



Drawn to Christ: Psalms 120-134 (Part 4) – God Restores Joy

Douglas Corin – 3 October, 2021

A number of months ago, we read in the Word the words of Jesus when he was talking to the Pharisees. And he said to them, *"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life."* And so we began from that time our series on the psalms called "Drawn to Christ" looking back at the scriptures which Jesus said bear witness of him. And during our sessions so far we've looked at various psalms and seeing how they bear witness to Christ. So far, I've treated them in groups of three. Today, we're going to do one. That's Psalm 126. Before I do that—before I read Psalm 126—let's pray.

We thank you, heavenly Father that we are able to gather as a church, a group of people who belong to you. We thank you that we gather here in fellowship with one another, with your Holy Spirit, and with the word of God. The word of God you describe sometimes as a hammer, sometimes as gentle rain, sometimes as milk, and other times as meat. However you bring it to us today, Father, we know that your word will not return empty to you, but will accomplish that which you have sent it into our hearts to do. And so we just offer ourselves to you and your word this morning. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Psalm 126

Psalm 126. A Song of Ascents. *"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; we are glad. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negeb! 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."

We'll take a close look at the psalm, paying attention to the wording. This is a poem written by a poet. And we'll just, on the way, gather the message of the psalm for ourselves in our sitting here at Crosspoint and as individuals. The title, of course, is A Song of Ascents. And it's one of those 15 psalms... the collection that people sang on their way up to the feasts in Jerusalem three times a year. And we know, therefore, that our Lord Jesus, during his time spent in Israel, would have sung this particular Psalm quite often.

The psalm begins: *"When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion..."* The first word is "when" so the psalmist is thinking of something specific, a specific time in the past. A time when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion. He doesn't spell out clearly what that time is. He doesn't put the historical fact together with it. I think that's on purpose. You'll find that in many of the psalms that they could relate to this historical situation or to that one, but the psalmist doesn't exactly say. And I think that's so that other people who read in later generations can apply the message of the psalm to their own situations. So it's careful, I think, not to tie it down to one situation. But we can guess a situation. And that would be the situation when they came out of captivity in Babylon, and many of them returned back to Jerusalem and to Israel.

"When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion..." So it is clear about one thing: It's the Lord. The Lord restored the fortunes of Zion. It wasn't the Jews themselves who restored the fortunes of Zion. It was the Lord. He is the only one who gets credit. The Lord restored the fortunes of Zion.

And then it says, *"restored the fortunes."* Restored. Well, that's a common word. We use that word every day. If your phone misbehaves and you play around with it, you come across a message that says "restore your phone to factory settings." Great. Another one: you buy the right kind of car polish, you can restore your car's paintwork to its original glossiness. On a more serious topic, couples who are estranged, friends who have fallen out, nations who've been at war often restore the relationship. They go back to how it was, how it used to be. And the times of peace when they got on well together. So we're familiar with the word "restore," but here it says that God restored the fortunes of Zion. Now, what would they be thinking of when they said "restored the fortunes of Zion?" Well, first we've got to think about what was Zion to the Jews. Zion, of course, was a city and the Lord said lots in his word

about cities, good cities and bad cities. But what the people of Israel would have thought about would be a whole grouping of ideas when they thought of their city, Zion. First of all, Zion was a place that their God had chosen for his own dwelling place. That's where the temple was. Zion was the place of their kings. That's where the palace was. And they knew it was the place of their future king: the Messiah. Zion was the city that protected them from enemies; a place of safety.

Just skipping back browsing through some of the psalms we've done already. Psalm 122 says, *"Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together."* So there's a sense of unity in Jerusalem. It's where the tribes went up—individual tribes—and they all came together as one. There the thrones of judgment were set. So Zion was a city which had the peace of good justice. Good justice, good decisions. Zion was a city of peace. Zion was a city of security. There was peace within its walls and security within its towers. And it's a city where the people looked out for each other because they had a common unity. They shared the city together and this common unity and almost unspoken willingness to each other was to look out for the common good. So David had said at the end... of the righteous... at the end of Psalm 122. *"For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good."* So it's that lovely city where there's... it doesn't talk about the crime and the other things that went on... it was a special, a very special city to the Jewish people. So when they're talking here about *"the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion"* that's all of the ideas that would be in their minds... back to that great city that used to be.

