
Our God is Able

Psalm 126

Overview

Text: Psalm 126

Topic: Understanding the restoring work of God

Theme: The restoring work of God understood through prophecy (a future look at it) and through figures of speech (a present look at it).

Target: Through unbelief over His promises, the church today has grown weak. We are not by and large inclined to draw joy and strength from prophecy/promise. The end results of God's restoring work is not consistently taken in by the church to where it has a purifying and an empowering effect for living today. Therefore, I will preach Ps.126 to Clearcreek Chapel...

- ▶ To increase gladness and steadfastness while awaiting God's glorious restoration in the midst of Babylon-like conditions
- ▶ To admonish the "quitters"
- ▶ To strengthen the faint-hearted
- ▶ To the end that "the joy of the Lord" will be our strength expressed in praying for His outpouring (v.4) and persevering through tears (Vv.5-6).

Structure

Understanding the restoring work of God

1. Through a perspective of the future (Vv.1-3)
 - a. The source of understanding (Vv.1-2)
 - b. The results of understanding (v.3)
2. Through a perspective of the present (Vv.4-6)
 - a. The prayers because of understanding (v.4)
 - b. The perseverance because of understanding (Vv.5-6)

The Big Idea: Confidence in God's future work must shape the Chapel's present work.

Introduction

I would like everyone's attention please. I have an announcement to make.

There is a Psalm in our Bible which claims that God can restore the fortunes of those who are devastated by the effects of their sin. He is able to do great things for His people. He is able to transform tears into laughter; sorrow into joy. He is able to fortify the fainthearted. He is able to stimulate the slumbering. He is able to lift up the downcast. He is able to broaden the mind of the narrow mind. He is able to excite the uncaring. He is able to renew the bleak. He is able to restart the stalled. He is able to make alive the dead. He is able to give hope to the hopeless.

Our God is able!

This is the announcement I have for this morning.

But for some of you this announcement sounds like a faint fog horn in dense fog. The eye of your mind is unclear. Your internal noise is overwhelming. "It will never get better. It will always be the same. There is no hope for change. I cannot live like this anymore" is the running commentary in your mind. And so, for you who today are ready to quit, God has a message for you. It is message of hope. It is the sure word that the Lord restores the fortunes of His people.

What will be required of you is to believe the Word in an obeying way. And this belief will be given to you if you hear the Word preached today. You must enter into the atmosphere of Ps.126 in order for your faith to be strengthened. You must not yield to despondency. You must not throw in the white towel telling the world that God and His grace are insufficient for your troubles. You must hear with faith the Word preached today. We need to ask God for help that He will grant this miracle of hearing with faith.

(pray and read Ps.126)

Setting the Stage

Sin has consequences. And the result of sin is not restricted to one person. As illustrated in the life of King David, sin damages families, communities and even nations. Generations after King David, we come to a time in Israel's history where they were reaping the effects of personal and societal sin. The Lord drove them out of the promised land starting in 605 BC. The Babylonians were God's instrument of punishment. The Israelites find themselves banished from their homeland. They find themselves in exile. Ps.137 describes the Israelites in Babylon as "there we sat down and wept".

But in our passage for this morning they appear to be different. Their situation does not seem to have changed. They are still away from the Promised Land. They still are weeping. And yet, there *is* a profound difference. They have a type of gladness leading to steadfastness in the midst of pain and tears. They have regained hope. They are glad. They are praying. They are persevering through difficulty.

What happened that caused this heart change? How did they regain their outlook when their situation hadn't changed? What was the cause of their delight and determination in the midst of difficulty?

Through a Biblical perspective of the future

The topic of Psalm 126 is clear. How understanding the restoring work of God occurs is first seen in vv.1-3.

- ▶ In vv.1-3 we notice that an understanding of the restoring work of God comes through a biblical perspective of the future.
- ▶ In vv.4-6 we observe that an understanding of the restoring work of God comes through a biblical perspective of the present.

Let's take a look at the first means of understanding God's restorative work by looking at vv.1-3.

The source of understanding

This angle on comprehending God's work can be observed by noticing the source of understanding.

In v.1 we have somewhat of a parenthetical statement. "We were like those who dream" is a phrase of conversation among the commentators. For some they see this phrase as simply meaning "ordinary dreams of sleep". If that is the right reading of this passage, then the point would simply be that this joy when God restores the fortunes is "dreamy".

But this interpretation does not help us understand v.3 when we see the people of Israel praying for the restoration of their fortunes. You see, they still are in exile. So why are they talking in past tense as though they were not in exile? The answer is found in the correct understanding of the phrase "like those who dream".

