

Modern Longings -- Ancient Words *Longing for Restoration*

Psalm 98

This sermon will be done in an interview format, i.e., one in which Pastor Jeff will speak with Pastor Greg about how Ps 98 has affected his ministry and personal relationships. These notes provide the main points.

The Overview of Psalm 98

Ps 98 is the basis for Isaac Watts' famous hymn, *Joy to the World*. And, as we read the Psalm, we see that it is indeed filled with joy because it tells us that there will be a time in which “*all the earth will burst into jubilant song with music*” (v.4) and will “*shout for joy before the Lord, the king*” (v.6). We usually sing *Joy to the World* at Christmas and think of the time when Jesus was born into this world in Bethlehem. However, as we look at the Psalm itself, we see that its main point is not so much the 1st coming of Jesus to begin the work of God's salvation as it is about the 2nd coming of Jesus to complete God's salvation.

Take out Ps 98 and let me walk you through it:

1. **It remembers what God has done in the past (98:1-3).**

As is so often the case in the Psalms, the Psalmist remembered the past “marvelous things” God had done for his people Israel. But, one thing that fills this Psalm is that God has done marvelous things not only for Israel but also for “the nations” (v.2), i.e., for “all the ends of the earth” (v.3).

2. **It implies that God's work is not yet done.**

Without directly stating it, the Psalmist wrote the Psalm in a way that demonstrates to anyone reading it that the Psalmist understands God is still at work in this world. Indeed, he knows fully that there is much work needs to be done. The world the Psalmist lived in was in need of God's miraculous work – as is ours!

3. **It looks forward to the day that God will complete his work in this world (98:4-8).**

This is the source of the joy. All the earth shouts for joy in v. 4 because of what will happen when God completes his work. And, the Bible literally means “all” the earth – both the people and everything else too: the sea and everything in it, the land and whatever exists on it. It's clear that all creation, animate and inanimate has been negatively affected by human sin.

And, this final work of God to make all things new will happen with the return of the King. The great epic literature of every culture and time in history draws upon this message, i.e., that the world needs a good and powerful king to come and change things. Ps 98 tells us a king will someday return and restore all that has been broken in this world due to our sin.

4. **It tells us judgment is a part of the joy-filled victory (98:9). *Sing, for the King comes to judge...***

This is the part of the Psalm we often ignore. In fact, when I hear “*Joy to the World*” in the shopping malls at Christmas, I don't hear anyone singing the 3rd stanza that says, “*No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground*” for the king comes to deal with the curse of sin wherever it has done damage in the world. I love how Pastor Tim Keller summarizes this Psalm. “*Joy to the world. The king is coming. He's coming to judge us! Yay!! What??*”

So, as I read this psalm, it says that in the midst of a very broken world, we know that God has power to change things for he has done it before. We cling to the promise that God will make all things right -- and that the final marker of his work will be the return of the King. And, it tells us that a part of God's re-creating work is that evil will be called out and judged so that God's kingdom of peace and justice will prevail.

So, we participate now in the process of what the New Testament calls “reconciliation”, i.e., taking what is broken and restoring it to what it is meant to be. This is the larger message of Ps 98 that has shaped the way I deal with things that emerge in our congregation that are clearly broken.

The Interview

1. Greg, I'm going to launch in right where you ended that overview. Psalm 98 seems to me to be thoroughly counter-cultural with its message that blends joy and judgment; discipline and restoration. Help us to understand why it has been so important for you and your ministry here at Lake.

I try to follow the template I see in this Psalm. A situation arises in the church or in a person's life that seems to be fully broken – so messy – usually because of sin. Often, at first, the situation seems to be

impossible. That is to say, I don't know what to do. But, as this Psalmist did, I take time to “zakar”, the Hebrew word for remember. I remember that God can do what I can't do. I remember that God has done miraculous things over and over. Then, I look forward to His promise to heal things and make all things new. I know Jesus came to bear the punishment for sin – and that a new start is always available for those who turn to him. I know both that sin is serious so that evil should not be ignored and swept under the rug. But, I also know that God's grace is greater than our sin. I embrace the Bible's teaching that one of the main reasons God has placed local churches like ours into the world is to be communities in which his work of remaking people takes place. So, remembering those things, I enter into a process with people that I pray will lead to restoration.