Well, of course, you've got the idea of restoring and that all brings to mind, "Well, what's happened? Why did it need restoring?" And we know from history that God had to deal with Israel because of their constant, unceasing sin. That's why things had turned south for Zion. That's why it had fallen away from its original glory and gone into the stage where it needed restoring.

Turn with me to Deuteronomy chapter 30. Deuteronomy chapter 30. Way back in the time of Moses, God had promised that he would restore. Deuteronomy 30:3. Well, we'll keep it in context and read from verse one to verse three. *"And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered*

you." So that promise had happened. And the Psalmist had experienced it. God had restored the fortunes of Zion.

He carries on, "*We were like those who dream.*" They were not those who dream, but they were like those who dream. What happened was flesh and blood real. They experienced it, but it was so wonderful it felt surreal. "*We were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.*" Now, in this Psalm, as in many of the Psalms, David, or the writer, speaks the word, "our." He doesn't always speak to God or speak a Psalm as an individual, but he's always aware of the group. Our. And yet he says "*our mouth*" that's one mouth, "*our tongue*" that's one tongue. So he's bringing the idea here that the experience is a unifying experience; they all went through it as one.

It was "*our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.*" So it was filled. It was filled to the point of overflowing. It's like fountains of laughter and joy coming out, and sharing with one another, flooding down on each other in like a gushing downpour of happiness. Laughter. They're glad. They're happy. And there's shouts of joy. There's more than one shout. I kind of think of a sports team... maybe a country's fans when their team has won the world cup or something and you see them on the TV, out in the streets, partying and shouting and laughing... that kind of exultant jubilation, cheering and whooping. So they were very, very happy.

On a more personal level, we can think of the happy times in our lives that we can look back to. And for many of us, that's looking back to family. I can think of my childhood when groups of cousins would come to our place and we'd be cousins meeting cousins and happy and delighted to see them. That sort of thing is as sort of in our past. We can imagine these happy situations. But these people they really experienced it when they were set free from captivity and allowed to go back to Zion.

"*Then they said among the nations, "the Lord has done great things for them."*" So "they said." Who's they? Well, it's the people who don't belong to Israel. In other words, it's the Gentiles. If it was... if we were living in that time, it would be us.

The nations said, "*the Lord has done great things for them.*" Notice that the nations didn't praise the Jews. "Oh, the Jews have done great for themselves." King Cyrus had given him the decree for setting the captives free, but the nations didn't say, "Wow, Cyrus has done great things for the Jews." King Artaxerxes had allowed Nehemiah to go back and given

money, given timber for building, but they don't say, "King Artaxerxes has done great things for the Jews." Even the nations said, *"the Lord has done great things for them."* But note: it's "great things for them." It wasn't "great things for us." *"The Lord has done great things for them."* They knew there was a distinction between the people of God and themselves.

We can see this in the history section of the Bible. Nehemiah 6:16. I'll read it to you. You'll recall that Nehemiah's the leader who came back to Jerusalem to organise the building of the wall around the city. Nehemiah 6:16. *"And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of God."*

So the nations around said, *"The Lord has done great things [beyond expectations] for them."* That testimony of the nations would have confirmed to the people of Israel that they certainly were not dreaming. The Lord really had restored the fortunes of Zion. And everyone knew it.

He carries on: *"The Lord has done great things for us. We are glad."* So the Jews affirm it. *"Great things for us."* Now it's from their point of view, *"Great things for us."* Not them. For us. *"We are glad."* We **are** glad. Now there's a change in tense. Before everything's has been, uh, was or were. Now it's are. We are glad. It happened in the past, but that happiness they're re-experiencing now. We are glad still. Previously they laugh with shouts of joy, but even now the gladness about the past event continues.