“Like those who dream” is a reference to prophecy. In the Old Testament we see people like Jacob (Gen.28:12), Joseph (Gen.37:5-10), Pharaoh and his servants (Gen.40:5,8), Daniel (Dan.1:17) receiving direct revelation through what was called “dreams” (see also Acts 12:9). What the Psalmist is saying here is that a look into the future through prophecy tells them that God has guaranteed a restoring of their fortunes. The reference points back to written prophecy like Deut.30:3 and not, I think, a current prophecy they are receiving. They simply are calling back to mind what God had already told them. God has promised restoration. They believe in a fresh way this prophetic promise. They are sensing the blessed outcome of this promise as though it had already happened. This was their source of understanding.

This is the first means by which they comprehended the restoring work of God. Through God’s sure promise they had a confidence that all God said would come to be. Beyond the curse of exile lay this promise of restoration. God’s redemptive program did not fail finally even if historical Israel failed through rebellion. If in exile the people turned to the Lord again, He would have compassion on them and they would be restored to enjoy yet greater blessings (cf. Deuteronomy 30:1-10; see also Jer.29:10ff).

“Restoring the Fortunes” meant unbridled joy. “Filled with laughter” spills out into “shouts of joy”. When this happens, God’s people will be “filled up with all the fullness of God”. They will be enjoying uninterruptedly a happiness unlike anything the world can give. There is no regret or anger or resentment or jealousy or suspicion or slander and gossip. Everyone who is there wants to be there. Everyone is fully satisfied.

And all of this done not in secret as the latter part of v.2 suggests. “Among the nations” we will have joy uninhibited and uncealed. All the nations will look on and say “The Lord has done great things for them”.

The results of understanding

Now what present effect or result did this have on God’s people? What emotional change came over them as a result of understanding God’s restoring work through a perspective of the future?

Two words might summarize this; assurance and gladness! You can see this in v.3 can't you? "The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.

They were so confident that what God promises He fulfills they talked about the "restoring the fortunes" as though it had already happened. Keep in mind that they are still in Babylon. This idea of speaking in the present tense about a future reality is like the Apostle Paul's words in Romans 8 when he said of the church, "we are children of God...heirs of God and fellow heirs of Christ". All that Christ possesses is ours through adoption! We have received the endowment of God; full and lasting gaze upon the glories of God ! This is ours beloved. And yet, we do not fully understand nor enjoy this inheritance. Nevertheless, it is to shape our perspective in this fallen world. We are to "rejoice in hope of glory" NOW!

So it was for the Israelites in Babylon as observed in v.3. The result of understanding God's restoring work through a perspective of the future was confidence and gladness. Circle those three words in your Bible...WE ARE GLAD.

Summary of Point 1

So we've seen in vv.1-3 that the Israelites whose unpromising situation had not changed were confident and glad. We noticed that the source of this confidence and gladness was a belief in what God said he would do. Their conditions were poor. But because they understood God's restoring work through a perspective of the future they were able to face the unpromising circumstances with confidence and gladness. This is the summary of Point #1

Through a perspective of the present

Understanding the restoring work of God comes not only from a perspective of the future (as noted in vv.1-3) but also through a perspective of the present as seen in vv.4-6.

In Vv.4-6 you sense a change in perspective. V.4 is a present tense prayer. In these verses we see a present condition of dryness and danger where there are many tears. It hints at the importance of perseverance. It is not filled with the laughter of vv.1-2. It is, however, filled with hope. What is happening in this section is both powerful and pertinent.

The prophetic promise sensed by the Psalmist in vv.1-3 gave him hope to pray for it now as seen in v.4. With the confidence and gladness gleaned from vv.1-2, He looks at the current situation. In v.4 he likens it to the Negeb. According to “The Moody Atlas of the Bible” Berry Beitzel says of the Negeb, “a barren wilderness south of Judah...constitutes an adverse environment...entirely dependent on rainfall...generally hostile to human activities...”

The Negeb, I’m told, literally means “dryness”. When the rains came in the southern part of Israel (which typically is dry) they would fall on tightly packed clay. The water then would funnel into wades. These wades (or little creek-like ruts in the dessert) would collect the rain water causing a rush of water into the southern part of the desert known as the Negeb.

The prayer because of understanding

V. 4 is a striking word picture of God’s ability to suddenly surge into dryness with His life-producing water. And this is precisely what the Psalmist is praying for. Because He knows of God’s restoring work, He prays for God’s restoring work. Restore our fortunes, O Lord. Come crashing into my barrenness and produce life-like streams in the desert!

