

The God Who Restores

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[0 : 00] Friends, what a joy it is to be with you as we consider God's Word together. It is fitting that in the beginning of this new year, we should gather and engage in one of the most important aspects of our lives.

Hearing from God as we look to His Word. So our text this morning is Psalm 126. Let's go to the Lord for help. Lord, we come to You this morning asking for the light of understanding. True faith to believe what You have spoken. Be with us this morning by Your Spirit. Would You give me the gift of teaching to encourage, rebuke, reprove, exhort.

And as seeds are planted in water, we pray that You would give the growth. You will give Your glory to no other. Lord, would You lift up Christ by Your Spirit and we would all behold His eyes, His glory with the eyes of faith.

Would You draw each of us by Your Spirit to declare that Jesus is Lord of all. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. In 1971, in the shadow of the Vietnam War, perhaps England's most influential theologian, cultural icon, and a leading member of the rock band, the Beatles, John Lennon would release a song called Imagine with these lyrics.

[1 : 30] Imagine there's no heaven. It's easy if you try. No hell below us. Above us, only sky. Imagine all the people living for today.

Imagine there's no countries. It isn't hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for. And no religion, too. Lenin diagnoses a problem. And he prescribes a cure.

No religion, countries, possessions. To evoke hope in dark times, he would paint a picture of a future world, which informs how the listener ought to live today.

The song ends with almost religious overtones of salvation. I hope someday you'll join us and the world will live as one. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, Italian citizens would sing the song from balconies and rooftops.

Viral videos showed Mayo Clinic doctors singing this song in their time of trouble. Now, a really good lie always has an element of truth.

[2 : 31] If you have a pulse, I don't need to convince you that something is wrong in the world. We live in times that seem to go from bad to worse. Oftentimes, it feels like we live in a desert.

A desert of God's word in the land. And a desert in our own love for God. And our hearts cry for renewal, restoration. In this desert, where can we hang our hopes?

What is the answer the scripture gives us of the restoration of the world? Well, this is the question that Psalm 126 presents to us. If you can find it on page 485 of the P Bibles in front of you.

If you're not familiar with the Bible, the big numbers are the chapter numbers and the smaller numbers are the verse numbers. Let's read it together. Psalm 126. When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy. Then they said among the nations, the Lord has done great things for them. The Lord has done great things for us.

[3 : 37] We are glad. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev. 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 main idea of this passage is that God will restore the world. And in light of that reality, we should live today with joyful, hopeful resilience. We will look at this psalm in three parts.

The first point in verse 1 is the restoration. The second point in verses 2 to 3 is the rejoicing. And finally, verse 4 to 6 is the resolving. Resolving to persevere.

Three points. The restoration, the rejoicing, and the resolving. So point number one, the restoration. Verse 1. When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

Now Zion is another name for Jerusalem, the capital city. And the psalm evidently was written sometime after the Lord had restored the fortunes of his people. We don't know exactly when this was written.

[4 : 47] Many see this as written by Ezra shortly after the people returned from exile from Babylon. But there were other times when the Lord disciplined the people and raised up judges to restore them.

Either way, the people are remembering when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion. God sent them away, but he brings them back. He is working out their health and not their harm.

And this is a picture of godly discipline. God disciplines those whom he loves. Often the words discipline and love sound inconsistent to our modern ear.

We often are told that love only and ever consists of affirmation. But friend, it is never loving to let someone die in their sin. A good doctor will give bitter medicine if it cures the patient of a deadly disease to restore them to health.

And parents, you know that disciplining your children is ultimately about restoring them. And children, know that although your parents do this imperfectly, they do it because they love you. In the same way, we practice church discipline because we love the person and we want to see them restored.

[5 : 56] God disciplines his people likewise to restore them. He sent them away, but now he brings them back to bring about health and not harm. And Israel knew what it was like to be disciplined by a loving and gracious father.

But God restores them. And because of that, they are celebrating. And point number one, the restoration. Point number two is the rejoicing. He's brought them back. And because of that, the people are rejoicing.

