

We Are Glad

Studies in the Psalms

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Let us read again God's word from the book of Psalms. For these Sabbath evenings in July, we're interrupting the series on John's Gospel and looking at some of the Psalms and I want to read now Psalm 126.

1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. 2 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." 3 The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad. 4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb! 5 Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy! 6 He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

This is God's word.

I want to think with you this evening about Psalm 126, a Psalm that we sing quite often. If you look at the structure of the Psalm as if it's a poem, there is one little phrase in the exact middle of the Psalm and the writer has put it there deliberately. It's at the middle because it's what the Psalm is about and it's the heart of the Psalm, at the end of verse 3, "we are glad." We are glad. The NIV has a nice translation, "we are filled with joy." So this is a Psalm about joy, gladness, and as such, that is an appealing subject to us because there isn't a great deal of gladness in our world. Gladness, joy, is a natural thing; it is the overflow from within us of a sense of peace and inner harmony and happiness. It's a beautiful thing and yet in our world, there isn't much of it. In fact, the world we're living in is so bleak that people now have to pay to be amused. British Telecom has a service called "Joke Line" whereas if you want to hear something funny, you pay so much, you dial the number and a disembodied voice at the other end of the line tells you a joke and this is how you're filled with gladness. There is something terribly sad at the thought that a company would actually think that people's lives are so empty that they have to actually pay to hear someone telling them a joke, and I hope I'm not treading on the toes of any of you who are regular customers of BT Joke Line.

There is an enormous entertainment industry, singers and comedians, and all of it really is a sign of a dying culture; of a sad culture; of people who have an inner emptiness. A modern commentator, I think, puts it well, he said, "Society is a bored, greedy king employing a court jester to divert it after an overindulgent meal." We have to pay to hire the imagination and the creativity and the humor of other people to brighten up our lives. Two weeks ago, my wife and I were in the city of Geneva and the evening we arrived, we went into the center of the city to the lake shore and there was a festival on; thousands of people had come from all over to have a good time. It was one of the bleakest, saddest experiences we've had. Apart from anything else, really, the place looked and the people behaved like Sodom and Gomorrah. We got out of it as quickly as we could, but it was just the emptiness and the shallowness and the pathetic bleakness of it all.

Other people try to achieve joy by getting rid of things that hurt, but such efforts never really work. People are bored. People are joyless. Look at the stress that people give nowadays on holidays. I am as keen on holidays as anybody else, I'm looking forward to having a good holiday, but there are people who seem to live for their holidays. Their whole life focuses around their next holiday and they're always planning for it and they're having two or three major holidays a year spending vast amounts of money and all that, to me, is saying that there is something bleak in that escape from real life. Yes, we enjoy these times when God gives them to us: we're refreshed, we're restored, we're glad to see new faces and have new experiences, but the balance isn't right.

Now, Christians should be different. Joy is the second quality of the fruit of the Spirit. We're to be joyful people. We're called to rejoice in the Lord always and yet are we joyful? Are we known for our gladness? You may be inclined to say, "Well, it's easy for you to talk. You don't know what my life is like. It's not easy for me at present to be joyful." And I would certainly accept that; that's possibly true, it's true of all of us at times. Gladness is not something we can work up. Artificial joy is a hideous thing, but this Psalm shows us how to be joyful and as we look at it this evening, it's two parts, we will learn the lessons which enable us to say and to mean we are glad; we are filled with joy.

Two simple thoughts, first of all, verses 1 to 3: joy builds on the past. Joy builds on the past. It begins when the Lord restored the fortunes of Jacob. That same Hebrew word is found in Job 42:10 when we're told that "the LORD restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends." Here was a man who was cast down in the depths of bereavement, of illness, of economic ruin, of psychological and spiritual despair. He was down as low as a human being could go, but by the end of the book, the Lord has rescued him. He has lifted him up; he has enriched his life; he has brought him back to prosperity and family and happiness. The Lord restored the fortunes of Job. That's the same word that is used centuries later in this Psalm, "the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion."

