

**PSALM 126:1-6 ESV**

1 A Song of Ascents. When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. 2 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." 3 The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad. 4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb! 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.

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

Scholars debate the occasion of this psalm's writing. I believe it was written after the exile, when God restored the fortunes of Zion through King Cyrus's edict to return and rebuild the temple. This story fits the occasion. Upon receiving such glad tidings, Israel would have laughed and shouted for joy, and the nations would have marveled. However, upon arrival, the hard work would have begun. The narratives of Ezra and Nehemiah reveal diverse hardships: enemies, immorality, low morale, lack of resources, fickle politicians, and more. God's blessing became burdensome.

Regardless of the psalm's occasion, we all pass through life's seasonality, sometimes shouting and laughing for joy, and sometimes weeping. Psalm 126 provides the two-sided path to enduring joy: gratitude and hope. The first half of the song reflects gratefully on past joy; the second half looks hopefully toward future joy. Gratitude and hope preserve joy through all seasons.

Psalm 126 also teaches us realism. Life is not a 24/7 shower of blessings. Furthermore, even when God blesses us, stewardship of these blessings can feel burdensome. Ask anyone whom God has blessed with marriage, children, a business opportunity, or even an inheritance. Stewarding these blessings in a way that pleases God and blesses the world will require labor and sacrifice. Tearful sowing precedes joyful reaping.

The metaphor of sowing and reaping points us to Jesus. Jesus says in John 4 that we get to reap what our Old Testament forbears sowed. Faithful Old Testament saints plowed the ground—through faithfulness, sacrifice, and suffering—so that New Testament saints would be ready to inherit the kingdom of God. The cross of Christ stands at the intersection between the ages: the age of sowing (Old Testament saints) and the age of reaping (New Testament saints). Because of Christ's work, the gospel is spreading to all nations. A global harvest is being reaped. We get to join the party of harvesters—not to mention angels (Luke 15:10)—insofar as we tearfully sow our gospel seeds for the sake of the nations.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 A Song of Ascents. When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

—"A Song of Ascents":

- Psalms 120-134 comprise the Songs of Ascent. Most are concise because pilgrims likely sang them by heart as they traveled to Jerusalem during the major feasts. They "ascended" up the temple mount, worshiping as they went.
- Worship is an "as you go" activity. It's not fixed to a structure or calendar. Israel worshiped as they went... to the Temple, to worship. They worshiped on their way to worship. Likewise, we must worship constantly, not just at church gatherings.

—"When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion":

- "Zion" refers most directly to the temple mount where Israel worshiped. Sometimes Israel could employ the term as a metonymy for Jerusalem or Israel (much like we might say "Washington D.C." to refer to a decision made by the United States). In this case, "Zion" refers not just to the temple mount but to all who worshiped there: to Israel.
- Other translations: "When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion" (NKJV); "When the LORD brought back his exiles to Jerusalem" (NLT); "When the LORD brought back the captive ones to Zion" (NASB).

- Scholars debate the precise meaning of this Hebrew word—whether it is general, referring to a restoration of fortunes, or specific, about return from captivity. Either way, this psalm appears to be about the return from exile. If it's not about the exile specifically, it is about God restoring Israel in a profound and powerful way.

—“we were like those who dream”:

- I like how the NET version reads, “we thought we were dreaming!”
- This is the psalmist’s way of saying, “It didn’t feel like real life.”
- Life is seasonal. We face ups and downs, mountains and valleys, gardens and deserts. When you’ve been in the desert, you sometimes expect to never leave it. You grow accustomed to sand and cacti. You protect yourself from disillusionment by refusing to hope for too much. This is human nature. The Psalms encourage us to believe: “Surely I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living” (Ps. 27:13). When God sovereignly alters the season, it can feel like a dream—like it’s not real life.

2 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." 3 The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad.

—The psalmist continues reflecting on God’s restoration with images of “laughter” and “joy.” These correspond to the rejoicing at the end of the song (see comments there).

