

# Gospel Work: The Tears and The Joys

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, now we come to our Bible reading, which is another psalm. And if you'd like to turn with me to Psalm 126, you will find our passage for tonight.

You'll find that on page 517 in the Big Pew Bibles. Did I say pew Bibles? Church Bibles, seat Bibles. You can tell where I come from.

So Psalm 126. Another one of these little songs of ascents, which were thought to be psalms written for pilgrims as they were journeying up to Jerusalem for the great festivals to sing together as they walked along.

So Psalm 126. When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue 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.

[ 1 : 15 ] 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.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. And may he add his blessing upon it to us tonight. Amen. Well, friends, let's open our Bibles again at Psalm 126, page 517.

And my title for this evening is Gospel Work, The Tears and the Joys. And you will see the phrase shouts of joy comes three times in the psalm.

In verse 2, and again in verse 5, and again in verse 6. And you'll see that there's mention of tears in verse 5, sowing in tears. And also in verse 6, he who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing.

So we have joy and we have tears. And this suggests that the experiences described in this psalm take the writer to both extremes of his emotional capacity.

[ 2 : 43 ] He knows what it is to shout for joy and he knows what it is to weep. And the focus of his attention and the subject of the psalm is what he describes in verse 1 as the fortunes of Zion, which means the well-being of the city and the people of Jerusalem, or if you like, the well-being of the people of God.

Now, we'll get our noses into this text in just a moment. But first, let me say something by way of introduction. When we are newly converted, when we first become Christians, inevitably, our initial experience of the Christian life is very personal.

And it must be like that. We realize that a radical change is taking place deep inside ourselves. Something has happened to us, something objective.

And this something is going to reorientate our whole outlook on life. Self-gratification, self-pleasing, self-serving, self-assertion, and self-everything else begin to be replaced by the desire to serve Christ.

Our self-life begins to be subdued and suppressed. And we begin with joy to serve our new master. But inevitably, in those early years of the Christian life, we're grappling with individual and personal issues.

[ 4 : 08 ] There's so much in ourselves that has to be sorted out. And it takes time. We learn gradually. It takes time as we learn to pray. It takes time as we learn to discipline our carnal instincts to do with sex and alcohol and so on.

It takes time as we learn to read and enjoy the Bible. It takes time as we learn to share the gospel with other people. As we learn to be regular at the meetings of the church.

Big personal changes are taking place as we learn to bring our lives into line with the Bible's teaching. And it doesn't happen overnight. So inevitably, in our early days of being Christians, we have to look at ourselves and our lives carefully.

And we have to ask the question, how can I begin to serve Christ? However, as the years go on, we become more conscious of the church. We realize that there's a lot more going on than just me and the Lord.

We begin to think of what our psalm describes as the fortunes of Zion, the well-being of God's people. And it's a mark of growing maturity in Christians when we begin to be concerned for the growth and the strength and the stability and the fruitfulness of the Lord's people as a body.

[ 5 : 26 ] And our concern for the church grows on two levels. First of all, there's our concern for the local congregation to which we belong. For a local church to flourish, there need to be a number of things going on.

The Bible needs to be right at the center. And the Bible needs to drive forward the work of the church at all levels. For example, its use of funds, its use of buildings and personnel, the shape of its teaching and its programs all needs to be driven by the Bible.

There also needs to be pastoral discipline. That is, a willingness in the congregation to conform to the ethical teaching of the Bible and a willingness on the part of the pastors and elders to call to account those who step out of line and dishonor the Lord, either by immoral behavior or by being grumbling or divisive.

Good discipline in a church is essential to the flourishing of a church. And a good church also needs to cultivate carefully its work of evangelism, its teaching of the Bible to everybody from the very young to the very old, its loving care given to those who are weak or dispossessed or damaged, and its training of all of us in Christian service.

Now those are the kind of values which I think we hold and treasure in this church. But we need to keep working to develop them because our enemy, the devil, never sleeps.

