

Like Those Who Dream Psalm 126

Psalms 126:1 (NKJV) A Song of Ascents. When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream.

Do you notice the phrase “A Song of Ascents?”

What does that mean?

Let me explain.

The Psalms are the songs of Israel, and they are unique in that they are given by God to teach, comfort, and encourage His people through all generations. In the Psalms, we find every human emotion expressed to the Lord.

The people who wrote these Psalms lived a long time ago in a culture that would be strange to us today. The Psalms of “Ascents” come from one of these cultural differences.

From the time of Moses, the Lord required that all the men of Israel gather in Jerusalem three times a year; once at Passover, once at Pentecost, and once for the Festival of Booths. Some of the Psalms were for these occasions. Psalm 126 is “A Song of Ascents.” “A Song of Ascents” means that the people sang this song when they were on the way to Jerusalem for the annual festivals.

The people remembered what God had done for them during these celebrations. Passover celebrated God delivering them from slavery in Egypt, which was a totally miraculous deal. Pentecost celebrated the wheat harvest, which is God’s provision, and the Feast of Booths celebrates God’s preservation of the people in the wilderness when they lived in booths (tents). The Feast of Booths carried the additional significance that it came at the final harvest of the agricultural year in Israel, which is, once again, celebrating God’s goodness and provision.

In some ways, we use Christmas in the same manner. We remember and retell the story of Jesus’ birth each year at the same time. We also use

Easter to declare the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In these “festivals,” we celebrate God’s goodness and provision.

The Lord established the festivals of Israel so His people would never forget their God and worship other gods. However, God knew that people are stubborn and prone to wander. So, in Deuteronomy 28, God tells the people exactly what will happen when they turn away from Him. As long as they worshiped only Him, they were exceedingly blessed. But, when they turned away from God, they were cursed.

The lesson for us lies in the truth of 1 Corinthians 10:11.

1 Corinthians 10:11 (NKJV) Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

The Israelites suffered because they valued things, pleasures, and power more than God. In their suffering, they cried out to God for salvation. Psalms 126 celebrates God delivering them from suffering. Having been forcibly moved to foreign nations, they did not think they would see Jerusalem again. So, the psalmist says:
Psalms 126:1 (NKJV) A Song of Ascents. When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream.

The phrase “brought back” comes from a Hebrew word which in some places, is rendered “revoked.” The psalmist is saying that the Lord released them from captivity. The ESV Bible says, “When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.” The idea behind “brought back the captivity” is captured by the phrase “restored the fortunes,” however, the history and context of “captivity” is lost in such a translation. The idea of captivity is essential to our understanding of this passage. I am not saying this to be critical of the ESV; instead, I desire to help us understand the meaning of “bring back the captivity” and help us realize that this can apply to each of us because we all are born slaves (captives) of sin.

The Israelites thought that salvation from captivity was impossible, yet the Lord did it. So, they walked in amazement, hardly daring to believe their eyes.

When God acts, we find it too fantastic to believe. For example, Acts 12 tells us that King Herod killed James, John's brother, and this pleased the Jews. So, he planned on doing the same with Peter and had him arrested and kept in jail. However, before Herod could carry out his plan, an angel came to Peter in the middle of the night, woke him up, and walked him out of jail. Acts 12:9 says:

Acts 12:9 (NKJV) So he [Peter] went out and followed him [the angel], and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.

God does things that seem almost too good to be true. Much of it we do not see because we do not understand. But, occasionally, like Peter, we get a glimpse.

At such times, we can say with the psalmist:

Psalms 126:2 (NKJV) Then our mouth was filled with laughter, And our tongue with singing.

The same thing happened to the lame man healed by Peter in Acts 3:8 where it says:

Acts 3:8 (ESV) And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

Our rejoicing in what God does is a witness to those around us. In Israel's case, the witness is to all nations on earth. Psalms 126:2-3 says:

Psalms 126:2-3 (NKJV) ²Then our mouth was filled with laughter, And our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." ³The LORD has done great things for us, [And] we are glad.

This same rejoicing is ours at Christmas. The Lord has done great things for us. The whole world celebrates the birth of God's Son, Jesus Christ. It is a season of joy because God has done something for us that seems too good to be true.

There are few places where the name of Jesus is not known, and in addition, many places have manger scenes. Despite this, many do not know Jesus. Perhaps they have heard His name, but they do not know

Him. The same can be said of nativity sets. Many do not understand the significance of the manger.

People are lost because they do not know the way of salvation, Jesus. Even though God has provided the way of salvation, most of the human race remains in captivity to sin.

Just like Israel, many need God's intervention. Many times Israel found herself subject to those who hated her. Therefore, we find in Psalm 126:4 a plea for God to deliver them.

Psalms 126:4 (NKJV) Bring back our captivity, O LORD, As the streams in the South.

The "streams in the South" refer to the Negev in Israel. The southern part of Israel was a desert (it still is). Some gullies and rivers remain dry until it rains, and then they are full of water. (You can find YouTube videos of water flowing in these streams!)

Israel's captivity is compared to the desert. Humanity's separation from God can also be compared to a desert. Psalm 63:1 speaks of this when it says:

Psalms 63:1 (NKJV) O God, You [are] my God; Early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land where there is no water.

A person without God will thirst and seek to satisfy that thirst. Everyone is different in how they experience spiritual thirst, but most of us drown it with the desires of our flesh. We are busy with our needs and wants, so we do not think about God. But for the person God releases from captivity, there is rejoicing like the early verses of Psalm 126.

As God's people, Israel was responsible for spreading the knowledge of God. As God's people, we are also responsible for spreading the good news. When God "restores our captivity," He expects us to declare (recount the details) what He has done for us. Each person has a unique story, which needs to be told. The psalmist speaks of this when he says:

Psalm 126:5-6 (NKJV) ⁵Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. ⁶He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.

The Lord Jesus compared the Word of God to seed. Psalm 126 uses the same simile. We all are to be sowing (planting). However, what about the weeping and tears?

This tells us what our attitude should be. We quickly become proud of what we know. Many of us feel that the world is entitled to our opinion. This reminds me of a story I heard (I can't say if it is true or not).

A young man fresh out of seminary was hired by a church to be their pastor, and he was sure they were lucky to have him. On his first Sunday, he came perfectly dressed and groomed without a hair out of place. His sermon also was perfectly prepared and would have earned him an "A" in his homiletics class. However, when he got up to preach, he got confused, and the more he tried to straighten it out, the worse it got. Finally, he started weeping and walked out. One dear saint in the back said, "If he had come in like he went out, he would have gone out like he came in."

We must remember you and I are just clay pots. The glory and majesty belong to God. Our attitude toward others needs to be one of love and compassion and not arrogance. The fate of those enslaved by sin will be terrible if they do not turn to Jesus.

The Lord Jesus took on a body of clay to set us free. Psalm 126 expresses the joy of the one who receives salvation and of the one who plants the seeds and sees the harvest. We should look at verses 5-6 again!

Psalms 126:5-6 (NKJV) ⁵Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. ⁶He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves [with him.]

Tears of compassion plant seeds of joy. As we share the Word of God, we share life, and as others come to know Jesus, we share in the joy of their salvation.

Christmas reminds us we have good news of great joy to share with all men.

Do you tell others what God has done for you?

If God has not done anything for you, please, please speak with me about it, and, more importantly, talk with God about it.