



These are the notes of a sermon preached at Firwood Church by Andy Evans on the morning of the 15 March 2009; these notes are, therefore, intended to be read in conjunction with the sermon. To download sermons and other free resources, visit www.firwoodchurch.com or subscribe through iTunes.

SONGS OF ASCENT - PART 7, THE LORD MY RESTORER

Psalm 126

A Song of Ascents.

**¹When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.**

**²Then 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.”**

**³The LORD has done great things for us;
we are glad.**

**⁴Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like streams in the Negeb!**

**⁵Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!**

**⁶He who goes out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him.**

1. INTRODUCTION

a. Background

The Songs of Ascent are a series of fifteen Psalms (120 through to 134) that were sung by pilgrims as they went up to the temple in Jerusalem to observe the major festivals and to worship the living God.

The Psalms are, in essence, a collection of songs and prayers intended to be used by the believing community in both personal devotional times and corporate worship. Given the back-story to the Songs of Ascent, it is most likely that this collection would have been sung in a corporate setting.

Given the likely context (pilgrims travelling up to the temple to worship the living God) and this corporate setting, it is surprising that so many of the Songs of Ascent are, in fact, songs of lament.

The notion of exhibiting such raw emotion publicly (much less singing such songs in a congregational setting) is altogether alien in our culture of Western restraint and decorum. It is important to remind ourselves, therefore, that *these* songs were most likely sung aloud as the pilgrims drew near to Jerusalem and the temple of God.

Consider the nature of these songs of lament.

Psalm 120, the Psalmist laments the fact that he is far from the people of God faced with opposition and hostility from a people hostile towards the living God. The Psalmist's lament is phrased in the strongest of terms,

Psalm 120:5

**Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech,
that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!**

In effect, the Psalmist laments, 'cursed am I that I live among such people'. It is difficult to imagine how this lament could be more extreme.

Again, Psalm 123 is characterised by lament. Again the Psalmist is facing opposition, contempt haughty arrogance. Now the Psalmist speaks on behalf of the believing community and cries to the Lord for mercy,

Psalm 123:3

**Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.**

Over the coming weeks we will hear the Psalmist cry for justice,

Psalm 129:5

**May all who hate Zion
be put to shame and turned backward!**

And, in Psalm 130, we will find the Psalmist in the darkest of places, 'Out of the depths I cry to you' (v. 1) yet resolving to 'wait for the Lord' (v. 5).

Psalm 126, like Psalm 123, is a song of corporate lament. The Psalmist is expressing the complaint of the community of believers. It is, however, a little different from the other songs of lament within this collection as the complaint is framed by joy remembered and joy anticipated.¹

1. THE HISTORIC EVENT

We begin, therefore, with the joy remembered; for the Psalmist refers back to a historic event in the life of the believing community.

Psalm 126:1-3

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a. The Restoration

The event in view is the restoration of Israel following captivity in Babylon.

The historical backdrop is thus: Israel was a divided kingdom surrounded by enemies. In 722 BC Samaria was conquered and annexed by Assyria and the Jewish captives were carried off to Assyria and dispersed across the kingdom.

Between 734 and 732 BC, Ahaz, king of Judah made a strategic alliance with Assyria and Judah came under the overlordship of the Assyrian kingdom. Later, in 597 BC, as Assyrian influence waned, Jerusalem fell to a Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. The remaining population were carried off into exile.

In the sixth century BC, however, something utterly astonishing takes place.

Scripture recounts that Nehemiah, a believer in the living God, serving as cupbearer to a Persian king requests permission to return and rebuild Jerusalem. The king agrees and later a decree is issued instructing the rebuilding of the temple.²

Historically speaking, there is a rational objective explanation for much of this: that Nehemiah uses cunning and his favoured position to influence the king or that there is some political benefit in re-establishing Jerusalem as a province of Persia.

Scripture, however, reveals that, in reality, the hand of the living God is working in changing the heart of unbelieving king and manipulating events and circumstances in order that his will might be done,

Ezra 1:1a

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom...

i. The Lord is the Restorer

Psalms 126:1

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion

The Psalmist rightly understands that the restoration of Zion was a miraculous work wrought by the hand of the Lord. The restoration of Israel should not be attributed to Cyrus, Nehemiah, Ezra, or any other person or human power.