—“laughter”:

- I’m reminded of the name “Isaac,” which means, “laughter.” Abraham and Sarah laughed in disbelief when God said she would give birth (Gen. 17:17; 18:10-12), but God brought it to pass, and they named their promised son Isaac because God made them laugh in amazement (21:6-7).
- God turns our laugh of disbelief and scoffing to a laugh of awe and amazement. The name Isaac serves as a reminder of God’s faithfulness and power to fulfill His promises, even in seemingly impossible situations. Israel’s exile would have felt that impossible—yet God restored her fortunes.
- Isaac’s story is prototypical for believers. God wants to fill our mouths with laughter over the impossible works He will achieve in our lives. Psalm 126 explores this theme.
- I have a friend who involves laughter as a filter for decision-making. His five L’s of decision-making: Life (the most important one, from which the others flow), Love, Liberty, Longing, and Laughter. If your decision fills you with a sense of life and liberty, manifests love, consummates longing, and affords you opportunities for more laughter... it is usually the right decision. At least, that’s how my friend makes decisions. I like it.

—“laughter... shouts of joy”: both laughter and shouts of joy speak of unbridled elation. Not many events in our lives elicit both laughter and shouts of joy. I’m thinking about the moment Alicia and I entered the driveaway car after getting married. I’m thinking of the time we discovered Alicia was pregnant by surprise with our daughter Molly. God wants to give us these moments. Yes, He sovereignly uses suffering to refine us, but “he does not afflict from his heart” (Lam. 3:33). God’s heart is to make us laugh and shout for joy. Give us that, Lord!

—“Then they said among the nations...”:

- Beginning with Abraham, God’s pattern has been to bless His people as a conduit to blessing the nations (cf. Gen. 12:1-3). You were not blessed just to be blessed. You were blessed for the sake of the nations. How might God use your strengths, gifts, experiences, finances, or other resources to save the lost in unknown lands?
- That pattern continues here. God performed such a miraculous renewal of fortunes for Israel that the nations could not help but give Yahweh the credit. O, that the LORD might so bless the church that the nations took notice! O LORD! The nations don’t see the blessing of Your church; they see our corruption! They see scandal! Our churches behave in a more worldly fashion than... the world! O LORD, how are we to show the nations how great You are when we so live for ourselves! Purify Your church, LORD.

—“‘The LORD has done great things for them.’ The LORD has done great things for us.”: The psalmist confirms what the nations observed. If the world sees the goodness of God, we’d better not overlook it!

—“we are glad”:

- The laughter and shouts of joy burst but fade. Gladness remains.
- It would be unreasonable to expect constant laughter and shouts of joy. Life is seasonal.
- Nevertheless, joy and gladness can be a mainstay in the Christian life. We might not always feel like laughing, but joy does not fade with life's seasonality. As the Apostle says, "We are sorrowful, but always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10).
- The gladness of 126:3 persists despite the disappointment of vv. 4-6.

—These first three verses provide one of the many examples in the Psalms of remembering God's past goodness to inspire worship. But there's a question in my mind. Consider Ecclesiastes 7:10: "Do not say, 'Why were the former days better than these?' For it is not from wisdom that you ask this." Apparently, there is a right way and a wrong way to remember good times.

- The right way to remember good times is to stoke joy, hope, and prayer. It is to intentionally call to mind God's former goodness with the express purpose of worship. When life hits us hard, Satan tempts us to doubt God's goodness. He paints a caricature of God with the oil of suffering. When we remember God's goodness in these scenarios, we realize that Satan is painting a caricature. In truth, God has been good. We just have to remember it.
- The wrong way to remember good times is to accuse God. Israel did this when the people pined for slavery in Egypt, imagining that they were better fed by Pharaoh than God. This required them to rewrite history. Pharaoh had been cruel.
- The same happened with Naomi. Naomi returns to Israel saying, "I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" (Rth. 1:21). First, if Naomi had been so "full" when she left—why did she leave? She left because of famine. She left because she felt empty. She left because she thought the gods of Moab would provide better for her than the God of Israel. Second, if Naomi was so empty now, what does that say about her amazing daughter-in-law Ruth who was **STANDING RIGHT BESIDE HER?! Ruth left everything for God and Naomi, and Naomi considered it as nothing. Bitterness blinds us to the blessings of God. Naomi remembered God's former goodness in the wrong way. She used it to rewrite history and accuse God.**
- Are you remembering God's goodness in the right way or the wrong way? Are you intentionally calling to mind the times when God filled your mouth with laughter to spur you into believing you will see His goodness again in the land of the living? Or, alternatively, are you rewriting history like Israel and Naomi, remembering your fantasy world and accusing God of not re-creating this mental fiction?

