



Psalm 126 - A Harvest of Joy

A Song of Ascents.

Introduction

This is a community lament that recalls a previous time of God's mercy on his people and asks for a fresh show of that mercy. The psalm does not specify which particular mercy or crisis is in view, and it is well-suited to a wide variety of comparable situations. In such crises, God's people may take encouragement from past events of mercy and pray for more of it. Repeated words that tie together the two halves of the psalm are: <<***the Lord restore the fortunes***>>, and: <<***shouts of joy***>>. The psalm also reminds God's people that their well-being impacts the nations around them.

It is the seventh in the series of 15 songs for pilgrims coming to Jerusalem. This song likely was composed after the exile, in wondrous gratitude for God's restoration and praying for a furtherance of that work. Refer also to the comment made on Psalm 120.

Psalm 126:1-3 - Recalling the Past Restoration of Zion.

The psalm opens by remembering some event in the past in which God restored the fortunes of Zion. This great mercy, which they could hardly believe, i.e. <<***like those who dream***>>, filled the people with gladness; it also impressed the nations with God's care for his people, and the people themselves took up the Gentiles' cry: <<***the Lord has done great things for us***>>.

- ¹ When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

Psalm 126:1

When the Lord restored the fortunes. The psalmist sang of a time when God set his people free from their captivity, and they were restored to Jerusalem, i.e.

Zion. Most associate this with the return from exile under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah: *<<In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared: ‘Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of those among you who are of his people – may their God be with them! – are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel – he is the God who is in Jerusalem>>* (Ezra 1:1-3), but it is also possible that it describes David’s return from his brief exile from Jerusalem in Absalom’s coup; refer to 2 Samuel Chapter 15. As one of the Songs of Ascents, the reader can imagine these words in the mouth of pilgrims on the way to or having arrived at Jerusalem. Perhaps they considered their seasons away from Jerusalem as a symbolic captivity, and they celebrated the larger return from exile and their current, personal experience of such. However, the expression is more general than that: *<<And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before>>* (Job 42:10), *<<O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion! When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad>>* (Psalm 14:7), *<<Lord, you were favourable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob>>* (Psalm 85:1), and: *<<Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions; they have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen oracles for you that are false and misleading>>* (Lamentations 2:14); also vv.5-6 refer to the more general type of restoration.

We were like those who dream. With power and beauty, the poet described the sense of happy, grateful astonishment at the power and goodness of God in bringing back his people from the captivity of Zion. It seemed too good, too great to be true, but it was true, as was the fact that Jacob’s favourite son was not dead: *<<And they told him, ‘Joseph is still alive! He is even ruler over all the land of Egypt.’ He was stunned; he could not believe them>>* (Genesis 45:26), as was the resurrection of Jesus: *<<But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them>>* (Luke 24:11), and the release of Peter from Herod’s prison: *<<Peter went out and followed him; he did not realise that what was happening with the angel’s help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision>>* (Acts 12:9).

Derek Kidner observed, “Whether Zion’s was from famine or siege, captivity or plague, it had been obviously miraculous and widely talked about. It remained a vivid national memory (the lively paraphrase in TEV: ‘it was like a dream! How we laughed, how we sang for joy ... how happy we were’), as inspiring as the outbreaks of revival in the Christian church.”

- 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts 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 rejoiced.

Psalm 126:2-3

Then our mouth was filled with laughter. They celebrated God's amazing work with laughter and singing. There was so much laughing that their mouth was filled with it. Spurgeon commented, "The mercy was so unexpected, so amazing, so singular that they could not do less than laugh; and they laughed much, so that their mouths were full of it, and that because their hearts were full too." He also quoted Martin Luther, "We must raise up ourselves with this consideration – that the gospel is nothing else but laughter and joy. This joy properly pertains to captives, that is, to those that feel the captivity of sin and death. These are the disciples in whose hearts should be planted laughter and joy, and that by the authority of the Holy Ghost, which this verse sets forth."

It was said among the nations. Israel was called to be God's living testimony among the nations that he is the one true God, Maker of heaven and earth. Sometimes this testimony would be through God's purifying judgements: <<*they and indeed all the nations will wonder, 'Why has the Lord done thus to this land? What caused this great display of anger?' They will conclude, 'It is because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord, the God of their ancestors, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt. They turned and served other gods, worshipping them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them; so the anger of the Lord was kindled against that land, bringing on it every curse written in this book. The Lord uprooted them from their land in anger, fury, and great wrath, and cast them into another land, as is now the case'*>> (Deuteronomy 29:24-28); ideally it would be through Israel's faithfulness and verbal witness: <<*Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity'*>> (Psalm 96:10). God's great deeds for his people also provide testimony, for example: <<*so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God for ever*>> (Joshua 4:24), and: <<*I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes*>> (Ezekiel 36:23).

The Lord has done great things for them. The sense of joyful amazement was not confined to the people of God. On looking nations had to proclaim that the work belonged to Yahweh, and that the work was truly great. Adam Clarke commented, “The liberty now granted was brought about in so extraordinary a way that the very heathens saw that the hand of the great Jehovah must have been in it.” Spurgeon added, “These foreigners were no dreamers; though they were only lookers-on, and not partakers in the surprising mercy, they plainly saw what had been done, and rightly ascribed it to the great Giver of all good.”

