

The Ride of Your Life: Why New Beginnings are so Vital to Your Voyage (126)

Chris Altrock – May 2, 2010

On Sunday mornings at Highland, we've been reflecting on the overlap between some contemporary songs and some ancient songs. The contemporary songs we've been exploring come from television's "The Travel Channel" which produced a list of the "Top 40 Travel Songs of All Time."¹ These are the songs which people say they most love to listen to when they drive or fly. Song #37 on that list is by a group called U2. The song is entitled, "Where the Streets Have No Name." Bono, the group's lead singer, was inspired to write the song after learning that on certain streets in Northern Ireland it was possible to determine the religion and wealth of a person simply from which side or end of the street they lived. That is, the name of the street told you something about the religion and wealth of those who lived there. The street names served to divide and segment people. In an interview, Bono remarked, "*That said something to me. And so I started writing about a place where the streets have no name.*" Let's listen to the first part of that song: *I wanna run, I want to hide, I wanna tear down the walls, That hold me inside, I wanna reach out, And touch the flame, Where the streets have no name, I want to feel, Sunlight on my face, I see the dust cloud disappear, Without a trace, I want to take shelter from the poison rain, Where the streets have no name...* The song is cry for things to change. Bono hopes for a time when people will no longer be divided and segmented—a time when streets have no names. It may seem an odd travel song. But I think people voted for it because it's about the ultimate journey—the journey from the way things are to the way things ought to be.

There is a similar travel song in the Bible. For two Sundays I've noted that thousands of years ago, during some of the most important journeys which the Jews undertook, the Jews compiled a list of their own travel songs. We know these travel songs as Psalms 120-134.

For two Sundays I've mentioned that there are four things to know about Ps. 120-134.

- First, these psalms were called the "Songs/Psalms of Ascents." The word "ascents" can refer to a slope or a stairway.² All 15 of these psalms relate to a journey or an ascent.
- Second, Psalms 120-134 were sung by Jewish pilgrims as they travelled to and from Jerusalem for three annual religious festivals.³
- Third, the Jews believed that these 15 Psalms corresponded to the 15 steps that pilgrims would ascend as they moved in the temple in Jerusalem from the Court of Women to the Court of Israel.⁴
- And fourth, the book of Ezra (2:1, 7:9) uses the verb "to ascend" to describe the Jewish exiles returning from Babylon to Jerusalem. These 15 psalms were likely sung by the exiles.⁵

And one of those songs, Ps. 126, is similar to U2's song "Where The Streets Have No Name." It is a cry things to change. It's about a journey from the way things are to the way things ought to be. Let's listen to it: *1When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. 2Then 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." 3The LORD has done great*

things for us; we are glad. 4Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb! 5 Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! 6He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. (Ps. 126 ESV)

Imagine a couple of guys, or a small group of men and women. As they travel to Jerusalem they start one of those “Remember when...” conversations. They dialogue about sweet memories from the past. That’s what vv. 1-3 capture. *Verses 1-3 capture the past: 1When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. 2Then 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.” 3The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad.* This “Remember when...” conversation centers on a time in the past when God “restored the fortunes.” At its core, that phrase refers to change. And not just slight change. *It refers to a radical change.* It refers to a turn around. A reversal. For example, “restore the fortunes” can refer to a radical change in *direction*. Sometimes it’s used in the Bible when a group of soldiers is pursuing an enemy and then, for some reason, they break off pursuit and turn completely around. It can refer to a change of *mind*. When someone changes their thinking or has a change of heart in the Bible, this is the phrase that is used. It can also refer to a change in *circumstance*—a radical turnaround in circumstances.

For example, you may have heard of a man in the Bible named Job. Even today we talk about someone having “the patience of Job.” At the beginning of the story of Job, things are awful. A hostile tribe kills Job’s servants and steals his oxen and donkeys. A forest-fire or grass-fire burns up all his sheep and the shepherds who were watching them. Another tribe kills more of Job’s servants and steals his camels. And worst of all, a tornado smashes into the house containing his seven sons and three daughters. Not one survives. Job’s life-journey is headed off a cliff. But by the end of Job’s story everything changes. Job has seven new sons and three new daughters. His oxen, donkeys, sheep, and camels far exceed what he had before. Everything is back like it once was, only better. And to describe this radical change of circumstance the Bible says this: *And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job (Job 42:10 ESV).*

As these pilgrims in Ps. 126 travel to Jerusalem for a religious festival, they remember a time when God restored *their* fortunes. We don’t know exactly what they are remembering. They could be remembering a 9-11 moment in the life of their nation when they came under attack but then things changed and they were victorious. They could be remembering a Great Recession when the economy in their nation tumbled but then God brought economic recovery. They could be remembering a time when a disease like swine flu swept through their nation but then God brought healing. Whatever it is, it was one of the radical changes, those reversals. The journey of life had been headed in one direction. And then suddenly God spun them around and they were headed in the opposite direction. God “restored their fortunes.”