[ 6 : 57 ] But as we grow up and grow more mature as Christians, we also develop a concern for the Lord's church everywhere, citywide, nationwide, and across the world.

The Lord's people everywhere are our family. So in our thinking, the fortunes of Zion become a worldwide concern. We learn to rejoice when the gospel is advancing, and we learn to weep when the church and its teaching become weakened or compromised, or if the Lord's name is dishonored by the bad behavior of professing Christians.

Well, now let's turn to this Psalm 126. It's that kind of concern for the welfare of God's people which the psalmist is expressing. His life has matured to a point where trusting in the Lord is not merely a personal concern about himself.

It's a concern for the fortunes of Zion, the progress and strength of the whole of Israel. And you'll see that the psalm falls into two equal halves.

In the first three verses, the writer is looking backwards to an earlier period in his life. And then in verses 4, 5, and 6, he's looking forwards to the future, well, the present and the immediate future.

[ 8 : 14 ] His backward look in verses 1, 2, and 3 is full of joy and gladness and laughter and appreciation of the Lord's kindness and goodness. The forward look is prayerful.

It's braced for hard work and difficulty, but it's ultimately confident. Well, let's spend a moment looking at the backwards and forwards aspect of this psalm.

And then we'll get down to the nitty-gritty of its teaching. The psalmist is looking back in verses 1, 2, and 3 to a time of great blessing. Now, we don't quite know what the blessing was.

It's impossible to date this psalm with any confidence. It could have been written in about 530 BC when the exile to Babylon, when the people of Judah had been taken to Babylon, had come to an end, and the Jews were beginning to come back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and the temple and recover their identity as the people of the God of Israel.

But we can't be certain, and we don't really need to know. What's important about this backward look is that the Lord has been re-establishing the strength of his people, and our psalmist and his contemporaries are delighted to see the Lord's blessing.

[ 9 : 26 ] Look at verse 1. We were like those who dream. It was like a dream for us. We were pinching ourselves. We could hardly believe the evidence of our eyes that the Lord should have brought new life into the dry bones of Zion like this.

Let me suggest a comparable situation for our own day. What would we feel like if hundreds of churches in the greater Glasgow area were all to come to life in a fresh kind of way, powerfully? If Baptist churches and free churches and independent churches and brethren assemblies across the city all began to preach the gospel with fresh power and to teach the Bible with great energy

and great enthusiasm.

Even Church of Scotland churches began to leave their follies and seriously re-embrace the authority of the Bible. If dozens of determined missionary-minded ministers were to drop like pennies from heaven and to fill the pulpits all across the city.

If the churches began to exercise pastoral discipline faithfully. If on a Sunday we were to drive around the city and see great queues of people waiting to press into churches so that they could be fed the word of God.

[10:42] In short, if there were a great awakening of interest in our Lord Jesus what would we feel like if we could see this going on around the city week after week? I guess we would come in here on Sundays and meet each other and our eyes would be sparkling.

We'd be like the first two verses of the psalm. We'd be pinching ourselves. We'd be laughing. Even the quietest among us might be shouting with joy in a muffled and British kind of way. Do you know what I mean? Ho, ho. And as it's put in verse 3 we'd be talking with great joy about the wonderful things that the Lord God was doing amongst us.

Now that's the kind of thing that seems to have been happening in Israel back in the time of our psalmist. But the new life and this restoration, whatever it was seems to have stopped. It seems to have been at some point in the past. And our psalmist has arrived at the beginning of verse 4 conscious that his people's fortunes have again reached a low ebb.

[11:44] And that's why he turns to pray and he says to the Lord, Restore our fortunes, O Lord. Now it's interesting that he doesn't betray any nostalgia for the past.

He's very conscious that things in the present are not looking too promising. But he doesn't wring his hands. On the contrary, he braces himself. He prays in verse 4 and he prepares himself for sowing and reaping in verses 5 and 6.

Now isn't that striking that there's no nostalgia? And isn't there a lesson for us as well? Nostalgia for the past. It's something which afflicts people when they get to a certain age.

