

The Lord will Restore
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I picked Psalm 126 this morning for our *let's start 2019 the right way* sermon. I love the simplicity and movement found in this short psalm, but also the depth of thought for us to consider. Whatever your 2018 was like, I'm hopeful that you will be encouraged by what you hear, especially if your 2018 was difficult and challenging and you need some hope that 2019 will be better.

That might be some of us, right? Maybe you've had some nagging trouble or discouragement. Maybe you're caught in habitual sin and you're frustrated. You can remember when things were better, when things were easier, but it's been so hard lately. And you're not very hopeful. My prayer is that God will give you some hope from Psalm 126. Let's read it together (READ).

There are two main sections in this psalm. The first 3 verses are a remembrance of God's grace and restoration. The second half focuses on the present. And let's start there ourselves - let's live in the now. There's really one plea, one desire, one hope (if you will) in this entire Psalm; the psalmist is looking to God to do one thing and we find that in vs. 4. "Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams of the Negeb." The Negeb was a portion of land south of Judea where the rivers would swell up with water in the spring from the melting snow coming down from the mountains. With full streams the fields were green and fertile blooming with flowers. The writer is longing for the day when his life and the life of the people would be filled with blessing and fulfillment.

The word here translated *fortunes* actually is the OT word for captivity. So, the writer is saying, "Restore our captivity, O Lord," which I think means, "Restore what we've lost in our captivity, O Lord." "Restore, heal, give back, dear God, all that was lost, all that was taken away when we were captive and held in a foreign land."

It's so brief, but Vs. 4 gives us a snapshot of the present predicament of the author and what he's hoping for. He's empty; he's needy. He's a man (presumably) living in lack because of some sort of recent captivity; he is lost and wounded by the unfortunate season of struggle and he's praying to God, "Lord, please, restore my fortunes; heal the wounds that I've received; give back what I've lost. I want my heart and soul to be satisfied and full so I can be fruitful and effective again."

Can you relate, FBC? Is that you? Could we just feel that for a moment? Let's empathize with the writer; let's feel his longing and even weep with him over his regret and sadness. But it's not too hard relating to this either, right? I would bet some of you could look back on 2018 and you can see your own loss from being captive to sin, too. Marriage was hard this year. Maybe you had a tough financial year and there were a lot of troubles that went with it; you

didn't respond with faith in God's promises, but fear got the best of you and you were filled with anxiety and responded sinfully. Maybe you've been lonely and you regret some of the choices you made out of your sadness. So, what should we do? What did the Psalmist do?

Well, he's crying out to God for help, right? "Restore our fortunes, O Lord," is a prayer. That's a good place to start. We shouldn't breeze past that too quickly. How many times do you get yourself in a pickle, but don't cry out to God for help? I hate to admit it, but I do that all the time. I don't cry out because I'm ashamed; I don't pray because I'm proud; I don't plead to God because I haven't despaired of my resourcefulness or my own wisdom quite yet. How silly! So, our own prayers and calls to God is where we should start. That is a way we fight the good fight of faith.

But the psalmist does more. In fact, this passage highlights at least two more ways in which the psalmist tries to cultivate faith in God. He's working for his faith, isn't he? He's not just kicking back in his spiritual lazy boy waiting for God to do something; he's acting faithfully with the hopes that God will move with power. And since it's faith in God's power he gets the glory, not the psalmist. It reminds me of the passage in Philippians where Paul says, "work out your salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who is at work within you." Work, Christian, but know it's God working in you. When you look to God for help, when you study his words, when you remember his promises, when you obey God's word in faith that's God working in you. And the psalmist, with God's grace and power, is cultivating his own faith so that he has confidence and hope that God will restore his fortunes in his season of captivity. Let's see what he does.

The first thing the Psalmist did was remind himself of how God has restored him in the past. That's what vs. 1-3 are all about. He remembers what God has already done for him; he remembers how God has delivered him before. Look how he starts doing that in vs. 1, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream." Do you see? When God worked it was like a dream. Wow! That's quite amazing; he's recalling a glorious working of God in his past. And he's talking our language, right? We love dreams. And by dreams the writer is thinking of something wonderful; a longing and a heart fulfilled. Think a happy ending to a movie with the musical score crescendoing and all the movie goers wiping away happy tears because something so wonderful happened.

In vs. 2, when psalmist remembers how God restored his fortunes before, he says, "our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy." I love how he's uses plural pronouns. *Our* mouths.... *Our* tongue. He's enjoying these blessings with others, right? Celebrations are always done best with others. When teams win the state championship they don't all dance and cheer alone; no, they huddle up, hug each other and celebrate together.

This blessing from God is noticeable by others. The second half of this verse says, "then they said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.'" The past work of God was so great that others noticed it, too. And the Lord is the one who has done it; vs. 3 says that and says, "The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad."

God is encouraging us in this passage to leverage the work he has already done to build and to encourage our faith today in his future grace. God has worked before; he has done marvelous things. And remember how glad we were? Do you remember how the evidence of God's grace was so obvious that even our neighbors commented on his provision? When we do that together our hope and confidence in God working again goes up. Friends, one of the ways you can cultivate and develop hope for your 2019 is by remembering how God has worked in your life, in our lives together, in the past.

