

Psalm 126 PM

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[0 : 00] We just pray, Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening, in Christ's name, amen.

So we are in a series looking at the Psalms, so week five into a six-week series looking at what it means to be human and looking at that through the Psalms.

And the big idea for the series, or the big question we're asking is, what does it mean to be human? And tonight, so I'll just tell you the main point, to be human is to be hopeful.

To be human is to be hopeful. I had a mentor in New Zealand when I was a younger man who always referred to the Christian life as a grand adventure. And I always really loved that description because there's so much joy and life sort of infused into that idea.

I know it's kind of easy sometimes to kind of, your life can get into this kind of rut and our existence can feel like you're just kind of grinding it out. But as Christians, we're not actually meant to kind of stay in a life like that.

[1 : 11] We aren't meant to have middle-of-the-road sort of lives, middling so-so cynical lives. Our lives should be marked by joy and hope.

I don't know if you've ever watched Lawn Bowls. Do you guys know what Lawn Bowls is? It's very popular back in the old country, Lawn Bowls. So you have a ball and you roll it down the lawn and you're trying to hit the little kitty, the little white ball.

The ball on one side of it, there's a weight on one side of it. So that when you bowl it, it always curves. You can't stop it curving.

It always curves. It always arcs. It always bends in a certain direction. And that is what our life should be like. It should always be weighted and curving towards joy, curving towards wonder.

It doesn't mean you won't suffer in life. It doesn't mean you won't experience pain. But our lives are weighted towards hope. And Psalm 126 is really, really helpful in us understanding that.

[2 : 20] So let's jump into it. It might be helpful to have the Bible open in front of you there. So it snaps in half really easily, actually. Just 1 to 3, 4 to 6. 1 to 3, you might have heard it.

It's all about the past. It's in the past tense. 4 to 6, future tense. So 1 to 3, the person who wrote this is thinking about things that have happened in the past.

4 to 6 is about hope for the future. So let's look at each of these sections. 1 to 3. First one there. When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.

So something happened in the past that was horrible. Like a plague or like a famine or an invasion. We don't know what it is.

But God intervened and saved them. God rescued them from something really awful. And it was so astonishing. It was so amazing, the rescue, that they said, we thought we might have been dreaming.

[3 : 24] It was so good. I took my daughter, Sadie, to Hamilton two years ago, the play. And it was a secret. She loved the play.

This was peak Hamilton, right? She knew all the words. She watched the movie a million times. And I told her we're going on a special daddy-daughter date. And I said, we're going to go to the aquarium.

But I actually took her to Hamilton. And when we got to the theater and she realized what was going on, she's beaming. And she looks at me. She cannot believe it. And she turns to me and she says, is this a dream?

Am I dreaming? Because it was that good. That's what's going on here. God's rescue was so astonishing they thought they might have been dreaming. The psalm also says that God's rescue was so ridiculously awesome.

And wonderful. That all they could do was laugh. Verse 2. And then our mouths were filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy. We were glad. I remember when I came to faith at 17 years old, I had so much joy.

[4 : 25] So much joy. Because I'd really, for the first time, heard about this thing called forgiveness from God. Because of what Christ had done on the cross. The promise that God would renew the world and our lives and me and would live in peace for eternity.

And I was so pleased. It's such a wonderful memory to have. That's one to three. They're looking back at this amazing rescue. Then we get to verse 4.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord. It's the only prayer in the psalm. So clearly something's changed. They've gone through that one rescue. It's awesome.

But it's all gone sideways. It's all gone pear-shaped. Things have clearly... It's tough right now. So tough that it's not a thing they can handle themselves. It's beyond their capacity.

So they're praying, restore, save us, God. So my question is this. When I was reading this, I was thinking, why didn't they lead with that? Why isn't this verse 1? You know, like, when we have dramas, we come to God and we're like, oh, God.

[5 : 33] Straight away in our mind, it's like, oh, I just, you know, hate my job. Not me. But, you know, I hate my job. You know, why don't I have a girlfriend?

I'm married. I'm just giving examples, right? Why don't I have a girlfriend? What's wrong with me? Or, like, you know, like, I'm really sick. Or family dramas. Whatever. That's kind of like we lead with that stuff, right?

