

The Antidote to Hopelessness, Psalm 126, 4/30/2023

Life is a glorious mess. Do you agree? Life is glorious and a gift and can be so exhilarating and filled with purpose and joy and laughter... it's also a mess. It's painful, disappointing, and unfair and filled with hardship, tears and tragedy. Now maybe you have been under the false pretense or false teaching that being a Christian only bring the glory parts and you can avoid the messy parts. Stop listening to that podcast. Now that's not to say that following Jesus and living out the Bible's moral vision in the world doesn't ease a whole host of ways that may escape some of the mess. I often consider what would have come of my life without Jesus and by his grace I have been spared from all kinds of brokenness. But I still experience the mess and being a Christian actually brings a whole set of new hardships with it. He's the point, regardless of our race, gender, age or faith background- to quote my favorite REM song- Everybody Hurts sometimes. What our faith does provide is a better way to navigate and thrive, both in the joy and the pain. But it also uniquely gives us an eternal perspective that is grounded in reality. And so whether you are new to Christianity or you've been a Christian your whole life- what we are learning together in this series in the Psalms we're calling The Antidote is training us for the messy parts of life. And so today we are tackling **hopelessness [Title Slide]**.

What does hopelessness feel like? The Psalms are replete with poetic prayers of what hopelessness feels like that we can all relate to at different seasons. Psalm 6 "I am worn out from groaning." **Hopelessness feels like UGHHHHH.** "All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes grow weak with sorrow." **Hopelessness feels crying yourself to sleep.** Or Psalm 88 "I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death." **Hopelessness feels like the glass is empty.** Psalm 88 "I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength." **Hopelessness feels like you can't get out of bed.** And of course the common cry of many Psalms "How long oh Lord? Will you forget me forever?" **Hopelessness feels like things will never change and God doesn't care.**

Can you relate to the Psalmist? Even if your life is personally OK- there is a sense in which all of us experience this just looking around at our world today- pandemic, shootings, war, crumbling institutions and cultural upheavals that make many of us feel like strangers in our own land. NY Times, Mary Pipher [Read Article] OK coping skills are good, but Mary- if that's all you have I'm heartbroken for you because as Christians we have something so much greater! And Psalm 126 gives us that using two powerful images or word pictures as an antidote to hopelessness. **Streams in the Desert, Sowing Our Tears**

Streams in the Desert: *When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. ² 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." ³ The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev.

The first three verses the Psalmist is recounting a historical moment of revival and restoration for the Jewish people, this was a "pinch me, I must be dreaming situation." Most Bible scholars

would agree that the Psalmist is referencing the miraculous return of the Jewish people to the promised land of Israel from 70 years of Babylonian exile in the year 538 B.C. If you are unfamiliar with this historical event, read the book of Ezra which chronicles that amazing story and this incredible celebration that the Psalmist is remembering. God did the impossible: He turned the heart of pagan king Cyrus toward the Jewish people- not only allowing them to return to their land, but funding their rebuild of the temple and providing protection. This was just unheard of in these days. So surprising and shocking this was that Psalmist says in verse 2 that even the surrounding nations had no choice but to attribute this to the Lord, God of Israel.

And as amazing as that season was in the life of Israel, that is now in the rearview mirror in this Psalm. Verse 4 tells us that life for Israel now was more like the Negev. The Negev is a barren, desolate place south of Beersheba, **show you a map**. All throughout the Negev are deep dried up riverbeds [**Picture**]- just miles and miles of wasteland and it seems like there is just no chance that life could ever grow in a place like this, doesn't it? He's saying this is how life emotionally feels right now, barren, lifeless and all our prospects seem dried up. No doubt, if you've experienced hopelessness, life can feel like the Negev. You look around and it just seems like you can't find anything green, you know?

But notice what the Psalmist is doing with this desert experience- he's praying his emotions to the Lord in faith. And he's remembering who God is and what he has done in the past for them. And saying God "Do it again." **Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev**. It's hard to imagine that the Negev could come to life, but occasionally storms in the mountain cause massive floods that come pouring through these dry riverbeds and suddenly, seemingly overnight there is green everywhere, wildflowers, plants, waters, animals come in. It would seem impossible for their desert circumstances to change, they just looked too hopeless. But the Psalmist looks back, and sees that God did the impossible in bringing back the exiles and knows that nothing is impossible for God. He is a God of restoration. He can turn barren deserts into rivers teeming with life, and he can take our hopeless situation and turn it to joy.

You may be in a dry, barren, hopeless place. Maybe you are stuck in a loop of negativity with your "always and nevers." "I'm never going to find someone to love me." "I'm always going to be alone." "My marriage is never going to get any better." "Nothing ever goes right with me." "I will always feel like I do right now." "I'm never going to get out of my financial situation." "I'm never going to get freedom from this sin." Or maybe you've been so caught up in your negative downward spiral that you can't see the water and the green grass that he has provided around you.

But look to the Psalmist- who knew the power and character of His God. Have you looked at his track record lately? Have you looked back at Scriptures testimony? Have you looked back at moments in your life when God rescued you, blessed you, restored your circumstances, surprised you with joy? If the Lord can bring water from a rock, the Lord can turn your desert into a river. **Isaiah 41:17-18** says, **"When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them.**

I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys, I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.” Martyn Lloyd-Jones said that in personal revival: “God does more in five minutes than man did in the previous ten years.” What we need in our feelings of hopelessness are “Do it again” prayers of faith in the nature and character of God. Lord I remember when you gave me a joy unspeakable when I gave my life to you, I’m asking that you do it again. God you broke my addiction in the past, I’m asking that you do it again. Lord, my spouse and I had a deep love for one another, I’m asking that you do it again. Father, I remember when my child gave their life to you and followed you, I’m asking that you do it again. Lord, there was time when our country repented and there was revival, I’m asking that you do it again. God can bring streams in the desert. What area of your life are you stuck in an Always/Never loop that the Spirit of God wants to break with “Do it again” prayers?