[Let's take a sip of water.] Verse four: *"Restore our fortunes, O Lord."* Wait a minute. I thought the poet had just been saying that the Lord had restored their fortunes... the fortunes of Zion. Now he's praying on behalf of the people, *"Restore our fortunes."* And here, for the first time in the text, we see the trouble that they have. They're thinking about that past restoration, that past laughter, those past shouts of joy. And suddenly they're thinking life is not like that now. That's a common experience for people of the world. We can remember something really happy to do with our family, or friends, and suddenly, "Oh, I miss them." That happiness sort of changes to a nostalgic sadness. I think that's what's happened here. He's told of this great joy, but he also realizes they need their fortunes restored still. Either those previous fortunes had withered away or they were no longer satisfying them. Restoration was not over yet. The Lord had given joy because the Lord restores joy, but they wanted their fortunes restored more and they wanted the Lord to restore joy again.

So what were they longing for? We can kind of wonder about it. Um, was it to do with Zion still? Did they miss the fact that they still didn't have a king? Uh, we do know that some people came back to Jerusalem and saw the rebuilt temple. And some people were rejoicing over the temple and others cried because it was nowhere as good as the temple that was there before. Or because the walls were still in a state of disrepair, did they feel unsafe? And when they were thinking of going back to their city and being with other like-minded people and having prosperity, did they find that they'd actually gone back to poverty? Was that the harsh reality of their daily lives? Or when he said "*restore our fortunes*" was he thinking more personally—not of the physical city, but of the people whose lives and livelihoods were now miserable after returning? The people remembered wistfully how happy they were after the Lord had restored the fortunes of Zion. Now by comparison, their lives seemed barren, dry, and troubled. But the psalmist knew what to do. He called on the Lord. "*Restore our fortunes, O Lord.*"

Now this situation is pretty common and familiar to people of our own day. How common it is to remember a past event, a past victory, a past time of closeness and cheerful company with friends or relatives... And then catching us off guard, those pangs of nostalgia rise up. What a moment ago was a delightful memory, now shrouds the present in a mist of misery and people long for the former times, which clearly outranks the present. Replacing the happy memories of friendly interactions, loneliness can raise its head. Recollections of trophies of former victories only highlight the current defeats, and rather than encouragement, a feeling of helplessness. The athlete who worked so hard to make the team, fails to make it. The worker who came to Australia for a new life gets made redundant. His friend gets seriously sick, money dries up, relationships enter a struggle, COVID-19 shuts things down. All made worse by the contrasting memories of how good things used to be. So it's a very familiar feeling.

Like the psalm's poet, the Christian too can suffer from a side by side display of the pleasant past with the negative now. A Christian remembers a time of her joyous conversion. My chains fell off, my heart was free. He remembers the overwhelming love that he felt at that time. "Amazing love. How can it be that thou my God shouldst die for me!" She remembers a new-found family of believers. We are one in the bond of love. All as she now perhaps struggles to make new friends or even find the will to come to the Lord in prayer and find help in a time of need. Yes, Christians too need to pray, "*Restore our fortunes, O Lord.*"

Back to the text: *"Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negeb!"* What was the Negeb? Well, it was a dry, large, parched area in Israel—much like the desert areas in Outback Queensland, Australia, but perhaps a lot more rocky than some of them. Spending much of the year dry, the stream bed relies on rain to fall upstream in the hills, and then little rivulets of water flow down into the dry stream bed gathering, congregating into the dusty stream beds and churning and splashing, they make their way twisting down the dry river bed overflowing to the surrounding dryness of the land, where the waters soak into the poorest ground and supply life to the long awaiting seeds and plants. The streams of the Negeb filled rapidly. Life returned quickly. There's almost a sense there that the Psalmist is saying, "Lord, please do it quickly. Please restore our fortunes quickly." Was the psalmist saying that the people were like the dry stream beds? Maybe. Maybe he wanted to be like a stream bed, full of water, sharing with other people. I remember the words of Jesus, where he says, as the scriptures say, rivers of living water will flow out, flow out from your innermost being.... speaking of the Spirit. Or was the psalmist thinking, not of the dry river beds so much, but of this surrounding dry land which relied on the water from the, from the river? I think so. They were like the dry land around about waiting for the life-giving water of God.

