

From Tears to Shouts Psalm 126

Around ten years ago, I planted cucumbers and tomatoes in my back yard. As the summer drew to a close, we became modest beneficiaries of our own labors. The few tomatoes were a hit, but the cucumbers seemed to take a hit at the hands of the typical, sweltering heat of Memphis (or at my unexperienced hands). In addition, the cucumber vines seemed to reject the trellis I carefully crafted for them, ignoring my intentions for them to grow up and around for easy access. For various reasons, my backyard garden was only a two-summer adventure. One reason I gave up the garden-ghost was that my expectations weren't met. To borrow from our psalm today, I expected sheaves, but I harvested a mere handful. There were no shouts of joy that summer, save one serendipitous moment that would motivate me to plant once again the following summer.

Life in and around Israel was an agrarian one. Marketplaces existed, but most peoples during the psalmist's day, and many in that region today, could turn my Balmoral backyard into a mini-produce section of Kroger. They lived and breathed the process of seeing a seed become a harvest. So, we're not surprised at the imagery of our text. Like cultivating produce, challenges are implied, past successes are remembered, and a harvest is longed for.

I. The Past Joys

Like a few other Psalms of Ascent, we're not led down the road of absolute surety regarding the occasion of this melodic composition. Yet, reasonable conclusions can be drawn from the text itself that this is a post-Babylonian-captivity psalm.¹ As we'll see, the language lends itself in that direction.

There is no record of this song's composer. We do know that the time it took to compile all 150 songs in the Hebrew Psalter was just over a thousand years. Moses is a contributor. Seventy-three Psalms were the product of David's Spirit-led pen. And here, though we're left in the dark as to the human author, if this is indeed a post-exilic song-poem, then it's not far-fetched to situate the arrangement of our text to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The verbiage of the text is found elsewhere in scripture. We spot the idea of *restored fortunes* way back in Deuteronomy 30. The conclusion of the book of Job might be the Old Testament poster child for the idea of *restoration*. Jeremiah spoke of the same throughout his laments and prophecies.² And so here, the Psalmist is composing with recollection.

a. *Too good to be true*

[1] When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Remember, the place called *Zion* is synonymous with Jerusalem.³ It's an expression which represents the totality of God's people who have experienced something from which they desire restoration, or a release of some kind.⁴ Instead of *restored fortunes*, the NASB renders the original a bit differently by expressing "*When the LORD brought back captive ones of Zion.*" The idea is that there's been adversity by loss,

¹ Allen Ross, *The Psalms: Vol. 3*, 663.

² Jeremiah 29:14, 30:3, 31:23, 32:44, as a sampling; also, Lamentations 2:14

³ T. Desmond Alexander, *A Biblical Theology of Zion*, <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2022/06/a-biblical-theology-of-zion/>

⁴ "Zion" is a metonymy, which is a figure of speech in which an object (or idea) is referred to by the name of something closely associated with it. We use this figure of speech all the time, such as "Silicon Valley" for the American technology industry, or "Wall Street" for the New York Stock Exchange (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metonymy>).

and God was not idle in the midst of the loss. He, *restored*, or reversed the misfortune. Thus, before we can see and feel the joy of what the psalmist is writing, it seems that one must at least understand something of *Zion's* underlying pain.

And what we know of God's people is that beginning with Adam's sin, loss, and the sorrows that come with it, now mark the whole created order. Nothing sits or moves on planet earth unaffected by the breach of peace and blessing caused by Adam's sin. With that being the foundation, a host of respected scholars concur that this specific occasion is in reference to Israel being taken captive by the Babylonians.