I guess to middle age. Perhaps it starts earlier. But especially when you get to the point in life when you realize that your past on earth is a lot longer than your future. I've certainly met Christians, not here in this church, but in other places in my past.

Christians who have been nostalgic for a past, a kind of rose-colored past in the church, as it has seemed to them. I've heard people speak like this. Oh, you know, I remember this church back in the days of the Reverend Silver Tongue.

[12:59] When he used to preach to us, he would lift you right up to heaven. The angels sitting up in the rafters in the church roof took out their handkerchiefs to wipe their faces. And I remember old Billy Thumperlot at the organ.

When he pulled out all those stops, he wondered if the stained glass windows could possibly survive. Those were the days. But what do we have now? Reduced congregation, dry rot in the roof, no money, nobody under the age of 50, and the Reverend Poker Face with his scrawny little sermons that wouldn't nourish a church mouse.

Have you heard people speak like that? Now, this psalm does not give us an ounce of encouragement towards nostalgia. Our psalmist looks back with joy and gratitude, but his eyes are on the future.

He's concerned with the immediate future of the people of God. There may be tears up ahead. He sees that. But beyond the tears, in verse 5 and verse 6, there is the joy of harvest.

Well, let's look at the details. This psalm is teaching us to have a love for the people of God and a great love for the well-being of God's people. So let's observe that love under five headings.

[14:16] First, we rejoice. The first three verses are an expression of rejoicing when the Lord restores the fortunes of his people. Now, in Old Testament terms, that kind of joy would arise from a number of related things.

First and foremost, there would be a willing and glad obedience to the law of Moses, the Bible, as it was for them. Whenever trouble comes to Israel in Old Testament history, it always comes as a result of God punishing his people because of their disobedience to his law.

He sent the prophets and the prophets were constantly calling the people back to the law of Moses. And when the people turned back to the law of Moses, they were blessed by the Lord and experienced great joy.

And this obedience to the law of Moses had other elements tied in with it. There would be a godly king. Some of the kings of Judah were godly kings. There was military strength against enemies like the Philistines.

There was joyful worship in the temple. There was an orderly carrying out of all the appointed sacrifices and the blessings of good health amongst the people and their livestock and good harvests.

[ 15 : 31 ] Life in the promised land was always intended by God to be a good and happy life in the land flowing with milk and honey. And when that life began to fall apart but was then restored, there was joy.

Now, in the era of the Christian church, in our era, there are similarities to that but there are also differences. The main similarity is that there is blessing to the church and joy in the church when God's words are loved and obeyed.

When churches accept the Bible as the very words of God and believe the Bible and obey it and in particular obey its call to submit to Christ as Lord and Savior, there is joy.

There's a foretaste of heaven. People's lives become characterized by a God-centered godliness. The power of the Holy Spirit is demonstrated in lives of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And while still being sinners, people begin to demonstrate honesty, truthfulness, integrity, fidelity in marriage alongside a biblical understanding of marriage, a willingness to battle for the truth alongside a willingness to accept hardship and difficulty.

[ 16 : 54 ] A church that gives us joy is a church that lives not by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, a church that loves Christ and is unashamed of him and of his words and of the teaching of the whole Bible.

Now that's the big similarity, living joyfully under the word of God, the law of Moses back in Old Testament times and the whole Bible in the era of the Christian church.

But there are differences as well. For example, we no longer rejoice in Jerusalem as the geographical center of the Lord's blessing because it no longer is.

We look forward to populating the new Jerusalem. And the battles that we fight today are no longer battles with Philistines and Amorites and Moabites. We battle against the devil whose weapons are lies and we battle using the weapons of truth and prayer and the Bible.

And we no longer run God's enemies through with sword or spear. We seek to persuade them of the truth of the gospel and if they turn and persecute us, we pray for them.

