in the town came to the church and they began to pray through the night again, again and again and wanted to hear and be in God's presence and hear the word of God.

[18 : 01] And many, many, many came to know Jesus Christ. It was an unusual and wonderful work of God that spread throughout New England. But in 1749, his church sacked him.

And I don't think New England is really the bastion of Christian faith today. In fact, I know a couple of people who are planting churches there today. The same is true for us as individuals. We can have the richest, most wonderful experience of the Holy Spirit and we should.

You can have it yesterday and you can be changed. But today, we need to struggle again.

However, I want to finish with this. I would be letting you down and it would be completely unfair to this psalm to leave us thinking that the Christian life has joy and sorrow in equal measure.

Because the psalm begins in joy, celebrating what God has done, and it ends in joy. And in the middle, both the sudden work of God and the slow work of God ends with shouts of laughter.

Yes, there are tears. Yes, there is weeping. Yes, we are in the desert. But by far, the main emphasis of this psalm is joy and laughter because our hope outweighs everything that is happening.

[19 : 21] And it does because God stands behind his promises. Do you notice the two shalls in verses 5 and 6? Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy.

He who goes out weeping, bearing seed for sown, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. This is God's promise for us. And it's not just for the life to come.

It is for this life. His promise is that if we are faithful in sowing, if we sow our lives in prayer, God will multiply the harvest, and we will come home with shouts of joy.

It doesn't seem like it, does it? It doesn't seem right to put our lives in the ground, buried with Christ. It seems impossible that anything could happen. But God is answering our prayers.

He will restore the fortunes of Zion. There will be a harvest of joy. And God's call to us from this psalm is to pray and work for restoration. And his promise is to flood the desert and to fill our hearts with that resurrection joy.

[20 : 31] So let's bow our heads. And I want to pray the collect again, because I think it just about says it all. Amen. Thank you.

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