Now, as I mentioned at the start, one main purpose of the series on the Songs of Ascent is for us to see how they bear witness to Christ. As a quick thought just here, let's remember that Christ came as the water of life to give life to all who believe in him. Let's pause and think about Christ reading or singing or praying this psalm yearly as he went up to Jerusalem. What would be in his mind when he read those opening lines? *"When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion."* Would he think of himself and the person of God as the one who had done that—who had brought about the restoration? Or perhaps he remembered it humanly and, um, he had unity with the people of Israel celebrating what God his father had done at that time. The fact that the people had been restored to Israel was a preparation for Christ to come and bless the people of Israel at that time so he could go about doing miracles, healing, and sharing the truth with people. Surely he would have been rejoicing in that earlier restoration to Zion. Or perhaps he was thinking more of the restoration that he was about to fulfil in Jerusalem with his death and resurrection. A restoration that would fill the mouths of his disciples with laughter and shouts of joy. A restoration that would cause them to be daily in the temple, praising God. *"The Lord has done great things for us. We are glad."* Or maybe he thought of the future restoration that his people would need... the one where he makes all things new as we read before the sermon in the book of Revelation 21:1-5. So already we can see in this psalm, it's drawing us to Christ.

Verse five. *"Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!"* Now here, the psalmist really gets into his poet mode. Poets love to use these illustrations and just settle our minds onto an illustration rather than spelling things out in plain English. What's happened here? A moment ago, he's talking about the streams in the Negeb. Negeb itself is a word which means parched and dry. So maybe he had that connection there about the water in the Negeb and the parched and dryness, and maybe he looks at the faces around him and sees their dry, parched faces with tears running down. Maybe that was a connection. Tears showed their heartbreak, their misfortune. Things are definitely not how they wish. And the contrast is especially noticeable as they remember how things used to be. *"Those who sow in tears,"* he says, *"shall reap with shouts of joy."* Those who sow, reap. That's the general idea of his illustration. Those who sow, reap. As sure as the harvest time follows the sowing time, God's joy will be restored. Even when sowing was done in tears, the harvest still comes with joy. There is joy. God restores joy.

"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." So in verse six, again if you just...as many of these psalms as the Jewish poetic method of, um, parallel, uh... I've just forgotten the term, but there's a parallel stepping where he says one thought and the next verse repeats it and just adds a bit more. And we've seen that in the psalms beforehand, but here it is again. He's saying the same thing, but just in a bit more detail... a different way...

"He goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing." So the person's home, which he goes out from, is a sad one. They're living in dire straits. He goes out of his home his face awash with despair, bearing the seed for sowing. He takes what little they have. The seed is what they made into their bread, the flour and their bread, but he's got to take it now, not leaving it as food to provide for the family, but to scatter on his pot of land somewhere.

"Bearing the seed for sowing, but he shall come home with shouts of joy." Home! That's the place where the man is delighted to share his successes with those he loves most deeply. The home he'd gone out from with tears, the people he wanted so much to help, he now comes back to. He comes home bringing his sheaves with him. There, the sheaves... they're his sheaves. They grew from his seed. They came from plants he had cared for. He had protected them from pests. He kept their life from being snuffed out by weeds. He cut those plants with his sickle. He bound those plants up into sheaves. They were plants to restore

his family. And he brought them back with them. With him. He didn't send them on ahead. He brought them with him because he was part of the joy coming back to the family. He brought shouts of joy back to his home. Notice he did shouts of joy. It was contagious. He wanted to share it. Bringing in the sheaves is contagious. He shares his shouts. For him, the sheaves mean as much as streams do to the Negeb—bringing life and joy.

Now, one thing some preachers get wrong with this is they turn this description into a prescription. They're looking for things for you to do. "Oh, you want to have, uh, more money in your life? Well, you got to sow money. Here's the phone number on the bottom of the screen for you to give it to." No, we can think that the Psalmist is trying here to get us to do something. "You're only going to get the harvest, if you go out and do that. Only if you sow. Only if you're weeping." No, that's not the point. This all follows the psalmist's prayer, "*Restore our fortunes, O Lord.*" It's God who does the work. And as we'll see in the next... next psalm, next time, unless the Lord builds the house, those who labour, labour in vain. No, it's not something for us to go out and work our way to it. On the other hand, it's not saying don't do that... don't go out and work... but that's not the point here. Harvest time follows sowing. Joy does follow tears.