The Psalmist looks through the historical events and understands the deeper reality: God restores the fortunes of his people.

ii. Restoration of Zion

I discuss the significance of Jerusalem more fully elsewhere in this series (see *Songs of Ascent, part III, The Lord my Dwelling Place*), but Jerusalem was more than just a city. Jerusalem was the place where God had set his temple and fixed his name. Jerusalem was the place in which the worship of the living God and the government of the people of God was centred. As such, Jerusalem was the place where God's presence was most clearly manifested.

The reference to Zion indicates that, however history might view these events, the restoration was primarily spiritual rather than merely political.

b. The Response

The Psalmist records the responses of two distinct people groups to this miraculous work of God.

i. The People of God

The Psalmist describes the response of the people of God as the Lord led them back into the promised land back into Jerusalem,

we were like those who dream (v. 1)

Then our mouth was filled with laughter (v. 2)

our tongue with shouts of joy (v. 2)

The imagery is vivid, the exiles are so overwhelmed that the day has finally arrived for them to return home that events feel unreal. It is as though they are sleepwalking through a dream. Consider the description that their mouths were filled with laughter and shouts of joy. Laughter is most often associated with humour, someone tells a funny joke and we laugh. When was the last time that you heard or experience joyful news and found yourself laughing with joy? Many of us may never have experienced this degree of joy.

Picture the scene: the captives returning to Jerusalem, grown men sitting by the roadside, some dazed, others weeping or laughing with joy. As the procession winds its way up Mount Zion people are literally shouting out with joy and excitement. They are finally home.

It is important that we picture as clearly as we are able the significance and weight of this joyous moment, for this event frames the entire passage.

To help us see more clearly, consider the response of 'the nations'.

ii. The Nations

Psalm 126:2b

**then they said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."**

For clarity's sake, we must first ask, who is the Psalmist referring to when he speaks of the nations wondering at the great deeds of God? The Psalmist is referring to unbelieving pagan nations.

This, therefore, is astonishing. The Psalmist recognises that the intervention of the Lord is so miraculous and so amazing that even the surrounding nations recognise the event for what it is and, in effect, glorify Yahweh, "The LORD has done great things for them."

Now look at the response of the people of God to the nations' acknowledgement of the mighty hand of God,

Psalm 126:3

**The LORD has done great things for us;
we are glad.**

There is an important dynamic at work here.

Primarily worship is vertical in its direction and intent. When we gather together in corporate times of worship, our songs and prayers are addressed to and directed towards the Lord.

Similarly, in our own devotional times, our primary motivation is to worship, honour, exalt, bless, glorify Christ Jesus.

There is, however, another dimension to worship. The Apostle Paul, for example, exhorts believers to,

[address] one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:19-20)

The Lord remains the object, recipient and, in fact, means of our worship, but notice Paul's encouragement that we should 'address one another'. Paul understands that there is also a horizontal aspect to worship. As we celebrate God and speak of his acts of mercy and power, this spurs us on to further worship King Jesus.

The Psalmist sees the nations respond to the mighty acts of God with wonder and awe and this results in yet another wave of praise as the people of God echo the nations' song: 'The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad' (v. 3).

2. THE PRESENT STATE

Psalm 126:4-6

**⁴Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like streams in the Negeb!
⁵ Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!
⁶He who goes out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him.**

a. The Psalmist's Situation

i. The Need for Restoration

Psalm 126:4a

Restore our fortunes, O LORD

Note that the Psalmist's prayer is not for himself alone. The Psalmist's cry for restoration is on behalf of the believing community, 'Restore *our* fortunes, O Lord'.

The circumstances around this Psalm are uncertain, however, it is clear that the Psalmist finds himself in a situation where there is a need for a further restoration of the people of God is necessary.

ii. The Psalmist is in the midst of barrenness

Psalm 126:4

**Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like streams in the Negeb!**

This area of what is now modern day Palestine is barren and dry desert during the summer. The periodic flooding would bring life to the area.³

The image is clear, the Psalmist situation equates to that of the dry waterbeds of the Negeb. Where, at the restoration, there was joy, fruitfulness and life, now there is only barrenness.

iii. The Psalmist is in the midst of trial

Psalm 126:5-6

**⁵Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!
⁶He who goes out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing**

The implication is that *now* there are tears, *now* there is weeping. Note, however, that, in the midst of the tears and weeping, there is a promise of future reaping and celebration.

3. FUTURE ANTICIPATION

a. Imperfect Restoration

Think carefully and clearly for a moment about what we have just read.

Psalm 126 begins with remembrance of a hugely significant moment in the life of the people of God. The people were in exile and bondage, but the living God intervenes on behalf of his people and executes a most miraculous rescue.