2. You have roughed out a visual to show how you envision restoration taking place in the context of a local church like ours. Let's see that. Please talk us through it.

Joy to the World

Where We Are (Our Condition)
Broken (Because of our sin)

Where We Will Be (God's Promise)
Restored (Because of God's grace)

What God Is Doing Now (The Process)
Reconciling the World (In Christ)

I take that very simple visual and begin with each situation that comes to me. Something arises in a marriage, a family or in our church that simply is broken. No matter how thoroughly broken it is, I know that God says it does not have to stay that way. He sent Jesus to begin the process of healing what is broken. And, as I said earlier, I believe one reason God brings a church existence is to participate in His reconciling work in people's lives. In Gal 6:1-4, we are told that when there is sin and brokenness in the church family, we are to work to restore people -- and that we are to do it with gentleness and humility. That is our mandate. So, with all that in mind, I enter into people's lives and into the process I put in the graphic with the faith that God can do more than I even know how to ask him to do.

3. That “Reconciliation Process” strikes me as being very hard. What kinds of steps should we anticipate in that?

I balk a bit at giving 1-2-3 kinds of steps because human beings don't seem to find healing in the same ways each time. And, the Bible doesn't really give us a formula to follow each time either. You and I have both stepped into situations in which we know that God calls us to be involved in this kind of work, but we don't know precisely how things will play out along the way. We have to keep coming back to the Lord again and again for guidance. But, at the same time, we keep going simply knowing that this is what God calls us to do.

Having said that, I have several words that I keep before me in the process – words that I think are consistent with biblical teaching:

- **Confession** – The whole truth needs to come out. In countless situations, people who have had sins being discovered have confessed only what has already come out. Since Adam and Eve hid in the bushes after they had sinned, people have kept hiding things. We feel shame. We experience real guilt. We hope to solve things on our own. But, it's hard to fix anything that is still in the dark. As painful as it is to bring things out into the light, ultimately it will be freeing. Bottom line: Transparency is essential to healing. It's not that the sin has to be broadcast to everyone. But, those involved in the process need to know the truth.
- **Repentance** – That's the word for turning around and going a new direction. I've found it involves owning up to how much pain our sin has caused others. And, when addictions have set in, I've found that something needs to happen to begin the process of uprooting the cause and source of the addiction. In repentance, we say something like, “Lord, I've sinned against you and against others. I ask your forgiveness. I ask for your guidance to know how to apologize genuinely and seek forgiveness from those I've hurt. By your grace and through your power, I will no longer live as I have.” To change long established habits or patterns of life may require professional counseling, a 12-step kind of program, and accountability. You will need a good support group in your church family to walk with you.

- **Discipline** – I use the word discipline rather than punishment or even judgment even though good disciplinary action always involves making judgments. The Bible’s word for discipline always, always, always has the goal of the relationship being restored as far as that is possible. I say “as far as possible” because when abuse or violence are in the brokenness, then whatever restoration might be possible does not mean someone should go back into a place of danger.
- **Holy Spirit Working in Community** – By this, I am thinking of all the things that should happen when you are involved in your church family, e.g., faithful worship in the services, participation in a small group, serving as God enables you, prayer, accountability, etc. God does is liberating work in you as you are faithfully involved in the church family you are called to.

Those are some of the things that come to mind, Jeff, as I think about this process.

4. So, it seems to me that this means that we understand God’s judgment, as Psalm 98 speaks of it, is not at all the end-goal of God’s restoration but an essential part of the process? Let me talk about that one.

