

New Yearnings for the New Year

Psalm 126

Like a Rose

Many of the psalms remind us of roses: they appear to us in the beauty of balanced symmetry. Viewed from different angles, each new approach is appealing. A rose can bring forth a sweet, attractive fragrance with memories that will last for a lifetime. The petal of a single verse can hold a life-changing principle, treasured for years to come. Botanists may analyze the vascular system of the stems, with their life-giving flow. And then, of course, there are the thorns, protecting the fragile beauty of the blossom. Is it any surprise that roses appear in pictures and paintings to remind us of the timeless beauty of life's precious moments? And so a psalm can impart magnificent meaning to each new generation. Psalm 126 helps us to express new yearnings for the New Year.

With this in mind, let's read Psalm 126 together, responsively. It is a "song of degrees" or a "song of ascent." The pilgrims to Jerusalem sang these psalms together in their holiday seasons, as may we. Here are life's timeless yearnings, ever new.

Psalm 126

A Song of degrees.

- 1 **When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion,
We were like them that dream.**
- 2 **Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
And our tongue with singing:
Then said they among the heathen,
"The LORD hath done great things for them."**
- 3 **The LORD hath done great things for us;
Whereof we are glad.**
- 4 **Turn again our captivity, O LORD,
As the streams in the south.**
- 5 **They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.**
- 6 **He that goes forth and weeps, bearing precious seed,
Shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.**

Theology: The LORD

In Psalm 126, the life-giving flow is from The LORD. This proper, personal name of the God of Israel is used four times in these six verses. Many scholars believe that this name is derived from a verb, so the meaning is "*the one bringing into being, life-giver... giver of existence, creator ...*"¹ If this is the case, it certainly adds a new dimension to our understanding of Psalm 126. It is The Lord who ends captivities and restores fortunes. The psalm emphasizes that He has done great things. He is the Giver of life. He may protect the fragile beauty of that life with

thorns of protection or correction. But the Lord alone can impart timeless truth to each new generation of mankind.

Connections, Comparisons and Contrasts

Like a rose, Psalm 126 can be viewed from different angles. Each new angle is appealing; artists could teach us about the timeless power of each new perspective. Taken together, there is balanced symmetry. But like a rose, the psalm portrays a matchless creativity as the diverse petals are woven together in wonder. This poetic hymn, sung by the ancients, portrays captivities and deliverance, harsh confinement and heartfelt cries. The great confidence is that The Lord who has done great things, will do those great things once again. But joy, laughter and singing are mixed with sowing and weeping. Life-giving moisture from a sudden stream is compared with the moistness of tears; gladness is contrasted with sadness. Despair and desire are stirred together in a recipe for hope. Weeping while planting leads to harvesting with joy.

To speak of something as “antiphonal” means that it is spoken or sung alternately by two groups. It is an echo for emphasis. An antiphonal piece might have the choir and congregation singing back and forth to each other to stress the importance of the message. In Psalm 126, this antiphonal aspect is evident in verses 2 and 3. The nations proclaim the reality that resonates with the saints.

The Lord Has Done Great Things for Them! (vs. 1-2)

“When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like those that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: Then said they among the heathen [nations], “The LORD hath done great things for them.” (Psalm 126:1-2).

The first line refers to the return of the saints to Jerusalem from captivity; the Lord restored their fortunes as they cried to Him. Like their ancestors who had been in captivity in Egypt, their cries were heard by the Lord and He knew about their sorrows (Exodus 3:7). Not everyone agrees, but verse 1 likely refers to their return from Babylon (as prophesied by Jeremiah, prayed for by Daniel, and brought about under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, and preached to the people by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah). In any case, the LORD rescued them from captivity with the joyous result: they laughed and sang, and were so joyous that they wondered if they were dreaming. Their desire accomplished was sweet to their souls (Proverbs 13:19). And this joy was not based in feelings, but in facts: the nations testified, **“The LORD has done great things for them!”** As we learned during [the Daniel series](#), the unique excellence of the Lord was magnified among the nations in Babylon.

Verses 1-2 testify to the truth in Romans: **“For whatever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope. Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind *and* one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (Romans 15:4-6). In Psalm 126:1-2, we learn how to have hope – confident expectation – about the future. Those in Zion had been restrained by the

nations, but they were released by their Redeemer and Rescuer. Their deliverance from despair was like a dream. When you and I dream, we sometimes awaken to wonder if it really happened. And sometimes we are discouraged to find it that it was all a dream! But these people were wide awake and aware of their awesome deliverance; it was no dream! And here are our new yearnings for this New Year.