The community of believers return and they are overwhelmed with joy and amazement, they are like those who dream, returning to Jerusalem with singing, shouts of joy and celebration.

And yet, the Psalmist turns from this moment to the people's present state and the Psalm transitions into lament. How can this be? Although the dating of Psalm 126 is uncertain, the consensus among commentators is that the Psalm is post-exilic and most likely written immediately following the restoration (some commentators speculate that the author may have been Nehemiah).⁴ We know, therefore, that the Psalmist is writing after the people of Israel have returned to the land, and yet he laments.

b. Looking forward to Christ

This is important and we see this same dynamic of judgement, rescue and restoration throughout the Old Testament in the lives of the patriarchs and in the history of Israel. The people turn from God, God acts against them in judgement before relenting in mercy and bringing rescue.

There is an awareness among the writers of Scripture and the faithful believing community, that these acts of rescue and restoration are an anticipation of something greater yet to come. This greater promise is fulfilled in Christ (see Hebrews 11:39-40).

c. Christ is THE RESTORER

i. Ransom, rescue and restoration in the Old Testament prefigure the victory of the cross

The language of ransom is commonly used in the Old Testament to describe this rescue from captivity,

Isaiah 51:10-11

**10 Was it not you who dried up the sea,
the waters of the great deep,
who made the depths of the sea a way
for the redeemed to pass over?
11 And the ransomed of the LORD shall return
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain gladness and joy,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.**

Isaiah refers to the great Exodus when the Lord rescued his people from Egyptian slavery and tyranny and understands that this mighty act prefigures a future event when the Lord will rescue his people from Babylonian exile and lead them back to Zion with singing.

This is astonishing. Isaiah prophesies of restoration before the exile has taken place. Isaiah understands that judgement is coming in the guise of Assyrian and Babylonian oppression, but, beyond this there is an astonishing promise of rescue; Isaiah sees that 'the ransomed of the LORD shall return'.

Captivity and judgement shall come for a season, but the Judge is also the Rescuer and Restorer.

But note also the terms of this restoration, Isaiah says that the Lord will *ransom* his people from their captivity. This is crucial, because the notion of ransom is central to a biblical understanding of the cross.

ii. The cross is the perfect ransom

Isaiah prophecy anticipates beyond the judgement to the coming restoration and to the perfect rescue achieved by Christ. Isaiah is, without question, the most Christological book in the Old

Testament and the notion of ransom is inextricably bound up with the promise of the coming Messiah (Isaiah 53:10-12).

This ransom theme reoccurs again and again throughout the New Testament,

Mark 10:45

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

1 Timothy 2:5-6a

⁵For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶who gave himself as a ransom for all...

1 Peter 1:17-19

¹⁷And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, ¹⁸knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

The great captivity is neither found in Egypt, Assyrian nor Babylon. The great slave master is sin, Satan and death.

The great rescue is achieved by Christ through the cross: Jesus Christ gave his life as a ransom for many.

iii. Joy of salvation

Let us return then to the response of the exiles on their return to Jerusalem,

Psalm 126:1-2

**¹When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
²Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy**

The reference point for followers of Christ is not rescue from Babylonian exile. Our act of remembrance points back to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is why the participation in the Lord's Supper is, at the very least, an act of remembrance (though it is much

more than this). We remember his broken body and shed blood. But more than this, we remember and think deeply on the moment we received salvation; the moment he rescued us from the dead.

Remember then, that first moment our eyes began to see Christ as he really is, remember that moment our closed and hostile mind was illuminated to the things of God and where the cross had once been foolish and offensive, it now seemed most beautiful. Remember that moment when your dead, lifeless, Christ hating heart was brought to life and suddenly you were overwhelmed with love for the Son of God who gave himself for you.

Were we not like those who dream? Were our mouths not filled with laughter and shouts of thanksgiving?

Scripture bids us remember,

Revelation 2:4-5

⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first

The Psalmist bids us remember, 'When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.' (v. 1).

iii. The End of Rescue and Restoration is the Glory of Christ

The outcome of restoration is that the Lord is glorified by both the people of God and the pagan nations.

The primary purpose of the cross is that Christ would receive maximum glory, maximum honour and maximum praise.

Ephesians 1:4b-6a

...In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace...

Paul understands that salvation is the miraculous work of God of which those who believe are the prime beneficiaries. Israel could claim no credit for the restoration. They were in captivity, powerless, utterly unable to help themselves.

