

Psalms of Ascent

Part 7 – Like Streams in a Desert

Psalm 126

The background of this Psalm lies in the year 586, and the 70 years of captivity in Babylon that followed. After the exile the people returned to Jerusalem and experienced the profound joy and gladness at returning to a land that God had given to them. However, the joy of freedom is tempered by the grief of seeing the walls of the city in ruins and the once fertile fields left unattended.



Many of the captives in Babylon had never known the land of Canaan. Only the aged were old enough to remember the former glory of Jerusalem. Men like Daniel, who had been taken captive as a teenager would have remembered what Canaan once had been. He would have remembered Galilee, and the Negev to the south, and the plains of central Palestine and the hills of Zion and its holy city Jerusalem. Certainly the people's euphoria would have been great as they returned to the land God had given to their fathers. In fact, as they returned to the land, the Psalm tells us that even the pagan nations looking on could only conclude that "the Lord has done great things for them" (vs. 2).

Psalm 126 is a song of deliverance. It may be neatly divided into two halves. The first half (vv. 1-3) is written in past tense recalling the Lord's faithfulness to His people. The second half (vv. 4-6) is a prayer for God to do once again what he has done in the past. The Psalmist prays for God to restore the fortunes of Zion as he had done before. Once again in this collection of Psalms we see a reference to Zion. In this sense Zion may be properly understood symbolically as the history of God's people from their entry to the Land of Promise to the establishment of the church to eternity in the age to come.

The story of God's people is one of sin, captivity, and restoration. Psalm 126 sums up that history. On the one hand, it's a story about Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar and King Darius; of men like Daniel and Ezra and Nehemiah. But this Psalm helps us understand how to properly interpret history in light of God's providence. Ultimately it is not the decrees of wicked kings or the designs of foreign invaders which craft the fate of God's people.

Main Idea: Those who experience God's gracious salvation are filled with joy and desire for others to know the same salvation and the same joy.

1. The Past

Vv. 1-3

- God routinely called his people to remember the past; to remember what he had promised and what he had done for them. In this way, remembering became an act of prayer and worship. God's past actions gave them confidence in his character as a keeper of promises. The history of God's people involves great trials, persecutions, and sufferings of all kinds. They were harassed and taken captive by Egypt and Babylon and Assyria. But those kingdoms and their kings were only players in the story God was telling. God's faithfulness to his people was so evident that even their enemies exclaimed, "The Lord has done great things for them" (vs. 2).

- The response to God's deliverance from Babylon is one of exuberant joy. In the first three verses the Psalmist uses the terms "filled with laughter," "shouts of joy," and "we are glad." This is a kind of joy which cannot be hidden. It is a visible joy. While God's people will certainly experience griefs of all sorts, it is also true that in Christ we will know times of joy so full that it will be given visible expression. And how can it not be this way? Like all of God's acts of deliverance described in the Old Testament, the release from Babylon pointed forward to that greater deliverance which would be purchased by blood of the Lord Jesus. Deliverance from earthly tyrants is a small thing compared to the deliverance from sin and death which is ours in Jesus Christ.

2. The Prayer

Vs. 4

- The second half of the Psalm takes the form of a prayer. God's faithfulness in the past having been recognized, the Psalmist now petitions the Lord to do once again what he had done for them so often in the past. Just as God had delivered them from the hands of their enemies before; just as God had restored their fortunes before the prayer is for him to do it again.
- While Psalm 126 is characterized by joy it is also a communal lament. The joy referenced is the joy of the Lord's past great works on their behalf and their hope that he will do once again what he did in the past. Certainly there is also great joy expressed over their current deliverance. However, this present joy is mixed with great lament.
- The exiles returning from Babylon, though joyful, were also grieved by the condition of Jerusalem, its surrounding lands, and the diminished number of the people. Some of their own remained in captivity. The prayer is a call to God to restore the former glory of the land, the city and its people. The concern expressed in the prayer is very much like that of the church as they pray for the salvation of the lost.

3. The Promise

Vv. 5-6

- The agricultural metaphor in verse five refers to the responsibility of the people to labor toward the great harvest. The lands surrounding Jerusalem which were once so verdant had fallen into disrepair. The fertile fields now lay fallow and unproductive. But the people understood what it would take to bring those fields back to fruitfulness. Though the labor would be difficult and often accompanied by tears, the harvest would surely follow.
- There is a principle indicated in these verses which served as an encouragement for the people returning to the Land. They were to persevere in their prayers for and labors on behalf of the full restoration of God's people. All of their labors toward that end would not be wasted. None of this calls into question the Lord's sovereignty in the restoration of his people. But in his providence, the Lord uses means to accomplish his purposes. And it pleases the Lord to use the prayers and labors of his people to bring about his grand designs.
- The promise is clear. "If the sower perseveres in the sowing, no matter how difficult or frustrating, there will be a harvest – there will be a coming rejoicing... Obviously, time passes between the going out with seed and the coming in with sheaves. But the point is clear: perseverance will pay off, the seed will produce a harvest, and the struggle will be replaced by celebration. This principle is true of agriculture; but it is also true of labor in God's kingdom" (Ross, 673).