That's some marvelous deliverance. We're not sure what it was. Was it the return of the exiles from captivity? Perhaps. Or relief from a famine or a siege or a plague? That may be the case, we're not told. It was some outstanding act of salvation and mercy and

power. God helped his people. God changed their lives. They prayed to him and he answered their prayer. He rescued them from some urgent need, from some terrible trouble. He restored their fortunes. He transformed their lives and it was clear that God had done it. So much so, the Psalmist says, that it filled everybody who experienced it with incredulous excited gladness. He says, "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream." We were going about saying, "I just can't believe that this wonderful thing has happened. Our dreams have been fulfilled. Our greatest expectations have been met. God has done more for us than we could ever have imagined. He goes on, "our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy," so these people are overwhelmed with delight because of something that God did for them in the past.

"That's what happened to us long ago," the Psalmist said. "That's what God did for us." And it was so dramatic that the surrounding nations noticed it. That's what he goes on to say, "they said among the nations," the Gentiles, "The LORD has done great things for them." All the nations round them, the Philistines and the Syrians and the Arameans and the Hittites, perhaps the Egyptians, the Babylonians, they looked at this deliverance. "Do you hear what's happened in Israel? Do you hear what the God of Israel has done for his people?" And that's an international talking point, what has been done for these people. The change is so obvious that unbelievers noticed it and the people of God agree and they say, "You're right. The LORD has done great things for us."

So here is the Psalmist and he remembers. He remembers. We were singing about that in Psalm 105. He casts his mind back to a glorious past. This is one of the pilgrim Psalms that the travelers sang as they traveled up to Jerusalem for the festivals. Perhaps that has awakened his memory and he remembers, and as he remembers, he's refreshed; he's encouraged; he is brought to praise; he is filled with gladness once again. Joy builds on the past. It's as the Psalmist says in another Psalm, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." My friends, no matter how bleak or discouraging your circumstances may be this evening, if you're a Christian, you can look back and you can remember and you can be filled with gratitude and you can say, "The Lord has done great things for me."

Step aside for a moment from your present difficulties. Think of all the blessings God has given you in your life. Think of all the prayers he has answered. Think above all about your conversion, how God delivered you from hell, from all your sins, and made you a new person, made you his child, gave you eternal life, the promise of heaven. God has done that for you. You've received that. What a momentous change. The Lord restored your fortunes. You were further down than Job, you were further down than the people of Judah here, and God has come and he has transformed your life, a massive, massive change and each one of us can say, "The Lord has done great things for me." And we can't remember this too often. We should constantly be looking back. We should constantly be giving thanks. It's one of the best antidotes to discouragement. When you're living in a present that is far from ideal, you have many, many difficulties, in the words of the old song, "Count your blessings," and it will surprise you what the Lord has done; how much he has done for you and as we think of the past, it gives us joy in the present.

Are you? Metrical version doesn't have it and I didn't check the Hebrew but the old Scottish Metrical version made the link quite clear: the Lord has done great things for us whence, whence joy to us is brought. Because of the great things that he's done, joy is brought to us in the present. Joy builds on the past.

But then secondly in verses 4 to 6, joy borrows from the future. Joy borrows from the future. The past can be a delightful place to visit, but it's a dangerous place to live in, and when we start living in the past, we are in spiritual peril. Living in the past, remembering, can damage your emotional health when it turns into a weakening nostalgia for the good old days, and a person who looks back, it's as if their life is over. The Psalmist doesn't do that here. He doesn't, if I can put it this way, he doesn't use memory as an armchair, he uses it as a springboard. The past isn't a comfortable easy chair in which he can collapse into and just sit there and think about the good old days. He uses the past as a springboard from which he can leap into the future. It's an impetus. The past makes him hopeful and prayerful and joyful. How does this happen? A very simple truth, a truth you all know: God doesn't change. God doesn't change. He's still the same God. If he has loved us in the past, he will love us in the future. If he has helped us in the past, he will help us in the future. If he has restored our fortunes in the past, he will restore our fortunes in the future.

