

Joy Remembered, Joy Anticipated

Psalm 126

8/23/2020

Randy Lovelace

This morning, we continue in this series on the Psalms of ascent. And today, we come to a Psalm of ascent that is familiar to many, perhaps one of the most well-known. It is a Psalm that has, if you will, something which is very, very much central to the way in which the Psalms are structured and the ways in which they call us to worship but may be quite foreign to a North American Christian experience. That is, it is wedding together both grieving and joy. Now, oftentimes, we don't wed those two things very well together. Even in our age, there are those that you can hire to help design a memorial service or a funeral that removes all forms of grieving and lament, and it's all celebration. On the one hand, I understand that. On the other hand, my fear is that we've lost the art of learning how to grieve and lament.

I would suggest, and I think this Psalm illustrates, that it's exactly our ability to grieve and lament that actually gives great energy and fuel to our joy. We do not have to have one at the exclusion of the other. But it is this psalm that directs us to do just that. It is joy remembered, but it is also joy anticipated.

Hear now God's word, Psalm 126.

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
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."
The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad. Restore our fortunes, O
Lord, like streams in the Negeb! Those who sow in tears shall reap with
shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall
come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Again, pray with me.

Father, we now ask that you would open our hearts and our minds to the power and beauty of your word that you would enable us to both grieve and rejoice, that all of this would be empowered by your Spirit, that you would be about building your kingdom, and that we would learn individually and corporately what it means to have a joy that is remembered but also a joy that is anticipated. Help the teacher. Feed your church. In Jesus's name. Amen.

I've been a homeowner long enough to remember the beginning of HGTV. And in the early days, many of those shows were after the same kind of model which was they would choose some family who wanted to do something to their house, they would bring in a designer, whiplash in some contractor, they would take the family away and put them up in a quality inn somewhere, and they made it seem like it was just a few days, but we know it would be multiple months. It was crunched down to 30 minutes, and you can have the vision of the house you would really want. And so the family would come back, and they were arguing like, oh, do you want this kind of counter? Oh, I don't know. And then suddenly, they would remove the curtain or whatever fancy thing they would do, and the family would be in tears of joy. Oh, I can't believe it. Oh, how wonderful this is.

And I remember what that kind of show was like and how tired of it I became. But I understood what they were doing. There's nothing like taking something which needed repair, which needed expansion, and to see it all new and restored.

Something similar to that happens here, but it's a little more contemporary. It's more like, if you will, the Game of Thrones meets Chip and JoJo. It's this idea where they were now taken from Jerusalem because of an enemy nation, Babylon, who came in to destroy Jerusalem because the people of God had refused to follow the Lord as He intended them to do. And they were overtaken by enemy nations

because He allowed it. They were taken away from Jerusalem, but Jerusalem was utterly destroyed. But then they returned decades later. We don't know the exact timing of this psalm, but it's probably something which Jeremiah prophesied about that after the time of the Babylonian exile, they would return again to this land from which they came. But what they return to is not a well-built re-glorified re-painted kind of house. No. The city was destroyed.

And this is the condition to which they returned. And out of this comes Psalm 126. And as we look at this psalm, it splits into two nice little sections. In verses 1 through 3, there is joy remembered. And in verses 4 through 6, there is joy anticipated.

First, the joy remembered. And to be able to remember this joy, there are two things that these verses teach us about the joy that they remember. They have to learn how to rejoice, and they have to learn how to worship. It's not that those are mutually exclusive, but they are two important parts.

With this joy remembered, they learned to rejoice. Notice what it says. It says, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream." What is that talking about? It means that they had been away so long and longed so much to return to the place that the Lord had given them that even being in the midst of Jerusalem in its present utterly broken down state, they were so joyous it was as if they were a dream. They'd been away from home for so long that now they arrive on the front lawn, and they look at each other as a metaphorical family, and they say, I can't believe I'm home. And they're on the front lawn, and they're weeping.

But their weeping is also joy. Notice what it says over and over again in this psalm, "Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy." Even amidst the desolation, they were rejoicing that they are home. Although the situation might be bad, although the world might seem like it's coming down around their ears, the Lord is with them and He's allowed them to return home. And "shouts of joy" is a repetitive phrase. In verse 5, "Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!" Then again in verse 6, they "shall come home with shouts of joy." In all of this, they are remembering that rejoicing is deeper than the fleeting moments of our present experience or what we've experienced briefly in the past. Rejoicing is not about our circumstances. The rejoicing that they tap into is that what has been removed from them in exile, what has been removed from them by seeing Jerusalem in desolation is that it's not about the glory of Jerusalem. It's not about what they would have experienced or didn't experience in exile. It's shouts of joy to the Lord. It's because God is with them. The Lord has provided for them even in the midst of desolation.

