

In a former life I was a musician, well I'm still a musician, but I went to the conservatorium here in Hobart for my undergraduate degree, where I studied contemporary classical composition. I wasn't overly talented, it takes a while – as they say – for you to find your voice, but I gave it my best shot. It was while I was doing this degree that I finally met Jesus, and there's an interesting phenomenon when you look through many of my key pieces, you can trace the emotional turmoil that I was going through in becoming a Christian.

My first semester I wrote a piece for solo cello that was called The Ocean, but the mood of the piece was like a wild offshore storm, with the cellist striding their fingers up high on the fingerboard and down to its deepest notes, giving impressions of wild waves and crashing lightning. Then in second semester I wrote a piece for Piano called "like a moth to a flame" which expressed the experience of a person being caught up in their temptations and ultimately being crushed by their guilt as it takes hold of their heart. The third piece in this lineage was called "subliminal", it musically told the story of someone in a coma who can hear someone by their bedside, but they just can't communicate back. Their melody, their emotions, never finding harmony with the rest of the piece. And in all this, resides a snapshot of my heart: the chaotic stormy anger, to the recognition of moral bankruptcy, then to this feeling of knowing there was someone or something there beyond my grasp – someone who was speaking tenderly to me, but the distress of not being able to reciprocate.

But suddenly it gives way. In my fourth semester I write a string quartet called 'Gratitude'. It was a piece about the plight of God's people, drawing on today's Psalm, 126.

It's just so clear, you can see where the songs of my heart turn inside out, moving from internal turmoil to praise and wonder. To this day my Psalm 126 meditation is the best piece of music I've ever written.

It's remarkable what art allows humanity to do that nothing else quite can, to probe the depths of our emotions, whether it's through music, poetry, sculpture, dance, and that medium revealing a window into the heart. It's this reason I find the psalms a little intimidating to preach. As you read the psalms, you're delving into the emotional and spiritual life of its author or the community they lead. A psalm is often less concerned about what you learn in the details of the words or how you might draw on them for a picture of objective reality, but more about how reality intersects with one's spiritual condition, hopes, expectations. Sometimes the psalms seem raw, a little too raw perhaps, and we recognise the emotions in ourselves and wonder how such accusing emotive language directed toward God made its way into the Bible. But the beautiful thing about the Psalms is this – the psalms come from God. It's not just human words to God, although it certainly is that. But it's also God's word to us. As we read the psalms, we have a model of what it looks like to wrestle with God in prayer, praise, lament – God has given us a playbook by which we can call out to him in our distress and in our delight.

So, I hope that today, as we walk through Psalm 126, it will be an opportunity to deepen our prayerfulness and sincerity of heart, and like I did 17 years ago, establish a foundation of joy resulting in praise.

Let's dive in.

1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.

2 Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,
"The Lord has done great things for them."

3 The Lord has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

This psalm begins with a picture of delight and thanksgiving. God has brought about a remarkable act of restoration for his people, and they are full of praise and joy. It was literally a dream come true, the unimaginable had become reality. What was it that had happened? Well, this psalm could point to many times in which God restored Israel, but this is a Psalm of ascent, and it is likely a post-exilic psalm. God's people had been in exile, removed from their home and their means of worship, their identity as a nation was shattered. But now their time of exile was over! They were returning to the land, to Zion, the city of Jerusalem, which the next generation had never seen. Many of them had only heard about their home, heard about the temple, the walls and its gates, the land of promise and covenant. Not in their wildest dreams would they get to see Jerusalem, or for the older generation, to return to see the promised land again, to rebuild the temple and restore their right worship. But now it was actually happening! As they ascended back to Jerusalem their mouths were filled with laughter, their tongues with songs of joy.

[Alpha illustration – Chilean miners

15 years ago – 33 miners

69 days

God's providence always ought to elicit praise from those he has blessed, but the word had spread and the nations around them had also marvelled at God's kindness. Of course, humanly speaking, it was the decree of Cyrus that enabled the return, but even the nations recognise the power of God in this, "The Lord has done great things for them," they say. "Yes, it's true, the Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy."

But this national expression of joy did not last. Perhaps it was the realities of returning to a desolate ruin of their city and the hard work ahead of them was setting in, perhaps it was pining for the familiarity of the Babylon, or simply the fact that many of the Israelites had not returned. Whatever it was, with these verses we now have the full picture:

4 Restore our fortunes, Lord,
like streams in the Negev.

5 Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.

6 Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.

This psalm is a lament. The opening verses are a call to remember. To dream again. To delight in the God who had restored their fortunes in the past. And as we read on we see that it is a prayer from a place of fruitlessness – asking for God to do his mighty work again. The writer is asking for a season of blessing

- like the river beds of the arid Negev region overflowing.
- Streams in the Negev come from an overabundance of rain, the writer wants God's restoration to be abundant, so there is a harvest of joy amidst their grief

[Relate something about how this is the nature of the Christian life] The songs in our heart can turn again, and we return to a place of turmoil or despair

[This Psalm encourages the Christian to also take heart, because this psalm sits in the context of the whole of God's redemption.]

The restoration of Israel to Zion was ultimately quite short lived in many ways, Jerusalem was sacked again, although they didn't go back into exile, they ultimately came under the rule of Rome.

But God's plan for restoration wasn't yet complete. They thought their restoration exceeded their wildest dreams, but God has done infinitely greater, bringing the full kingdom of heaven in Jesus.

