

Those Were the Days

Text: Psalm 126

I love a good news story.

I read one in the paper during the week.

Article on Russian couple

married for 3 days, separated for 60 years, finding each other again.

What a joyous reunion that would have been.

I can't begin to imagine how they would have felt.

That indescribable joy is something that comes out in the first half of this psalm we are looking at this morning.

Psalm 126 is the 7th of 15, what are called, Psalms of Ascent.

The Psalms of Ascents go from Ps120-134.

They were sung by pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem for the various feast days.

It is thought that there were stops along the way for rest and refreshment.

While there they would sing one these psalms in worship.

It breaks evenly into two parts:

Verses 1-3 are a reflection...looking back...

a reminder of the Lord's past work.

Verses 4-6 are an anticipation...looking forward...

expecting God to do something amazing again.

It begins with a scene of nearly delirious joy and praise,

A scene from Israel's past...

when the people were released from their Babylonian captivity
and returned to Jerusalem.

The second half jumps to the age in which the Psalm was written,

a time of difficult, unrewarding labour and even weeping.

While it describes the hard times...

it also contains a prayer for, and prophecy of, better days ahead.

It is hard for us to appreciate the opening verses because not many of us have experienced anything quite like this homecoming.

These ecstatic people had been released from 70 long years of captivity
and returned to their homeland.

They were so overwhelmed by this sudden change of fortune...

it was like they were walking in a dream.

It seemed too good to be true.

They were saying to each other... 'Is this a dream?' 'Please don't wake me.'

I think that those who lived in Holland during the Second World War would have a better understanding of it than us in the younger generation.

I have read and heard the stories of jubilant celebration when the liberating armies moved through the villages.

Singing and dancing, joy in the heart.

So full were the Israelites with joy that they could not contain themselves.

They just had to express their joy...yet couldn't find ways to do that.

The only expression that suited was...laughter!

It couldn't be done with words.

See it with people when they get great news in the mail (getting the dream job).

Yahoo! Dancing around.

Not only laughter...but also singing...songs of praise...full of joy.

I want to challenge you with a thought...are you seen as a joy-filled Christian?

I'm not a Simpsons fan...but I know enough about it to know that Ned Flanders is portrayed as the joy destroying Christian in the show.

God deserves our praise for setting us free and changing our lives.

We should remember where we were when the Lord found us...

That he has delivered us from our lost place.

These Israelites were so filled with awe at what God had done in his power, for his glory...

They simply couldn't hold back their praises.

What a lesson for us!

We have been delivered from death and Hell by the grace of God.

Our names have been written down in glory.

We are children of the living God!

We have a reason to rejoice.

Are you filled with praise to God, are you quick to tell of his goodness, grace and salvation?

I love it when I visit people and they share the goodness of God in their lives...

Even when they face tough times.

Verse 2 even tells us that the nations around them were amazed at what they saw and heard.

They knew the Lord was with these people.

Reminds me of the time the Israelites were preparing to enter the Promised Land for second time.

Spies had been sent in to Jericho to check out the situation.

They were hiding with Rahab.

^{Jos 2:9} and said to them, “I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you.

^{Jos 2:10} We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed.

^{Jos 2:11} When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

Exceptional joy doesn’t last long.

It won’t last because life is always a combination of ecstasy and agony,
good times and bad times, joy and suffering.

Ask anyone who attended *the Gathering* the other week.

The joy fades as the reality of everyday life strikes.

The joy didn’t last long for the psalmist and his generation either.

The first 3 verses are about the return of the Jews from Babylon,
And we know from Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai & Zechariah just how difficult that rebuilding task was.

The work on the temple was started when they excitedly laid the foundations...then they stopped.

This second temple was so inferior to the original that the older Jews wept at the sight of the new temple.

Those wonderful days of return were followed by many days of dark discouragement and hard work.

We can all relate to times when joy seems to dry up.

Not just the joy of youth, as you grow older and slower.

But what about spiritual times...when that joy dries up.

The joy in the Christian life so easily dries up...

And we start acting like Ned Flanders.

James Boice talks about four joys that are commonly lost by Christians.

1. The joy of salvation.

This loss is nearly universal for those who have been believers for a long time. Once the initial joy passes, it should be replaced by a more settled but equally valuable attitude of quiet trust.

But for some people, the joy is replaced by doubt and uncertainty,
to the point where you wonder if you are saved at all.

This loss of joy doesn't mean the person is not a Christian,
but it is still a difficult experience to live through.

It is a real joy killer.

2. Christians can loose the joy of spiritual victory.

This joy is experienced when overcome a specific sin you are struggling against. When God points out a sin in our lives...and suddenly there is a breakthrough.

The unforgiven grudge against someone, the addiction to drugs or alcohol, broken family relationships, issues of lust or greed etc.

There is joy when you see God working powerfully in some area of your life,
making you more like Jesus Christ.

But the joy vaporizes when you come up against another sin to deal with.

3. The joy of Christian Fellowship

This is a wonderful thing that can be lost in a number of ways.

The person closest to us may die, relationships may be broken because of the attitudes of the heart.

It may change because you move...jobs, home, state.

4. The joy of a new work for God.

You probably know the joy of taking on a new challenge, starting a new project. But the excitement of new beginnings settles down into the mechanics of hard work, slugging it out in the trenches.