He has a perspective of the present that is hopeful. He knows God will ultimately restore the fortunes. He will ultimately bring the Messianic blessings to His people. But he longs for a foretaste of the ultimate restoration. He yearns for revival. This promise-induced hope gave rise to his passionate prayer!

The perseverance because of understanding

Now shift your attention to vv.5-6. Notice that there is no necessary tension between passionate prayer for revival and persistent efforts to faithfully carry out God’s agenda. When we talk about renewal we are talking about a v.4 kind of event. But this view does not cancel out our responsibility to daily carry out God’s good will.

And we find this understanding of the restoring work of God through a perspective of the present in vv.5-6.

The Psalmist recognizes the grind of life. They are still in Babylon. They still must persevere through pain and tears. Working to see the restoration of the fortunes is a ministry for the present. Notice what fuels such steady, ongoing, faithful, obedience.

In v.5 we come to a proverb of sorts. “Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy”. This is a general promise given to God’s people to motivate them to steady ministry. We see a similar incentive in 1Cor.15:58; “Therefore my dear brothers stand firm...” and Gal.6:9-10; “Let us not become weary in doing good...” and 2Cor.9:6; “Remember this: whoever sows...”. What kept the Psalmist persevering through tears is the prospect of future joy; the joy we noticed in vv.1-2.

His understanding of the restoring work of God is shaped by this metaphor. God’s restoring the fortunes is promised (the point of vv.1-3). God’s restoring the fortunes can come immediately (the point of v.4). And God’s restoring the fortunes does not cancel out hard work motivated by hope (the point of vv.5-6).

If v.5 is proverb, then v.6 is a promise; a personal promise (notice the pronoun shift from v.5 to v.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 the very encouragement one needs for perseverance. Despondency and slowness of obedience are remedied by this promise. Temptation to quit because life is so difficult is severed by this promise. Can you see this? The writer is saying that the means of understanding how God restores the fortunes is to notice the present. The here and now can be quite grueling and exhausting. Today does not resemble vv.1-2.

Tears flow but we must still go. Confidence in God’s future work must shape the Church’s present work. We are not allowed to quit. We are never given permission to give up. This is the message of vv.5-6. This is what must land upon us today. The Kingdom will be restored (vv.1-2). That confidence must give rise to gladness (v.3). That gladness must empower us to pray expectantly (v.4). And that gladness must empower us to persevere through all the pain and all the tears of obedient living (vv.5-6).

Closing

In closing, let me tie up the loose ends by tying together four points.

1. God will restore the fortunes (Vv.1-2).

In our last book in the Bible we come to words “No longer will there be anything accursed but the throne of God and of the Lamb

will be in it and his servants will worship him. They will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun for the Lord God will be their light and they will reign forever and ever. And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true...” (Rev.22:3ff).

Jesus Christ completed the restoration of His people on the cross and through the resurrection. His people will enjoy this restoration fully and uninterruptedly at the consummation; the 2nd coming of Christ.

There is a time (and I pray sometime soon) where “The Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God...”

Oh, beloved, this is security!

2. *We, therefore, are to be glad (v.3).*

A future guaranteed paradise (i.e. gazing at Jesus’ face forever) is to make us happy today. The Bible commands us to “set your minds on things above...” (cf. Col.3:1ff). Fix the gaze of your soul upon future reality! We will have, through belief in what God said, a gladness that fortifies us for today. Weakness, timidity, dependency, gloom, indifference, grumbling, complaining, and the like are cured by belief that God’s word is sure!

Oh, beloved, believe in the gospel!

3. *Gladness gives rise to expectant prayer (v.4).*

One of the ways we can check to see whether or not our joy is rooted in the right soil is to examine our prayer life. And not merely to see whether or not we are praying. Rather we need to examine both how and for what we are praying.

Welling up to overflowing must be passionate praying. We must be characterized by gladness that gives rise to expectant praying. We must long for an extraordinary downpour of God’s blessings; suddenly “like streams in the desert”.

Oh, beloved, let us express our gladness in God through expectant prayer.

4. *Gladness gives rise also to perseverance (Vv.5-6).*

Here is the call which comes to all today. Give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. Don't allow your business or your domestic cares or your home repairs or your school worries to eclipse discipleship and evangelism through the local church. What a waste and misfortune that would be. Yes, ministry is toiling and tearing and inconvenient. But the struggles of a life spent for the glory of God through the restoration of his church to the amazement of the nations cannot be wasted efforts. A life of self-protecting ease with hope of stress-free weekends is a wasted life. In an environment of marital strain, wayward children, recurring regret, cancer, failing health, financial trouble & terrorism weeping sowers are the only joyful reapers.

Oh, beloved, give yourself to something larger than yourself

Because our God is able.