

3. Springs of faith

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[0 : 00] Now let's pray together. We rest in you, our shield and our defender.

Lord God, you are good and generous. From you come everything that we have, everything that we love, everything that we have ever had or have now or ever hope for.

We want to take a moment to thank you for those blessings that you pour into our lives. For loved ones, for friends, for homes, for companions on the journey, for food, for shelter, for all the many things that make life full and enjoyable.

We want to praise you. And we praise you too, Lord, that you have called us for these moments to listen to your word. Help us to listen with care, with open ears to that word.

Help us to understand it. Help us to catch something of the wonder. This is not just an ancient word spoken many centuries ago. But this is a living word, spoken not just to your people of long ago, but to your people now.

[1 : 16] As we have sung, we go in faith, our own great weakness feeling, and needing more each day, your grace to know.

Father, how we need your grace. We are sinful. And we ask your forgiveness for our many sins. For our sins of rashness and brashness.

And for our sins of cowardly silences and failure to be strong. And we thank you that ultimately we will not reach the goal by our own determination, by our own wit and wisdom, but solely by your grace.

Yours is the battle. Yours shall be the praise. As we meet here, we remember that we are surrounded by need. The world is full of sadness.

We give you thanks for all the many blessings we enjoy. We want to remember those, perhaps even in this room, who are finding it hard to thank you. We are finding it difficult to find anything in their lives that causes them joy.

[2 : 27] And we remember the fallenness and the brokenness of the world. And we thank you that one day you will introduce a new creation where there will be righteous, and when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

We ask as we pause for these moments that you will indeed strengthen us. That you will indeed speak to our hearts. That our hearts may burn within us.

That you will speak to our minds. And you will open our eyes. That you will then send us out into the world, strengthened and encouraged, and more ready to spread that glorious gospel which you have given us.

And we praise you with all our hearts. In the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

And now if we come to our reading, which is on page 517 in the Bibles.

We are reading once again three of these songs of ascent. As I said of the first session, these songs of ascent begin in what is called Meshech and Kedar in Psalm 120, which is about the limits of the geographical horizon of the Samus.

[3 : 49] In other words, they begin just where we are, and the end in Zion, the city of God. And each group of three follows that same pattern in a slightly different way.

And so it is here again. So Psalm 126, a song of ascent. When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongues with shouts of joy. Then they said among the nations, The Lord has done great things for them.

The Lord has done great things for us. We are glad. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy.

He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. Then the next psalm, which is a psalm of Solomon this time. [4 : 52] One of the two psalms in the Psalter attributed to the king. Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil, for he gives to his beloved sleep. Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb, a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them. He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. Finally, Psalm 128. Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways. You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands.

You shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house. Your children will be like olive shoots around your table.

[6 : 00] Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord. The Lord bless you from Zion. May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.

May you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel. Amen. That is the word of the Lord, and may he bless it to us. Now, if you travel by train fairly regularly, you'll be familiar with the words spoken at many stations, mind the gap.

The gap, of course, between the train and the platform. Now, that phrase, mind the gap, is very appropriate often for our Christian experience, and our Christian pilgrimage.

Because very often there is a gap, and if we don't mind it, we'll fall into it. One side of the gap is what God has said in his word. Things like, Thus shall a man be blessed who fears the Lord.

May you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel. And so on. These great promises. But, these great promises, we often run into circumstances, where they don't seem to be true, don't we?

[7 : 19] In other words, there's a gap between what we believe and our actual experience. And unless we come to terms with that, we are going to be utterly disillusioned and disappointed in our Christian life.

How do the promises match the experiences? And that's the point I want to begin at. Because one of the things I said about this group of Psalms is they're realistic songs.

They don't pretend pilgrimage is easy. But the other thing is they are reassuring songs. They tell us the gap is there often, but they tell us how to bridge the gap by showing us that the great promises of God, even though they appear often not to be fulfilled, these promises are ultimately true.

These promises are ultimately reliable. Now, last week, we looked at the difficulties of pilgrimage. We looked at the way in which pilgrimage so often becomes a terrible grind and so often becomes an effort, simply putting one foot in front of the other.

Here, we are going to look at the resources for pilgrimage. What does God give us to help us to bridge the gap, so to speak? That's why I've called this the springs of faith.

[8 : 39] If you like, the living water that bubbles up in the desert. This comes right at the beginning of the Psalter, Psalm 1, the blessed person who is planted like a tree beside the water.

