

## **“Blessed & Begging”**

Psalm 126

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

### **A Song of Ascents.**

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.*

*Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then they said among the nations,  
“The LORD has done great things for them.”*

*The LORD has done great things for us;  
we are glad.*

*Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
like streams in the Negeb!*

*Those who sow in tears  
shall reap with shouts of joy!*

*He who goes out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
bringing his sheaves with him.*

### **Introduction: When’s the Last Time You Really Rejoiced?**

I love to laugh. Many people might not know this about me, but I love to laugh long and hard. It’s very cathartic, a great cleansing experience, especially when I’m stressed. Not everyone connects with my sense of humor, but I remember several months ago, I was watching Brian Regan’s latest comedy special on Netflix. Brian Regan is a clean comedian whose humor I really like. I was laughing so hard my face was soaked with tears and I couldn’t see. I love laughing like that.

When I was in Uganda, Carol Lee and Meghan Bell were enjoying watching clips of Tim Hawkins on YouTube, laughing out loud. It was fun to watch them enjoying his comedy so much. At our Valentine’s Couples’ Dinner, we enjoyed some good laughs with Tim Hawkins clips and some other hilarity that will not be repeated – What happens at the Valentine’s Couples Dinner stays at the Valentine’s Couples Dinner!

But here’s a question: When was the last time you were so overwhelmed with joy over some good thing that happened to you that you really rejoiced, laughed out loud, not over someone’s comedy, but over something that happened to you? When I first realized that Beth and I were really going to go to Israel together for 10 days at no cost to us, and that I was going to get to teach the Bible in Israel, I was pretty overwhelmed with joy. It was definitely one of the best experiences of my life.

But those experiences are rare, aren’t they? Here’s another question, to put things in context: When’s the last time you got really mad at something that happened to you that you didn’t like? Does that

happen more frequently? I know it does for me. I get frustrated and angry at little things that don't go my way, while it usually takes a huge event of an unexpected positive nature to make me really rejoice.

As someone who loves language, I sometimes ponder why certain words fall out of usage. Two words we hardly ever use anymore in modern English are among my favorite words: cherish and bliss. We generally only use "cherish" in wedding vows, if at all. And no one really talks about bliss anymore, except maybe to make a sarcastic comment about "wedded bliss," almost always in a dismissive manner. Another great, almost lost word is "exult." Not exalt, but exult, "to show or feel a lively or triumphant joy; rejoice exceedingly; be highly elated or jubilant."

I'll give you my favorite use of the word "exult," and it's from the Bible, Zephaniah 3:17 –

*The LORD your God is in your midst,  
a mighty one who will save;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness;  
he will quiet you by his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing.*

God will exult over us with loud singing. He will quiet us with His love. He will rejoice over us with gladness. You know one word that beautifully sums up God's treatment of us in this verse: cherish! Ephesians 5 uses the word cherish for Christ's treatment of His church, saying much the same as what is said in Zephaniah 3:17 –

*In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. – Ephesians 5:28-30, ESV*

God cherishes you. He saves you because He delights in you. The thought of that trust ought to fill us with . . . BLISS!

### A. Blessed (vv. 1-3)

Psalm 126 opens with bliss –

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.  
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then they said among the nations,  
"The LORD has done great things for them."  
The LORD has done great things for us;  
we are glad.*

#### I. When the Lord restored . . .

The ESV translates verse 1 as "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion," which is a legitimate translation, but a more literal rendering, as reflected in the KJV and the NASB, would be – "When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion" or "When the LORD brought back the captive ones of Zion."

We aren't given any specific information about the author of Psalm 126 or the original historical context. It was placed in the Songs of Ascents to be used in gathered worship by God's people, suitable for a number of different settings and occasions, but I personally think the specific language of a return from captivity in verse 1, if taken literally, best reflects the post-exilic time in Israel. John Calvin was convinced of this, too, and that fits one of my rules for Bible interpretation – If it was good enough for Calvin, it's good enough for me.

