

An Emotional Journey

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[0 : 00] Okay, we're going to look for a little while this evening at Sam 126, the Sam that we read or that was read by Ross earlier on.

And if you're here for the first time over the last number of weeks in the evening, we're looking at the songs of Ascent, that is Sam 120, Sam 132, we're not looking at all of them, but most of them.

And these were Psalms that were sung by the people of God on their way up to the various festivals at Jerusalem. Okay? Songs for the journey, that's what they are.

And we've seen that these songs for the journey in the Old Testament are still great application for us in our lives. So as I said before, it is really helpful to see our lives as a journey and be reminded that the journey itself of life is not the goal.

So that life itself is not the goal of life at one level. There is a destination of which living is a very important part. It's not just that we're kind of treading water until we reach a destination.

[1 : 05] The journey matters. The journey is really important. But the whole of Christian living, the whole of our lives are revolved around the idea of coming home, of coming home.

That is a powerful reality that we are living our lives with a view to coming home, to fulfilling all the deepest longings and desires of our hearts by when we find that in a relationship with Jesus Christ when we come home.

And that's kind of highlighted at the end of the Psalm, Psalm 126, where he who goes out weeping, bating, the seed for sowing shall come home, shall come home with shouts of joy.

And there's that whole idea that there is a homecoming that is a focus of our lives. And the Psalms of Ascent feed into that in the sense that the people of God sung them and they were on a tough journey, physically a tough journey because it came at the end of that journey.

It was uphill. We've seen a lot about the hills in these Psalms. Corey spoke about them and Callum spoke about them last week. And I guess when you're just near the end of your destination, there's the hills leading up to Jerusalem, then that was quite tough.

[2 : 20] Although they were heading for the feast, they were focusing on God and who is worthy and they were focusing together. They were a community of people traveling together towards the feast.

And these were songs of faith that they sung, songs to encourage them. So songs are great and they ought to be encouraging. It's a really terrible thing if you come to church and it's singing so really bad and awful that you're discouraged by it.

Never happens, guys, here. You're okay. So, but it is, isn't it? If you come and it's terrible, it's just out of tune, it's too high or too low or it's just grating and even at a kind of technical level, it's great to enjoy and be blessed in the words and the songs and doing that together and what we can learn from it.

And this is one of these songs. It's a great song and it's a song that really has it all. Both as it was initially written or as it was originally written, but also as we take its images and realities for the Christian life and where God fits into everything, absolutely everything of our life.

There's so much truth, so much emotion in this Psalm, so much heart and it's all given in poetry. Now, I know it's difficult for us. It's really difficult to translate Hebrew poetry as a bit of a Hebrew expert.

[3 : 44] I'll know, you know, these things that I find it difficult to get across that great poetic reality of the Hebrew. The Hebrews are very, it's a bit more like Gaelic, John, you'd be better with it because it's more like, it's a very emotive and emotional language.

English is not, English is very stoic and flat. And so it's difficult to get across the parallelism and the form and the poetry in the Hebrew.

But all of this Psalm is written in tremendous poetry and it's a great thing. And you know, we need more song in our lives, not less. Song is hugely important.

It touches our hearts. It's very powerful and it also informs our mind. You think of some of you people here, as I can think of songs, I will hear a song that I knew, I haven't heard for 35 years and I will be able, when I hear it, to remember every single verse when it starts as I sing along with the singer.

We don't forget song. We don't forget the words of song. We don't forget what is in song. It's tremendously important. Songs of our childhood. Songs that we remember truth from.

[4 : 57] And I think often we underestimate song in a rather cerebral, stoic, prosaic interpretation of the faith. Song and emotion and movement is hugely important and the Psalmist here is in poetry and in song expressing the journey, the Christian journey.

And just say a little, can I say a little bit about the Psalm in its context? Because what it's doing here, it's split into two verses one to three and then four to six.

It's two kind of strophes, two verses, two stanzas as it were. And there is recalling, a part of it, and he was recalling the Babylonian captivity.

You remember the people of Israel were in the Promised Land and they were promised blessing and land flowing with milk and honey as they kept close to God.

But as they rebelled against God and as they turned away from God and as they worshiped idols, then they knew God's judgment and they were taken from the Promised Land into captivity and spent 70 years in captivity in Babylon, that great powerful nation who took them as slaves as they turned against their Lord and their Savior.

[6 : 12] And it was a part of judgment and yet within that judgment there was promise for them if they returned. And it's the theme of, you know, Second Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel that we know so well and Ezra and Nehemiah.

They're all books of the Old Testament that speak about, speak into the captivity, speak into the separation between God and His people and the judgment that He brings onto them.

