



PSALM 126

An Expression of Joy

This is Holly Culhane with Presence Point and welcome to our *Psalms for Shepherds* series. This week we continue our journey in the Psalms of Ascent with *Psalms 126*. Although perhaps written as a corporate lament, there is much language of hope and joy in these six verses. Listen and follow along as I read *Psalms 126*.

- ¹ When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.
- ² 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."
- 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.
- ⁵ Those who sow with tears 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.

Nearly every verse contains an expression of joy—laughter, images of restored fortunes, streams in the desert, and abundance of harvest. There is an important special note I would like to share about the phrase 'restored the fortunes of' in verse 4. It is not the idea of fortune, as in wealth. Instead, as it is used in this psalm, the term literally means "restore the captivity of." In other words, the expression is best understood to mean Yahweh returned them to the way they were before some kind of calamity occurred, likely referring to the return to Jerusalem after their exile and captivity in Babylon. No more exile. Freedom from bondage. A long-awaited return home. And Yahweh brought this about.

Now we can better understand how momentous and incredible the event was that the psalmist referenced and why there was such jubilation. Joyous indeed. However, we can also see in the song that the current state of the psalmist is not one of joy, ease, and abundance, yet he writes and sings in hope. Much like the hope we found in *Psalms 125*. Note the tense of the verbs used: verses 1 and 2 use verbs in the past tense, "the LORD restored", "we were like those who dreamed", "Our mouths were filled with laughter", "it was said among the nations." But in verse 3 the tense shifts from – right in the middle of the sentence – from past to present when we read,

"The LORD has done great things for us [past tense], and we are [present tense] filled with joy." It was the looking back at God's faithfulness, at what He had done in the past that allowed the psalmist and singers to proclaim in that moment that they were filled with joy. The question we must ask ourselves is do we live like this, dear shepherd? Facing the day as author, Pete Santucci, says, "like giddy dreamers whose dreams had actually come true"? Remembering God's grace, His merciful love, the beauty in your life, and your standing in Christ no matter what may come? It is a reminder to remember. To remember the goodness of God.

The fact that the psalmist begins by looking back on the faithfulness of Yahweh is especially poignant because, in verses 4 through 6, he gives us a glimpse into the present situation of the people of Israel.

- "Restore our fortunes, LORD...."
- "Those who sow with tears....."
- "Those who go out weeping....."

Israel appears to be in crisis and in need of God's rescue again. There are tears and weeping and unfulfilled dreams pictured as seeds not yet grown, not yet producing sustenance or fruit. There is a lesson in what the psalmist does in these verses: he turns to his God in prayer, imploring the Almighty to return them to a place of peace and joy. He pictures their situation as a desert in desperate need of life-giving water. Maybe you – or someone you influence – feels exactly like that today. If so, what should you or they do? Well, notice the verb tense changes again to the future tense.

- "Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy."
- "Those who go out weeping... will return with songs of joy."

Because they have known God's care and provision in the past, joy is paired with their present sorrow. Do you see the confidence in God here? They have hope for what their future holds, no matter how the present looks. Their outlook is exactly as ours should be in tough times. I think of Luke 6:21, an allusion to this psalm in the New Testament from the mouth of Jesus: "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh." The Good Shepherd Himself confirms that our weeping and tears will in fact turn to joy ... that which is now mere seed will become an overflowing harvest. What comfort this brings!

The writers of the *She Reads Truth Bible* reading plan, *The Psalms of Ascent*, sum up *Psalm 126* this way:

"This song uses the memory of hardships [and rejoicing] as encouragement to remember that joy is worth the journey. And with that hope, this song calls the singers to be confident God will continue to use sadness to bring a better joy as they press forward."

Yes, the joy in Jesus is worth the journey through this world. Our God tells us this in His Word, and our experience as believers testifies to this, as well. Remember *Hebrews 12:2*, where the author says of Jesus Himself, "...who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross scorning its shame..." He endured hardship. And He enables, equips, walks alongside, and even carries us, so that we can do the same, knowing that our salvation, healing, restoration ... our harvest and songs of joy and laughter will come.

I wonder, fellow under-shepherd, has it been your experience that remembering God's loving intervention, activity, and presence in your past is helpful when you are going through hard times? Does remembering what Christ endured for the joy *of being with you* give you comfort? Is it difficult for you to remember the goodness and faithfulness of God when you feel sorrowful? If so, what makes it hard and what might you do proactively to help yourself remember? Today, do you need to be reminded of how in the past our Good Shepherd has kept and cared for you, or a loved one, or one or more of sheep in your life?

Pour out your prayer to Him, and may this psalm be a template for you. Look back. Choose praise and joy. Lay your requests before Him with the confident expectation that He will certainly be faithful again. After all, He has promised it.

My prayer is that your sadness and mine, when it comes, will bring a better joy to us as we press forward and that you find yourself held, hope-filled, and at peace in the presence of your Shepherd today.

Thank you for joining me this week. As you allow Jesus to shepherd you, may you shepherd well those He has entrusted to your care.