Saying the Lord has done great things for us in verses two to three. The people are rejoicing because God had restored their fortunes. Now, is Israel rejoicing because God had filled up their bank accounts?

Like the time of the year where your employer gives you a little bit extra in your paycheck? No.

Now, when you hear the word fortune, don't think about God restoring their bank accounts.

Rather, God is Israel's fortune. He is the real treasure in worth. And he brought them back. And the basis for rejoicing isn't material wealth, but God's grace.

[6 : 57] God's grace causes celebration. And the sorrow and sadness of their exile had been replaced by celebration. The Lord had done great things for them.

Once enslaved as a people, they knew they deserved God's rejection. But God had been gracious to them. Not in their wildest dreams would they have expected to receive the amount of grace they'd been given.

I think that's what the end of verse one means. We were like those who dream. When God freed them and restored them, it was like a dream come true. It was unexpected.

They are amazed at God's grace. Now, if you're anything like me, you can read verse three and just mentally skip over it. Yeah, the Lord has done great things for us.

What's the big deal? It's like someone telling that Neil Armstrong once walked on the moon. It's a dry historical fact. Yeah, in the same way the Lord has done great things for us.

[7 : 54] What's the big deal? But look again at verses one to three. Don't miss the tone in these verses. These people aren't sighing under their breath. Verse two says the people's mouths are filled with laughter.

And their tongues are shouting for joy. They're laughing. These people are shouting, the Lord has done great things for us. And the people can't contain themselves.

And the reason they're celebrating is because their God is a God of grace. And God's mercies were new. They had personally tasted and seen that the Lord is good. And this mercy is sweeter than honey.

He restores them when they deserve to be exiled forever. And that causes celebration. Israel is partying with more joy than the country of Argentina after winning the World Cup.

They're singing, they're laughing, they're leaping with joy. Because God has shown them grace.

Friend, let me ask you. Do you experience this level of joy in your faith?

[8 : 52] Is your worship characterized with joy, singing, even laughter? Overflowing joy where you can't even contain yourself. And you start laughing. You start singing.

You know, for some of us, we know the Christian life is serious. It's serious business. And we should be serious people. As we contemplate eternal realities like heaven and hell, eternal torment, grace and godliness.

These are serious matters. That is true. Yet, at the same time, true godliness means remembering God's goodness and rejoicing. It means delighting in God.

Rejoicing in his goodness. That's what it means to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Put in the opposite way, orthodoxy without doxology is the religion of hell.

True orthodoxy, true doctrine always leads to God's praise. You know, Satan and demons know propositions about God. But they never delight in God.

[9 : 55] They can affirm the apostles in Nicene Creed's. But they never delight themselves in God. Never rejoicing in God. Some of us may want to reduce Christianity to a set of facts that must be believed.

And you know what? That's true. And Jesus would say, if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples. If we want to know Jesus, we must know his word. And truth is as essential to our living as light is to seeing clearly in the dark.

We cannot live the Christian lives apart from truth. But the Christian is the one who can say, the Lord has done great things for me. The Christian has tasted and seen that God is good.

And this is not a special class of Christians, right? The spirit, according to Galatians, is joy. Faith removes boasting and fills our mouths with shouts of joy.

Because the Lord has done great things for us. The Christian glories in God. As one famous London pastor would say, he spent half his ministry telling his people to study more doctrine.

[10 : 56] And the other half saying that doctrine is not enough. Consider, are we rejoicing in God as we ought? Who of us could say yes? If someone said yes, I would seriously question that person's judgment.

And the fact is, our hearts aren't bubbling with the kind of joy the psalmist has. Where we say, the Lord has done great things for me, we are glad. Well then, should we just fake it until we make it? You know, name it and claim it? No, no. Neither of those are scriptural. We certainly don't want to do those things. So, well then, what prevents us from saying like this, like the psalmist saying, God has done great things for us?

What's the psalmist? Well, it's because you and I are proud. We are proud, aren't we? You know, pride is like an odorless gas.

Invisible, but poisonous. It's perilous. It's like when you were in the car with the garage door closed and the engine is running. You don't realize it, but you're breathing in poison.