[ 18 : 06 ] So, Tronites, can I call you Tronites? Let's pray for a growing capacity to rejoice, to have our mouth filled with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy as we see the Lord in various places, both in local congregations and other types of gospel work, as we see him restoring the fortunes of his people.

So, there's the first thing, we rejoice. It's good to have a capacity to rejoice and to laugh. Secondly, we are noticed. Look at the last phrase of verse 2.

Then they said, among the nations, the Lord has done great things for them. Now, the nations means the Gentiles, the pagans. Do you see the force of this second half of verse 2?

The Lord is blessing his people greatly, his own people, and outsiders, people like the Philistines, are looking on in surprise and amazement to see how united and happy and strong and blessed the people of Israel are.

And look at what the Gentiles say. They say, the Lord, Yahweh, has done great things for them. They knew his name, they knew of him, the name first revealed to Moses at the burning bush.

[ 19 : 23 ] So, the Gentiles are connecting Yahweh with the great things that are happening to their Israelite neighbors. How then might we connect this with our own time and place?

let's pray that people who are not Christians will see the blessing of God on the churches and will have no option but to say, the Lord, the God and Father of Jesus Christ, appears to be blessing these people.

What an extraordinary phenomenon. You wouldn't expect this in 2015, would you? But this is just what happens again and again. I imagine that most of us who are here this evening were initially drawn to the Lord when we were pagans because we could see his gracious and lovely work in the lives of Christians that we knew or in the life of a local church or a group like a Christian union in a school or university.

We looked at these Christian lives and we said, there is blessing here. I could do with a bit of that myself. So, do let's pray. Let's pray, for example, for our plasma screens down on the street. You'll have noticed them. Is plasma the right word? Paul, are they plasma screens? I don't know. I always thought plasma was something to do with blood. Anyway, if it's got into our screens, maybe it's giving them a transfusion, doing them good.

[ 20 : 47 ] But let's, seriously, let's pray for the effect of those screens because people do stop and look at them. And as they look at them, we want them to realize that the church is very different from what they thought it was.

We want them to say, for example, are they really young people in the Christian church? I thought the church died off a couple of hundred years ago, a bit like the dodo. Are these youthful people in the church?

Do they study the Bible? Can they possibly be looking happy? I thought that to go to church, you had to be a miserable looking octogenarian. So, let's pray that in that sort of way and in many other ways, we will be noticed so that people begin to say the Lord seems to be doing great things for them.

Not just in our church, but in all churches where the Bible is loved and preached. Now, it's important, of course, that we are authentic. Occasionally, you see publicity from churches and Christian organizations that is somehow too glossy and too smiley and you wonder if you're being hoodwinked.

I don't think our publicity is like that, but the important thing is that our lives should be authentic. Jesus said, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

[ 22 : 04 ] So, the purpose of changed lives is not to praise up the people, but to praise the Lord of the people, the Father in heaven, to recognize that it is the Lord who has done great things for them.

So, let's pray to be noticed in a way that honors the Lord for his sake. Thirdly, we talk. Look at the second half of verse 2 and then at verse 3 as well.

In verse 2, it's the pagans who are saying the Lord has done great things for them and in verse 3, it's the Israelites who are saying the Lord has done great things for us.

So, the Israelites as they meet together are saying to each other, isn't it wonderful to see what the Lord is doing among us. They're not only observing his great deeds, they're actually talking to each other about them.

And that kind of talking together about the great deeds of the Lord is very encouraging. Verse 3 of this psalm is the basis of one of our best hymns written by Francis van Alstine.

[ 23 : 11 ] Do you know the hymn that begins, to God be the glory, great things he has done, so loved he the world that he gave us his son who yielded his life and atonement for sin and opened the life gate that all may go in.

And the chorus ends, O come to the Father through Jesus the Son and give him the glory, great things he has done. Now, she must have had Psalm 126 open on her desk while she was writing that hymn.

It's good for us to talk like this to each other. Every congregation over time develops its own culture, its own features. And all of us play a part in contributing to the building up of our culture or, if you like, our shared values.