Think about a time, friends - right now - when God worked in your life. What was it for you? Was it during a time of sickness where he didn't just bring comfort and healing, but more importantly, he deepened and strengthened your faith in his promises? Or maybe it was when you were lonely and he brought you forever friendships in Christ.

I think our move to this new facility will be one of those moments we can look back to as a church family. We can now to say to one another, "Remember when we gathered on that commitment Sunday at the HS in May of 2015 and together we made pledges and sacrifices of giving for the next 3 years. Do you remember how none of us thought we could raise the needed funds, but God did it! And then the money actually came in; together we all remained faithful to God in giving. And now, we actually can serve more people just like we hoped and prayed." And then we can say, "And God exceeded our expectations by letting us keep our old building for our Youth Center!" We can say what the psalmist said at the end of vs 3, "The Lord has done great things; we are glad!"

Now, sometimes, our memory can get a little foggy about God's work. Especially when we are discouraged, it can be hard even remembering what God has done; we can doubt. But even when that happens, we can go back to the most important, the most joyful work God has ever accomplished for us. His rescue of our souls. Friends, the most important work you can ever remember is God delivering you from the powers of darkness and ushering you into the kingdom of his beloved son. Nothing is more amazing; nothing is more miraculous. Friends, really, train your mind with the Word of God so you see and believe that God has never been better to you and he has never done anything more amazing than causing you to be born again to a living hope. When God made you alive with him by canceling the record of all the sins you've committed with your words, with your thoughts, with your actions and cancelling sins legal demands he performed the greatest miracle in the universe for you. As a blood bought follower of Jesus you are a walking memorial of God's amazing and lavish grace. Do you know this is exactly what Paul is doing in Romans 8:32; he says, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" Didn't God already give you his son? And if he gave you his son, don't you think he will give you everything else you need? Of course he will, my good brothers and sisters. Be encouraged!

But the psalmist is cultivating faith another way in the second half of this passage. The key is found in vs. 5-6 so let's read them again (READ). So, we're back living in the now and the

psalmist is acutely aware of his suffering. He talks about his sorrow and tears. Notice how he's confident though. Those who sow in tears *shall reap with shouts of joy!* He says the same thing in vs. 6; those weeping shall come home with shouts of joy bringing his harvest. But, and here's what I want to talk to you about, his anticipated joy was going to follow the painful sowing and planting in grief.

Appreciating the fear, the anxiety, and the sorrow of the images or metaphors in this passage is hard for us to do. Most of us have been spared from life-ending drought. Imagine: it's planting season, but the ground is so dusty and dry you just can't imagine anything will grow this year. But if you don't plant there will be no harvest. And without a harvest, your family will die of starvation. But the seeds you hold in your hand could feed you and your family for another month or so prolonging your life, but dashing any hope for a future. You could pack your bags and head for a new land, but that's going to be a long, difficult journey and starting over feels just as scary as planting these last few seeds into a dry earth. What in the world do you do?

Vs. 6 says, "He who goes out weeping, bearing seed for the sowing..." Jesus (and science) said, "Unless a grain of wheat (a seed) falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Here's what I'm thinking: some of you are holding the remnants of your captivity in the palm of your hand not wanting to let it go. You don't want to let your hopes go, your dreams go. 2018 was supposed to be different; it was supposed to look like... this (whatever this is). Or maybe it's not 2018, maybe it's your marriage, your family, your friendships. You're not supposed to still be single; you're not supposed to be widowed; you're not supposed to still be sick. So, you have this picture, this remnant, this dream of what could have been and what should have been in the palm of your hands, but it's dead and you won't let it go. But here's the deal: the longer you keep holding on you stay in captivity.

The psalmist understood that to see the restoration he was hoping and praying for, he had to let go of his seed. He had to put the last remaining seed, as dead as it was, in the ground with the hope and promise that God would bring new life from it. I've already been hinting at this, but let me say it another way: God has woven into the fabric of this very world that life comes from death. The very food we eat is a reminder to us of this very thing. We only have a harvest because we put a dead seed in the ground with the hope of fruit and produce. We must do the same thing with our lives.

Our master, Jesus, goes on to say from what I quoted earlier this: "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Do you see the connection? Our inability to let go of that grain of wheat, that seed, is really an unwillingness to let go of our very lives. Our dream of marriage or our future or our status is really just an extension of the love for our own lives that must die.

Can I ask you to think about something? What is it that you might be holding onto that's keeping you from experiencing the restoration that the Lord promises to all his sowers? What seed are you struggling to let go of? I get it; to let go is painful. To say goodbye to hopes and

dreams and aspirations is a hard thing to do. But those are the very things keeping you in captivity. Sometimes, the only thing to do is stand at the side of a grave and weep over what's died. But you can weep with faith knowing and believing that God will bring life. Remind yourself of the psalmist's trust in God and ask the Lord to give you that trust, too. Pray those words: I will reap with shouts of joy; I will come home with bundles of grain and harvest on my shoulders and we will be glad in the Lord again.

Key text: Psalm 126:4

Questions for the week

- Can you relate to the psalmist's desire and prayer? What restoration are you eager for?
- Do you see how remembering God's grace in the past can serve and strengthen your faith? what things can you remember God doing that inspires you?
- What do you need to die to and mourn to see a restored future?