When Babylon's ruler, Nebuchadnezzar, seized Judah in 597 B.C., which was the first of 3 deportations, Judah was already in flux. The political strategies of her leaders, who were seeking to side with Egypt, were ineffective at best.⁵ As always and as it will forevermore, God's word proved true.⁶ Off to a foreign land went the cream of Israel's citizenry. Many of their most prominent and wealthy residents were carted away. It seemed all was lost: their land, their holy city, their temple, their elaborate sacrificial system, the priesthood, their king, and surrounding it all, life as they knew it under God's shalom. The cities brutalized. The poor left to die. It was now a land of the destitute. Psalm 137 captures the mood of God's people living in Babylon, "*By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?*"⁷

All they'd ever known, taken. The familiar places—the place of one's birth, that house and neighborhood that one grew up in, the places of celebratory gatherings, gravesides of ancestors, now either inaccessible or decimated in the takeover. And to add insult to injury, those with a few years under their belt wondered if they might ever return home. And indeed, thousands never saw their native soil again, being 70 years under Babylon's rule.

Yet, when we open up the book of Ezra, just as we noted from the life of Paul in the book of Acts, and throughout the book of Jonah, God uses whomever He wills to work His wonders in this world. In this case of exile, a pagan king named Cyrus was on the menu of God's glorious providence. Cyrus ruled Persia, who eventually seized and defeated Babylon. And beginning with Cyrus' decree, things were set in motion for the longings of Israel to be met. Restoration was stirring, and the psalmist expresses the first stirrings by the metaphor of a *dream*.

We say it in moments of great euphoria. On vacation, "I'm living the dream!" In an ideal situation, "Pinch me! I'm dreaming!" You can envision the decree being read amongst the various pockets of Israelites. "*Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. [3] Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD...*"⁸ Despondency and hopelessness vanished and replaced with what we find in verse 2. The power and kindness of God seemed too good to be true, and now, joy. And joy has tendencies. It's not shy. It's often a contagion—a powerful one.

b. *Too glorious to keep silent*

⁵ ESV Bible Atlas, 170.

⁶ Jeremiah 22:18-27

⁷ Psalm 137:1-4

⁸ Ezra 1:2-3

[2] Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy...An incredible turn of events, to be clear. The decree itself was surprising enough, but that Cyrus sent them away with provisions of “*gold, silver, goods, beasts, and costly wares*” was a lavishness than none could have predicted. These acts by a pagan king were nothing short of the invisible hand of the Almighty. “*The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.*”⁹ One commentator wrote of this stunning development, “[The Jews] ceased not to marvel that the worshippers of the sun should show them such unsolicited kindness.”¹⁰

And this was no subdued celebration. Laughter **filled** mouths. This is not the kind of laugh that happens over a well-crafted joke, or after a clumsy moment. This is the kind of **laughter** that happens just on the other side of one’s darkest sorrows; a laugh, from the depths, that says, “If you only told me about this happening, I wouldn’t have believed it!” But the laughter issues into another expression of great elation: **shouts of joy**. After God’s people came back from Babylon and just after they laid the foundation floor for the new temple, listen to what Ezra 3 conveys,

And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. [12] But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, [13] so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.

When relief from any kind of tyranny happens, whether it be from sin or difficult circumstances, joy can’t be silenced. The laughter and shouting are “extravagances of gesture and of voice.”¹¹ And the joy of Israel isn’t contained simply within her own walls, but God’s greatness finds inroads into other lands. Notice the middle of verse 2, **then they said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.”** The goodness of the grace of God and the power of God and the provision of God in delivering them from their captors spread far and wide. And, even if I’m stretching what the pagan nations surrounding Israel actually embraced about Israel’s God, this at least signifies that something of God’s hand was acknowledged in their decreed release.

And is not this our collective confession brothers and sisters? **[3] The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad.** In our land, our context, we’ve been afforded the privilege of living our days out from under tyrannical regimes, but what none can escape is the oppression Jesus describes in John 8, “*Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.*” These bonds aren’t broken by the decrees of earth. They can’t be unlatched by the schemes of man. They require divine justice, divine power, and divine mercy. As the psalmist looks back at a watershed moment in the history of God’s people, we can’t refrain from doing the same. And when we do, oh, the great things done on our behalf! Great things, which aren’t summed up in terms of where we’re living and the plots of ground we stand on, but we rejoice in our eternal standing! For, the very One who spoke so plainly of our oppression in John 8 is the very One who rescues from such bondage. We look back two millennia on a Man rising from the dead for our adoption as sons and daughters of the living God. And when we do, we commandeer the psalmist’s words for ourselves: **We are glad!**

⁹ Proverbs 21:1

¹⁰ William Plummer, *Psalms: Geneva Series*, 1111.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Psalms 93-150*, 97.