We want the restoration without the judgment... or want the judgment to come from us and not God. I really think we get hung up on this – I know I do. In one sense we don’t love the idea of God bringing judgment to us personally – but we want “judgment” and “justice” for others and for the places of injustice. We want things to be made right - BUT, we just want that to happen the way we think it should happen. Especially in the world we live in, we assume that the right thing (justice) is what we believe to be right and that getting enough people to think like us and believe like we do – that whatever wrong is out there can be made right... or we are frankly more focused on what people think is right versus doing what is right! And all this is human centered versus God centered... We want to be the judgment bringers... and by making the correct judgment it all is made right. But, Greg, this Psalm and this bigger conversation we are having is bigger than the verdict of judgement - what is right or wrong – it is more about the role of Gods judgment in reconciliation...

5. As we were talking last Tuesday, we began speaking of what I called “personal ingredients” that are significant in the reconciliation process if brokenness will be healed and restoration will take place. Some of them are mentioned specifically in Psalm 98. Talk about what those are and your experience with them.

Yes, Jeff, three ingredients are stated in Ps 98 – but the first is a word so profound in Hebrew (“hesed”) that we need two English words to apply it. Here are the necessary personal ingredients I find necessary:

- **Love** (v.3) – Just as God loves each person and acts in ways that are best for us, so each party needs to have the longing of God for the other person in their heart, i.e., each person needs to truly long to have the best possible thing happen in the other person’s life. This means turning from self-focus to “others-focus”. Sin usually means that the perfect relationship we once longed for may not be possible. But, we still want God’s best for all involved – and pray for it.
- **Commitment** (v.3) – The word for love in v.3, hesed, refers to God making a covenant to be faithful to keep loving all who turn to him in repentance and faith. He makes a commitment to us. If we return to him, he will forgive us and start again with us. We all need to make that to one another when we begin this reconciliation process – each individual to one another; all of us to the church engaged in the process, and all of us to glorify the Lord in how we go about the matter. I’ve found that, for restoration to happen, each party needs to make a commitment to stick with the process because we will all have things happen that make us want to quit.
- **Equity** (v.9) – What a great word to guide us! What a hard word to achieve! It has to do with each party looking at a matter and saying, “That’s good and appropriate for us all!” It’s not the kind of settlement in which one or the other party thinks, “I won! I got her/him!” Or, one says, “I got ripped off in the deal.” It says that what has happened is good for each individual, good for the church and ultimately, good in the eyes of the Lord. The world should be able to look at what has happened and say, “What a great God they have!!”
- **Justice** (v.9) – We misuse this powerful and beautiful word in our society. It’s not just about judgment – though that surely is necessary for justice to be achieved. It’s not just about punishment – though that

sometimes is appropriate too. Justice is a word that means, “Everything has been made right.” When justice happens:

- 1) Everything wrong has been disclosed.
- 2) Appropriate discipline has been enacted.
- 3) Genuine apologies have been spoken.
- 4) Forgiveness has been offered and accepted.
- 5) All parties renew their commitment to live a life glorifying God.

It seems idealistic, Jeff. But, you and I have both seen this at work. You keep your eyes on that goal of God’s restoration and just keep taking steps in that direction. It seems, at the beginning and sometimes in the midst of the process, impossible. But, we can give witness, can’t we, to the fact that God does work to bring about this kind of restoration in which justice reigns.

6. What is your hope for how this message based on Psalm 98 will change us as individuals, as families and as a church?

There are so many things, Jeff – so many things. I pray we as a church will not look at people just for what they’ve been or done in the past but for what they can be if they will let God do his work in them.

I pray too that, when failures come to the surface in the lives of anyone in our church, we will not give up on them. The truth is, as one of our spiritual leaders, Dave Rumpf, once told me, “We all need to be found out. We all need to be set free from sin and to be restored in our walks with God.” He was right. I pray that we will take the brokenness caused by sin seriously and never close our eyes to that. At the same time, I want us to be a church fully involved in our small groups and classes – in our children’s and student ministries -- in God’s work of rescuing, reconciling and restoring people.

And, I pray we will celebrate each recovery – each life finding a new beginning and our church a place of growth. And, may that happen until we sing “Joy to the World, the Lord has come.”