Rejoicing must go deeper than our present circumstances. This is an important note for us. What seems as just six months that we've been in this pandemic feels so much longer. And yet, there will be a day, church, when we will look back and we will tell the story of 2020 and maybe 2021. But it will be a blip on the screen of eternity. We remember and rejoice even in the midst of challenge and difficulty because our rejoicing goes deeper than circumstances. It's because the Lord is with us.

But they're also learning to worship. When it says, "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,'" meaning they're learning to worship because it is clear that they're not allowing the circumstances to color their worship. They're rejoicing in the God who has brought them home, and their rejoicing is going out as a report into the world. And the world is now saying, look at them.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, we might have experienced very real suffering in this time. But what a great testimony to God that instead of the church grumbling, the world could say, how could they rejoice and find comfort in a God of grace in the midst of this? It's because our mouths are filled with laughter not because we are denying the realities of our suffering or the difficulty of the desolation. It's because they understand that ultimately all of this is about who God is in their lives. And the world says, the Lord has done great things for them. And then they say, yes, the Lord has done great things for us. We are glad. We are glad.

Imagine if God could give the church of Jesus Christ and could give to you and to me not a spirit of grumbling but a spirit of rejoicing and gladness. It's an opportunity to go in deeper when people ask you, as people inevitably are as they are asking me, how are things? And as a pastor, I don't know why they feel like I'm going to give them some amazing answer. But I've done two weddings in two weeks. By the way, that is delicious irony that even though these weddings had to be rescheduled that God is still about bringing two people together to make them one, that God is still building the world.

And people say, I know you're a pastor, so how are things? And there was a time during all of this where I was wondering, am I allowed to talk about how I'm rejoicing? Am I allowed to talk about that even as one whose parents were diagnosed with COVID, even one whose friends have suffered as a result of it? Can I talk about the good things which the Lord is teaching me and teaching His church? It is an opportunity to lean in and say, let me tell you. And even to my own family who might be watching today, they're like, how do you feel about not being able to meet together? I'll say, guess what, mom and dad? Do you know that people are hearing my preaching who have never met me, who have never set foot in the State of Maryland?

Last night, I got to do my first livestream wedding. We had guests from Scotland to Brazil to Lebanon to Uganda. It was an opportunity to preach the gospel. God is at work. And what they saw there, as we weren't singing, but we had musicians, we read five sections of scripture. And I got to preach the gospel and how that's illustrated in marriage. We are praising God. What an opportunity. May God take from us any spirit of grumbling and give us a spirit of gladness that we might learn to worship, that His name might be made great.

This is their joy of remembering. Now, remember, it's happening in the midst of desolation which is why they must turn from joy remembered to joy anticipated. Here, it is almost like a different psalmist wrote the next section because it says in verse 4, "Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negeb! Those who sow in tears," wait, what do you mean sow in tears? You see, to our ears in the West, the idea that we can both rejoice and weep don't seem to go together. But the Psalms would have none of it. The Psalms teach us over and over and over again to do both. Why is that? It is because when it says, "Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negeb," what they're saying is now they're home, and the Lord has brought us thus far. We rejoice. We shout with joy. And then they open their eyes, and they look around, and they see the desolation. And now that they're home, they need to start families. They need to build houses. They need to sow seed for crops in the midst of the desolation.

So what's happening here metaphorically through this farming image is they're learning how to grieve why they're there to begin with and why there is desolation. They're grieving as they are sowing. And as they're sowing new fields, building new houses, starting new lives, restoring Jerusalem, they are also grieving the fact that it is a result of their sin. It's their sins and their parents' sins, their grandparents' sins, their siblings' sins, their friends' sins, the sins of Israel. Sin in the Bible is never merely individual; it is also corporate. Even though the Lord had been faithful to them, they had refused to remember that it is God who has provided all things.