And this first part of the Psalm is recalling their freedom from captivity. After 70 years they are taken from captivity back to the Promised Land.

And it's not a great translation when it says the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion because it gives us the idea of kind of fortune, luck, magic, whatever.

But it really, practically, or literally means the Lord turned back our captivity. He brought us back from captivity, restored, and it's the idea of health and strength.

[7 : 18] Lord gave us health and strength again. And I'm just going to, maybe you'll turn with me if you can find it because it's quite important. Ezra and Nehemiah, if you go back before the book of Psalms or the book of Job, and then there's Ezra and Nehemiah.

And these are, the prophets spoke into the situation that we've been looking at. So in Ezra chapter one and verses one to four, there was a foreign king called King Cyrus.

And King Cyrus wasn't a believer but he was used by God to release the Israelites and allow them to go back to Jerusalem and to build the temple.

So in the first year of King Cyrus, the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, King of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout the kingdom and put him around.

Thus says Cyrus, King of Persia, the Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all, whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

[8 : 26] These are slaves. These are people who have been in captive for 70 years. And he says, let them go and rebuild the house of the Lord of the God. He is the God who's in Jerusalem. Let each survivor in whatever place he sojourns be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and beasts, beside free will offerings for the house of God that's in Jerusalem.

Okay, so let's put into context. That would be a little bit like Nicola Sturgeon coming into the church and saying here, you're the church planting church. I think you should go and build three or four new churches.

We will fund all the church planners, we'll buy buildings for you, we'll allow you to go and we'll hope everything will be filled. It's kind of a bit like that, except a hundred times more unbelievable, that this foreign king who wasn't a believer sent this captive people back because he cried out to the Lord.

He sent them back and gave them money and gold and silver to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. And it was incredible that people couldn't believe it.

The Lord has restored the fortunes of Zion. We were like those who dream. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. It was utterly unbelievable that they were allowed to return and return to the promised land.

[9 : 40] And it was incredible joy and they give glory to God who allowed them to experience this as believers. So that's the first three verses.

And then the second three verses are a reminder that it is also an unfinished task. Not only does it say, the Lord has restored our fortunes, but then there's a prayer, restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the desert.

So there's an unfinished task. In other words, if you look back at the story in the Old Testament, you realize that not everyone returned at the beginning, unbelievably.

Some stayed in Babylon, some stayed in Persia. It was a mixed return. There was still more people to come back. There was still more captivity to be restored. There was still more joy to be received and a greater blessing to pray for and to ask for.

There was still patience and tears, but also hope and restoration of a rebuilt Jerusalem to look forward to. And probably thinking more forward to the messianic age when the Messiah would come and they would enjoy the total blessings of the Redeemer.

[10 : 58] Okay, so that's kind of the story, the two parts of this chapter. Now, they fit into our broad spiritual experience, because this is seen as a journey and we're in a journey, and let's fit this Sam into our own spiritual experience, because as I said earlier, the Sam is full of contrasts, okay, extremes, extremes either end in many ways with lots of experience in the middle.

And we can apply these contrasts and we can see them in our own spiritual journey, and we can see that we take God and there's a reason for all of these things. So can I just go through one or two of the contrasts?

There's drought and abundance, isn't there? In verse 4, there's the desert, the Negev, the desert, and there's abundance when the flash floods come into the desert and bring growth.

And so that's one of the contrasts. There's the idea of captivity and the captivity being changed into freedom.

And so there's this whole idea of a spiritual desert in our lives when we run from God, because that was their experience as a people.

[12 : 14] It was dry, unproductive, and barren. And it was only as they cried out to the living God and saw Him that as they saw their need of Him again and returned to Him that they knew abundance and blessing and harvest and health.

That whole idea of restoring our fortunes, the idea of being strong and healthy and fruitful and blessed. Now that's very basic, isn't it? In the extremes of our Christian life, there's drought and there's abundance.

And sometimes the drought comes from turning our back on God, the spiritual drought. The blessing comes as we turn back to Him. And that relates to sowing and reaping.

That's another contrast in the Psalm in verse 5. Those who sow and tear shall reap with shouts of joy.

These extremes in the different parts of our journey, there's times in our lives spiritually when it all seems like it's sowing and tears, when it's hard where there's not much fruit.

[13 : 18] There's very little evidence of life. I'm a bit of a gardener and I've got a little raised plot in the back garden where I sowed in tears, I sowed potatoes a few weeks ago.

And for weeks and weeks and weeks I looked out the window every morning. There was nothing there. It's just black soil, bleak, barren. But then one day some green shoots.

And now there's strong sheaves. Oh, not quite. There's no flowers on them yet, so I can't dig up the plants yet.