[11 : 57] If we've lost the joy of being a Christian, it's because we are proud. Let me show you what I mean. Consider Jesus' words in Luke 7. That whoever forgives much, loves much.

Whoever thinks they've been forgiven little, loves little. And the context was Jesus was invited to a dinner party. Hearing about where Jesus was, uninvited, a sinful woman crashes the party to see Jesus.

She laid herself down at Jesus' feet and began weeping. And with her tears, she began to wipe Jesus' feet with her hair. And the religious leaders thought this woman was filthy.

Unclean. Jesus, do you know what kind of woman this is? Keep your distance. Jesus, if you knew how filthy this woman was, you wouldn't even touch her.

But to their shock, Jesus receives her. In the everlasting arms of the Lord, she is welcomed. In the arms of Jesus.

[12 : 58] Sin destroys, but the Lord Jesus delights to restore sinners. Would we be like this woman? People who know their own spiritual bankruptcy? Falling on our face, crying tears, and wiping them off Jesus' feet with your hair.

You know, giant sinners know they need a giant savior. And this woman knew that, and because of that, she loved much. And Jesus responded to her accusers by telling a story about two debtors. The first owed 500 denarii, roughly eight years' worth of wages. The second owed 50. Both are forgiven. Jesus asked, which of these will love more? Well, they answered, the one who has been forgiven more.

That's right. You've spoken correctly. Secondly, whoever loves much has been forgiven much.

Whoever loves little thinks they have been forgiven little. If we've lost the joy of being a Christian, it's because our hearts think we have been forgiven little.

In our proud hearts, we think Jesus is but a little savior who fits inside your pocket. We don't have a posture of weeping at Jesus' feet because of our sin. Now, some of you are thinking, wow, that's a simplistic assessment of why someone fails to have joy.

[14 : 04] Life isn't that simple, you would say. You know, things are breaking in your life and God is nowhere to be found. You think God is more like an absentee landlord. Like Naomi in the book of Ruth, you change your name tomorrow, which means bitterness.

Because you feel the Lord has dealt very bitterly with you in your misfortune. The last thing you would ever say is that God has done great things for you. Well, I don't want to minimize the real hurt you may have experienced.

Real pain. But let me ask you a question. Do you understand yourself to be a sinner deserving of nothing but God's eternal condemnation?

You and I must answer yes to that question without excuse if we are experiencing joy. We do deserve God's eternal condemnation. Because if you are a Christian, even though we can't say with the Israelites that God has restored us from the exile back to the promised land in the Middle East, we can say like everyone else, we were once children of wrath.

God created us and because of that, we are ultimately accountable to him. And God is righteous and he cannot just brush our sin under the rug. Because God is good and his eyes are too pure to see evil, we are under God's righteous condemnation.

[15 : 22] And because of our sin, we at one time were separated from God, alienated, strangers to the promises, having no hope and without God in the world. We are guilty of high treason against God's infinite majesty.

Consider how heinous your and I's sin are before a just and holy God. And what great wrath we have deserved. And separated from Christ, the deadly sword of God's wrath hung over our heads. Help us to save ourselves. Even if he had an ocean of good works, it would not be enough. Just wash away the stain. Left to ourselves when God's stamen summons us to stand before his throne on that last day.

Every mouth will be silenced. The divine judge will render a guilty verdict. Not because he is harsh, but because he is unswervingly good. Now, it's only the first day of the new year, but here's the best news.

You will hear this new year. And there is no better news than this. Because, but God, rich in mercy, even while we were still sinners, he sent his own son Jesus, fully God and fully man, to rescue us.

[16 : 28] The Savior who left glory, came down, walked this earth to save sinners. He never sinned, not even for a millisecond. But despite never sinning, Christ took our place under the deadly sword of God's wrath.

For all who had returned from their sins and put their trust in him alone. He takes away our filthy rags and he credits to us new righteousness, new robes he places upon us. And Jesus rose from the dead on the third day.

