

Psalm 126 AM

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[0 : 00] We ask now, Heavenly Father, as we turn to your word, that you would lead us into a good pasture by rivers of still water, and as you do so, you would restore our souls, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. I add my greeting to Chris's, and say it's very tempting to preach Psalm 23 this morning that was just read.

It's a very beautiful psalm. But we're going to go back to Psalm 126, which is also a little treasure. So if you have your Bible, would you open back there? It starts on the bottom of 517 and goes over to 518.

Over the years, I've been very helped by a preacher whose name is Dick Lucas and his take on this psalm, and I hope it will become precious to you. Psalm 126 is about hope and how it works, because to be human is to be irreducibly a creature of hope.

And that's not so easy today, is it? I mean, the world feels more and more dangerous and fragmented and broken, from finances to inequality to the future of our planet.

[1 : 27] There's a lot of cause for pessimism and even cynicism. And I think one of the key signs of this today is the reception of artificial intelligence, AI.

Did you know there are a number of key scientists in Silicon Valley who are working at the cutting edge of AI who call themselves effective accelerationists?

Simply put, they believe that the time has come to replace humans with AI. And they're doing what they can to accelerate this move.

And they view all the rest of us who don't agree as naive optimists, clinging to a hope of survival that is a figment of our imagination. The future, they say, the future hope is post-human.

Get on with it. But I think there's a more important reason why hope is in such short supply today. And it's the simple reason that as a culture we've left God behind.

[2 : 30] So the centre of meaning and of hope is no longer God in heaven. We've placed it in me and in my feelings. So the answers are no longer in Jesus Christ but where they are within me.

So I have to be authentic to my true self. And I think that's left us feeling weightless and uncertain and fragile. And I came across a poignant illustration this week.

Billie Eilish is a 22-year-old pop sensation from the United States. And with her brother, she wrote the heart song for the Barbie movie.

And Barbie sings quite sadly in the movie this song. And it's called, What Was I Made For? And it starts, I used to float.

Now I just fall down. I used to know. But now I'm not so sure. What was I made for? Sorry, what I was made for. What was I made for?

[3 : 34] All together now. And you can see online when she sings this at live concerts, there are rows and rows of teens and 20-year-old young women particularly weeping and weeping and singing this at the top of their lungs.

It's become a little bit of an anthem for the generation. What was I made for? And you can't help watching that as a believer and feel if only someone were to get up and say something like, You were made for hope.

And the only true source of hope is in God himself. You were made for God and you'll only find your true self in him. And his love in Jesus Christ has given you such a hope that you could only dream about.

It would make you deliriously happy and unbearably hopeful. And that's what Psalm 126 is about. It's about the reversal of hopelessness.

It's about the restoration of hope. And the psalm is meant to fill us with hope. And it applies especially, I think, to Christians. Because as Christians we also need this restoration from God. [4 : 50] You know, many of us feel that God is a long way away. We keep moving but we just sometimes wonder why. I know it's me who's moved and I've messed up. But I don't really think God could ever use me again.

I have doubts about serving him. I know I'm supposed to be hopeful. But unless God does something, I'm losing hope. And Psalm 126 comes as a fresh word of hope to us. And the way it leads us to hope is by walking through three tensions. And the first tension is the tension between memory and hope.

And you can see this from the very shape of the psalm. In verses 1 to 3, it's all about the past. Remembering the astonishing work that God had done in the past.

Look again please. Verse 1. When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Our mouth was filled with laughter.

[5 : 53] Our tongue was shouts of joy. We can't locate what marvelous restoration this was. But what God did was obviously completely supernatural.

Something you might dream about. Beyond any human possibility. It was a revival and a restoration that was his. It's impossible to deny. And that's why the nations in verse 2, the nations round about also sing and say, God has done great things for you guys.

And the key sense in the words in the psalm, particularly in this first section, are the idea of an astonishing reversal. When the Lord restored, it's reversed.

It's turned over. Fortunes is a word that has captivity on it. So it's not just he brought us back to a place of neutrality. He brought us home on his shoulders.

And what God has done is so shockingly wonderful, it's left the psalmist flabbergasted in the past. And the reason for drawing God's past work into memory, why is it?

[7 : 02] It's because things now are rough and harsh and dry and hard. And it seems there's no hope whatsoever. And if you look at the second half, all the psalmist can do is weep.

So you see verse 4, he says, Lord, restore our fortunes like streams in the Negev. The Negev, the desert.

This is the connection between memory and hope. Lord, the psalmist says, you did it once. We desperately need you to do it again. Without your working, we have no hope.

Things are so dry and so hopeless. We might as well lie down on the rocks in the desert and hope for water. Trying to move forward spiritually and personally and together is like throwing seeds out on those barren, dirty rocks in the desert.