So, it seems like the writer of this Psalm is looking back at the time when God brought back the first captives to return to Zion, to Jerusalem. The first group of captives was taken from Jerusalem off to Babylon in 605 BC. This is when Daniel and his friends were taken captive. In 597 BC, a second wave of captives were taken, including the prophet Ezekiel, who was also a priest, and King Jehoiachin, also known as King Jeconiah. Jerusalem was completely destroyed by Babylon in 586 BC, when the Temple was also demolished.

In 605 BC, Jeremiah the Prophet made a prophecy in connection with the first wave of captivity into Babylon. He said God had appointed 70 years for the Babylonian captivity, after which God would restore His people to the land. Around 538 BC, almost 70 years after Jeremiah's prophecy, Daniel, now an old man in exile, prayed to God, wondering when He would keep His promise. By Daniel's calculations, the 70 years were soon coming to an end.

Well, God heard and answered Daniel's prayer, exactly in keeping with His prophecy through Jeremiah. In 536 BC, Cyrus the Persian ruler, issued a royal decree allowing for the return of the Jews and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, including the rebuilding of the Temple. So, in 535 BC, exactly 70 years after Daniel and the first captives were taken into exile, the first group of captives returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest, and they laid the foundation for a new Temple in the same year. You can read the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to get more information on this first return.

But the rebuilding of the Temple stalled and was more difficult than they first returning exiles thought it was going to be. God's people got distracted by building their own houses and the Temple was not finished and dedicated until 516 BC – Hmm . . . 516. Isn't that exactly 70 years after the final destruction of the Temple? Yes, it is! So, the Temple was begun exactly 70 years after the exile began and was completed exactly 70 years after the exile was complete and destruction of the Temple was complete. God is sovereign over all history!

I think the people of God realized the exact timing of the return and the rebuild and were ecstatic to realize that the Lord was with them and that He remained fully in control. Add to these exact timings the fact that the prophet Isaiah had named Cyrus as the deliverer and restorer of God's people 150 years earlier, and it was all almost too good to be true. It caused laughter or joyful disbelief and it caused the people of God to pinch themselves in disbelief: *Are we dreaming? Can this really be happening, just as God foretold through His prophets so long ago?*

## 2. They said among the nations . . .

The remarkable providence of God was so amazing that even the nations took notice.

*then they said among the nations,*

*“The LORD has done great things for them.”*

The nations had seen Jerusalem surrounded and destroyed. They had seen God's people taken captive, their city and their beloved Temple in ruins, piles of burned rubble. Now, they saw streams of people

returning and rebuilding, raising from the rubble houses and even the Temple. They were amazed. What looked like the final end was not; a new beginning had been given to God's people, and even pagan unbelievers took notice and gave credit to God.

Now, here's where we must step from history to our lives and start asking some questions: When was the last time the world took notice of something happening in the church and acknowledged that the Lord's hand of blessing must be behind it? Or does the world usually hear us talking about what we want to do to the culture or what we want the culture to do for us? Are we more eager to speak of political and cultural things in a combative tone than to tell of what the Lord has done in a celebratory tone?

### **3. The LORD has done great things for us!**

Notice what is on the lips of God's people:

*The LORD has done great things for us;  
we are glad.*

If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, the LORD has done great things for you:

1. He has created you in His image and given you life.
2. He sustains you every day and every moment of your life.
3. He has given you His word, so you can know Him and know His will.
4. He sent His Son to be born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law.
5. Jesus lived a perfect life and fulfilled all righteousness for you, doing what you could never do to earn what you could never earn – a true and perfect fulfillment of the Law, a personal and eternal righteousness before God.
6. Jesus then went to the cross for your sins, taking all of your disobedience and shortcoming on Himself, covering your sins with His blood, cleansing you of every stain of evil.
7. Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath, satisfying the justice of God against your sin in His own suffering and dying.
8. Having cleansed your sin and satisfied God's wrath, Jesus died and was buried, entering into the power of death so He could overthrow death with His resurrection.
9. He rose again from the dead, defeating death and bringing everlasting life to light in His resurrection body.
10. Jesus is the firstborn from the dead, the first fruits of the new creation, securing in His own glorified body the certain hope of our resurrection and of the new heavens and earth.
11. Jesus ascended to heaven, where He sits at God's right hand, making intercession for you. He never stops praying for you, representing you before the Father.
12. The Holy Spirit has come to you to give you life and faith, that you might be joined to Christ forever.
13. God the Father has adopted you as His child forever, giving you the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit as a seal of your adoption – the Spirit of Adoption – and as a down-payment on your eternal inheritance in Him.
14. The Spirit brought you to Christ and keeps you believing in Christ. He draws and He keeps His own!
15. Jesus has promised to return for you, to take you home to the place He has prepared for you as your eternal home.

Why would the God of the Universe do all of this for you? Does He need something from you? Does He owe you something? Does He benefit in any way from anything you give Him? No. No. No. He has

done great things for you because He loves you. He does not love you because you are lovely, but because He loves you He is making you lovely in His Son, Jesus Christ, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in you. He draws you in love, He saves you in love, He is transforming you in love, and He will bring you home in love.

Can you say, “He has done great things for us, and we are glad!”? Is this your testimony? If it is not, turn to Jesus today, and put your faith in Him alone. Do not delay. Why would you not want the abundant goodness God has for you in Christ? If this is your testimony, tell the world! Let the nations be glad when they hear from your lips of the great things the LORD has done for you!

If God’s people could so rejoice and sing and wonder at the lovingkindness of God in returning them from exile to Jerusalem, how much more should we rejoice and sing and wonder at the great salvation He has given us in Jesus? He has not brought us to an earthly city with broken-down walls and piles of rubble. He has brought us into His heavenly kingdom. He has not brought us to a city we might lose again to enemies who surround us, but He has brought us a sure salvation, anchored and kept in Christ forever!

He has done such great things for us. We, of all people, should be most glad!

## **B. Begging (vv. 4-6)**

But life is hard still, isn’t it? You might say, “Yes, I know the LORD loves me, but I still struggle. I struggle with doubt, fear, sin, anxiety, financial pressure, marriage difficulty, wayward children, a corrupt and decaying culture that exerts its poisonous pull on everyone and everything around me, including my own heart. Yes, the LORD has done great things for us, but that doesn’t seem to change the daily realities I have to face.”

Well, if you’d be honest enough to admit that you feel that way, you’ll find yourself in good company in Psalm 126. Psalm 126 opens by looking back on the great things the LORD has done, but it continues by crying out to God for the good things we need Him to do right now –

*Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
like streams in the Negeb!  
Those who sow in tears  
shall reap with shouts of joy!  
He who goes out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
bringing his sheaves with him.*

### **I. Restore our fortunes, O LORD!**

Verse 4 is a strong and even a desperate plea: Restore our fortunes, O LORD! It’s an intentional parallel to the opening line – The LORD restored our fortunes, and we laughed. O LORD, restore our fortunes now!

I don’t know the exact timing or circumstances of the writing of this psalm, but I could easily imagine it being written by Ezra during the rebuilding of the wall under Nehemiah. While God’s people were able to rebuild the Temple under Zerubbabel and Josiah in 516, the walls of Jerusalem remained in ruins for

decades more. Ezra returned to Jerusalem in 458 BC, almost 60 years after the Temple had been rebuilt, and he began teaching the Law of God to the people. He was given money by Artaxerxes, the Persian ruler, to beautify the Temple, which was very simple and plain. But the walls remained in ruins.

