

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.*

*<sup>2</sup> Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.' <sup>3</sup> The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. <sup>4</sup> Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. <sup>6</sup> Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.*

We continue our series on the psalms of ascent. This psalm isn't by David and most commentators say that it relates to events some hundreds of years later when captives returned from Babylon in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Asaph who is the author of many psalms has 128 musicians descendants mentioned in Ezra 2:41 though no one has attributed his name to this psalm. A few commentators suggest it about David's return after he fled from Absalom's coup d'état (2 Samuel chapters 15 to 19). As an aside it's a great story about how the people wept as David left Jerusalem and had to cross the Jordan with his household and army... mostly men of Judah the tribe David belonged to. It's fourteen generations between Judah and David and the tens of thousands of men with David were nearly all descendants of Judah... all cousins and uncles where tribal loyalty was family loyalty. Most of Absalom's followers were from the other tribes of Israel. The "us" and "them" was clearly already happening, even though they were all descendants of Jacob, just one or two generations further apart. The land was divided tribally, and that was what led to division after Solomon.

This psalm is the seventh out of fifteen psalms of ascent, where people rejoice as they approach Zion, the hill at the centre of Jerusalem. They were happy. Their dream of coming to Jerusalem was being fulfilled. If we read the beginning of Ezra what occurred is the fulfilment of the dreams of people and the prophecy of Jeremiah

**Ezra 1:1-5** *In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing: <sup>2</sup> "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. <sup>3</sup> Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. <sup>4</sup> And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem." <sup>5</sup> Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> All their neighbours assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with valuable gifts, in addition to all the freewill offerings.*

**Jeremiah 29:10** <sup>10</sup> *This is what the LORD says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my good promise to bring you back to this place.*

Seventy years after the exile of Judah, God moves the heart of King Cyrus to initiate the restoration of the Temple... that is an answer to prayer – a foreign king recognising the God of Israel as truly God of heaven. That is something that all those who went to Jerusalem would see as truly wonderful and a new beginning for them, back at home in Judea.

*<sup>2</sup> Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.*

Wouldn't any of us be filled with joy and laughter if our nation turned its back on humanism, atheism and all the other ideologies that have caused so much misery to generations, and instead turned towards God in the same way people did in the days of Whitefield and Wesley. Recently a pastor from Fareham Living Word fellowship, Chris Wickland, prophesied there would be a great turning of people to God as a result of the calamities facing the nation. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wgx6F6if6ml>). As Christians, we rejoice when we hear about people accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour, but mostly these stories are from Africa, Latin America or Asia where large numbers are saved. One of Martin Luther's famous quotes is that "the Gospel is nothing less than laughter and joy". Whatever we think of Martin Luther, probably that he was a great humourist and fond of laughter isn't the main thing that he is remembered for. He wrote "A poor man, entangled in sin, death and hell, can not hear anything more comforting than this precious, dear message of Christ. His heart must laugh deeply and become joyful about it ... . Sadness is hereditary to us, and the devil is the spirit of sadness, but God is the spirit of joy, who saves us." There is a lot to be joyful about knowing that our sins are forgiven and that Jesus has won the victory over sin and death. Christians should not be miserable sad people, but those who in the words of Psalm 100 "Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs." The mark of a happy home is laughter and the humourless

Christian is no example of someone passionate about what the Lord has done in his or her life. Those coming to Zion were glad to be coming to a place to worship God. Likewise, when we come to worship our Lord and Saviour, should not we also be glad?

*Then it was said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.' <sup>3</sup> The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.*

My knowledge of the history of the Persian Empire is insufficient to know if other nations taken into captivity were ever granted the right of return, but there is mention of repatriation of displaced peoples in the Cyrus cylinder. But the psalmist is aware that the news of the return of 50,000 captives (see Ezra 2:64-69) plus half a ton of gold and 3 tons of silver would be a talking point in the Persian Empire. It was a great company of people and animals leaving for Jerusalem. It was recognised that the God of Israel has answered the prayers of his people. Persians and others would be saying that the Lord has done great things for the Israelites.

There was a time when Britain was known as a nation blessed by God. In the last war, the nation prayed and the army was rescued from the beaches at Dunkirk. Later the nation prayed and the planned invasion was cancelled. The Lord did great things for Britain and saved it from invasion, but after the war, many turned their faces away from God to embrace human ideologies, materialism, immorality and hedonism. These were the same reasons that Israel and Judah were invaded, defeated and sent into exile. Many expected God to continue to bless Israel but they took Him for granted. There was a remnant who kept the faith, and they suffered great disappointment as they were sent into exile. But within a couple of generations, some of their children and grandchildren were the ones who joyfully returned to Jerusalem. The psalmist repeats twice "the Lord has done great things" but He did this for the people who honoured Him – they were small in number but they were faithful. Some may say that God refined the people of Israel as many from the earlier captivity of Israel were scattered by the Assyrians and are never heard of again, while those from Judah taken by the Babylonians remained faithful, and to this day remain a people scattered over the world of whom a minority returned to Jerusalem. The temple was restored by Ezra and the walls by Nehemiah. Their legacy lasted until Jesus came 400 years later. The foundations were re-laid in Israel, and the people rejoiced.

*<sup>4</sup> Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. <sup>6</sup> Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.*

The streams in the desert often arise suddenly with unexpected force – there may be surprise at how fast this happens. We were looking at the early church in Acts a few weeks ago. There were 120 believers in the upper room, and a day later 3,000 and a week later 5,000. Imagine this happening today – we are few, but what if next Sunday we're packed out? God can do great things, so we must expect the unexpected in human terms. Those returning to Jerusalem recognised there was much work to be done as the homes they returned to were dry and ruined and needed to be rebuilt. The relief of cool water in the desert places, allowing the livestock to be watered and life to return to a dry land is a plea that we can echo. Our land is dry, its people lack the living water of life that Jesus promises, and our fortunes are at a low ebb morally. Many have prayed with tears as their own families have walked away from Jesus, many have prayed with tears as they have suffered misfortunes in life, many have cried to the Lord for help and healing. Whatever the circumstances we are exhorted to <sup>6</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray continually, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). There will be a harvest from the seeds sown, even if we don't see it in our lifetimes. The promise in this psalm is that those who sow in tears will reap songs of joy – that is not a maybe. Those who go out weeping with seed to sow, will return with songs of joy and be laden with sheaves – that is not a maybe, but something that will happen.

Jesus says <sup>3</sup> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup> Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup> Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. <sup>8</sup> Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup> Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. <sup>10</sup> Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 6:3-12)

Let's pray