II. The Present Longing

[4] Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb! Now, in what situation does this psalm writer find himself and his people? What would draw out his longing for what was once a reality in Israel? If this song was written shortly after the return of the exiles, then what we know is that once back in Israel, things weren't a walk in the park. The land and homes had been disregarded. The place of worship, destroyed. The Law of God, at best, neglected. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah spell out many of the exact challenges. But this was not sheer nostalgia. The fortunes the psalmist has in mind are related to the glory of God. With this fresh start, they could once again function as a community that reflects Yahweh's will—in the marketplace, in the temple, and in the home. That's inside of what we're to understand when we consider verse 4, **Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb!**

Negeb was a region in the extreme southern parts of Judah. It stayed dry much of the year. It was a harsh environment. One commentator tied this image to this contemporary plea of the psalmist, "The new experience of laughter, shouts of joy...has to be balanced with the reality of life in Canaan...out of the ashes of Judah's destruction and out of the land that lain fallow, the returnees had to eke out an existence."¹² With the blistering heat this week in Memphis, I imagine that navigating the Negeb most days was similar. Today, the most parched parts of the Negeb region receives less than an inch of rain a year.¹³ In the psalmist's day, in that region one would only eke out an existence. But the longing here is clear—LORD, do something about this charred, dry, rough time we're having! Bring Your life-giving waters down to us!

I took my National Geographic World Atlas off my shelf this week, and it confirmed the details of smaller tributaries snaking through the Negeb wilderness. And it's these smaller riverbeds that are empty most months of the year, until the seasonal rains decide to fall on the distant mountains and plateaus. At that point, it begins with a trickle, and in minutes, a raging river. After the water calms, seeds, livestock, and humans alike spring into action and become the immediate beneficiaries of something that falls and flows from above. So, the psalmist's request is not only that the God of heaven might give a restoration of life as they once knew it, but it's a request for Him to act with suddenness.¹⁴

And we see why they would ask such a thing beginning in verse 5. Though the past reflections are meant to establish the Israelites' hearts in joy as they went up to Jerusalem singing, in every age and season for God's people, longings persist. The world is in a fragmented state. Sin is still knifing its way through individuals, communities, and governmental powers. We scramble to find cures for diseases. Inside a ton of information at our fingertips, we deal in ounces when it comes to true wisdom and knowledge. And, if we're honest, we're always teetering between God's glory and our own. And a result of it all is sorrow. In the end, what will answer this longing for restoration? What will meet and melt away this comprehensive sorrow underlying much of life itself?

While my own family continues to mourn loss, many of your own sorrows are no less intense or important. Who among God's flock wouldn't welcome the Negeb moment of Christ appearing in the clouds in the next five minutes? But, as the psalmist expressed in song what God did, and expressed

¹² Longman & Garland, *Psalms*, 910.

¹³ <https://www.kkl-jnf.org/> - info on all things Negeb (or Negev)

¹⁴ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 475.

in song his longing for God to do more restorative works in his current longings, the melody line follows.

III. The Promised Harvest

[5] Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! [6] He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. The picture here is again invoking the world of farming and agriculture. But notice, what is described here is far from the sudden surprise of the overflowing banks of the Negeb. Here is a picture of hard labor with delayed blessing.¹⁵ It's the constant, cyclical reality of the farmer. He is called upon to be patient, faithful, steady, and humble. He can't part the clouds for more sunshine, or effectively dance for rain. He is utterly dependent and, though doing all he knows to do, he understands that the growth of those seeds are, at the end of the day, out of his hands. But, he doesn't place his seed in the ground without good reason. He has a history of seeing past harvests, so he sows in hope. Yet, the hope is not without its challenges.

