

Restore Our Joy

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Bible Verse: Psalm 126
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Well, I invite you to turn to the book of Psalms, Psalm 126 for our text this evening. We're delighted to have all of you with us here this evening and just the special privilege of week by week going through the word of God. I'm quite confident that in days to come, we'll look back on these as most special days as the Lord gives us breath.

Psalm 126, beginning in verse 1.

1 When the LORD brought back the captive ones of Zion, We were like those who dream. 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter And our tongue with joyful shouting; 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 captivity, O LORD, As the streams in the South. 5 Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting. 6 He who goes to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed, Shall indeed come again with a shout of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

We come back to the Psalms tonight after being away from them for a few weeks and we find ourselves in the middle of what are known as the Songs of Ascent, Psalms 120 through Psalm 134, and many people believe, and I share the belief, that these 15 Psalms were sung by pilgrims as the Old Testament saints went up to Jerusalem for the annual feasts, and so they would sing these songs over and over again over the course of their lives and they would come deeply embedded in them, and the word of God expressed in these would be that which came to be on their minds as they celebrated the annual feasts and remembered God's faithfulness to the nation of Israel. As we've said and just by way of brief review, these 15 Psalms break down into five groups of three, triads, and they follow a pattern that's pretty observable when you know to look for it. In the first Psalm of the triad there will be a description of some kind of problem, and then following that in the second Psalm of the triad, there will be a meditation on the protection of God, and then the third Psalm of each triad will have some kind of emphasis on the theme of peace.

So problem, protection and peace, and the cycle of that within each triad and then multiplied by five triads, gives a sense of some of the ebb and flow of life. You know how it goes, we go through issues in life, we face difficulties, we face sorrows and God

draws us closer, we become reassured of his protection, we find peace in that, and then, you know, we walk in peace for a while and then new things come up and the cycle seems to start over again, somehow in the midst of that, the Lord graciously sanctifying us, with each continuing issue the Lord graciously making us more and more like Christ. And sometimes people wonder, you know, "Why must I suffer so? Why must life be so difficult?" Well, the Apostle Paul dealt with that and, you know, he faced far more difficulties than most of us face, and one of the things that the Lord is teaching you through your trials is to be dependent upon him. There's so many good things that come from it spiritually. It weans us from a love for the world. You know, we become so easily attached when things are going well and we lose sight of heaven. Well, when the world lays its rod to our back, we find that this isn't such a great place after all and it makes us look forward to heaven and makes us look up for grace in a way that we find our satisfaction in something other than this world. That is pleasing to God when we do that, and beyond that, beyond that it just detaches us from the world and causes us to look more toward heaven.

So Psalm 126 is the first Psalm of the third triad and numbers can sometimes be a tricky thing in a sermon, but in the first Psalm of this third triad we would, therefore, expect it to be something about a theme of difficulty, a theme of problem, and that is exactly what we find to be the case as we look at the two sections of this Psalm. Now we need to set the context for it so that you have a sense of what is being said. Those of you that have read through your Old Testament know that God sent the Southern kingdom of Judah into exile for 70 years in order to discipline them for their sin and their abandonment of faithfulness to him and the Babylonians carried them into exile, and I want to just read you an extended portion from 2 Chronicles 36 to set the stage for that. So if you'll go back before the books of Job, Nehemiah and Ezra, you will find the book of 2 Chronicles and in verse 36 you get kind of a summary statement of how things went.

2 Chronicles 36 beginning in verse 15 where it says, "The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them," meaning his people, he sent word to his people "again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy. Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans," another word for the Babylonians, loosely speaking, the king of the Chaldeans "who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand. All the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he brought them all to Babylon." Pause there for just a moment. So all of the articles that were an expression of their worship in that dispensation, it was all carried away from the land and taken away to a foreign nation. God was bringing severe judgment upon his people and then things got worse.

Verse 19, "Then they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all its fortified buildings with fire and destroyed all its valuable articles. Those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were

servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it kept sabbath until seventy years were complete." So God lifted his people up, as it were, disciplined them and took them away to a foreign country and Jerusalem was left behind and the people were dwelling no longer in their own land but in a land with a foreign language and with foreign king and foreign customs, and they no longer had the privilege of being their own nation.

So this was a time of great discipline, lasted for 70 years which is longer than many of us have been alive even, to give you a sense of perspective. You know, we get upset when our favored political party is out of power for four years, you know? Here's 70 years, seven decades of being under foreign domination, and so they were under a severe discipline at the time. Now after that, after the 70 years were completed, God had mercy on them and he raised up a king of Persia named Cyrus, his tomb stands to this day in the nation of Iran, and in 2 Chronicles 36:22, you read about how God put an end to that discipline and embarked on a new time of dealing with his people. So 2 Chronicles 36:22, "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, 'Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up!'"'"