The change was so radical that these pilgrims say “*we were like those who dream.*” In other words, things went from bad to good so drastically that they were pinching themselves. They knew it just had to be a dream. And when they realized it wasn’t, their mouths were filled with laughter and joy. Even outsiders—here, called “the nations,”—who saw or heard about what

happened, remarked, *“The LORD has done great things for them.”* The terrorist attacks stopped. People once out of work became employed. The plague vanished. And even outsiders noticed the turnaround and said, *“The LORD has done great things for them.”* God *“restored their fortunes.”*

I remember one early morning several years ago when I received a phone call. A young married woman from this congregation had recently given birth to a son and some kind of complication had just set in. She was being rushed to the emergency room as we talked. But by the time I arrived at the hospital she was gone. It was about the worst set of circumstances I had ever witnessed. Many of us wondered how things would work out for this young man named Wasim. He was now a widower, with a new son and two other daughters. Things seemed grim. But today, years later, Wasim is happily re-married to a woman named Valerie and they have three sons and two daughters. Every Sunday morning Wasim, Valerie, Claire, Caroline, Seth, Jacob, and Philip worship at Highland and serve with Highland. And they are living proof that God restores fortunes. God can take a journey of life which seems headed toward despair and darkness and completely turn it around so that it's headed toward love and life.

One of the youth ministers in this congregation is named Buster. He came to Memphis State planning to be a leader in business. He hoped to eventually make a lot of money. Buster grew in his Christian faith, got baptized, became a salesman, and planned on climbing the corporate ladder. But after he and Kim, the woman who is now his wife, got more and more involved in ministry and service others, God reversed Buster's plans 180 degrees. Buster left his sales career and was chosen to be Highland's youth minister. For more than twenty years he has devoted his life to helping young people learn to love Jesus and live like Jesus. Through his leadership teens in the Mid-South have painted hundreds of homes as part of Highland's Work Camp and served thousands of children through what we call TIME trips. God *“restored the fortunes”* of Buster. He took a life-journey that was headed in one direction and turned it completely around.

This congregation works closely with a ministry to the unemployed called HopeWorks. A few weeks ago I went with representatives of HopeWorks to the men's prison in Whiteville, TN. Antonio Owens was with us. He is a staff member at HopeWorks and has spoken at Highland several times. Antonio got up in front of those convicts in Whiteville and talked about how he had been in their shoes. He had been in prison. He had used drugs. His journey had been headed toward a long life in prison or a short life on the streets. But there he was that day—clean, sober, educated, and helping these soon-to-be-released convicts. God restored Antonio's fortunes. He turned Antonio's life around.

But what about the present? All these stories are from the past. All this text has been about the past. Is all this radical change only a thing of the past? Let's listen to the psalm one more time: *1When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. 2Then 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." 3The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad. 4Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb! 5 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. (Ps. 126 ESV) Where verses 1-3 are about the past, verses 4-6 are about the present. Now the pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem stop talking *about* God and start talking *to* God. They stop partying about the past and start praying about the present. Apparently, some of these pilgrims' journeys are not going so well in the present. There are troubles back in their home communities. Or they have some health issues. Or their marriage is falling apart. Or money is tight. Or their kids keep getting into trouble. Or there is recurring sin in one man's life. Or there is recurring addiction in one woman's life. And now, as they think about the present, they pray: "*Restore our fortunes, O LORD...!*" "Do today what you did back then." "Turn my life around today just as you turned others around yesterday."