So too were we, captive to our own flesh, dead in our own sin, blind to our own wretchedness and scrambling around in the darkness. And then God intervened and enacted a plan which had been formulated before the foundation of the world. Through sheer grace and loving kindness he rescued us and adopted us, but with an end purpose in view, that we would be 'to the praise of his glorious grace'. In other words, we would see how hopeless our situation was and how undeserving we are and that this would cause us to celebrate the sheer grace of God,

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (1 Timothy 1:15)

The end of the salvation rescue mission is that, as the nations recognised God's hand at work in the restoration, Jesus would gather a people from every tribe, tongue and nation to the praise of his glorious grace.

Revelation 5:8-10

⁸And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹And they sang a new song, saying,

**"Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
¹⁰and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth."**

We are saved that we might become worshippers of King Jesus. We are saved that we might lead many to become worshippers of Christ Jesus. The unbelieving nations witnessed the mighty hand of God at work in restoring Israel. Christ calls us to live out the gospel so that our unbelieving neighbours might see something of the love, mercy and transforming power of Christ at work in our lives.

d. Understanding lament

As believers in Christ, how then should we understand and apply the Psalmist lament? If all the Old Testament promises anticipate and are fulfilled in Christ and Christ has now come, is there any place for lament within the believing community?

Absolutely.

Israel's lament was grounded upon the fact that the restoration was incomplete, imperfect and temporary. Here our situation differs. The cross of Christ is in no way incomplete, imperfect or temporary. The cross of Christ is the long awaited fulfilment of all the Old Testament promises and is utterly sufficient for salvation. There is still a sense, however, in which believers are living in the gap between promise and fulfilment.

In the incarnation the kingdom of God was inaugurated, but will not be consummated until Christ returns. This is why we still feel pain, still experience sickness and death and still struggle against hostility and opposition. We are living in the gap anticipating the Lord's return.

And so then the gospel is both pragmatic and yet full of hope. Consider the words of Jesus,

John 12:23-26

²³And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Truly, truly, I 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. ²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honour him.

First note the pragmatism. Jesus understands his road will lead him to suffer and die and he warns his disciples (both here and elsewhere) that they should expect the same. However, through this and over this there is a great hope, an anticipation of restoration and reward, ‘Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life’ (v. 25).

And so, as believers, we live in the gap between promise and total fulfilment and between confirmation and consummation. We join then with Paul,

¹For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ²For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, ³if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. ⁴For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened-not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee (2 Corinthians 5:1-5).

4. CONCLUSION

a. The Gospel Call

Now is the time for self-reflection and we must begin with *the* question. Are you a believer in Jesus Christ, have you surrendered your life to him and, has he made you his own? It is important that we begin with this question to ensure that we understand that there is a difference between the believers who receive and celebrate restoration and the nations who look on, recognise something amazing has occurred, but refuse to come to Christ that they may have life.

b. ‘Remember’ - the antidote to bitterness

There is such a thing as ungodly lament. This is when lament turns to bitterness or despair. Our bitterness will eventually lead us to turn the finger against God. Despair will eventually lead us to abandoning all hope and, ultimately, the gospel.

How then should we respond to difficulty, opposition and hardship? What then is the antidote to bitterness and despair? The Psalmist remembers rescue and restoration. Believers must remember the cross.

When things become tough we look to the cross to understand what godly endurance truly looks like. More than this, however, we remember the cross to remind ourselves all that Christ has achieved: that suffering is not pointless and that death is not the end.

c. 'Look up' - the antidote to despair

Believers, we know that we have a King who reigns over every circumstance and every activity. Believers we know that this King will return for those who love him. This is our hope. This is the antidote to despair.

We know that things will get worse, but hope sustains us for we know also that he will return and make all things new. We know that we may experience opposition, persecution and hostility, but hope sustains us for we know that he will return to conquer every enemy. We know that we, or our loved ones, may be slaughtered for the sake of the gospel, but that we will return with King Jesus riding upon the clouds of heaven.

When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:28).

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¹ J.L. Mays, *Interpretation: Psalms* (John Knox Press: Louisville, 1994), p. 399

² See I. Provan, V.P. Long & T. Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2003), pp. 266-288

³ J.H. Walton, V.H. Matthews & M.W. Chavalas, *The Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Inter Varsity Press Academic: Illinois, 1997), p. 555

⁴ L.C. Allen, *Word Biblical Commentary: Psalms 101-150, vol. 3* (Thomas Nelson, Inc: Columbia, 2002), pp. 229-231