The Lord has done great things for us. The singer heard what the nations said, agreed with it, emphasised it with repetition, and personalised it. It became the declaration of what God had done for his people: <<***Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things!***>> (Joel 2:21).

It could be said that there are four occasions where many experience great joy and the sense that God has done great things in the Christian life:

- The joy of salvation.
- The joy of spiritual victory.
- The joy of Christian fellowship.
- The joy of a new work for God.

And we rejoiced. There is a joyful peace in the declaration. This is not a worked-up, hyped-up enthusiasm. This was the confident joy in what God had done, simply to declare **we rejoiced**. Clarke observed, “This is a mere burst of ecstatic joy. O how happy are we!” And Spurgeon noted, “It is a poor modesty which is ashamed to own its joy in the Lord. Call it rather a robbery of God.”

Psalm 126:4-6 - Prayer for a Renewed Restoration.

The words of v.1 here become a prayer: <<***Restore our fortunes, O Lord***>>, i.e. “show us mercy now as you have done in the past.” The images that follow: the streams in the Negeb and seed for sowing seem to illustrate the kind of renewal asked for, namely, a good year for crops. Since Israel’s life in the land was to show forth a new Eden for all the world to see, such agricultural fruitfulness would necessarily be tied to active faithfulness on the part of the people: <<***and the Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul***>> (Deuteronomy 30:9-10).

- ⁴ Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

Psalm 126:4

Restore our fortunes, O Lord. The second half of Psalm 126 does not deny the amazed joy of the first half, but it recognises that there is still work still to be done. The returning exiles, whether under David or post-exilic leadership, realised there was much work yet to do, and the restoration had only yet begun. However, they recognised that it was the fulfilment of a promise: *<<then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the Lord your God has scattered you>>* (Deuteronomy 30:3). The reader may imagine the sense of one whose life is profoundly changed by Jesus Christ. They are grateful and amazed at what he has done, yet can in the next moment consider how much more needs to be done.

The Negeb is the arid southern region of Judah; when the rain fell in far away mountains its dry gullies became watercourses that would turn the land green with plants. The watercourses in the Negeb flowed and it was the work of the Lord: *<<He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water>>* (Psalm 107:35), *<<I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert>>* (Isaiah 43:19), and: *<<For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song>>* (Isaiah 51:3). Those watercourses could appear suddenly and rush with a mighty flow, sometimes known as flash floods. The psalmist prayed for a mighty, sudden work of God in just this fashion to further the work of restoration among his people.

Kidner commented, “Few transformations more dramatic than that of a dry gully into a torrent. Such can be the effect of a downpour, which can also turn the surrounding desert into a place of grass and flowers overnight.” And Clarke added, “They desired that their return might be as rapid and as abundant as the waters of those rivers.”

- ⁵ May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
- ⁶ Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

Psalm 126:5-6

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. The gladness of the first half of Psalm 126 was real, but only part of the picture. With wisdom the psalmist

reminded himself and all believers in God that great joy is often preceded by a season of tears, as if they are seeds sown that will bring a crop of joy to be later reaped. Kidner observed, “The two images of renewal (v.4b and vv.5-6) are not only striking: they are complementary. The first of them is all suddenness, a sheer gift from heaven; the second is slow and arduous, with man allotted a crucial part to play in it.”

This illustration puts a connection between the tears and the joy. Some Christians want to reap the joy without ever having sown the tears. Spurgeon commented, “He drops a seed and a tear, a seed and a tear, and so goes on his way. In his basket he has seed which is precious to him, for he has little of it, and it is his hope for the next year. Each grain leaves his hand with anxious prayer that it may not be lost: he thinks little of himself, but much of his seed, and he eagerly asks, ‘Will it prosper? Shall I receive a reward for my labour?’ Yes, good husbandman, doubtless you will gather sheaves from your sowing.”

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. The idea is repeated and enlarged. Those who have endured much weeping, if they truly carry it as seed for sowing – holding and casting it with faith in God and in his promise – may be assured of reaping a good harvest: <<*For you also, O Judah, a harvest is appointed*>> (Hosea 6:11), and: <<*So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up*>> (Galatians 6:9). Kidner commented, “Both the going forth and the coming home are stressed by a doubling of the verb, and might be translated, ‘He that surely goes forth weeping, will surely come home with shouts of joy.’”

Shall come home with shouts of joy. Tears truly sown in faith will bring in time a true harvest of rejoicing, as if the reapers held heavy sheaves of grain. This is a powerful and great promise that tears and sorrows need not be wasted, but can be sown for a joyful harvest received in a better season. Spurgeon commented, “Because the Lord has written doubtless, take heed that you do not doubt. No reason for doubt can remain after the Lord has spoken.” In the joy of the present pilgrim gathering, the reader may sense the singers enjoying that harvest, yet wisely understanding that there will be future tears to sow in faith.

Alexander Maclaren wondered how much encouragement and strength “have been drawn for centuries from the sweet words of this psalm. Who can tell how many hearts they have braced, how much patient toil they have inspired? The psalmist was sowing seed, the fruit of which he little dreamed of, when he wrote them, and his sheaves will be an exceeding weight indeed.”