The Psalm seems to be written in a barren, difficult time. It's discouraging. Nothing much good seems to be happening and so he prays in verse 4, taking up the phrase from verse 1, "the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion," he says, "Restore our fortunes, O LORD." Restore our fortunes. They were in trouble and we are in trouble. They were thine and we are thine. They had great needs and we have great needs. Work a total change in our situation. Restore our fortunes.

My friends, do you ever feel the need to pray like this? Perhaps some of you feel that need even this evening. "Lord, I really do need your help and I need it now and I need it in a significant way." And we can always pray that prayer. God changed your life in the past and he can change your life in the future. And if you're not a Christian this evening, you can pray this prayer and remember that God has done it for millions of people and he can do it for you in Christ. "Restore our fortunes, Lord, change me for the better. Change my life for the better. Make me a different person." My dear friends, don't let us ever give in to apathy, to hopelessness, to cynicism, to despair. We should always be a glad, optimistic, joyful people. Restore our fortunes, Lord.

And the Psalmist gives us two striking complementary pictures of how it might happen in verse 4 and then verses 5 and 6. "Restore our fortunes, O LORD," here's the first picture, "like streams in the Negeb!" The Hebrew word "Negeb" simply means "dry or parched." Now, it's actually a place name in our world today, as you know. The Negeb or the Negev is the desert in southern Judah which stretches down to the Sinai Peninsula. It's one of the most barren places on earth. It's like the moon. But from time to time, sudden torrential showers come. The heavens open; inches of rain fall in hours; they fill the water channels and suddenly that desert becomes a garden. I haven't seen it happening but we saw it happening each spring in Cyprus, incredible to see. You could drive down the road from Nicosia to Larnaca on a Sabbath morning and you were looking at a desert. You

could go down three days later and all you could see was green grass and poppies of every color. Beautiful. The rain had come and the desert, as the prophet said, blossomed like the rose. And that happened often and suddenly the dry barren Negev became a beautiful fruitful place.

So that's the lovely picture that the Psalmist takes hold of and weaves into the Psalm. "Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb!" My life's like a desert. My soul is barren and dry. What I'm asking you is to turn that desert into a garden. Send the streams of your Holy Spirit in such an abundant way that the desert in me, in my life, blossoms like the rose. And God does this. Sometimes he does it in revival. Again and again throughout history, suddenly God has worked and a bigger change has happened in a nation in a week than happened in the previous 50 years, and God suddenly lays bear his arm and suddenly tens of thousands of people are brought into the kingdom. He restores the fortunes like streams in the Negeb. Conversion is like that. One day a person is cold and dead towards God with no desire for Christ, the next day they're a warm, loving believer.

Sometimes it happens to us in our spiritual lives. We make a sudden leap forward in spiritual maturity. I've seen it happening again and again to people who have discovered what we call the Reformed faith. They've been reading, they've been Christians for years, suddenly it has all come together for them and they see the beauty and the symmetry and the coherence of the whole system of the Reformed faith and they say, "Yes. Why didn't I see it before? This is biblical Christianity. This is the real thing." And you see them growing. I was referring this morning to Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, this very thing happened to Dr. Lloyd-Jones. In the year 1949-1950, a very tired, well known preacher, he was on holiday in north Wales and God met with Lloyd-Jones that year, that summer, in a mysterious way and worked upon him by his Spirit. As he himself said, he was never the same man afterward. God did something to him that changed him in a very profound way that he never forgot.