We now turn to the second image we have in this section of the psalm. The first image was streams in the Negev. The second image is that of **sowing our tears**. ⁵ *Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.* ⁶ *Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.* The first image of streams in the desert points to a work that is all God’s sudden and undeserved blessing and revival. Something that can happen overnight and in a miraculous way. The second image points to God’s providential work, partnering with our faithful, slow efforts, our labor and toil day after day. See God works through both the miraculous and sudden intervention to bring us hope- a sudden healing of our body or mind, a financial windfall out of nowhere, a surprise pregnancy that we didn’t think was possible, a loved one that suddenly gives their life to the Lord...but he also works through steady, resilience of our hard work providentially...sowing seed, tilling the field, getting up each day to do put the work in, putting one foot in front of the other, even when we don’t feel like it, even when life is hard and we are feeling hopeless. Now let’s be honest, we all want the first one. Sudden revival- Yes gimme some of that! But often the way that God works is through the regular means of grace, the daily rhythms of faithful resilience.

Some of us need to hear this today. Maybe you are in a desert season in your life and you are just stuck in the sand not moving. You are allowing your feelings to control your entire life. You are stuck. You aren’t looking for a new job, you aren’t investing in friendships, you aren’t seeking the help you need right now, some of you haven’t come back to church yet and you are letting the desert eat you alive. Now there are good health reasons some of you are watching online, but some of you if you are honest with yourself- it’s because you are stuck. But the Psalmist calls us to get up out of the sand and sow our seed.

Notice, the Psalmist says God restores our hope and joy THROUGH our tears. He’s not discounting the emotional pain and sadness. Cry- it’s good for you- in fact our tears are actually contributing we might say by watering the seeds that we are planting. Spiritually this is true. Did you know that God keeps a record of all your tears? **Psalm 56:8 says: Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll – are they not in your record?** God keeps track of all your tears, and one day he will personally wipe the tears from your eyes. So here’s the encouragement: **Don’t waste your tears, invest them in your labor!** Your tears aren’t wasted in God’s field. Do you trust him

with your tears? Do you trust him with your labor even when you can't see immediate return? Galatians 6:9 gives us this word of encouragement: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.* You know what separates Christ followers from others is not that we don't have sorrow and pain. It's that like Rocky- we keep getting up. 2 Corinthians 4: ⁸ *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;* ⁹ *persecuted, but not abandoned; knocked down, but not destroyed.* So you got knocked down in your fight for sexual purity or sobriety? Get back up. Your marriage feels like it's on the ropes, don't give up- keep working to love each other, to seek counsel, to forgive one another even through tears. You feel like giving up on your prodigal children- you keep praying for them and loving them and reminding them how much God loves them and trust God to bring in the harvest. The advocacy work you do to help under-resourced students- it's hard work and sometimes it seems that there is little progress, and maybe you feel like just staying down for the 10 count. Get back up. Don't give up, keep sowing! Don't give up fighting for the rights of the unborn and abandoned children and the sanctity of marriage and the family. Keep sowing, invest your tears faithfully trusting the Lord for the harvest.

You say, "OK Nate, that's motivating and all but isn't all this hope talk just blind optimism? Yeah it might make you feel better, but how can we really know there is hope for this world, for the injustices, for the pain and suffering, for my problems?" Did you notice the Psalmist said those who *sow with weeping WILL return rejoicing*? That doesn't sound like blind optimism, that sounds like grounded assurance. The Psalmist trusted God to bring them hope for their labor, but this Psalm is also looking forward to the promised Messiah- the one who would come to restore all things forever, the one who would bring a harvest of salvation and joy to the world. Friends, we have the same grounded assurance to anchor our hope and restore our joy in the gospel of Jesus! Jesus Christ was a man of sorrows. Even in his grief, bearing the rejection and the sin of the world, he went to the cross- sowing with tears. His body was buried like a seed in the ground and it seemed like all hope was buried with him. But what was sown in tears, he reaped in joy with the harvest of his resurrection. Jesus Christ got knocked down and Satan thought he had the victory, but he got back up. And what feels like a dream, that you and I would be forgiven, redeemed, restored- is a reality. He is the stream of life in the desert. And one day Jesus will return and take all our grief, our tears and our prayers, and mix them together and bring to birth a whole new world, free from injustice, and pain and suffering and you and I will be completely the version of ourselves we always hoped we can be.¹ And so we toil and till, in the grounded assurance, a living hope that we know where all this is going. We know the end of the story and it's beautiful. Whatever setback you face today you know where this goes.

So don't give up hope, trust in the track record and character of God. As *Charles Spurgeon once said: "God is too good to be unkind and He is too wise to be mistaken. And when we cannot trace His hand, we must trust His heart."* Keep asking the God who brings streams to the desert to do it again in your life. Where in your life do you need to ask God to bring streams into the desert? And do it again? And where do you need to keep sowing seed, investing your tears in

¹ Thanks to John Mark Comer for this phrasing.

the good that Jesus has called you to, trusting that he will bring the harvest? Trusting that in due time the Lord will appear and your labor will not be vain.