Lord, do what you did before. Restore the fortunes of Zion. And what's helpful about this is that verses 1 to 3 are not nostalgic. The psalmist is not looking back and saying to the younger generation, Ah, boys and girls, the good old days.

[8 : 14] If only we could go back to them. No, no. It's a memory of what God did in the past. And it becomes the basis of the prayer in verse 4. There's a true story about Billy Graham.

When he was at college, he was taken with a class to London. And there they visited the house of John Wesley, who was under God, responsible for the great revival in the 1700s.

And if you've ever been to Wesley's home, in the study, there's a kneeler and there are two little knee marks on the kneeler. When they got back in the bus, the teacher counted the students and one was missing and he went back.

And there was Billy in the study on the kneeler, calling out to God, Lord, do it again. Lord, do it again. Lord, do it again. Perhaps even better is Jesus in the book of Revelation, when he's writing to the seven churches.

And he writes to the church in Ephesus. And he says, you know, there's a lot of great activity going on in your church and programs and you're super busy, but I've got one thing against you.

[9 : 23] You've abandoned the love that you had at first. And what does he tell them to do? He says, remember from what you've fallen, repent and do the works you did at first.

Not go back and try and feel the feelings, but remember what it was like to be in that restored relationship with God and come back to him.

So this is the first tension that helps us with hope. True hope begins to arise as we recall and retell and remember what God has done. That's exactly why we come to the Lord's Supper week by week or month by month.

We take, we eat, we drink, and we remember the great work of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus for us, paying for restoration and renewal and new blessing.

And that's what we're going to pray for in just a few minutes. So that's the first tension, the tension between memory and hope. But there's a second tension, and it's between God's work and ours.

[10:32] Did you notice in the first verses that the work of restoration came from nowhere but from God alone, humanly impossible, supernatural through and through, when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion.

The Lord has done great things. The nations say the Lord has done great things. But when we put the second half of the psalm together with the first half, we get a dose of Bible realism.

The psalm is not encouraging us to sit around and wait for God to start working. Nor is it encouraging us to get busy at the work of spiritual restoration all by ourselves.

And part of the point of this psalm is that God's work is done through our prayers and through our work. That's why the picture of work in the second half is backbreaking, painstaking, farming.

Verse 5. Those who sow in tears shall reap the shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping or he who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing. It's no good to ask God for restoration or revival or renewal unless you're willing to work.

[11:48] And even when it seems hard and even when it seems fruitful. So if we ask this psalm, how do we know when God is working? The answer is simply when men and women are working too.

Because God's work is done through us, it's not that we sit back and pray, pray, pray and wait and then jump on it. Nor is it that we work, work, work and God blesses us for the sheer quantity.

Oh well, I'll give in to them and I'll now bless them. No, no, all our work must be done accompanied by prayer. This is the normal shape of the Christian life. This is the normal shape of Christian ministry.

We demonstrate our trust in God. We demonstrate our hope in God. By working and praying for God to work. And I think this helps explain why Christians go backwards and forwards between two poles.

Between Christian activism and Christian contemplation. I grew up in a solidly activist Christian environment. We were always doing things.

[12:51] Doing, doing, doing. Monday, Wednesdays, Saturdays. I've been on countless missions since I was a teenager. I've organized missions. I've marched in demonstrations with other Christians.

Not political activism but spiritual activism. That was the culture I grew up, the Christian culture I grew up in. In the last decade or so in North American evangelicalism, there's become a growing interest in the more contemplative side of Christianity.

A fascination with the spiritual disciplines as the way forward for us as churches and individuals. Fasting, solitude, meditation, journaling. And the danger of activist Christianity is it is possible to substitute your activity for genuine, humble, trusting God.

Because we have to, all of us have to come to a place where we say unless we pray first, we're finished. But the danger of contemplative Christianity, it's possible to become so focused on yourself and your spiritual life that you lose focus on God and your neighbor.

But the picture of the Christian life and the picture of Christians serving here is sowing seed. Think about that for a moment. It's such a powerless and tiny thing to do.

[14:10] And that's how God works. God usually works in slow and small ways. Not in big and splashy ways. God usually works in the world.

God usually works in the world. I think the great temptation for us today is to think that by big conferences the kingdom will be brought. Big conferences and splashy titles will do the work of God.

We've had a rash of these in Canada. Conferences called History Makers. Oxygen. Unleashed. And they use the language of being strategic and transforming and converging and uprising and starting.

And usually the advertising on these conferences says this will be the most significant Christian gathering of the century. And I've been to some of them.

And the hope subtly shifts from God to our newfangled strategy and tactic. But there's very little to show for them. But when God decides to act, he usually starts small through a small group of

people who begin to pray.

