

Praise, Prayer and Promise

Three things that this psalm teaches us about harvest:

Firstly - Praise for the past

When the announcement reached the Jewish communities in exile that they were free to go back home, the people were electrified and ecstatic.

The Persian King Cyrus had decreed that the captives could return to the land. It seemed almost too good to be true.

During the long years in exile, many of them had wondered if they would ever see Jerusalem again.

But now at last news had come.

As they gathered their few pitiful belongings together, they were like people walking around in a trance.

They said, *we were like those who dreamed.*

For the first time in about 70 years they had something to rejoice in. But 70 years is a long time and the people who returned would have been very different from those who had left; many would have been born in captivity and they would have heard all about the glory of the land that they had left.

They were going home to their roots, to the country of their parents and forefathers; brought up in ancient stories of days gone by – Abraham, Moses, David and the likes.

As their preparations moved into high gear they begin to laugh and sing – something new was happening for them.

It was also a witness to the non-Jewish people, as they watched from a distance.

Why were these people so happy?

It was said among the nations – *the Lord has done great things for them.*

The nations observed, and saw a miracle unfolding as the Jews returned again to their own land. They acknowledged that the God of the Hebrews had helped His people – and the Jewish people also responded, saying that the Lord had done great things for them.

But they were going back poor and pathetic people, back to a land that was desolate, and the walls were broken down, and the Temple had been destroyed, and they had a huge challenge in front of them.

Their needs were great: they needed manpower, finances and protection. They needed a leader, and up stepped Nehemiah, the great wall builder, one who had

excelled in Babylon and who had won the favour of King Cyrus. Up stepped Ezra the prophet, who brought the Spirit of the Lord back to the Temple through his Word.

This was a time for counting their blessings – looking back and seeing God's deliverance.

Psalm 126 was composed to reflect this time and it would have been used for centuries to come, finding its fulfilment in Jesus as he neared Jerusalem, and he would have sung these very words.

It's wonderful to look back and count our blessings. To look back and see what God has done in our lives.

The Christian faith is a faith that is expressed in song. We have much to praise God for, and when we look back our hearts can be full of praise.

They said, *the Lord has done great things for us, and we have been filled with joy.*

Perhaps we've been there – when we've won a battle over an illness, when we've overcome a challenge in life, and we look back and we can see the Lord's hand in it and we can surely say, *The Lord has done great things for us and we are filled with joy.*

We don't say it enough, and today, as we remember harvest – this is a time when we can say thank you to God for all our blessings.

The hallmark of a Christian is to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and it comes as no accident that the second fruit of the spirit mentioned by the Apostle Paul is Joy.

Today, friends, as we look back to our past, let us be thankful to God for his deliverance, and for his hand upon us on our journey, and allow Him to fill our hearts with joy.

For the Christian must always look back to the cross, for on the cross God has won the decisive victory for us, and we can celebrate and be grateful and say – *The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.*

Can you say that with me today?

Prayer for the present

But this psalm just doesn't stay or live in the past and neither should we. Life is not static but life is a journey, and goes on, and we can't live in past blessings, but we must live in the present and face the challenges that the present brings to us.

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

They had returned to a land of need. There was no milk and honey, there were barren unploughed fields, all around them was despair. The land their fathers had left some 70 years earlier, was a bare shadow of what they now experience.

The south, the Negev, was the desert area and that was arid and barren. But after heavy rains, the dry waterbeds became a torrent, streams appeared on the wilderness and the wilderness blossomed again. The writer of the psalm knew this and so he prayed...

Lord restore our fortunes like streams in the Negev.

So, the returning exiles pray that what is now only a trickle of people may become a river, until all twelve tribes have been brought back to Israel.

Their prayer was simple, honest and poignant – *Restore us Lord, like the Negev.*

In other words, flood us with your presence, drench us with your spirit, fall upon us Holy Spirit and renew us and revisit us again, don't forget us.

You've taken us home – now restore our fortunes...bring your blessing to us.

They ask for everything necessary to rebuild their land and community.

It's a great prayer for us also, at this devastating time for our nation. Lord restore to us again...Help us to blossom and be fruitful...a prayer for the church today also, as we see such decline and disinterest in our Western nations.

The Israelites pray not just for a shower of blessing but they are praying for heavy rain. In the rainy season the desert is transformed – what a vision for us individually, collectively, nationally and internationally.

Lord revive your church, pour your spirit upon us today and start with me!

Yes, they looked back and saw what God had done in the past, now is the time to look forward, and to pray and trust that God is able to do it in the present.

What about us?

Are we being challenged at the moment? What are the main concerns that we have?

Well, this teaches us to look back and to be filled with joy, but also to be hopeful that the God, who helped us in the past, is still with us, and we can bring our prayers to him and plead with Him to fill us afresh with his spirit.

*The final two verses are about **Promise for the future.***

The first year after they returned home, life would be very difficult. There would be no crops to harvest right away. The ground would need to be ploughed after 70 years of lying wasted. They would have to make a fresh start by planting their crops and waiting for harvest time. It would be a period of austerity, of rationing food.

Life would be challenging and back-breaking as the ground is dug over and seeds planted in hope of a harvest. There would be tears, tears of fear, if the harvest fails then they die; tears from hard work of perseverance and persistence.

Picture the father who has returned to his home land with his young wife and children... he can use the little grain that he has gleaned to feed his family now, or he can scatter it and plant it, with the hope that a harvest would grow – it's a tough decision – live for the moment, or plan for the future.

He decides to plan for the future and sow the seed, but as he dips his hand into the apron and scatters the seed over the ploughed land, his tears fall into his apron as he thinks about his children and wife and of the meagre bowls of oats that they will live off for at least the next six months until harvest.

How sacrificially they will have to live until the harvest time. He feels as if he is taking food out of his children's mouths. He was sowing with genuine tears. He was weeping as he carried seed to sow.

But at the same time, he is a man of great faith in his God, because he knows that a time will come when he will return with songs of joy, as he carries sheaves home with him.

This picture in his mind keeps him going.

This is a great psalm of faith. It begins with songs of joy when they leave Babylon to return home, and it ends with songs of joy as the first crop is brought into the barns. But in between are times of uncertainty and prayer, and faith and tears and challenge, but God brings them through this sadness to that place of joy again.

This psalm has been interpreted to speak also into our spiritual lives. Those who live sacrificially for the sake of the gospel. Those who are hungry for the word of life. They may endure present suffering and struggles but they have the belief that their joy will be fulfilled when they see a great harvest of people coming to faith in his church.

So, this psalm teaches us three things about Harvest.

Praise God for past blessings

Pray to God for the present to restore our fortunes

Trust in God's Promise for the future, that all things will work out to the good, for those who trust in God.