This was the experience of the Jews...

the excitement of the return replaced by the hard slog of rebuilding.

Joy turns to despair and longing.

For the psalmist the memories of the past could have become just mere nostalgia.

Those were the days we say.

They were the good times...they were wonderful, but they are gone forever.

But in Ps 126 the memory of those joy-filled days of singing and laughter aren't just nostalgia.

They become the basis for a strong hope of even better days to come.

It was not wishful thinking...

But solidly based on the character of God.
God is good...that goodness is unchanging!
He has granted wonderful joy in the past...
So he can be counted on to do that again.

So after remembering those great days...

Instead of settling down to the dreary present he asks God to restore those good times again.

He prayerfully asks for what is good and glorifying to God.
Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev (v4)

The Negev is a desert.

It has deep gullies that are dried up former streams...Parched, barren, and hot.
At those times when the winter rain falls on the highlands to the north...

The water descends from the hills and rushes to fill the barren wadis with clean refreshing, water.

The Psalmists life feels like a dry desert...

He wants (expects) God to send the refreshing into his life, and the life of the nation.

The psalmist looks to a time of joy to come. (v5-6).

People looking up from the difficulties of their present situation, expecting blessing from God.

The harvest always only comes after a long period of hard work and waiting.

This is a dose of spiritual reality.

While God does work suddenly and without work on our part...

In most situations in life, the rewards only come after much hard work,
even when we know that God is the source of blessing.

This image of sowing and reaping brings in mind the parable of the sower from Jesus.

The thing about that parable is that only a portion the teaching sown takes root and produces a crop.

But a portion does take root and produce fruit.

So don't despair, don't give up...

Even if the labour is hard and the days are long and hot.

God is the Lord of the harvest.

Of course our labour will be hard, we live in a hard and sinful world.

But the one who sows in tears WILL reap with songs of joy.

The one who goes out weeping WILL return carrying sheaves.

Is there anything to compare to our joy in heaven when we stand before the Lord with those who have been saved through our faithful sharing and teaching from God's word?

Dr Leavell, great American preacher and teacher in the 1950s tells of a night after a time of preaching in one place.

While standing around talking to some people after the last night in the town he noticed out of the corner of his eye a young women standing there wanting to talk with him.

She had two small children with her.

After the others had left she came over to speak with him.

She said, "Dr. Leavell, I have come many miles to be here tonight."

This was back in the fifties before there were many four-lane highways and interstates.

Obviously it had taken her a long time to get there.

Dr. Leavell said, "You mean you came all this way just to hear me preach?"

She said, "Oh no, I came here just to tell you something."

He said, "You came all the way here just to tell me something?"

She said, "Yes." He said, "What is it?"

She said, "Dr. Leavell, over twenty-five years ago I was just a nine year old little girl in the Delta of Mississippi, and I lived alone with my mother in a little one-room shanty not far from town. One night there was a knock on the door and there stood the pastor of the church with a tall man in black.

Well, they came in and that man sat down on our dirty floor right beside me, pulled out a little Bible from his pocket and opened it and told me about the Lord Jesus Christ.

She said, "I bowed my head in that little house and I asked Jesus to come into my heart. That night my mother and I went down to that church and joined the church and I and my life has never been the same."

Dr. Leavell said, "Well, that is a wonderful story, but what does that have to do with me?"

At that point, tears began to well up in the eyes of this young lady.

She said, "Dr. Leavell, you were that man in that black suit, and I drove all this way just to thank you for telling me about Jesus."

At that point tears began to roll down Dr. Leavell's cheeks.

He said with quivering lips and a cracking voice, "Honey, would you do me just one favor?"

She said, "Dr. Leavell, I will do anything you ask me to do."

He said, "When you get to heaven will you tell Jesus what you just told me?"

She said, "Yes, I will." He said, "That will be heaven enough for me."

Conclusion

So what great things has God done for us?

We may not have been chained and dragged off to another country...

But we are slaves to sin.

God says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

That's the bad news.

The good new is that God has turned our sorrow into joy.

He has delivered us from captivity.

The captives in Babylon couldn't save themselves...

So God freed them and brought them home.

We are captives to sin and can't free ourselves.

But God can and did...

He sent Jesus Christ to do the work and to lead us home.

He destroyed the chains that hold us as he hung on the cross.

He leads us back in to the presence of God...

What joy that brings to our hearts...

That's why we sing songs like 'When I survey the wondrous cross'.

There are new songs of joy and praise in our hearts.

So what should we do?

Remember and praise God for the past.

Israel's restored fortunes were proof of God's faithfulness.

The work of Christ is our proof of God's faithfulness.

Remember the gracious way he has dealt with us in the past.

Remember the freedom you have in Christ.

And pray...

Pray that God will restore the joy of your salvation.

Pray that God will restore the joy of fellowship.

Pray that God will restore the fortunes of this church.

I have heard many people talk about the good old days of Dandenong...

Like it is past and only a memory.

Pray that God will restore the fortunes...

He has done it in the past...he will do it again.

Pray that the seeds of the gospel you plant, we plant, will reap a harvest of joy...

Even if they are sown in tears and hard work.

So remember the past, be encouraged by it and keep working.

The Lord who gives us the work to do...also sends the harvest.