[15:17] And he usually does it outside of the normal channels. I hesitate to use this illustration. But when my wife Bronwyn and I went to university, there was a tiny little Christian group there that was in disarray and deeply divided.

It was more Marxist than it was Christian. I can answer questions about that later. And so Bronwyn and I and another young woman began to meet to pray each week.

And so we began a prayer meeting for the Christians who'd gather. We began three Bible studies, which were really terrible. They were terrible. And we created a constitution.

We really didn't know what we were doing. And when we left, it was fragile and small and delicate. Twenty years later, I went back from here in Vancouver. And I spoke at a youth convention in Sydney.

And I met a guy there. He said, oh, you're David Short. He said, we've just celebrated 20 years of the Christian group at that university. And I know your name because it's on the constitution.

[16:23] I said, how are things going? Oh, he said, we've got four to five hundred people meeting in Bible studies and two full-time workers. And all I could say is the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion.

We didn't know what we were doing. The same is true for our beloved Anglican network in Canada. As a church, we're part of this ANIC, Anglican Network in Canada.

It was started as a protest movement with one congregation. And it was born in a lot of weeping. It was sown in tears. And now I think there are 70 or 75 congregations across the country.

And when we elect our bishops in synod, there's no politicking. There are no speeches. We pray. And there's a spirit of deep prayer. I mean, it's still fragile and dependent on God.

But I think those of us who were in the Anglican Church of Canada can say in a small way, we've seen the Lord restore the fortunes of Zion. Without the Lord working, without us working, there will be no hope.

[17:32] But through prayer and through the goodness of God, our hope is in the name of the Lord, that as we go out weeping, he will make our work fruitful. And that's the second tension, God's work and ours.

And there's a third and final tension, and it's the tension between sorrow and joy. This is a very important tension. In verses 1 to 3, the joy and the laughter is in the past, and it's in sharp tension with the weeping and the sorrow in the present.

It's important because it doesn't matter how much the Lord has done for us in the past, it will never completely get rid of our sorrows.

I mean, following Jesus does not mean unbroken joy every day. No matter how much you have laughed in the past, no matter how much you've seen God at work, you will still weep.

There'll still be times of sorrow. But the great thing about the psalm is we look at the whole psalm, and the point of it is that sorrow and joy do not have the first word, nor do they have the final word.

[18:41] Because if you look closely at those last verses, just as the psalm began with songs of joy, it finishes with shouts of joy. And when you become a Christian, life doesn't suddenly get happy and easy, but the deepest music of your life becomes one of joy.

You're now a child of the great King who holds you in his steadfast love, who will never let you go.

As we just sang a few minutes ago, that so long as he stands in heaven, my life is secure in him.

And there's nothing in heaven and earth that can pluck you out of his hand. And there's no joy, that joy no one can take away. It's joy that is inexpressible. But the fact is, if you grow to become like Jesus, there will be more sorrow in your life than before you became a Christian, because you recognise that when you sin, you're not just breaking rules, but you're breaking his heart.

And when you look at other people now, you had no idea how eternally precious they were. You can no longer look at other people in exactly the same way again.

But here's the great thing about this tension. The psalm tells us how to convert our tears of sorrow into tears of joy.

[19:59] And the key is in this picture of farming and sowing. Yes, it means the Christian life and Christian ministry is difficult. There is no, I don't think there's any life or any work that's tougher and leads to more tears.

But as we sow with tears, our tears are literally watering the seed. Have you ever thought about that? And the promise of God in this psalm is not just someday in the future he will wipe away the

tears from our eyes, but he will use our tears in the meantime to fertilise the seed, to bring life out of death and joy and blessing.

There's no reaping without sowing, but here is the great promise of this psalm. There's no sowing without reaping. As we sow in prayers and tears, I don't think there's any greater joy than seeing God at work.

Nothing comes close to that. And of course, as we step back this morning in the context of the Lord's Supper, the greatest restoration and reversal God has already begun in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The man of sorrows, whose life was watered by tears, and he died, and when he died, he explained, he literally planted his body into the ground as a seed.

[21 : 26] And God raised him from the dead, giving us the certain hope of forgiveness and the certain hope of friendship with him and an eternity where evil will be done away with utterly.

And the joy that's begun in us and grows is not just a joy for eternity future, but it's the joy of hopefully, fruitfully serving him in this life.

One of the old catechisms, the Heidelberg Catechism, begins with the question, what is your only comfort in life and death? What is your only hope in life and death? And the answer is that I am not my own, but belong soul and body, both in life and death, to my faithful soldier, sorry, my faithful saviour, Jesus Christ.

Christ. So during this month, at the end of the sermon, we have little musical reflections. And the one that's chosen today picks up Psalm 126 and praises God and prays that he would continue to restore us in the future.