And the travelers use two illustrations to demonstrate what they pray God will do today. First, they think of the *sudden* way that the streams in the Negeb would fill and flow. The word "Negeb" means "dry" and refers to the southernmost part of Judah. For parts of the year the river beds there were dry and dusty. But during other parts of the year, rain would fall and the river beds would quickly fill and flow.⁶ There would be flash floods during which the river beds would be gorged with water. And the pilgrims beg for God to bring about that kind of sudden change to whatever negative circumstances they are dealing with in the present. They believe that God is still capable, in the present, of a sudden turn of events. *They pray for sudden change.*

But they also pray for slow change. They think of the slow change that comes when a farmer sows seeds in a field. One day, the farmer goes out and toils and labors and sweats to plant seeds. But weeks later, he comes back in with the sheaves of the harvest. What was once just dirt and seeds is now a rich, abundant, and fruitful harvest. The change didn't happen overnight. It took weeks. But the change was nonetheless dramatic. And it brought joy to the farmer. These pilgrims beg God to bring about that kind of change to whatever negative circumstances they are dealing with in the present. They don't care if it's sudden change or slow change, they just want change. They want a turn in the journey of their lives. And they believe God can bring it about in the present, just as he did in the past.

If I were to say just one thing about the Highland Church, I would say this: We're a group of people who also believe that God can bring about radical change in the present. There are people with us this morning whose marriages are falling apart. There are people here this morning with sexual addictions that no one knows about. There are people here who are so lonely you don't even want to think about going back home after worship. There are people here with cancer that looks like it's going to win. But we at Highland are the people who believe that God can still bring about radical change. He can still restore fortunes. It may be sudden change. It may be slow change. But we believe God still brings the change. And it's our prayer that this new building will become God's restoration headquarters—a place from which his restoration flows into the lives of millions. We believe God can turn around *your* life right here and right now. And, we believe that by working together with God, that restoration can spread to this city and to this world.

We believe this not only because we've experienced it and because these travelers sang of it. We believe it because Jesus lived it. The journey of Jesus' life seemed headed only to darkness and despair. He was nailed on a cross, abandoned by his friends, and rejected by the religious establishment. But God restored his fortunes. God raised Jesus from the dead. He turned things around for Jesus. And that same Jesus has done the same for us. Most of us associated with this congregation have personally experienced a kind of death and resurrection reversal. In the words of that famous hymn "Amazing Grace," many of us at Highland were lost, but now we are found; we were blind, but now we see. Hundreds of us have walked into a pool of water, weighed down with sin, and with a direction in life we wanted to escape, we confessed our faith in Jesus, and we were immersed in that water. Then we walked out of that water a brand new person with a brand new direction. That's the business that God is in.

You may know that a man named David is the author of some of the psalms. Even if you're not an active churchgoer, you may have heard of David. He was that young boy who became the king of Israel but then had an affair with a married woman and killed that woman's husband. The child they conceived died. The journey of David's life was headed off a cliff. But in the darkness, David prayed the prayer of Ps. 126. David prayed in Ps. 51, "*Restore to me the joy of your salvation...* (v. 12). It's the same word: "restore." Even in the darkest, messiest, and most sin-filled moment, David believed that God could do what he's always done: restore. He believed God could still turn things around.

We believe God can do that for you today. Some of our elders and staff and spouses are going to be available for prayer in the aisles. If you'd like to pray the prayer of Ps. 126 this morning, go to one of them while we sing this song.

If you need a turnaround and would like to talk privately with one of our shepherds, then go to what we call The Shepherd's corner—a set of tables and chairs in the hallway adjacent to the church offices.

And if you'd like to take that first step of faith toward restored fortunes, you can do that this morning as well. Two weeks ago we baptized Brady Hoggard, the first person to be baptized in this baptistery. You can take the same step this morning. Just see any of us in the aisles or down front and we'll baptize you today.

¹ <http://www.worldhum.com/features/lists/world-hum-top-40-travel-songs-of-all-time-20081208/>

² Thomas, Robert L.: *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries : Updated Edition*. Anaheim : Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998, 1981, S. H4608

³ James L. Mays *Psalms* Interpretation (John Knox 1994), 385-386; Hughes, Robert B. ; Laney, J. Carl: *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Tyndale House Publishers, 2001 (The Tyndale Reference Library), S. 224

⁴ Allen, 219; Richards, Lawrence O.: *The Bible Readers Companion*. electronic ed. Wheaton : Victor Books, 1991; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996, S. 378; Archer, Gleason Leonard: *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*. 3rd. ed.]. Chicago : Moody Press, 1998, c1994, S. 499

⁵ Allen, 219.

⁶ Derek Kidner *Psalms 73-50* Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (IVP, 1973), 439.