- While foreigners spoke of the greatness of God's mercy to Israel, The gospel puts this word of praise in the mouth of the nations – God's restored fortunes are now for all people in the new covenant.
- The nations can now say with all of God's people "The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy."

You might say to me "So what, Al. Why does this matter, we know that the gospel has spread to the ends of the earth, I get that. But why is this now an encouragement for me to take heart? Why does it matter *here* to know that all the nations will be able to sing a new song of praise?"

Well, it's because we're all in some way or other exiles. We've all experienced times of separation from God, whether that's the period of our life before we dared to say, "Jesus is my Lord", or whether it's a dark night of the soul where despite our crying and our tears, echoing the words from psalm 88 – my closest friend is darkness – we just don't sense the Lord's presence.

But we look at the cross, and we can say “The Lord has done great things for us” because he’s offered [1, and 2, and 3, and 4] each and every one of us a place in his kingdom, in his family, he has reached out to us in Jesus, and when we receive that gift of wonderful grace by faith, Jesus says “I am never letting you go”. Jesus says in John’s Gospel: “All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away ... I shall lose none of all those he has given me but raise them up at the last day.”

St George’s, the Lord has done great things for us. It’s not just that Christianity has spread across the globe, but it’s that the gospel has come to Tasmania, to Hobart, to Battery Point. To you. God has done great things for you, and this is your song of joy.

And so you say to me, “Al, I get that, but where is the joy now? Of course, I received Jesus with joy when I first believed, but life just wears you down, you know?” Jesus fundamentally changed the world, and receiving peace with God is wonderful news, but the world is still a broken place. We’re still waiting for the promise of the kingdom of heaven to come in its fulness. Things might not have worked out how we had hoped, or life has had some horrible twists and turns. Many people in this room have suffered greatly. Becoming a Christian doesn’t mean the end of suffering in this life, in fact Jesus says we ought to expect it. Matthew chapter 5 makes that abundantly clear. If anything, by adopting Jesus’ outlook, we’re even more aware of the world’s brokenness, our own brokenness, and struggles.

So we need to be reminded: the Lord has done great things for us? That Jesus loves us... this gives us confidence to pray. Like this psalmist we can pray “Restore our fortunes, Lord”, let the water of everlasting life flow through my arid heart that aches for rest, that aches for justice, that aches for hope. Send your holy spirit to comfort me and to continue doing his work of restoration in me.

But this psalm knows that hard times often don’t end with a prayer. Sometimes they do, and that’s wonderful. But experience teaches us that God’s plans and purposes in our struggles don’t necessarily match up with our timelines. There is a reality to suffering that means sometimes it’s prolonged, despite our prayers, despite God’s promises. And so, this psalm invites us, to sow, to sow what we have even amidst our sorrows, that there might be a harvest of joy.

Tim Keller is so helpful on this point that I want to finish with his words, because I found it so comforting. Here’s what he says:

Your sorrows - your tears - are like seed, which when sown properly can bring you a harvest of joy. The implications of the metaphor are at least these two:

It’s possible to waste your sorrows. Imagine a farmer going out with a sack of seed and he’s supposed to be sowing all over, what if he just dumped it all in one spot. That would be a waste of seed. It wouldn’t be a harvest, there might be a few fruit that grew up right there, maybe nothing. It would be a total waste. And it’s possible therefore to grieve in such a way that doesn’t produce any fruit in your life at all. It’s possible to just dump - just weep, cry, yell and scream and basically not see any fruit in your life from it.

Secondly, the most intriguing part of this metaphor here is that your joy is produced by your sorrow. We all hope and believe that joy will follow sorrow, and there are passages of the bible that say this (psalm 35). We're very sad and we're hoping that God will bring joy in after our sadness time. But this isn't saying joy follows sorrow, but that joy is produced by the sorrow.

What can this possibly mean? Sowing seed, the sadness and grief, can make you a happier person in the long run. If you sorrow in the proper way. How can that possibly be? The answer is, what we know because we're Christians is this, if you look to Jesus, this can come true:

Jesus is the ultimate example of someone who brought joy out of sorrow. Jesus Christ literally brought us joy out of his weeping. His agony and weeping was substitutionary. He stood in our place. And therefore, when he took our punishment, his weeping was the ultimate sowing in tears, and it brought the ultimate harvest of joy. When I see him dying so I can live, going through this incredible grief and sorry so he can bring joy to the world, that enables me to sorrow in a far better way.

Why?

1. When I think of him suffering for me I won't suffer in guilt - Jesus took the punishment
2. I won't suffer in self-pity and anger, I won't say how dare God let this happen to me - I'll say wait a minute, God suffered more than I did so that one day I can live with him forever, and that gets over your self-pity and anger
3. When I see him suffering for me, I can suffer in patience, because I say, look, his disciples did not understand what was going on when he went to the cross, he said what good could God ever bring out of this, but God did of course.

So, when I see him suffering for me it makes me patient, it gets rid of my anger and self-pity, it also gets rid of any sense I might have of guilt, and you know what happens then? Then I just become patient, leaning on him, humbling myself, and when it's over, the sorrow creates a new Christ-likeness, an ability to depend on God and not my circumstances.

Jesus Christ was the ultimate example of sowing tears that reaped joy and if you watch him suffer for you, if you keep your eye on him when you suffer, your sorrows will not be wasted - they will bring long-term great joy.