

Pilgrimage Psalms

Psalm 126: Sob While Sowing, Rejoice While Reaping

INTRODUCING THE PSALM

This psalm was no doubt written after the return of the exiles from Babylonia, likely some years later. Liturgically it was probably written for the Jewish pilgrims who were on their way to Jerusalem for the fall festival, Yom Kippur, the new year. This was also the time for sowing seeds of winter wheat, thus the allusions to planting and harvesting.

Regarding the theme and content, this psalm recalls the initial joy when the exiles returned. After a while the honeymoon was over, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem didn't occur as quickly as they had wished. Sure, patience was needed, but where would they get their motivation? 'Remember the joy, the laughter and singing. Polish up your memory; recall how God did what you thought was completely impossible: He brought you back from captivity—just like He did in the exodus from Egypt! As Nehemiah said in the post-exilic period: "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh. 8:10) Versus: allowing your grief to sap your strength and immobilize you.

Key (repeated) words in this psalm: "the LORD," "songs of joy," and "carrying."

VV 1-2 RECALL GOD'S PAST BLESSINGS

- + **"When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy."** There was precious little to laugh about in Babylon. But God turned that around, giving them freedom, with full reason for joy.
- + **"Then it was said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.' The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy."** There was a twofold effect of the blessing of returning home: 1) Joy for those who returned. 2) Honor for God among the nations. God's gracious and powerful actions to rescue His people were so obvious that even unbelievers recognized what He was doing. Believing Israelites (like the psalm writer) were not too proud to concur: 'You're right, God has done great things for us. Isn't it wonderful? Join us in praising Him, if you will.'

In the wake of the Tsunami in Southeast Asia, it remains to be seen—but we certainly pray for this—that Indonesia (a Muslim nation), Sri Lanka (Buddhist), and India (Hindu) will recognize God at work through our nation to deliver significant aid to the afflicted peoples.

There is great value in giving full rein to joy, at least once in a while. This is such a deep, instinctual need in us humans, that some depend overly much on alcohol in order to release their inhibitions and sing out.

The devil tries to give us amnesia about what God has done for us, leading us to ingratitude, to muffle our joy. Mark Buchanan in his *Your God Is Too Safe* quotes Screwtape, a senior devil, to Wormwood, a demon in training, in *The Screwtape Letters*. . .

- + Joy sustained Jesus in His most crucial hour: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the JOY set before Him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2).
- + Beware of those who denigrate others singing with joy in their hearts to God, for cheap laughter, or who protest: “I can’t sing.” William James, the father of American psychology asked the rhetorical question: “Do we sing because we’re happy, or are we happy because we sing?”

2. VV 3-4 PLEAD FOR GOD TO RENEW HIS BLESSINGS

- + **“Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev.”** Give us a fresh outpouring of your grace and help, in dramatic ways, if necessary.

3. VV 5-6 RECORD GOD’S ANSWERS TO YOUR PRAYERS

- + **“Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.”** Times of deprivation and sadness are never limitless for believers. Psalm 30:5, 11-12. Jesus referred to this metaphor in John 12:24, “Unless a kernel of wheat falls and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”
- + Jesus also referred to this metaphor regarding the “harvest of souls” and the need for workers to carry in the harvest, in Matthew 9:34. In the process, they will experience tears and sadness. Those who study how to endure the pain of conflict (incl. conflict in churches) say that being able to see the reasons, some productivity and redeeming value in the pain, are much better equipped to cope.
- + Don’t forget to put down in black and white an objective record of how God came to your aid—or others’ aid. Also write down your requests of God.

LIVING THE PSALM

- 1. Develop your memory of how God rescued you in the past.**
- 2. Efforts to worship God with other believers are worth it, even if you experience inconvenience on such a “pilgrimage.”**
- 3. Anticipate God’s coming to your aid in the future, even through unexpected circumstances. God will know and decide.**
- 4. Sometimes “pull out all the stops” to express your joy and thanks for your salvation.**