

Pilgrim Joy

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[0 : 00] Well, I should probably tell you that after that children's talk that my name is Dan Gifford and I'm a trustworthy person. I hope that you can trust what I'm saying here, but it is taken out of Psalm 126.

And you can follow along and see if I stray from that at all. It is about trust in God. And Bruce Hindmarsh last week started us off on this new sermon series that we are on, on the Psalms of Ascent.

They're the Psalms from 126 to 134. And as he mentioned, these are Psalms that were sung and said by pilgrims making their way up to Jerusalem.

Now, when I hear the word pilgrim, I have to confess that I tend to think of a man or woman who is dressed in black and white with wide-brimmed hats for the men and buckled shoes who sit down to a big feast, a glorious feast in November.

And that's because of my, I think I went through too many American Thanksgivings. And so my mind is clouded with that idea of pilgrim when I hear it.

[1 : 14] And I think we need to get that idea straight in our mind when we're looking at this passage. Because pilgrim, I decided to look it up in a dictionary, means somebody who goes on a journey to a holy place for a religious reason.

So it's about people who are on a journey. And that is what the people singing the Psalm 126 were doing in Old Testament times. They were going up to Jerusalem to a holy place.

And that place was on a high hill called Mount Zion. And all along the journey, these Psalms of Ascent, of going up, were sung and said.

They were prayers to God. And when people heard that singing and that speaking of those songs, they were deeply encouraged and strengthened by it.

Their faith grew. And so the journey, the traveling, was part of the importance, a great important part of the pilgrimage. Now these Psalms have spoken to Christians ever since there were Christians because of the fact that we are pilgrims as well.

[2 : 24] Now the Bible tells us we are on a journey. That we are journeying to a holy place. And that that place is the presence of God. It is the holy city, the new heaven and the new earth.

Where God's home will be with us. And that he will live with us. We will be his people, Revelation says. And he will be our God. And there he is going to wipe away our tears from our eyes.

And there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. That's the journey that Jesus has put us on by his death and by his rising again to eternal life.

He has assured us by doing that that our destination will be something we will see. And as with the pilgrims to the temple, he is actually doing a very powerful work through that journey that we are on. Now I wonder if you children have ever been on a long trip with your parents. And at any times during that trip you said, Are we there yet?

[3 : 33] I bet you if I was to ask you to raise your hands, almost 100% of you would have said that. In fact, I bet some of your parents have said that too.

Are we there yet? It is a question about wanting to be there. It is something we feel on our journey to heaven as well.

And in fact, Christians throughout the ages have said that during their journey. Are we there yet? One of the most well-known sayings of the early church was Maranatha, which means Lord Jesus come quickly.

They are wanting the journey to end, for them to see this great place where God is, where they are in his presence. Are we there yet? Well, what this means is that on our journey to God, we need help to persevere, to have patience, and to continue on.

We need help to persevere. And the greatest strength that we can have in that is joy. Joy is the fortifier, the energy drink, the thing that keeps us going on this journey, on this pilgrimage.

[4 : 45] It is the great strengthener on our journey. It sustains us. And that's why Psalm 126 is here. It is teaching about the importance of joy in the pilgrimage. And that's important because for the world, joy is something that we manufacture as an escape.

But this psalm tells us that there is a source to our joy. And I want you to look at 126. In the very, very middle of that, if you were to put your finger right in the middle of Psalm 126, you'll see three words.

We are glad. We are glad. And it's an interesting thing to say because the question comes up, aren't there tough travel days?

You know, aren't there days when you don't feel emotionally glad? And the other thing is, this psalm was obviously written by people who knew about weeping and about tears.

How are they able to say, we are glad? Well, the reason for the gladness has nothing to do with the emotion of that day, of the moment.

[5 : 54] It is all based in the past and the future work of God. It's this idea of being surrounded by God's powerful work. Look at verses 1 and 2.

They're in the past tense. When it talks about God restoring the fortunes, these are things that have happened in the past. And if you look in verses 4 through 6, they are in the future tense.