The Lord restored their fortunes when, in their captivity, the saints of Zion cried to Him; He answered all their pleas. With laughter they could testify; no trouble could destroy: that those who plant their seed with tears shall harvest them with joy.

The Lord Has Done Great Things for Us! (vs. 3-6)

“The LORD hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad. Turn again our captivity, O LORD, as the streams in the south [Negev]. They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goes forth and weeps, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him” (Psalm 126:3-6).

Here the antiphonal echo is, “The Lord has done great things for us! We are glad!” According to Psalm 61:5, God gives His own the heritage of those who fear His name. The writer of this psalm praised the Lord who had done great things for each new generation.

But there is a problem. What’s the problem? The psalmist wrote, **“Turn again our captivity, O LORD.”** What?! The Lord had delivered them, but now they are back in captivity again?! Even a quick reading of the Book of Judges reveals a stunning cycle. Israel worshiped the Lord. Israel wandered from the Lord and was enslaved. Israel waited on the Lord, crying out to Him for deliverance. Israel won great victories through the guidance and help of the Almighty. And so they worshiped the Lord before they wandered away again. Most generations of believers are very familiar with this cycle on a personal level, and frequently on a national level. Even as we speak, these United States of America are wandering into the slavery of sin – “slouching towards Gomorrah” in the words of Robert Bourke.ⁱⁱ

In this past year, where did you feel that you were in captivity – either through your own iniquity or being snared by the consequences of the sin of another? Was your conscience pummeled by pornography? Did you get caught up in the controlling tyranny of the tongue? Did you feel controlled by government overreach? Were you enslaved by your entertainment? Were you surprised by sneaky sin after it had made you its slave? Did you feel slammed by the slander of another? Have you become the awkward slave of substance abuse? Are you in financial bondage due to your spending habits? In each one of these situations, we could pray, **“Turn again our captivity, O Lord!”** The same LORD who gave hope to Israel can give hope to you as an individual.

This is the message of the Messiah – the Christ who delivers us. The real joy of the Christmas holidays is that Immanuel’s nativity will lead us from captivity. The birth of Christ signaled coming deliverance for those in bondage and captivity (Isaiah 9:1-6). This is why Peter later preached, **“...saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindred of the earth be blessed. Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning**

away every one of you from his iniquities” (Acts 3:25b-26). The Son of God was born as a human being in Bethlehem. His righteous life, His vicarious death and His glorious resurrection and ascension into Heaven show us that He can conquer every captor. We can escape from captivity through the conquering Christ. These are new yearnings for this New Year. Why not cry out to the Lord to deliver you from captivity this year? And as you do, pray for your fellow captives. He will bless us in turning every one of us from our iniquities.

How will this happen? The psalmist prayed, Let it be like the sudden flooding of a wadi in the wilderness. Another name for “wadi” is “arroyo” – a steep sided dry gully that rarely gets rain. But when it comes, look out! Sudden flooding of an otherwise dry stream bed is well known in certain parts of the desert wilderness. So the psalmist wrote, “let it come like the streams in the Negev” (the arid wilderness area in the south of Israel). In this New Year, we are yearning for that kind of rain: suddenly showering us all with blessings.

But what if we don’t see the overflowing stream beds? What then? Do we give up? No, the psalmist continued: if it is to be that the only real moisture is our tears, we will press on. We will plant good seed, watering it with our weeping. This is the nature of hope: confident expectation. That even if we must go forward into dry and dusty times, weeping as we are planting our good seed in hope, we will do so. Why? It is because we know without doubt that God will give us a bountiful harvest and that we will rejoice in coming days. So whether 2022 overflows with sudden, surprising waters of wonder or wearily weeping over thirsty soil, we will press on in hope. And these are our ever-new yearnings for this New Year.

With joy and gladness they rejoiced like people in a dream, and so we learn to trust in Christ, The Lord whom we esteem. “The Lord has done great things for them,” the nations then would say. The Lord has done great things for us, through Christ’s great work today.

Oh Lord, restore us even now, from our captivity. Like streams within our wilderness enliven joyfully! But if we all must plant good seed and water it with tears, we still believe your promises of joy in coming years.

Pastor Gordon Dickson, Calvary Baptist Church, Findlay, Ohio www.cbfindlay.org

¹ Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 218.

ⁱⁱ This was the title of Bourke’s book, written in 1996. For more information, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slouching_Towards_Gomorrah