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

—"Restore our fortunes, O LORD":

- The psalmist recalls former joy and breakthrough (vv. 1-3) to motivate prayer for future joy and breakthrough.
- Verses 1-3 focus primarily on past joy; verses 4-6 primarily on future joy. The first half of the psalm highlights gratitude; the latter, hope. In the center, we have present tense joy. Psalm 126 shows us how to enjoy present-tense joy: import it from the past and the future. Gratitude for past joy imports it into our present; hope for future joy also imports it into our present.
- Gratitude and hope are like anchors on either side of a rope bridge. Underneath the bridge is despair. The ledge ahead could be labeled "hope for future joy" and the one behind, "gratitude for past joy." When we recall God's past goodness to us and hope in His future goodness, we import joy from the past and the future into the present.
- If this song was written after Israel returned from exile, it would make sense. News from King Cyrus that they could return and rebuild the temple would have filled their mouths with laughter. At the same time, it had been seventy years since the exile began. The new generation had not even seen the land of Israel. They had grown comfortable in the largest empire in the world—the United States of its time. Most did not want to go home to a devastated, impoverished land, and rebuild.

The psalmist's prayer would thus reflect a desire that Israel value God's promise of the land enough to return and rebuild.

—"like streams in the Negeb": Kidner says, "The name [Negeb], meaning 'dry' or 'parched', is given to the southernmost part of Judah, extending down towards the Sinai peninsula."

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.

—"sow... reap... seed for sowing... come home... bringing his sheaves":

- The psalmist replaces the prior image of rushing water in the desert with another about sowing and reaping.
- The first image conveys God's sovereignty in restoring our fortunes, while the second highlights human responsibility in cooperating with sovereign seasons.
- Kidner: "The two images of renewal (4b, 5-6) are not only striking; they are complementary. The first of them is all suddenness, a sheer gift from heaven; the second is slow and arduous, with man allotted a crucial part to play in it."
- If this relates to Israel's return from exile, the decree from King Cyrus that Israel could return and rebuild the temple would have felt like a stream in the wilderness... a sovereign change that no Israelite could have catalyzed. After this initial thrill, however, the frustrations associated with rebuilding the temple, repopulating the land, protecting their assets, and re-learning how to walk with God would have required hard work—sowing in tears, if you will. Read Ezra and Nehemiah for more on that story.
- Above, I mentioned getting married and having a baby as examples of times when God filled my mouth with laughter and shouts of joy. After these initial thrills, however, the hard work began. Nothing on earth is harder than building a happy marriage and family. The good news is: those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy!

—"Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy":

- I said this emphatically in the comment above, but is it always true? Some faithful spouses suffer the loss of a marriage, and some faithful parents suffer children who abandon their values. Certainly, we can say that those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy as a general maxim like what we read in the Proverbs. But it seems too bold to declare a guaranteed harvest to faithful sowers of seed.
- In context, the psalmist is expressing faith that his prayer in v. 4 will be answered. God would restore their fortunes like a river in the desert—but—he emphasizes in verses 5-6 that it won't come without effort.
- Therefore, we must be careful how we apply this verse to us. Not everyone who works hard sees it pay off in the hoped-for way. Even with a literal harvest, sometimes the seed doesn't take because of drought or pest. Generally, hard work pays off with a harvest, but sometimes it doesn't in the hoped-for way.
- In an eternal sense, our labor always pays off—if it's for the LORD. First Corinthians 15:58: "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." Because of resurrection, everything you do for Jesus pays off eternally. You reap an eternal harvest. This includes "failed" ventures. If you did it for Jesus, it didn't fail eternally.
- In an earthly sense, Psalm 126 motivates us to cooperate with God's sovereign seasons, laboring to complete what He initiated. God restored Israel's fortunes (vv. 1-3), but there was still prayer to engage in (v. 4) and work to do (vv. 5-6).
- This reminds me of Jesus's interaction with His disciples in John 4. Jesus had pit-stopped in Samaria to preach the gospel to a sinful woman while the clueless disciples went into town to buy food. After Jesus led the woman to Jesus, the disciples returned asking if He wanted food. He responds in John 4:

- 34...*"My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. 35 Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. 36 Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. 37 For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."*
 - Jesus uses a similar sowing/reaping metaphor to depict the new age dawning in His incarnation, which the disciples had overlooked. The Lord's usage of this metaphor indicates that the ones who sowed seed were Old Testament prophets, judges, kings, priests, and everyday saints who lived faithfully, "tilling the ground" to prepare for this moment. Now the moment has arrived. Our Lord has come! The harvest is here. The disciples overlooked the harvest, running into town to buy food. Jesus had food to eat that they knew nothing about—doing the will of God. So what does this all have to do with Psalm 126?
 - We live in an age of harvest. It's time for us to reap what our Old Testament forebears labored for. What they testified about has arrived in Jesus. All nations are streaming into His kingdom, just as the prophets said. It's time for us to open our eyes and see the harvest. It's time for us to reap what they sowed.
 - The above example about Jesus in John 4 provides an "eschatological" application to Psalm 126. But I think we can apply this in another way. As we've been noting, life is seasonal. When God showers us with blessing, it requires further prayer and more work to steward that blessing to reach its full potential. Whatever we're building for God will frustrate us. Therefore, we must remember with gratitude how He restored our fortunes; we must look ahead with hope to how He'll restore them further.
 - Furthermore, we must see what the Father is doing and partner with Him in that. In Psalm 126, the LORD restored Israel's fortunes, so the psalmist labors and prays as a steward of that restoration. The reason he felt such confidence in the future is that God started this whole thing. He sovereignly filled Israel's mouth with laughter, doing the impossible and unexpected. He was partnering with God.
 - It's the same for us. We don't want to waste our lives laboring in barren fields. We should consistently ask ourselves: what is the Father doing? What is the Spirit breathing life on? How is He restoring fortunes? Eschatologically, we know that the Spirit is breathing on the expansion of His kingdom through making disciples of all nations. In our personal lives, it's possible for us to discern what God is doing—in our specific time, place, and situation—and partner with Him in that. When we do, like the psalmist, we can labor and pray with confidence that our tearful sowing will lead to joyful reaping.
- "He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing"
- If this is about Israel's return from exile, the emphasis on weeping makes sense. It's not just because sowing seed is hard work; it's because every seed cast to the ground reminds Israel of its former glory and the pain of two generations.
 - We live in a therapeutic culture where psychological and therapeutic language has gone mainstream. This is partially good and partially bad. It is good because it destigmatizes getting help and promotes awareness of mental health. It is bad because people can become so focused on their emotions that they—to use biblical language—stop sowing.
 - The sower in this passage keeps casting seed DESPITE weeping. He doesn't wait to be fully "healed" before engaging. I'm reminded of Samuel who grieved over Saul, and God told him, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons" (1 Sam. 16:1).

- I'm also reminded of people whose family members were murdered and who lost homes in Saul's persecution. Luke says, "those who were scattered went about preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). They didn't wait until they'd completed years of therapy before preaching the word. They preached as they went, and the church flourished.
- I'm not suggesting there won't be seasons of downtime where we are less engaged in kingdom work. There will be. Sometimes we must pause to let Christ do a healing work inside of us before we move out to let Him work through us. In our pausing, however, let us seek to do "the will of him who sent me" (John 4:34). This is our food.
- This is personal for me. After a very rough transition in February, I paused for several months to let the Spirit work and heal. I also paused to hear Him. Once I heard Him, however, I knew I couldn't sit in my puddle of tears. Instead, He called me to sow in tears. A line of them marks my path. I am not healed; I am healing. I feel God's presence with me as I partner with Him to steward the restoration work that He began. Sometimes, like the lepers of Luke 17, God heals us as we go. I feel it.

—Verse 6 says essentially the same thing as verse 5, but it builds with elaborate language. The psalmist thus magnifies both the depth of the pain and the height of hope.

—Kidner: "So the psalm, speaking first to its own times, speaks still. Miracles of the past it bids us treat as measures of the future; dry places as potential rivers; hard toil and good seed as the certain prelude to harvest."