So let's develop the habit of doing verse 3. When we become aware of advance and blessing, let's tell each other about it. I'll just give you one example.

Our minister, Willie Phillip, came back from India a couple of weeks ago. And since coming back, he's been talking to us about some of the great things that God is doing through the work of the Delhi Bible Institute.

[ 24 : 20 ] How new centers of training are being opened up in states all across the north of India. Hundreds of evangelists and church planters are being trained and sent out into situations which are often hostile to the gospel.

But the gospel is advancing in north India, even in the teeth of increasingly militant Hinduism. The devil, no doubt, is gnashing his teeth in frustration as he sees his schemes being thwarted.

But amen, let them be thwarted and the Lord's people will talk to each other and they will say, the Lord is doing great things for us. We are glad. Let's do more of it.

It's good for us. It's encouraging to point these things out to each other. Now fourth, we pray. At verse 4, as we saw earlier, the psalmist changes gear.

He turns through 180 degrees. He stops looking backwards and he starts looking forwards. The restorations of the past, the blessings of the past, seem to have dwindled and the present situation looks difficult.

[ 25 : 28 ] So what does he do? He prays. He knows that the restoration of the fortunes of Zion can only come about if the Lord himself does it. Look back to verse 1.

It was the Lord who restored the fortunes of Zion in the past. And in verse 3, it was the Lord who had done great things for his people.

It wasn't godly kings or powerful military commanders who had brought the restoration. It was the Lord himself. Not that our psalmist is an armchair believer.

He knows that he and many others are going to have to roll up their sleeves and work. And he's going to come on to that work in verses 5 and 6. But he knows that if the Lord doesn't bring blessing, no amount of hard work on the part of the people will achieve anything.

It's like the first verse of Psalm 127. Unless the Lord builds the house, unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.

[ 26 : 31 ] Or think of Jesus speaking to the eleven apostles on the Thursday evening before he was crucified. John chapter 15. He says to them, apart from me, you can do nothing.

Now in that great long speech in John's gospel, he's commissioning them to do a great deal, to go out and preach the gospel. And he expects them in the years ahead to be up and doing.

But he knows that the power for effective work comes only from him. Apart from me, you can do nothing. And our writer of Psalm 126 knows this very thing.

So he sends this pleading prayer to the Lord in verse 4. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev. Now that picture of streams in the Negev is a powerful picture.

The Negev, or Negev as it's sometimes spelt, is a large area of desert country that runs southwards from Judah or Israel right down towards the Sinai Peninsula.

[ 27 : 32 ] I haven't been there, but I'm told it's very hot and very dry. You don't want to spend a day there unless you have air conditioning and plenty of hydration. But apparently it can rain there, and when it rains it can be torrential and very sudden.

No west of Scotland drizzle, but downpours, an inch and half an hour, that sort of thing. And the dry stream beds are suddenly gushing with tons of water.

So what our psalmist is praying for in verse 4 is for the people of God to be gloriously and dramatically refreshed by downpours of blessing from the heavens.

He's thinking big here. He's praying a big prayer. He is not asking for a scotch mist on the campuses. He is asking for streams, torrents in the Negev.

Do you remember that old hymn line? Thou art coming to a king. Large petitions with thee bring. In other words, a king, the king that we come to, has mighty resources and great wealth.

[ 28 : 36 ] Don't ask him then for a dry crust. Ask him for a bakery full of fresh bread. Ask him for big things. So our psalmist prays, and verse 4 sets an example for us to follow.

So friends, let's keep on praying and asking our Lord to send downpours of blessing upon Scotland. But our psalmist also expects the people to work.

So here's our last heading. We work. Verses 5 and 6. Now, the work of building up or restoring or revitalizing the Lord's people is pictured in different ways in the Bible.

In the next psalm, Psalm 127, the work is pictured in verse 1 as building the house, perhaps building Solomon's temple, and also as watching over and guarding the city.