And our joy is tied to the confidence that Jesus rose from the dead. And he forever secures our salvation. God has done great things for us. If you are here and you're not a Christian, know that God does not want your lip service, but your heart.

So call upon him now and Christ will joyfully receive you. Learn from the example of the sinful woman that he will not turn you away. Refuse him now and you will meet him as your judge. And that will be your eternal ruin. Christian, admire the grace of God like you would a priceless diamond. Once we were lost, but now we are found. God's restoration of the world begins with the restoration of you and me and sinners to himself.

[17 : 35] And that restoration produces joy. But notice one other thing in this passage. When God restores the people, the nations take notice. Look at the end of verse 2.

Then they said among the nations, the Lord has done great things for them. The surrounding nations took notice of God's restoration of Israel. And the surrounding nations see the mighty work of Israel's God in restoring them to the land.

Now we are not restored to the promised land in the Middle East. But is there something about the church that makes the nations take notice? Jesus would say in John 13, By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

The nations take notice when the church loves each other. And Paul would say in Ephesians 3 verse 10 that even the angels are appearing to see what God is doing in the church. Now the world

will never celebrate God's mercy in Christ.

And the amazing reconciliation that happens among Christians that share a joint faith in the risen Savior. In all the year in review articles, you won't see one celebrating God's mercy shown in Christ to countless millions.

[18 : 45] I double checked before this morning, I didn't see anything. The world increasingly sees Christianity as intolerant, even dangerous.

As a Christian, we are increasingly out of step with the culture. The views of gender, sexuality, the sanctity of human life, marriage. We are strangers and exiles. Yet, our love for each other, our unity in a divided world should also be increasingly counter-cultural.

And the local church is the beginning of the counter-cultural resistance. Our unity is our corporate witness to the nations that are perishing. But really, our unity is the tip of the iceberg.

The real strength is what lies beneath the surface unseen to the human eye. Our triune God is a fountain from which our unity flows. Our love for each other communicates to the nations something about who God is.

As he himself is united together in Father, Son, and Spirit. So he unites his people. And the fact is, God hates division among Christians. Because it lies about who he is.

[19 : 53] Division camouflages God's glory to the nations and defames his character. Proverbs 6, verse 19 would say, There are six things that the Lord hates. Seven that are an abomination to him.

And the last item in the list is the person who sows discord among brothers. You know, Satan is a divider. He loves division. He hates the unity of the church. And our real enemy is Satan, the flesh, and the world.

Not each other. You know, an old Puritan, Thomas Brooks has much wisdom to offer us about Satan's devices against Christians. In his book, Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices, Brooks would say, Satan first works us to be cold, and then to divide, and then bitterness and jealousy, and then we devour one another.

First to be cold, then you start gossiping, murmuring, attacking each other, and then eventually, spiritual cannibalism among your own family. You know, we tend to be very good prosecutors when it comes to our own, other people's sins, but when it comes to our own sin, quickly transform into world-class defense attorneys.

Christian, be very suspicious of your own heart more than hearts of others. But Brooks gives us wisdom here. Here's one remedy to this disease that camouflages God's glory.

[21 : 17] Dwell more upon God's grace in your brother and sister's heart than you do on their weakness. In other words, are we quick to see God's grace in each other, or are we quick to criticize?

Do we assume the worst in each other, thereby killing love and unity, or do we assume the best in others? You know, we should naturally need glasses to see each other's graces more clearly. And by so doing, Brooks writes, much sin would be prevented. The designs of wicked men frustrated, Satan outwitted, many wounds healed, many sad hearts cheered, and God more abundantly honored.

May that be so among us. The nations are in our backyard, in a divided world, our love and our unity should make the nations pause. May our unity and our love cause New Haven to say the Lord has done great things for that church.

So is that it? Are we to go around joyously all the time loving each other? Is that the sum of the Christian faith? No, no. The first point was restoration. The second is rejoicing, but the last part is the resolving.

[22 : 24] Resolving to persevere. Look at verse four. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev. The pilgrim was called to persevere in the desert.

That's what the Negev is. The Negev is a desert in the south region of Israel. The name literally means dry land, a land that can't sustain even the sparsest plant life.