Such things do happen and they can happen to you and to me. Are you praying for things like that? Or are you just jogging along faithfully in your Christian life? Have you great expectations from God for yourself, your family, for our church, for our wider church, to the nation? Restore our fortunes like streams in the Negeb. Pour your Holy Spirit down so that there's a new flaring of love and grace. Wouldn't that be a great thing for us to pray for Trinity congregation this coming autumn that God would be pleased to pour his Spirit upon us? Upon me. Upon our elders. Upon our deacons. Upon all those who work in the church. Upon all our members, that God would help us to leap forward in maturity and usefulness; that it would be the best year of our lives; that we do more for God; be used for God more than in the previous ten years. God can do that. God can do that. Restore our fortunes. Turn these dry places into potential rivers.

Joy borrows from the future but then there's another picture. This is how God works but it is not his usual way of working and so the Psalmist gives us a second picture. "Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!" Here there is no shower from heaven; there is no great period of revival that we can sit back and enjoy. The picture here is of

hard, tedious work day after day, month after month, little to show for it. Sowing in tears, working hard in the kingdom but perhaps not seeing very many results. We can all identify with this picture.

How can we be joyful? Because sowing is itself a hopeful, forward looking, optimistic, joyful activity. Why do you sow? Because you expect a crop, you expect a harvest. It's wearisome business to sow but the wearisome is swallowed up in future joy. What we're doing now is sowing; sowing in our work for the Lord; sowing in our children's lives; in our own lives; in our Sabbath school classes and campaigners and CY; in our witnessing and teaching and preaching; sowing in our troubles, in our sorrows. We're sowing in the duties God gives us. We're sowing as we're caring for other people. We're sowing as we bear burdens, as we face disappointments. We're sowing. We're sowing and the process isn't easy but we can be glad while we're sowing because we know what it's going to produce and what's going to happen.

Do you remember Paul in Romans 5? "We rejoice in our suffering." Why? "Because we know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance, character, and character, hope." By God's grace this is making me a better person. By God's grace, this is making me more like my Savior. It's hard, it's difficult, it's discouraging, but it's sowing. It's a profitable forward looking activity. It's not just moving one pile of stones and putting them in another pile. It's not pointless, meaningless activity. Everything you do as a Christian is sowing. There is a purpose for it. There is a goal. There is a harvest. There is a fruit. There is a result which is going to fill you and me with great joy, and we've just got to remember that what we're doing is sowing. It's sowing and that's the important thing.

So these are the pictures the Psalmist uses to help us to borrow joy from the future. God can turn this desert into a garden and I'm going to ask him to do it, and until he does and until he does, I will sow knowing that the sowing itself will produce a harvest. There is a little word which is in our translations. The Hebrew says in verse 6, "He who surely goes out weeping shall surely come home with shouts of joy." Surely. It's in the Scottish Metrical version. Some of you remember that version. "That man who bearing precious seed and going forth doth mourn. He doubtless, doubtless, bringing back his sheaves, rejoicing shall return." It's in the new version to some extent in the word "indeed." "He will return with shouts of joy and bear his sheaves indeed." It's certain. Paul says, "Whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." In due season we will reap. We will reap if we do not give up.

We are glad. How can we be glad at a difficult time? Because our gladness builds on the past. God has done great things for us. And our gladness borrows from the future. He is able to turn the desert into a garden and he will give a harvest to those who sow. One commentator puts it this way, "We are people whose lives are bordered on one side by the memory of God's acts, and on the other side by hope in God's promises." The memory of God's acts and the hope of God's promises, and whatever else is happening, are able to say, "We are glad." Amen.

Let us bow in prayer.

Fill us, O God, with joy. Make us a glad people, a happy people. Help us to remember more than we do all the kindness and mercy that you have shown us over the years of our lives, the countless blessings we have received, the multitude of ways in which you have demonstrated your care for us, above all in restoring our fortunes in conversion. Help us to be glad. And as we look, O God, at a present which is sometimes bleak and discouraging, help us to remember that you're the God who can make the desert blossom like the rose and we pray, O God, that you will be pleased to do that. In the meantime, help us to continue sowing every day at every moment, sowing in faith, knowing that a wonderful harvest is coming. We pray this in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.