The life of Job is documented to teach us this very truth. I was struck this week how James, the half-brother of our LORD, was led to speak of both farming and Job in the same breath. We read there, "*Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient...As an example of suffering and patience, brothers...You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.*"¹⁶

I don't know what tears are falling from you as you seek to cultivate a life of faith and love, dear brother or sister. I surely don't know what tears lie ahead for you—only God knows. What can we do but sing along to this tune with the voice of trust and obedience? We look back and take notice of the grace of God, and we're made glad. Oh, the great works of God, who here can number? Saved from the punishment we deserve because of our sin, justified before the bar of God, adopted into His family, kept by His power, preserved in our multiple acts of folly, restrained in our countless desires to do evil, grafted into Christ's bride, recipients of the Holy Spirit, born again to a living hope through the Word of God, etc. These *great things done* in days past, considered by faith, are meant to give us the needed boost this day. Yet, we are such that God knew we needed even more assurances than past mercies. We look ahead.

And looking ahead, after seasons of tear-watered ground, we're not meant to see empty fields. Our futures should be thought of in terms of heaping *sheaves*. Our Lord Jesus says it this way, *[29] And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.*"¹⁷ I mean, the sorrow represented in leaving behind a brother, or a mother, or a child is a cut too deep for words. But the promise is a profusion of blessing that can't be measured or compared with what is considered to be some of the most sacred of relationships in this life. This promise envisages, not simply a temporary family but an eternal one, and not just a house left behind, but a dwelling place more wonderful than anything the earth has to offer.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ross, 672.

¹⁶ James 5:7-11

¹⁷ Matthew 19:23-29

¹⁸ Craig Blomberg, NAC: Matthew, 301.

So hear it clearly: This promise in Psalm 126, understood in light of the gospel, is exceedingly lopsided. In God's kingdom, there is no ratio of 1:1 in terms of loss and gain. Backtracking to Job, we see the excess of grace in action, "*And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends. And the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before.*"¹⁹ A few years after this restoration, Job got old, his new family passed on, and all of his servants and livestock are no more. That restoration, and the restoration of Jews back into the promised land, are all meant to serve the world in seeing the truth that in Christ Jesus, the grace and mercy of God are so great, that nothing compares!

What an incentive to believe in Him! He gives eternal life, and a kingdom, and a family, etc. This is why He came and suffered at the hands of sinful men, only then to defeat the grave and every evil entity now put on notice regarding their final and full demise. What encouragement to persevere, even in sorrow—*Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!* His is the timing. Ours, the faithfulness. We echo Herbert, don't we?

I live to show His power, who once did bring
My joys to weep, and now my griefs to sing.²⁰

We have grief, but we have joy to release, songs to sing, a great Savior to praise all our days and into the eternal hills. "The campaign is short; the victory already secured: we have but a few skirmishes to pass through, and then He, who has promised to make us more than conquerors, will put a crown of eternal life upon our heads."²¹

Conclusion

A decade ago, on an evening of surveying my surly cucumber plants, I noticed that some of the plants had grown on the other side of my neighbor's fence line. As I bent down to carefully pull the plant over the fence, there was a weighty resistance in my efforts. When I finally brought the stems over, I discovered three super-sized cucumbers. All my disappointments melted, and my expectations forgotten. Like a carefree child, I ran in overjoyed to show Jessica, Isaac, and Beth Ann. With the joyful memory of what happened in the past schooling the present longing, and with great anticipation of what was ahead, I planted a garden again the following year.

There are sheaves in our future, no matter the weather, no matter the unbelieving prognosticators. So let us keep pressing into Christ. Be released to weep as you go. Look back at God's nurturing hand, but never with the expectation of full renewal in this life. Because here's what's on the other side of this life's fences: "*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us...*" Inside of today's tears, rejoice in the goodness of Jesus. For in the age to come, when He brings us to our true home, He will replace our weeping with unhindered shouts of unending praise!



¹⁹ Job 42:10

²⁰ George Herbert, *The Temple: Joseph's Coat*, 161.

²¹ John Newton, *Letters of John Newton*, 146.