We lead with that stuff. I totally understand. Why doesn't the writer of this psalm lead with that? Why isn't verse 1, life's really brutal, help us? Why does he begin with all that other stuff at the start?

All the remembering stuff. It's because the writer is trying to nurture their hope. Hope is obviously in short supply in this situation. So it begins with a memory.

Not to be nostalgic. She's not trying to be sentimental. But things are so rough right now, it's hard to think really hopefully. So to nurture their hope, they look backwards.

[6 : 33] They borrow hope from what God has done in the past. And that gives some sort of impetus for their faith and hope and joy right now in what they're going through.

I have a friend who's a hypochondriac. Like a serious hypochondriac. Do you know what that is? Hypochondriac. Hypochondriac is somebody that thinks they have all these maladies. Or think they have all these sicknesses.

But they never do. They don't. They're totally fine. But I have a friend who's really serious hypochondriac. And so what she, let's call her she. Let's say she's a she. She. So it's like, you know, something will happen.

Like they have a little rash. And it's like, oh my goodness, I'm in liver failure. Or something like that. Like they'll Google it and they'll get terrified. So what she's done is she, she's written down all of the, this huge list of diseases that she has thought she's had in the past.

But obviously didn't. And it's on her phone. And when she's feeling like, you know, find some little bumpage. Oh my God. You know, like something's, something's horrible. She reads the list to remind her that actually I'm probably okay.

[7 : 47] So it's a great, she read the list to us. And I said, can you just send that to me for no particular reason? Gallstones, pancreatitis, heart attack, detached retina.

I don't even know what that is. How would you, what would be the symptom for that though? Is your eye like fall out? I don't know. Glaucoma, flesh eating disease was the last thing that she thought she had.

But she, she didn't have it. So when she gets freaked out, she reads the list and she goes, you know what? I realized that I'm kind of crazy. And this reminds me that, that thing that I thought was really bad is actually not that bad.

And it calms her down. What's she doing? She's looking backwards to fuel hope. Sometimes when I feel really overwhelmed and a bit discouraged in life, I run through in my mind, the ways that God has come through for me in the past.

And it furnishes my imagination. It feeds my faith. And I can tell myself, look, God has always had me. God has always had me. Deuteronomy, there's a great passage in Deuteronomy.

[8 : 50] I think it's 37. It talks about underneath are the everlasting arms. I love that picture. God has always had, always has me. Why do I think he won't continue to have me in the future?

So I furnish my faith with stuff that's happened in the past. So the psalmist recalls the goodness of God, his rescue in 1-3. Then based on that, prays for rescue for their current situation.

That's the first half. That's it right there. 1-3, the pivot is verse 4. Then for the rest of it, we have these two pictures, two like word pictures, sort of painting a picture of what God's rescue would look like.

And it can look like a number of different things. Look at the second half of verse 4. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev.

That's a picture of what God's rescue could look like. Like streams in the Negev. Okay, streams in the Negev. That's a desert. That's a desert in the Middle East. I think it's south Jerusalem, I think.

[9 : 55] So streams and rivers flowing through that. That's like, that's a miracle. The other picture, the other picture of what rescue and restoration could look like, what they're hoping for, is verses 5 and 6.

Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seeds for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing sheaves with him. So this is another picture.

It's not a picture of rivers and deserts. It's a picture of a farmer sowing seeds, and then later on harvesting those seeds. Great pictures. The first one, the rescue, could look like something sudden and spectacular.

The second picture of rescue is a picture of something that's slow and progressive, which is another way God works in our lives.

Let's think about these pictures some more. First, the streams and the desert. Sometimes life does feel like a desert, and the thing about deserts is that you can't save yourself in a desert. Like, you're hooped. There's no food, there's no water, there's no shelter.

[10 : 55] You are hooped in a desert. By your own efforts, you can't save yourself. God allows deserts in our life sometimes, because deserts are places that we learn to pray.

Deserts are places that we learn that our resources, our own personal resources, come to an end, and that there is a God that we love and we're going to trust in, and that He is a way out of this, our only hope.

Someone said to me this week, actually, that the desert experience reveals what has always been true, and that is we should always be reliant on God. So in a place of utter dependence, the psalmist says, restore us like a river turning up in a desert.