In 445, Nehemiah was deeply troubled by the vulnerability of Jerusalem, and he asked Artaxerxes for permission to return to Jerusalem and lead an effort to rebuild the walls. This effort was difficult and dangerous, and it faced much opposition from Tobiah the Ammonite and Sanballat the Horonite. I could imagine Ezra writing Psalm 126 as he was longing for the walls of Jerusalem to be rebuilt. God had been so good to restore His people to the land, to allow them to rebuild the Temple, and even to allow the teaching of the Law to be re-established, but now, they were still vulnerable to enemy attacks. They had no way to secure themselves from raids by surrounding enemies. Would God be pleased to restore them again, to restore them still further?

Or perhaps the state which caused such distress was not the absence of walls but the cold, formal worship of the people, who were outwardly compliant with the Law but were inwardly far from God. Read Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, who preached to the people of Jerusalem after the re-building of the Temple: The priests serving in the Second Temple were corrupt and selfish, the offerings the people brought to the Temple were blind and lame animals, the people withheld the full tithe – the full 10% God has commanded – and instead brought only their leftovers to God. Divorce was rampant among God's people. Worship was cold and lifeless. Does any of this sound familiar? Maybe Malachi wrote Psalm 126!

It doesn't really matter who wrote Psalm 126 or when. If it mattered, God would have told us. The fact is, Psalm 126 applies as much to us sitting here more than 2,400 year later. How? Because God has done great things for us, and we are glad, but we need God to restore us again. We need Him to do great things for us still. If we look at the state of our churches, our homes, and our private lives, we can see the deep need we have for the reviving and restoring work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, our homes, and our churches.

Like streams in the Negeb – The Negeb is the dry southern desert in Israel. It has wadis, dry stream beds, that can be filled by seasonal rains. Some of the wadis are only filled once every 7-10 years in intense rains that come only one per decade or so. When these desert stream beds fill with water, the flood can be powerful and the life that blooms can be beautiful and breathtaking. That's what Psalm 126 is pleading for God to do – Oh LORD, we are dry and lifeless! We need the refreshing rain of Your Spirit!

## 2. Sowing in Tears

Then, Psalm 126 closes with agricultural imagery –

*He who goes out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
bringing his sheaves with him.*

This is an emotionally powerful image, of a farmer going out to sow seed without much hope. He's weeping as he's carrying his bag of seed. Maybe it's the last of his grain. Maybe it's so dry he thinks it's a waste of time. He's weeping, in despair, no hope.

You might feel that way when you sow seed. When do you sow seed? When you share the Gospel with someone. If you know the LORD has done great thing with you, and you've tried to share this good news with others, you may have experienced the reality that the world does not often say, "The LORD has done great things for you!" The best we can hope for sometimes is, "Well, good for you!" And these days, we often encounter much worse.

### **3. Reaping with Joy**

Still, God calls us to sow the seed, whether we do so in joyful and hopeful expectation or weeping in despair! God calls us to faithful sowing, and He promises to bring forth the fruit He has decided to give.

In basketball last year, Andrew's coach told him repeatedly, "You miss 100% of the shots you don't take." In other words, the ball's not going in the basket if it never leaves your hands! The same could be said for the seed of the Gospel. 75% of the time, it might hit bad ground, but 0% of the seed that remains in our bags bears any fruit.

Notice that as the people of God are sowing seed in Psalm 126, they are also earnestly pleading for fruit!

#### **When's the Last Time You Earnestly Pleaded?**

I opened by asking us to consider when was the last time we really rejoiced. When did we last experience bliss? When were we able to exult?

Now, I'd like to ask another question as we close and prepare for the Lord's Supper: When was the last time we earnestly pleaded with the LORD? When was the last time we shed tears in prayer, pouring out our hearts for restoration?

God wants us to laugh and sing and pinch ourselves at the incredible, undeserved, unexpected goodness of our salvation, and He also wants us to weep and plead with Him for the great needs we see in our lives, our homes, our churches, and our culture! Will we rejoice? Will we plead? The Lord's Table gives us a great opportunity to do both.