But you know, there's this, the different times, there's going to be a time when I can go out with my fork and dig up these lovely white fresh potatoes, real potatoes, and it will be great to do so.

Sowing and reaping. Our lives are like that. So there's times when we're sowing and it seems bleak and dark and unproductive, and yet there's other times when we see amazing answers to prayer and vitality in life and even blessing as we share our faith with other people.

[14 : 27] And it's a recognition that there are these different times on the journey which is related to the other contrast, tears and laughter and joy, both in verse 2 and verse 5, that our mouth was filled with laughter in our tongue with such of joy, those who are so in tears, reap with such of joy.

This great reality that Christ comes into the emotion of our lives as a journey that we're on and that we experience these things, don't we take?

We know these things in our lives. We have times of celebration and times of great sadness. That's life. You will have these different experiences. And they may be the extremes, but within that there's times of sorrow and times of joy and times of mild happiness and times of mild discontent.

And we see that that is part of the journey of life. And it's important to legitimize the joy and the laughter as well as the tears before God, recognizing the need to take Him into all of these things.

And see, maybe particularly, no, not particularly, both in celebration and joy, because the celebration and the laughter was a result of God at work, wasn't it?

[15 : 45] They were amazed at God at work. They laughed and they were joyful at the incredible restoration. And we need to celebrate God and laugh and be joyful as Christians.

We're awful somber, awful solemn. We can feel gilly if we're laughing and joyful in church. Why should that be? But also recognize the place of tears in the Christian life and tears sometimes, because we are distant from God, not necessarily, but it can be tears of repentance as we come back or it can be tears that we experience because we're far from God, or it can be tears because we don't understand what we're going through.

Psalms 137, which is a very famous one made famous in secular society by Boney M many years ago who sang the song by the rivers of Babylon, we sat down.

How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? They couldn't sing, they were silenced because of their experiences. And the relation between joy and singing and being in God's presence was powerful and ought to be powerful.

There were tears and laughter. And the last parallel is between not home and home. You know, verse 1 says that we were captive, we were not at home.

[17 : 10] And verse 6 at the end says, we come home. We'll come home with shouts of joy. And there's the reality of the Christian journey also being that we need songs for the journey because with exiles we're citizens of heaven.

We belong here but we don't belong. This is not our home. It will be our home. Hebrews 13, 14, I think, says that for here we have no lasting city but we seek the city that is to come.

We're sojourners, we're pilgrims. The journey, we await His return and the renewal of all things so that this will become our home in reality.

And this is a really strong part of the imagery, a shadowy imagery that the Old Testament believer had of being on a journey, sharpened for us in Christ and fulfilled as we have faith in Him and as we know what He's done and look forward to what is still to come.

We're home but we're not home. It's a journey of contrasts. So we have a broad Christian experience. And we also briefly, as we look to conclude, we have a growing knowledge of God in this Sam.

[18 : 30] And it really is a remarkable paradox and I think a really important paradox for us to understand in our Christian lives because it's one we often struggle with. As we face Him who is our destination, there's this great paradox in the Sam and in the Bible where there's suddenness and slowness.

And there's the suddenness of God at work and the slowness of our experience as we wait on Him. Can I just say a little bit about that before we finish?

Because I think it's very important. There's an expression in the Sam of the suddenness of God, His power which is beyond our comprehension. There's a couple of things.

The first verse which speaks about the Lord restored our captivity. It was sudden. It was unbelievable after 70 years they were set free and they were given gold and silver and they were to go back to Jerusalem.

It happened really quickly, really suddenly. And that is given a poetic expression in verse 4 which says, please do it again, restore our fortunes like a stream in the desert.

[19 : 39] That speaks about the suddenness of God working because it's a picture of flash floods, water that came from the south and gushed down these dry riverbeds. I've probably told you the story before.

It's the only story I have of flash floods and it was from our honeymoon 29 years ago when we were in Rhodes. And every day we went back to our accommodation across a bridge and that bridge crossed a fairly deep, empty, dry gully as we thought it was.

And the last night of our holiday there was a humongous flood, rainfall, thunder and lightning.

And by 4 in the morning there was this raging, roaring noise outside the window and we looked out and this dry, deep gully was filled with water so that trees were coming down it and trucks were coming down it who almost, trucks were hanging over the edge because it changed so quickly overnight into a river.

And that's the picture of the streams. Streams not a good translation. Streams in the desert sound just like little dribbles. There was actually a raging torrent that would immediately bring grass and greenery and fruitfulness to the desert place.

[21 : 06] You know, you've seen it in some of these David Attenborough programs, how the desert changes so quickly into a place of fruitfulness. And that's the picture we have of God at work.