So for the person that came to Australia and got made redundant, let's say he's a Christian, God will restore joy to him. Does that mean he's going to get back his job that he lost? No. God restores his fortunes. It doesn't say which specific fortune, but God will restore his fortunes if he's a Christian. God will restore his fortunes and he will be able to shout for joy. We can think of other situations too. A Christian who's grown dull. He's lost a sense of joy. God will restore it. God will restore it. It may take time. There's a time between the harvest and the sowing, but God will restore it.

What I don't want to do with this passage is make promises that God doesn't make in saying, "Yes, you'll get your job back." "Oh, you're going through a time of poverty now. Yes, God will make you rich soon." You can't say that because God doesn't promise the exact things, but what I can stand and say is what God has said, God will restore. God will restore your fortunes. Even the apostle Paul... I often think of him. He had such a struggle in his life. He was often shipwrecked, but he wasn't shipwrecked every day. He wasn't shipwrecked in every voyage. He got beaten and taken out to be stoned, but that didn't happen to him every day. Good things happened to the apostle Paul. One time, I think Titus came to visit him. And Paul thanked God because Paul was having such a miserable time and then God sent this man Titus to him and Paul felt so encouraged. You find that, I think at the beginning of 2

Corinthians. So even somebody like Paul who had the worst of circumstances often, even he had his fortunes restored. God knows what we can handle. We may think, "How can I be happy again? What hope is there for me to have the good life again?" Our God will again fill your mouth with shouts of joy.

Now let's bear in mind, too, that this psalm is not restricted to the prayers or experiences of one individual. It's a group psalm... on behalf of a group. The group shares the blessings of restored fortune. The laughter and the shouts of joy are shared in the company of others. Praising God for what he has done is a group activity. The prayer of the psalmist is not just, "Restore my fortunes, O Lord" but *"Restore our fortunes, O Lord."* He who comes home doesn't do so secretly, but shares his shouts of joy and brings his sheaves home with him for others. And so, other than thinking only of ourselves as we read this psalm, we can perhaps think a little bit widely as CrossPoint. CrossPoint. If we pray, *"Restore our fortunes, O Lord,"* what would that mean to CrossPoint? I don't know the answer. Maybe you don't either. But restore our fortunes, Lord. Restore the fortunes of this church like streams in the Negeb.

It is likely that, though it's the Lord who will restore your fortunes, he will actually use others to do it... just as he used King Cyrus and King Artaxerxes to restore Israel to Zion. Often our blessings from the Lord come through others and he will likely use you to restore the fortunes of others. Be on the lookout to do good. Look for those opportunities. Let us not fail to recognise the grace of God that has given us the blessing of being a blessing to one another.

In closing, the Christian doctrine, the Christian teaching taking a wider point of view, the one that summarizes this psalm the best, I think, is the doctrine of the steadfast love of God. Turn with me to Lamentations chapter 3. Lamentations chapter three. It's just after Jeremiah. Lamentations chapter three, verses 22 and 23. *"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."* And one more—just back in the previous book of Jeremiah. 33. Jeremiah 33 and we'll read verses 10 and 11. God restores joy. Verse 10: *"Thus says the Lord: In this place of which you say, 'It is a waste without man or beast,' in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man or inhabitant or beast, there shall be heard again the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord: 'Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!' For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the Lord."* The

steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. Why did God restore the fortunes of Zion? Because his love for Zion was steadfast. Why was God going to again, going to again, restore the fortunes of the psalmist and others? Because his love for them was steadfast. He cares. God will again restore your fortunes and my fortunes and our fortunes because his love for us is steadfast. And in the last day, he will restore our fortunes fully. Eternally. Because his love for us is steadfast. Because of his faithfulness, we shall all come home to the new Zion, bringing our sheaves, with shouts of joy, and there we'll be face-to-face with the one who sacrificed his life and carried our sins in his body on the cross to bring about the ultimate restoration. He alone restored us to God his father, from whom and to whom are all things, including the glory. Let this psalm draw us to Christ. Let's pray and give thanks.

You are a God who is steadfast in love toward us. And as part of that, you restore joy. We don't always remember that, but we can trust that. As part of your love, you do restore our fortunes... whatever that means, Father, for the people listening here today or those that listen later online. We ask that you will hear their prayers, see their tears if that's the case, and arrange for things that they may come home with sheaves shouting for joy. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, we pray, and help us under your guidance to restore the fortunes of those around us. In Jesus' name, Amen.