God is in the past and in the future doing great things for these people. And the psalm is saying that we all live in the context of God's grace.

We are walking towards God, towards heaven in His grace. We are surrounded by it. And that deeply affects how we live today.

It affects us by giving us joy. So looking back in verse 1, this psalm calls people to remember the day when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion.

[6 : 52] And we don't know for sure which event God is referring to there because God has done so many great things for Israel. In fact, the psalm probably calls us here to remember all the saving works of God.

But the most recent rescue that these people would have known was when the Israelites were suddenly allowed to return to their homes after being deported hundreds of miles away to a strange land for 70 years.

And not only were they suddenly told you can go back to your homes, they were told you can rebuild your temple. In fact, the pagan king says, do it.

Make a new temple. Rebuild your city that we destroyed. And this seemed too good to be true. In fact, you see here in verse 1 that they were like those who were in a dream when they heard the news.

They went from people having no hope to having their mouths filled with laughter and their tongues shouting with joy. They were immersed in joy. We saw little examples of this this week in the news.

[8 : 02] When every one of over 300 people on that Air France flight that crashed came away with only minor injuries, the minister of transport had one thing to say.

He said, this is a miracle. This is a huge miracle. And you saw rejoicing. You saw people joyfully, with tears, welcoming each other.

And then last night, Russians and people all over the world rejoiced because men who were trapped 600 feet below in darkness, entangled in nets, were brought to the surface unexpectedly in perfect health.

It was an outcome of extreme hope, especially after the disaster in the submarine five years ago in Kursk. In both of those situations, you saw fortunes restored that people who were facing the worst of circumstances in life suddenly had their lives given back and it was good news, beyond hope.

And the result was tongues filled with joy and laughter. Well, this is what happened in a much deeper way to the people of Israel. And unlike CNN or CBC, the nations that were surrounding Israel, the pagan nations, all recognized that this thing is so incredible it can only be the hand of God.

[9 : 24] That's why it says in verse 2, then they said among the nations, the Lord has done great things for them. They recognized it was only God. And the psalmist said, look, if those people recognize it, you have to remember, yes, in verse 3, they are right, the Lord has done great things for us.

That is why we are glad. Don't forget. Remember how joyful that you were. And that speaks directly to you and me as Christians.

Because each of us have experienced a reversal of fortune, a restoration of fortunes, beyond anything this world could ever offer, beyond what the passengers of Air France or the Russian sailors experienced.

Because you and I have been brought out of darkness into Jesus' marvelous light. Every one of us, if we know Jesus as our Savior, have been brought, have been rescued from that place of the darkness, the tangled net of sin, to rising to a new life with Him.

And this is our joy. This is the source of our gladness. It is in the real fact of a past rescue.

[10 : 43] And unfortunately, we in our human nature over time tend to easily forget this. We tend to forget the joy that comes from having this certain fact of Jesus saving us.

And that's why it's so important for us to continually read the Bible. That's why in Sunday school, when you are attending classes, it's a wonderful thing to hear of the great things God has done and His promises to you.

And it's why Holy Communion is a great gift from God, that Jesus gives it as a gift. Because when He tells us to eat and drink, what does He tell us to do it in?

In remembrance of me, He says. Remembrance of His sacrificial death for the forgiveness of sins. Remembrance of His glorious resurrection that you and I will share in one day.

These acts of God affect us permanently and they produce joy. Now, in these shortened services that we have this summer, we don't sing the Gloria at the end of the service.

[11 : 48] But remember this in September, that that Gloria is this expression of joy being heaped upon joy because of remembering what Jesus has done for us.

And it says, we praise Thee, we bless Thee, we worship Thee, we glorify Thee, we give thanks to Thee, all one after another. Because these are expressions of joy on top of joy because of the finished work of Jesus Christ.

This is the past source of our joy. It is the past great work, that powerful great work of God for each of us. Now, the other side is gladness and joy that comes because of the future being in God's hands.

