

The journey to Jerusalem invoked the memory of happier days when “the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion.” Those were the days when Israel was filled with laughter and songs of joy. From the time of David onward Israel spoke of “the fortunes of Zion.” Pilgrims trekked to Jerusalem for the annual feasts with a keen sense of God’s redemptive history. Each travel day began and ended with stories of God’s victory, whether it was the exodus from Egyptian bondage or the conquest of the promised land or a defeat of the Philistines or a return to Zion from exile in Babylon or Persia.

For Christ’s followers the songs of Zion take in the sweep of salvation history from the song of Moses to the song of the Lamb. In our praying imagination this psalm bridges the two testaments. Allen Ross writes, “Israel’s deliverance from bondage (forgiveness and restoration) filled them with joy and a new life, and our redemption from bondage of sin (forgiveness and salvation) should fill us with joy and life as well.”¹

The first psalm in the previous two triads (Psalms 120; 123) emphasized distress and contempt. Hard times were felt by pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem. But in Psalm 126, sounds of laughter and songs of joy overwhelm the memory. Instead of drought conditions in the Negev, life-giving streams; instead of sowing in tears, joyous harvests; instead of weeping, singing. The back story may be brutal but in the company of God’s people the psalmist is swept up in joy – communal joy. Lament gives way to laughter.

Dreamers

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.
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.”
The Lord has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.*

Psalm 126:1-3

Whether the psalmist had in mind the exodus or the exile Israel’s miraculous redemption felt too good to be true. The people of God felt like they were dreaming. Dreamers is an apt description of the recipients of God’s unmerited grace and favor. We have done nothing to engineer our release from bondage. We are helpless to save ourselves. We might as well be asleep. “Those who are saved must pinch themselves, as it were, to make sure it is really happening. God’s redemption of us from bondage and oppression is so marvelously incomprehensible.”² When the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room, he had to convince them that they were not dreaming or seeing a ghost. So he showed them his hands and feet, but “they still did not

¹ Ross, Psalms, 666.

² Reardon, Christ in the Psalms, 251.

believe it because of joy and amazement” (Luke 24:41). This is the kind of joy or rapture referred to in this psalm. We are the passive recipients of God’s amazing grace and our hearts are filled with joy.

Undoubtedly many of our brothers and sisters in Christ who were formerly Muslim will identify with this psalm in a unique way. They have come to faith in Christ through dreams and visions. God has revealed to them that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life *prophetically*. God has transcended the usual means of witness and spoken directly to the person and they have embraced the faith.

Exuberant, ecstatic joy captures the psalmist’s experience of salvation whether we follow the Hebrew text and read, “We were like those who dreamed,” or we follow the variant reading of the Greek text, “we were like those who are restored to health.” The phrase, “Our mouths were filled with laughter,” implies deep-seated, uninhibited joy. As the organ of expression, the mouth is filled with sounds and words of celebration and joy.³

The redemptive trajectory celebrated in this psalm climaxes in the believer’s “new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead .” We are “filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,” wrote the apostle Peter, “for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:3, 9).

We cannot engineer our own happiness, no matter how hard we try. Deep happiness belongs to those who acknowledge their desperate need for God and their inability to merit salvation. In the upper room Jesus revealed the open secret of true joy when he promised, “my joy . . . in you. . . “that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11). Our joy is tied inextricably to who God is and what God has done for us. It is because “The Lord has done great things for us” that we can be “filled with joy” (Ps 126:3). We are poor and in need of God’s riches. We are sin-sick and in need of God’s forgiveness. We are weak and resting in God’s strength. We are hungry and dependent upon God’s provision. We are holy because of God’s holy-love. True joy is as far removed from the self-made man or woman as you can imagine. We could never have created this joy. No, not in a thousand years. This joy is as Jesus says, “my joy” and belongs to us only in so far as it belongs to Jesus first.⁴

Desert Streams

*Restore our fortunes, Lord,
like streams in the Negev.
Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.*

³ Ross, Psalms, 667.

⁴ Webster, The God Who Comforts, 106-107.

Psalm 126:4-6

Augustine exclaimed that the Christian should be a “alleluia from head to toe!” There is little room here for a dour, joyless believer who knows nothing of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). “Hilarity is integral to Christian pilgrimage,” writes Eugene Peterson. “There is no question that being a Christian involves us in many sorrows, many struggles, sober hours of repentance and meditation. But there isn’t the slightest suggestion in Scripture that grim resignation is characteristic of Christian character. How could it be when God is the victor?”⁵

The psalmist is an eschatological disciple. He anticipates the fulfillment of God’s promises and the satisfaction of his God-given longings. He navigates the arid wilderness of the Negeb in southern Judah with passionate resolve. Faithfulness to the end is his commitment. His firm hope in God’s sustaining grace. Although life may feel like a long trek across a desert, the psalmist refuses to mouth a dry complaint. A sudden cloud burst revives the desert with life and beauty and inspires the psalmist with a vivid picture of God’s restoration of the fortunes of Israel. The reversal can be instantaneous. What was a dried, mud-cracked river bed suddenly becomes a powerful torrent. Streams in the desert correspond figuratively to the living water promised by Jesus: “Whoever drinks the water I will give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14).

The second picture envisions the hardscrabble existence of the farmer whose work demands blood, sweat, and tears. There are times when life feels too demanding and the deferred gratification for the long-distant harvest too great to bear. When all of life seems to boil down to work and waiting. But once again the psalmist sees the promise more than he the pain. The literal sowing and harvesting is a metaphor for struggle, but it is a faithful struggle rewarded with an abundant harvest. “Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy” (Ps 126:5).

The promise of an abundant harvest, one so great that it inspires songs of joy, corresponds to Jesus’ teaching in the upper room. Like the psalmist, Jesus promised the disciples that their grief would turn to joy. He drew his illustration from the prophet Isaiah: “A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world” (John 16:21; Isa 26:16-21). Jesus compared his disciples then and now to a woman in labor. In “a little while” (Isa 26:20) our grief will turn to joy because we have been given “new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade” (1 Pet 1:3). Jesus said, “Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy” (John 16:22). This lasting joy will not be seasonal but eternal because nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39).

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation on the Ways of God Formed By the Words of God*. New York: WaterBrook, 2017. 47.