It's completely dry. Life feels like that sometimes. Dryness. Like the dry cracks in the ground, we experience the painful cracks in our own lives. The psalmist found himself in that place.

He prays more like he shouts to God, restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev. Now, the Negev, this desert region, is known for flash flooding. The psalmist is praying that these rains would sweep into the desert, transforming the desert overnight into a green garden, a place teeming and brimming with life.

That's what the psalmist is praying for in verse four, asking God to instantaneously grant life in the desert. God, I'm struggling to survive in this desert. There's no life, there's no water spiritually, I feel dead.

[23 : 32] God, give me water like a stream flowing in the desert. God, restore my fortunes. And God can accomplish more in three seconds than we can in 30 years, laboring under our own efforts.

And the psalmist to persevere in the desert begins to pray. But he specifically is praying for revival. He desires for God to sovereignly transform a desert, a spiritual desert, into a land teeming with life. And true revival begins with what the psalmist is doing here, prayer. Many have tried to gin up revival, claiming they could guarantee the results. But there is no formula for revival.

God sovereignly works in different times in different ways. Look again at verse four, it is the Lord that does the work of reviving the people. And this happened in the Reformation. Out of the darkness of the dark ages, the flame of the gospel suddenly began to rapidly spread across Europe.

And God took the church that was headed in the wrong direction and reverses course and straightens her out. And the church is reformed according to the word and gives life to many across Europe.

[24 : 36] But maybe one of the lesser known revivals is the Welsh revival. The song we just sang, Here is Love, comes from this time of the Welsh revival. God transformed entire towns seemingly overnight.

Martin Lloyd-Jones, the Welsh preacher, called the doctor, would give up the stethoscope and enter the pulpit. And he pastored a small church in a poor town in Wales before his time at Westminster Chapel in London, having never received a theological education.

In this small town, children wore rags, often went barefoot, many were fatherless. And the physical poverty was exceeded only by the spiritual poverty in the town. In his mind, he was tired of treating the symptoms of sin and he wanted to get to the heart of the matter and so he became a gospel preacher.

On his gravestone is written, For I determine not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. He committed himself to expeditional preaching and prayed the Lord would revive the people of Wales.

And God instantly transformed the spiritual dryness and became a town teeming with life in the light of the gospel. Church members began to gossip about the gospel around town and people who were a billion miles away from God heard about the great mercy found in Christ.

[25 : 48] And the gospel would transform one individual, it spread to a family and eventually the whole town was turned upside down. The town was transformed and people would spontaneously start singing hymns on the corners, shouting with joy.

God visited these people and restored the town. Seemingly overnight, the streams of God's grace were flowing like streams of the Negev. And as a result, children had food on the table for the first time because fathers stopped squandering their paychecks on alcohol.

Husbands began loving their wives. A true revival. And God is in the business of restoring the world. It was true in Wales, it was true in the Reformation. Could it be true in New Haven too? Robberies, murders, domestic violence, drug overdoses on the green are no more because the men and women who used to do those things are in churches rejoicing to hear of Christ crucified. Pray that streams would flow like streams in the Negev. And church family, join us in the important work of prayer. He can do it instantly if he chooses to.

[26 : 52] But sometimes God chooses not to do it quickly. Sometimes he chooses to act slowly. And that's verses 5 to 6. Verse 5, God sometimes acts slowly in the work of restoration.

Verse 5 pictures a farmer experiencing sadness, sorrows, and despair. Sometimes a farmer doesn't feel like getting out of bed and starts sowing seeds for the harvest.

And farmers know they have to discipline themselves. They have to go out and plant seed even in their sorrows. And the psalmist picture here is striking. The farmer is in tears.

He's weeping. And he is planting seeds even as the tears are coming down his face. The farmer must plant the seeds even as he weeps.

And I imagine this farmer is tempted to give up. But he goes out and he sows the seed for the harvest. And it's hard work. And Christian life is much the same.