So you look at verses 4 through 6, it's all in the future tense. And it's saying that because God has acted in the past to restore the fortunes of Israel, it is in His character to do it again.

As Sean says, because of what He has done in the past, what He has shown Himself to be in Scripture and in your life, He will do it again. This is His character to bring you goodness and grace in your future.

[13 : 04] And so the psalm prays for two things differently. First, it prays that God will restore fortunes suddenly and powerfully. And the image it gives is of the dry ravines in the Negev desert turning into flash floods.

These are water courses in the Negev. This is an incredibly desolate area. And it's saying here, may that be filled with torrents of water, life-giving water flowing through it.

And the results that you see even today when that water comes is a sudden greening of the area and beautiful flowers coming out very quickly within days.

It is a sudden work of God that the psalmist talks about in the future that he prays for. But there's a different type of work in the future as well. It's the second prayer. And that's in verses 5 and 6.

That God will work through the present suffering that you go through over time to bring goodness to his people. The way he puts it is to use an image of a farmer sowing in tears and reaping with shouts of joy, planting seeds with sadness, and then in the harvest having shouts of joy coming with it that the seeds have grown and flourished.

[14 : 31] And what this tells us is when a person, when this psalmist looks at the future, all he sees is a deep abiding trust that the future is in God's hands. Not only is God going to act very powerfully and completely when Jesus comes again, but he will, until that day, walk with his people and work through their sorrow and their grief to bring about that goal of joy, of true joy.

And so verses 5 and 6 tell us that the seeds symbolize everything that disappoints us, the sufferings we experience in our life. But when it is planted in God, in his plan, there is a crop of joy that will surely come from it.

It's an audacious thing to say. It's a hard thing sometimes to hear when you are going through that suffering itself, that God will use that to bring joy into your life.

It's hard to believe. Just like it may be hard to believe a farmer putting seeds into the desert and seeing that suddenly flourish after months of growth.

But you know, what is extraordinary about that call is that it is done by people who know about weeping and suffering firsthand. This is what they've gone through for 70 years.

[15 : 55] Yet they sing in faith that God will bring about a joy through the very hard things they are going through. That even through that suffering, that is part of God's plan to bring them joy.

There is a joy that comes simply in the fact that you go through pain in his care and in his sovereign work. To know that brings joy. Probably the hardest question that you get faced with as a Christian that I as a minister get faced with is, why does God allow suffering?

Why would he let goodness come into my life and then take it away and dash my hopes? Or why would he allow pain to hit me so deeply? And the answer is that we don't know.

I don't know because we don't see the whole picture yet like God does. We are like the farmer planting in sorrow, not being able to see yet the incredible work that God will do through it in the future.

But this psalm is pointing to the great promise that we hear in Romans, that in all things God works for good for those who love him, for those who are called according to his purpose.

[17 : 11] That's what the psalm is pointing to. Christian joy is not an escape from sorrow. It is knowing that you weep in him. your sorrow is in him.

It is knowing that this is not outside God's great work. In fact, you will see it is part of God's work when he brings you joy. That's the incredible expectation that the psalm asks us to pray for, that God will bring joy into your life no matter what your circumstances.

And he will do it not only completely and decisively one day, but he will also grow that joy in you through the ups and downs of your life. And so I want to invite you today to pray through Psalm 126 this week because it is a psalm that urges you to remember that God has done great things for you, not only for the Hebrew people, but for you in a more powerful way.

He has forever changed you and saved you in Jesus Christ. And all you go through now, he is using to bring about lasting goodness and joy in your life.

He has joy waiting for you in your future. In fact, so great is that joy that you will shout and be filled with laughter. That's the prophecy of this chapter.

[18 : 36] There is a well of joy that comes from believing and trusting Jesus' past work and his promises that will be fulfilled in your life. So may God grant you joy and the perseverance that comes with that joy as you continue on this journey as a pilgrim, as you both remember and expect his great goodness.

Amen.