In Psalm 23, we get it again, he leads me beside the still waters. So, how do we get the springs of faith to keep going? Where are our resources to come from?

See, once again, they don't come from ourselves. They come from God. And these three Psalms tell us three great resources that God gives us. I'm going particularly to talk about Psalm 126, the first Psalm we read, and then very briefly mention 127 and 128.

The springs of faith. Now, first of all, Psalm 126, which tells us that God brings new life. That's what the subject of this Psalm is.

God brings new life. God gives us springs in the desert. When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. A sense of wonder here, isn't there?

[9 : 46] We know this in our own lives. Unexpected good things suddenly come in and flood us with joy. Getting a job you didn't expect to get.

Sudden recovery, if you like, from a serious illness. Or perhaps especially finding someone you love whom you discover with great joy actually loves you.

This is the kind of experience that's mentioned here. Probably, historically, this comes from the return from exile, God's people in Babylon, and then returning to Jerusalem.

Now, if you read the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, you'll discover that joy didn't last very long. Not because God had let them down, but because they became disillusioned with their circumstances. But there are two parts to this Psalm. And the two parts don't seem to hang together very well. So, mind the gap between verses 3 and 4, so to speak.

[10:46] Because verses 1 to 3 is about laughter, but verses 4 to 6 is about tears. There is a definite gap here, and a fairly nasty one.

So let's look then at these two sections. First of all, laughter. The great acts of God. The Lord has done great things for them, say the other people, and then the people themselves join in praise. The Lord has done great things for us. We are glad. We are jumping with joy. Probably, a church in Uganda would more warm to this than a church in the Western Isles.

But there are different ways of showing gladness, and so on. Apologies to anyone from Stornoway. The great acts of God.

Probably here, the return from exile. But read the book of Acts, the surging life of the infant church. The way in which story after story tells us of the blessing of God.

[11:48] The word of God growing, multitudes being converted. Read church history, and often you'll find such stories. There are times, in other words, when climbing is easy.

When the climber feels that you can climb forever. And that, of course, is the grace of God. I want you to notice two things, though. This is entirely the work of the Lord himself.

You don't organize a revival. That's a work of the Holy Spirit. Notice the word dream. We were like those who dream.

You might as well have been asleep, because God did it himself. God worked, even when his people seemed moribund and dead. And that has happened so often in the past.

Bishop Butler, a good and godly man, living in the 18th century, is a time when spiritual life in this country had sunk, probably even lower than it is now.

[12:54] And he wrote in his journal, I will never have a successor, because the church in England, no power on earth, can save. He was absolutely right, of course, in saying that.

Here's some 18 months after that journal entry that John Wesley sat in Aldersgate, and his heart was strangely warmed hearing an exposition of Romans.

God laid his hand on the Wesley brothers, on Whitefield and on others, and in a few short years, revival was sweeping through large parts of this country, of America, and parts of Europe.

It was totally a work of the covenant Lord, mouth filled with laughter, tongues with shouts of joy, and of course, Wesley's great hymns are one of the manifestations of this.

Because so often, when God the Holy Spirit is moving, one of the ways in which he's manifested is by glorious hymn writing, like some of Charles Wesley's hymns. Because that's the second thing it leads to praise.

[13:53] Verse 3, is a song of praise. The Lord has done great things for us. We are glad. You'll notice that they said among the nations in the previous verse, there didn't need to be any spin-doctoring and publicity.

When God is at work, people notice. Because the power of God is something that cannot be ignored. Now, of course, when we talk like this, it's instantly there's a problem, isn't there?

There's always jam yesterday. There's always jam tomorrow. There's never jam today. That's the problem. And by the way, it can be very discouraging reading accounts of revival.

Very discouraging reading accounts of Christian triumphs and then looking around us. Because that's not the point of Christian biography or church history. The point is not to say that happened then, so it must happen now.

The point is, it is God who brings new life. We cannot possibly say God will bring great revival in the lifetime of anyone in this room.

[14:58] We cannot possibly mandate God. But since God is God, we are like those who dream God can and will do such things whenever he pleases. That's the first part of the psalm, the rejoicing at the mighty acts of God.

But the second part of the psalm brings us back with a jolt, doesn't it? Restore our fortunes, O Lord. He has restored the fortunes, but the prayer is the same.

