

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us

Chas. Dickens opens “*The Tale of Two Cities*” Words perfectly descriptive of our text:

A song of ascents. Ps 126 THIS SONG OF ISRAEL’S RETURN FROM BABYLON

Some commentators: “*Most beautiful of all the Psalms!!!*”

- ¹ When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, (JERUSALEM’S TEMPLE MT RECLAIMED)
we were like those who dreamed (DON’T WAKE US)
- ² Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. (ECSTASY)
Then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.” (PAGANS: *WE NEED TO CHECK IT OUT*)
- ³ The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.
- ⁴ Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the Negev. (HOT/DRY DESERT)
- ⁵ Those who sow with tears (BITTER SOBS AT THE LOSS OF EVERYTHING)
will reap with songs of joy.
- ⁶ Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow
will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them. (GOD WILLING A HARVEST)

I. THE ECSTASY

606 Nebuchnezzar conquered Palestine only Jerusalem remained.

He was Sadaam Husain’s hero Arch anti-Semite!

Jeremiah had predicted 70 yrs. captivity (“*settle in...make the best of it*”)

Ezekiel preacher in rural countryside.

Daniel preacher in the city of Babyl.

Cyrus (Persian) conquered Babyl. Sent the Jews home to their Fatherland = celebration

It was a peak experience! Joy, dancing, singing, Ecstasy!

ILLUS: Abraham Maslow: “*peak experiences*” Absence of tension, worries/anxieties melted away, sense of oneness with family, community, nature, GOD. RARE. PASSIVE

Correlation: emotional maturity and spiritual depth. Immature/shallow religion

PSYCH: observed the relationship of emotional strength AND religious depth and connection with the Divine.

ILLUS: Pensacola Fl. Vacation Frolic on sand and in Gulf wife/children perfect!

II. AGONY

The captives return home!! Homeland is desolate. Nothing left! Walls to rebuild. Temple restored. Fields readied for planting precious seeds. Depending on God to supply rain germination of seeds and harvest of sheaves. Negev: desert. Only God will enable a crop there. UMBRELLA

ILLUS Ever felt like God was not paying attention. Heaven's phone off the hook?
650 prayers in the Bible 450 with answers

THE PROPHETS STRUGGLE:

Jeremiah in Lam. 3:44: *"thou hast wrapped thyself in a cloud so that no prayer can pass through."*
Habbakuk 1:2 *"How long shall I cry to thee and you not hear or cry violence and you not save."*
Job 30:20 *"I cry to you and you do not answer. I stand before you and you just stare at me."*

ILLUS: When his wife died Arthur Gossip (hailed "the prince of Scottish preachers: preached a sermon he titled: *"When Life Tumbles In"*.

"Our hearts are frail and there are places where the road is very steep and very lonely. But we have a wonderful God...and as Paul put it, *'what can separate us from His love?'* Not death!! He says immediately. Push that aside as an obvious impossibility. No! Not death. For standing in the roaring of the Jordan, cold to the heart with its dreaded chill and very conscious of the terror of its rushing, I too can call back to you who one day in your turn will have to cross it, be of good cheer my brothers, for I feel the bottom and it is sound."

ILLUS: Does Jesus care when I've said goodbye to the dearest on earth to me?
And my sad heart aches till it nearly breaks, is it ought to him does he see?
Oh, yes he cares, I know he cares, his heart is touched with my grief,
When the days are weary and the long nights dreary, I know my savior cares.

ILLUS: UNANSWERED PRAYER "yes" "no" "wait awhile"

ILLUS: *Of Human Bondage* (Novel & Movie) Somerset Maugham (Autobio) "Phillip"

ILLUS: Gethsemane *"if possible"* *"cup"* *"never the less..."*
Cross + torture Isa. 53 precision prediction of gross brutality!

Pierced for our transgressions
Crushed for our iniquities
Chastised for our peace
Whipped leaving stripes for our healing

ILLUS: St. Augustine *"Thou has created us for thyself oh God..."*

Of Monica's prayer (confessions)

"You oh God, in the depths of your counsel, hearing the main point of her desire, regarded not what she then asked, that you might make me what she desired."

Sometimes the answer to prayer transcends our request... God has something better than...

ILLUS: HABBAKUK 3:17 Recalls Hurricane Helene Devastation 500 miles Fla, N.&S Carolinas, Tn., Ga. 140 MPH winds. 152 deaths. Survivors interviewed thanked God for life having lost everything in the world.

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,
¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.
¹⁹ The Sovereign LORD is my strength;

LAST DAYS??? Rev. never more relevant. 4 horsemen of the apocalypse
War (110-150) Famine, Disease (covid) Pestilence (FIRES, FLOODS, QUAKES,
SUNAMIES) "Terra Firma...not"

II. Paul's "thorn in the flesh" Cor. 12 :8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

ILLUS: When Satan inflicts on us as he did on Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Job, Paul, & JC, the curse of infirmity, hardship, insult, or suffering, and we not flag in the faith but hold true...we turn calamity into victory and become God's most powerful witnesses.

ILLUS: Pres of Asbury Theol. Sem.

ILLUS: Romanian Christian prisoner. Pres. of Asbury Seminary...St. Louis. Romanian pastor.
Communist prison. Tortured, interrogated, 12, 14, 18 hours a day, weeks at a time.

Months wore on. "I can't take anymore." Voice in my head said read. Books were burned: Only had 2 books. E.Stanley Jones: **Christ and Human Suffering**-----Cpt: **"Life in the Cross."** **"Jesus took the curse of sin, and suffering in the world....and all the pain, humiliation, and disgrace of the cross and he embraced it."**

...You have your **ultimate weapon**. Kill me. I have mine: die. My sermons are on tapes and my blood will be wiped across every one of them. And they will be played over and over all across the face of **Romania**. **Underground**: the pastor wants to be a martyr. We're not stupid. Let him go. Words of Jesus: *He who saves his life will lose it, he who loses his life for my sake will find it.*

Amid the noise of abuse he heard a voice from on high. Embraced the Cross...