And every now and then it happens, doesn't it? You've seen those photos of, like, deserts, dusty, and then there's some freak rainfall, and then 48 hours later, it's just exploding in wildflowers and grasses and life.

Sometimes God does just invade a situation, interrupts a really barren place, and it's wonderful. It's incredible, and it does happen.

[12:07] And I just want to say, us Western Christians, we can be a bit cynical about such things. But let's not be so sophisticated that we're closed to the idea of God miraculously and suddenly and incisively invading our life in a pretty miraculous way and providing for us.

I remember, I can't remember if I've told this story, I was finishing theological school. I was at Reggie College. I was 10 days out from graduation, and I hadn't paid my fees.

I still owed. I'd had all these part-time jobs, and I'd just, like, feed them little bits of money as it came to me. And I was 10 days out from graduating, and I went downstairs and spoke to the lady who I got to know very well downstairs, the accounts person.

And I said, what do I owe to graduates? It was like \$837 or something like that, which is fine.

I didn't have it. And this Chinese church asked me to speak at their youth retreat, randomly. So I did the youth retreat.

[13:18] It was, you know, it went well. And at the end of it, they gave me a check, and it was like \$842. It was the bizarre amount of money.

And I said to them, one, this is too much money. Like, it was a bit average, to be honest. Like, this is, I said, this is too much money for this.

I'm just not used to receiving money for this kind of thing. And they said, I remember the woman, I so remember this conversation. She said, no, we really prayed, and we felt like this was what we were supposed to give you. So it was almost exactly dollar for dollar what I needed so I could graduate regent.

Sometimes God just does invade our life like that, in quite miraculous ways. Don't be so sophisticated that you don't leave that out of your prayers. But not always, though, right?

Not always. Sometimes the way God comes into our life and rescues us and restores us, like what's being prayed for here, is slow and progressive. That's the second picture of restoration.

[14:18] This is five and six. Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy. So sowing. So it's a picture of a farmer sowing in a desert. In verse six, there's the farmer goes out weeping. So why are they weeping?

Because it's a desert. It's arid. It feels pointless. And for a really long time, they sow the seed. It's like, what is the point? What is the point of even doing this? But a harvest does come.

And there's joy. There's shouting. This is talking about God's intervention, which is slow and gradual. And just as spiritual as a sudden miraculous thing.

It's God working through our slow and steady faithful efforts. So if you're in a desert, spiritually, let's say you're in a desert. Just, you know, my advice would be don't grit your teeth and just kind of wait it out.

You know, don't waste this time. Weep. Be sad. But still sow. Weep. But still sow.

[15 : 24] This person is weeping. They're really, but they're still sowing. So still sow. Which means, let's say this. Let's say you're desert as you feel very distant from God. Still sow in prayer.

Still pray. Even though you feel like you're wasting your time and it feels completely pointless. I don't even God. Is God even there? I don't know. Still do it. Come to church. You're not feeling it. I understand. Still come.

Still go to your Bible study. Still read your Bible. Maybe you feel like nothing is happening, but you're a farmer. You can't see the sprouts coming. You can't see the little bits of green coming yet. It feels pointless.

Your prayers are made through tears and doubt, but Psalm 26 says it is not in vain. Right now you're sitting and you're waiting, but there will be a harvest.

It's hard, but it's never hopeless. Remember the little weight in the bowling ball? We're always weighted towards hope. We always lean towards it.

[16 : 23] Let me finish up here. Life, you know, life can be hard. This is what the psalm is about. Somebody whose life is really hard. You accept the reality of that, but lean into the hope you have from God.

And when I'm saying this, I'm not saying, you know, I'm not saying, let's just be more optimistic. I'm not saying that. That's like a, what is optimism? That's like a temperament, right?

That's a temperament. And I'm not saying, you know, think happy thoughts about past stuff as like a, like a, like a mind trick. I'm not saying do mind tricks to kind of get you through something.

I mean, that's fine. If you've got some good mind tricks, that's fine. But gospel hope is different to these things. Gospel hope says, God is with us.

It is going to be okay. Good will come from these, these barren places. Perhaps quickly. Perhaps really slowly.

[17 : 22] And through many tears. And perhaps you will only see restoration in the new creation. But it will come. To be human is to be hopeful.

Amen.