So we get Psalm 106 that goes through the whole history of Israel. It reminds them that even when Israel, having been freed from Egypt and the hand of Pharaoh, loaded down with more wealth than they've ever had in their lives, they go to the banks of the Red Sea, and they turn and see the approaching Egyptian army, and they turn and grumble saying, is this what you have done, O God? Why have you brought us here? We want to go back. And yet, God in His mercy forgives them and still leads them through the sea.

And then when He takes them to the promised land, even there they are like, why have you brought us to a land of giants? And they want to go back. They don't remember. They are grieving because it is their sin that has placed them in the midst of this desolation. The Lord has allowed them to experience the consequences of their sin as He allows us to experience the consequences of our sin, not to

rub our noses in it but to remind us that we ought to remember Him. And He is the one who redeems. He is the one who restores. He is the one who forgives.

If Israel didn't acknowledge the desolation, they wouldn't be fully human. If we don't grieve our sin, if we don't grieve the sin in the world, then we are denying reality. We're denying the reality of our own hearts and denying the reality of the world. We are fallen because of sin.

It's important to remember to grieve. As Peter Scazzero says in *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, he says,

"Our culture routinely interprets losses as alien invasions that interrupt our normal lives. We numb our pain through denial, blaming, rationalizations, addictions, and avoidance. We search for spiritual shortcuts around our wounds. We demand others take away our pain. Yet, we all face many deaths when in our lives."

What Peter Scazzero is tapping into is that to be a healthy follower of God is not to deny the reality of sin and the brokenness that it causes in our lives, and in the lives around us, and in the world around us, but we can grieve it. Lord, have mercy. Because if we don't, then what will happen as wounded broken people if we do not properly grieve is we will begin to resent. And when we resent, we become hostile. And when we become hostile, we blame shift. And when we blame shift, toxicity grows up in our veins and impacts our relationships, our communities, our nations, and our world. But for the church of Jesus Christ, for the nation of Israel, it was intended that they grieve, even that they ought to sow new seeds of new life while weeping and grieving why they're there and why the circumstance is as it is.

In anticipating this joy that is to come, they learn how to grieve. But they also learn how to plant. You see, what happens here is it says, "Those who sow in tears," meaning those who are planting seed, "shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him." What's happening is they're grieving, but they're also saying, we're still supposed to plant new seed of new life.

I think what's being said here is a powerful spiritual lesson about what it means to be a follower of God. And how do we appropriate this as those who are now on this side of the incarnation and on this side of the resurrection? I think it is this, as the theologian Michael Bird says,

"The good news of the gospel does not allow us to forget the depths of our sin or to forgo our continued struggle against it, but neither does the gospel allow us to incessantly bemoan our wretched estate without respect to the joy that washes over it nor to revile ourselves day by day without mention of the justification that frees us from all condemnation. Our gospel faith bids us to think of our sin as nailed to the cross, and we bear it no more for God has made it well with our soul. It is God who has declared us, even to make us something new, light in the world, holy ones, children of God, and the church triumphant."

It means that Israel, as the church today, grieves the reality of our sin, but we are no longer defined by it. We're not enslaved by it. We're not identified by it. We have been made new through the work of Jesus Christ who has taken our sin upon Himself which enables us as those freed from sin and death, although grieving our sin, we also plant new seed of new life. This means we do so individually. We don't bemoan that we are wretched sinners. We rejoice that we have grace and mercy through the Lord Jesus Christ. We are made new. But we are also to do so collectively and not just individually. Collectively, there are things which we can do as we plant the seed to build Christ's kingdom. You see, we are saved and brought into His kingdom, but we're brought into the kingdom together collectively as a people, as a nation, as a church. And He intends for us to plant seed.

What do I mean? PD Mayfield shared with me this week a quote from his sister who said, "Being a farmer is this. It's a hundred percent risk every year. When you're planting seed, it's 100 percent risk that it will come, or it may not." What does that mean? When they're sowing the seed, they're praying, Lord, will you return the streams of the Negeb? It seems dry and desolate. So we're going to take the risk as a nation and rebuild. But it's not for the sense that Israel might be great again but rather that His name might be great, that they belong to Him. And as they sow, Lord, provide rain. But there's risk.

What does that mean for us collectively as a church? And what does it mean for us individually? Let me speak to this matter. This weekend marks the middle between two political party conventions. So right now, our culture, our nation is ripped apart. Recrimination is flying one way and the other. And, unfortunately, that also infects the church. People are recriminating, calling names, cancelling on social media and sometimes in the face. All these things are happening. What do we do as a practical point in this moment? What does it look like to plant the seed of the gospel as the church of Jesus Christ in the midst of a country and a world that seems as though it's falling apart at the seams? I believe it begins, is sustained, and ends with love. Now, that may seem trite and kind of sweet, but I don't mean it that way.