[28 : 03] And the Apostle Paul picks up this imagery in Galatians 6 speaking to a church that has grown weary to imitate the farmer that does not give up. Galatians 6 verse 9, And let us not grow weary of doing good.

For in due season we will reap if we do not give up. And right before that verse he said, The seeds are good works. In verse 8, For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption.

But the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. Be like this farmer. Do not grow weary. Keep planting seeds. Keep doing good. Especially to those in the church.

Knowing that one day you will reap a harvest. Labor like a farmer does and do not give up. Now don't misunderstand. We are not saved by our works. We are saved by faith in Christ alone.

Apart from any works. But these good works authenticate whether we have saving faith or not. If you sow tomatoes you will reap tomatoes. If you sow deeds of death you will reap judgment.

[29 : 06] If you sow seeds of life from the Spirit you will reap eternal life. Those works authenticate whether we have true saving faith. As Luther said, we are saved by faith alone but saving faith is never alone.

Many of us know what it is like to go into the field with tears. But be like the psalmist and look to the joy on the horizon. Joy is promised if you do not give up.

I have to look up in the dictionary what the word sheaves meant. It means bundles of ripe stock tied together after a farmer is done reaping the crops. And the farmer brings home the harvest and is a time of joy.

One day we will reap if we do not give up. But the seed of good works is not all there is. Not only should we not grow weary in doing good works but don't grow weary in declaring God's word.

The seed that we must plant in tears is the gospel itself. Paul in 1 Corinthians 3 would say I planted the seed and Apollos watered but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything but only God who makes things grow.

[30 : 07] Paul would tell the elders at Ephesus that he spent three years with them teaching in tears. And the psalmist pictures a laborer planting gospel seeds when they are weary and tired. Church, do not lose heart in this.

Keep planting by declaring the gospel. You know, sometimes we grow discouraged because we don't see fast enough growth. And the picture the psalmist gives us is one of slow growth. The farmer plants and is trusting God to do the rest.

Our part is merely to plant. God is calling us to be ordinary people using ordinary means. Trusting God will do the work. Don't give up on this important task. Finally, one question I've been asking myself is in the beginning of verse 6.

Who is the he being referred to there? He who goes out weeping. How would Jesus have understood this psalm? You'll notice the title of this psalm says this is a song of ascent.

This was a song book used when Old Testament saints would sing as they ascended the hill to Jerusalem at the appointed festivals, the Passover, the Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles.

[31 : 13] It doesn't say whether Jesus ever sang this psalm. But in Luke 2 we read that Mary and Joseph took Jesus with them to celebrate the Passover and the two would have sang this psalm.

I wonder if they realized that the answer to these pleas for mercy was walking right there alongside them in the person of Jesus. God himself who took the form of a serpent whose very life would be full of weeping but was a seed that would produce a harvest.

Jesus would say in John 12 truly, truly I'd say to you unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone but if it dies it bears much fruit.

Jesus went into the field weeping burst into tears over Jerusalem over his friend Lazarus' death.

These tears were a sign of his compassion his love for sinners.

His heart was full of compassion even toward his enemies. The one who walked in the desert land did not grow discouraged at doing good even to those that would seek to crucify him. And the transformation of this desert of a world would come through Jesus.

[32 : 21] One who would allow the nails to pierce him to bring about spiritual restoration to the entire world. The one who was able to transform the spiritual desert into a garden teeming with life through his resurrection.

And how did Jesus endure these sorrows? Hebrews chapter 12 looking at Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.

Jesus would weep knowing that one day he would come home with shouts of joy. And Jesus the farmer brings the sheaves home with him. He brings his people home. Jesus reigns begins the restoration of the entire world.

His resurrection was the beginning of a harvest season where many are brought to life. Jesus will one day restore this sin-filled world. Don't put your confidence in the flesh. Our only hope this year and each year after is in Christ.

Hang your hope on the one who is hung for you. He has done great things for us. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, you encourage us as we must go out in tears.

[33 : 38] Help us to look to the Lord Christ whose tears were a sign of his love for us. Help us to look to that final day when we will come home with shouts of joy and every sorrow and sighing will be no more.

We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.