Like streams in the Negev. Now the Negev was the barren, stony land south of Jerusalem, not desert in the sense like the Sahara Desert, a sandy waste, but rather a bleak, desolate land of chasms and ravines and stony territory.

The scene of many of Abraham's wanderings, incidentally. There are times in the equivalent of the Negev when we wonder if pilgrimage, if journey is worthwhile.

There is no sign of new life. There is no sign of living water. Restore our fortunes like streams. We need streams bursting out in the barren land.

[16:10] We need the river of God's grace. Now what are we to do? I want you to notice two things here again. First of all, there is still life-giving water.

It's a very different kind of water. Look at verse 6. He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing. There is life-giving water, but it is the tears of the sower.

Not the sudden burst of life. It is the tears of the sower at slow and discouraging times. We all know these times, don't we?

We pray and it doesn't seem to be answered. We tell people about the Lord. They don't come to Christ. They don't even come to the church. Life so often seems like sowing on barren ground. So the life-giving water there is the persistence, the tears, the commitment of the sower. Because that means a certainty of harvest shall come home with shouts of joy, bearing his sheaves with him.

[17:11] Now very clearly that does not mean as I've said that in any given person's life or in any given generation of the church there will inevitably be great revival and pouring out of God's spirit.

But it does mean that sowing will eventually be rewarded by reaping. Very often it's the tears and prayers and sowing of one generation that leads to the great blessing in the next generation.

Now, naturally we don't like that. We want to be the people who lead the vanguard of the... Don't we? We want to be in the history books as those who have turned back godlessness and so on.

It's not like that. We keep on... Our task is to keep on sowing. We have no responsibility for the harvest. That's holy God's work. Sometimes it may happen to people in this room sometimes God gives a great privilege of being involved in a time of reaping.

But the time of reaping may come after you've gone. I was reading biography of Judson who went to evangelise the Negev or in his case Burma seeing hardly any blessing at all.

[18:23] This is what he wrote. We sow on Burma's barren strand in the Negev. We reap on Zion's hill. In other words the results of the sowing will only be seen at the journey's end.

So that's the first thing. God gives new life. Very briefly two illustrations of that new life in the next two Psalms. 127 God gives security.

Once again of course not the security that means there'll never be any problems. You see two main... Where do we live our lives? Where do we if you like what areas of life are we climbing on the pilgrimage in?

There are two areas. There is the city and there is the home. In other words our public lives and our private lives these well-known words unless the Lord builds a house those who build it labour in vain.

This of course is not advocating we sit back and do nothing. Vain you rise early and go to bed late to rest he gives his beloved sleep.

[19:30] I often think when I'm tossing and turning at three o'clock in the morning I can't be one of his beloved. It's nothing really to do with that. It has to do with the fact that all our work must be done solely in the energy of God himself.

Phrenetic activity without the Lord's blessing will achieve nothing. This word in vain an Old Testament word meaning empty worthless the word of Ecclesiastes nothing will be achieved simply by frenetic activity and neither in the city nor in our homes but God God guards God gives and he builds for the future that's the point of this and then that's developed in the third psalm God gives new life God gives security finally God gives prosperity now this is not the prosperity gospel which is a dangerous delusion the idea if you love God and follow him everything will go well two cars in the drive big bank balance villa in whatever you want to have a villa in you may not like the same places as me and fill in the slot yourself none of these things may happen but none of them are a sign of God's blessing nor is the absence of them a sign of God's curse the point is this is the final assessment of God on the pilgrims to Zion you shall be blessed blessed does not mean happy primarily you could be feeling very happy and under the judgment of God you could be feeling utterly miserable and still blessed blessed is God's final verdict blessed is what

God says on the arrival in Zion see family life is a gift even in the fallen world in the Christian world in particular we love to make gifts into problems don't we think of a number of conferences and books written on family life and they we know of course in the fallen world families can bring great

problems as well as great joys but family life is a gift and also family life is rooted in God's faithfulness may you see your children's children in other words the presence of God the promises of God carrying on through the generations God gives new life God gives security prosperity God gives prosperity the journey in other words has a destination and the climb is worth it Amen let's pray Lord God whether we are rejoicing at the moment like the streams flowing in the desert or whether we are utterly cast down and depressed whether the climb is easy or difficult or even if we haven't begun the climb we pray that these great words will speak to us today a particular assurance that he who goes out weeping bearing the seeds for sowing shall come home with shouts of joy bringing his sheaves with him we ask all this in Jesus name Amen I to He to