He's quick. There's a suddenness. There's a great freedom here, a restoration. And the New Testament speaks of that in 1 Corinthians 15.

Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed in the moment. In the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet for the trumpet will sound the dead and will be raised impeccable and we shall all be changed.

There's a suddenness. There's going to be a suddenness of God at work and there's a suddenness in salvation where we are taken, we might not see it but we're taken immediately from darkness into light from the moment we believe from death to life.

And we see it in the work of Christ in the cross where He says, it's finished, it's done, it's a sudden work, a three hour work, maybe we can talk about it being in the darkness of the cross with all that had gone before it.

[22 : 16] And there's a great speed with a suddenness with which God works. He works in our life. You will know that and experience it if you're a Christian. There's times when God has worked suddenly in ways you haven't expected.

He's powerful beyond our comprehension. So the suddenness of God at work, but that's God's point of view. It's often not like that for us. We have to be patient because they were seventy years in captivity and there was a lot of tears and they didn't, it didn't seem like God was working quickly and suddenly to them in the journey.

You know what it's like when we're on a journey, we're very like what it's like for little children who are going up to Inverness and you're not past the fourth or a bridge yet. Are we there yet? Are we there yet? And every two minutes they're asking, are we there yet?

Well, we're like that as Christians. We're always impatient and asking God, where is the suddenness that it is spoken of? Because it's a paradox because of His suddenness.

His suddenness is different from our understanding and we are to be patient because of the slowness often of our experiences through tears, sometimes joy, through repentance, through sewing and reaping, through restoration.

[23 : 36] It's, we can't manufacture God working. We so, we return to Him, He does the miracles. He's the one who works.

So I think that's an important paradox to understand that God has His own clock. He has His own time and He can work suddenly and yet for us it seems very slow in our experience as we are asked to wait on Him.

There is a paradox, I know there's a paradox in that, I recognize that. In 2 Peter 3, it's the last, you know, it speaks of that, the Lord is not slow in fulfilling His promise as some count slowness, but He's patient toward you, not wishing that anyone should perish but all should come to repentance.

So God's timing is different and sometimes we are very impatient with Him, but He asks us to wait and to trust and to believe that there will be, and you know one day we will all be in glory and we will recognize the suddenness with which God is working in our lives.

So we are asked to be patient and as we are patient and trusting in Him, waiting on Him, then that's a powerful testimony. That's a really powerful testimony because we will see Him working in our lives.

[24 : 52] We will see it in our own experience. You know, the psalmist speaks of that. He says, you know, we saw God working. He restored our fortunes. We were like people who were dreaming. We couldn't believe God was at work in our lives.

It's a bit like the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They couldn't believe that it was God that was there with them in the presence of Jesus. Or Peter, when he's freed from prison by the angel, Acts 12 verse 9, I think that maybe it's the last time I put that up.

Yeah, Peter, he was released from prison by the angel and he didn't know that what was being done was by an angel. It was real, but he thought he was seeing a vision. Sometimes when we see God at work in an unexpected miraculous in our everyday lives, it brings great amazement and great laughter and great joy that God would deign to work in our lives and amazing that He should work in our ordinary lives.

And it's a good thing to laugh and to be joyful when we are just taken aback by the suddenness and by the amazing reality of God working in ordinary people like you and me.

And I think when we learn to lean on Him and learn His timing and learn to wait and be patient, knowing that He will suddenly answer our prayers, it resonates and there's a great testimony in the world in which we live because the second part of that verse says that great things were said among the nations.

[26 : 21] The Lord has done great things for us. The Lord has done great things for them. People will see when we rest on God, when we wait on Him, when we trust in Him, that will turn people powerfully because God works in our lives when we wait on Him.

And He works suddenly in our lives and He blesses the patience of faith. And your world, your nations, the people around you will see that and will acknowledge the greatness of God.

So I think we learn about God's clock, God's timing in the Psalm, and it's good to sing songs about God. And life is a powerful melodic testimony.

It ought to be our lives, a powerful melodic testimony of God. It should be a sweet song, our lives, even in the tears and through the laughter.

But do you remember that life isn't ultimately a destination, it is a journey towards the fullness of our relationship with God when we meet with God face to face and come home.

[27 : 39] Okay? It's good, isn't it? It's good to have that longing to come home, it's a good thing. And then we find in Christ that's multiplied a million times.

We long just to be in Him. And we are asked to be patient and to trust and to wait in Him even when we don't understand what He's doing. I think that comes across very powerfully in the Psalm.

They were surprised by joy as they did turn back to Him and saw the amazing reality of His salvation and of His work in their lives. Amen.