In our psalm, 126, the work is pictured as sowing and reaping in verses 5 and 6. And it's very interesting to see the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 3 putting both of these pictures together to describe the work of strengthening the Lord's church.

[ 29 : 47 ] He writes, I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. And then just two or three verses later, he writes, like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation and someone else is building upon it.

Let each one take care how he builds upon it. And between those two quotations, he says to the Corinthians, you are God's field, God's building.

You see, the two metaphors together, perhaps Paul had been reading Psalms 126 and 127 when he picked up his pen to write 1 Corinthians 3. Anyway, we'll leave the building metaphor aside for

now and think about the sowing and reaping of our verses 5 and 6.

There's something very poignant about these two verses. The poignant thing is not so much the reaping with shouts of joy, but the sowing in tears. Is sowing generally done in tears?

Do our British farmers do their sowing in tears in the spring? I would have thought they're more likely to weep in August and September when it's harvest time, but there's so much rain that they can't get the harvest in. Why should the tears be at sowing time rather than at reaping time?

[ 31 : 01 ] Well, the reason may be that our psalmist is allowing the reality of spiritual work, what we would call gospel work, to spill over into his metaphor. If this man, our psalmist, is a man who's done a lot of sowing in the sense of laboring to get the law of Moses into the hearts of his fellow Israelites, he may have met with a lot of resistance.

And he may have gone home some nights after a hard day's work and wept as he sat at the kitchen table, wept because of the hardness of heart that he'd encountered during his day's work.

Now, I think it's right for us to identify this sowing with our evangelism. After all, it's the way that Jesus himself used the same metaphor.

He said, a sower went forth to sow and the thing that he sowed was the good seed of the word, which was the message of the gospel. Did Jesus sow in tears?

He did. He was the most joyous man that the world had ever known, but his sowing of the gospel brought him to tears because so many who heard him hardened their hearts against the gospel and against him.

[ 32 : 16 ] And when finally he rode into the city of Jerusalem on the borrowed donkey, Luke writes this, when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, if only you had known this day the things that make for peace, but now they're hidden from your eyes.

They had had so much opportunity. They'd seen his mighty miracles. They'd heard his wonderful teaching about the kingdom of God and about himself, teaching which they recognized had an unprecedented authority about it, but they had said no to him.

How could he not weep? The apostle Paul was just the same. He said to the Ephesian elders in Acts chapter 20, remember that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.

Admonish everyone means tell everyone the gospel and warn them of the consequences of refusing it. Paul's tears have the same origin as Jesus' tears.

They're not the tears of sentimentality, but of realism, tears that come from knowing the consequences of disobeying the gospel of Christ. So we mustn't be surprised in our day if our sowing of gospel seed brings us to tears at times when we come up against stubborn hard-heartedness, especially if the hard heart belongs to someone that we care a great deal about, a close friend or perhaps a member of our own family.

[ 33 : 46 ] To engage in evangelism is to risk grief. If we want dry handkerchiefs, let's not go evangelizing. If we want dry handkerchiefs, let's not start planting the gospel in Kelvin Grove and Queens Park.

But look at our verses 5 and 6 because they could not be more encouraging. These words, remember, are not just the words of the psalmist. They're the words of God.

Those who sow in tears, says the Lord God, 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.

To engage in gospel work and gospel planting up to the neck, to engage in the Christian life with real love, will be an emotional rollercoaster.

But it's worth it because the harvest home is promised here by the Lord God. the sower shall come home in the end with sheaves. Yes, the sowing will be hard.

[ 34 : 56 ] Jesus' parable of the sower assures us that a lot of the seed sown will in the end be unfruitful. But there will be a harvest and some of it will be spectacularly fruitful, 30, 60, even 100 times what was sown.

We rejoice, we're noticed, we talk to each other, we pray, we work. So friends, let's be up and at it. Are we not in good company, in the Lord's company, and each other's company? We have each other's arms to lean on. We're not soloists, thank God. And our great aim in the grace and power of the Lord himself is the restoration of the fortunes of the people of God.