I want to go back for a brief moment as I close to one of the founding authors and theologians of the reformed tradition at the time of the reformation. As a young pastor and theologian, John Calvin, in sharing what it meant for the church of Jesus Christ, both individually and corporately, to live in the world, this is what Calvin says in a brief portion of his collection on theology called *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. In talking about the love of neighbor, he says, "is not dependent upon the manner of men but looks to God," meaning it's not about whether other people merit our love. Here's what he says.

"The Lord commands all men without exception to do good, yet the great part of them are most unworthy if we judge them by their own merit. But here, scripture helps us in the best way when it teaches that we are not to consider that men merit of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men to which we owe all honor and love. And particularly among the household of faith, that is, the same image is more carefully to be noted, Galatians 6, in so far as that image of God has been renewed and restored through the spirit of Christ."

As he considers that, that we're to love others not because they deserve it but because they bear the image of God in them, and particularly those who are a part of the household of God, although we might disagree, because of Christ's work, the restored image of Christ is being made new in us every day. And we particularly are to seek to love one another.

But he then says, "Therefore, whatever man you meet," and we would add woman, of course.

"Therefore, whatever man you meet who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help them. You might say, he is a stranger. But the Lord has given him a mark that ought to be familiar to you by the virtue of the fact that he forbid you to despise your own flesh. To refuse to help another is denying that they are of the same flesh as you are. Well, you might say he is contemptible and worthless. But the Lord shows him to be one to whom he has deigned to give the beauty of his image that even those who we consider contemptible and worthless, ne'er-do-wells,"

Liberals, conservatives, rich, poor, black, white, American, Russian, everyone bears the image of God.

Calvin says,

"Now, if he has not only deserved no good at your hand but has also provoked you by unjust acts and curses, not even this is a just reason why you should cease to embrace him in love and to perform the duties of love on his behalf. You will say, he has deserved something far different from me.

Yet, what has the Lord deserved? While he bid you forgive this man for all sins he has committed against you, he would truly have been charged against himself, that the sins that have been perpetrated against us, even Christ has taken on those sins upon the cross. Assuredly, there is but one way in which to achieve what is not merely difficult but utterly against human nature."

Thank you, Calvin. It's completely against our nature to love our enemies. And so he says,

"To love those who hate us, to repay their evil deeds with benefits, to return blessings for reproaches, Matthew 5, it is that we remember not to consider men's evil intention but to look upon the image of God in them which cancels and defaces their transgressions, and with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them."

Do you know that the gospel calls us to a cancel culture? But it's not the kind of cancel culture that we're doing. We cancel any right to hate others, to grumble against them, to call them names, to disregard them or to dismiss them. We are to even love them in the midst of their persecution. To plant this kind of seed requires both grieving and joy, joy knowing that as we plant the seeds of love in the midst of the world that is coming apart at the seams that we reject this pettiness, we reject the idea that others do not bear the image of God, we reject inculturation of the church, we reject separation of the church from the world, and we reject the domination of culture from the church.

What we do is we say, Lord, may the seeds of love which you have planted in our hearts transform us to be a people that plant the seeds of love in our neighborhood, in our workplaces, over Zoom, over social media, over prayer groups, all of it. Lord, may you bring a great harvest of your kingdom expanding. And we ask you for mercy because forgive us because to love the enemy is against our nature. But you have done great things. Because we remember while we were yet your enemies, Christ died for us.

What a people to be freed! What a message to preach. What an opportunity to plant, not to make anything great but His name for the expansion of His kingdom and the glory of Christ in the church and in the world. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we now ask that you would take your word and transform us as a people that we would rejoice in the love of Jesus Christ our Savior, but that our rejoicing would turn to planting even while we grieve the reality of sin, of our own sin and the desolation it has caused not only in our own lives but as we have heard others and as sin has upset and turned this world upside down. But you, O Lord, in Jesus Christ through the power of the cross and the resurrection are about restoring all things. Lord, would you give us the seed of love which you have changed us with that we might plant it around for the name and the glory of Christ. Do this, O Lord. In Jesus's name. Amen.