So here Cyrus having conquered the prior kingdom of Babylon, he now brings an end to the exile and he tells the Jews that they are free to go home. They've been released to go back to their homeland and so this was a time of great rejoicing for them as they went back to the homeland, went back to their own nation and they had this marvelous joy that filled their hearts as they came back and they were brought out from under the exile that God had imposed upon them. Now all of that to say this: after those 70 years of captivity, it was a joyful thing to return and most scholars, I think it's fair to say, believe that that return from exile is the background to our Psalm tonight, Psalm 126, and that helps us read it with a fresh sense of perspective.

You see there in verse 1 of Psalm 126 now, he says, "When the LORD brought back the captive ones of Zion," Zion being a poetic name for Jerusalem, "We were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter And our tongue with joyful shouting; 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." And you might say there's an obvious theme of joy in that Psalm and you're starting to wonder maybe there's a mistake here because the pastor said that this was a theme of problems and this seems to be opening on a theme of great great joy. Well, that's true, it does, it was a joyful thing for them to return from exile, but when they returned a sad reality hit them. There was a lot of work to do and there was poverty all around them. The walls were broken down. The temple had been burned and everything that they remembered, the older ones remembered about the prior time in the land of Israel was much much different now and there was a colossal

effort that was ahead of them, waiting to be done in order to build the nation back up. The walls around Jerusalem, the temple had to be rebuilt, and what happened is this, the joy with which they left Babylon and came back to Jerusalem, that joy gave way to a sense of discouragement and that seems to be the background to this Psalm. It is a focus on the discouraging hardship that the people faced and gives us a sense of how they responded to that and what the comfort of God was for them in the midst of that discouragement.

Now I think that some of us, if not most of us, can identify to one degree or another with that. You've gone through times where, you know, something really special happens, there's a special event in your family or good things happen and you're just filled with joy over it and there's just this sense of exuberance at what has occurred, but later on another event comes and hardship hits, or maybe the joy is taken away by some other kind of intervening event and what used to be a time of joy now has been replaced by sorrow. You know, those of you that have been married, maybe some of you that have lost your spouse, you can relate to this. You had the joy of your wedding, you had the joy of the early days of your wedding, your marriage and all of those good times, but now that seems like a distant memory, now you're left alone and the other half of the bed is cold and you're lonely and you feel the weight of missing that loved one. That gives you a little bit of a sense of how joy turned into sorrow and now what? Now you look back and the joy seems like a distant memory and you're left with the pressing difficulty of the sorrow of today. What does the word of God have to say to us in the midst of times like that in order to comfort us and how would we respond to these things spiritually? That is what Psalm 126 teaches us.

There are two sections to this Psalm. In the first three verses, you see what you could call a reflection on past joy. If you're taking notes, that would be the title of the first point, a reflection on past joy. Then in the second section, you see a request for future joy. So there's a contrast in this Psalm between past joy and future joy and that's what we want to focus on in the remainder of our time here this evening.

So a reflection on past joy, point 1. The Psalm opens with this joyful memory of their release from captivity. Look at verse 1 with me. He says,

1 When the LORD brought back the captive ones of Zion, We were like those who dream.

He's making an analogy to a common experience. You have happy dreams. You have a happy dream at night that transcends the boredom or the hardship of daily life and, you know, you're out in a green field someplace and enjoying an occasion, and then the alarm goes off or you start to wake up and quickly that dream is gone and you find out that it was too good to be true. You know how it is, dreams disappear when you wake up; they slip away until what seemed to be reality is no longer the case. Well, he's saying that, "Our return from exile was something like that. The joy of returning from exile was intense. We were so thrilled and we were overcome with the knowledge of what had happened. That exile had been difficult. We had borne children and raised children in exile who never knew anything about the freedom of being our own nation and now it

was all being given back to us, so it seemed, and we're going back to the homeland. So we're free again and what a wonderful time it was."

So it was so good, this was like a dream, this was like the best of dreams after such a time of hardship, but the thing about this dream, coming back from exile, was that it was real. This really happened and their emotions were based on reality, and as a result of that, they expressed their emotions, as you see it stated there in verse 2, he says,

2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter And our tongue with joyful shouting;

And joyful shouting is a particular theme of this Psalm. It's mentioned three times in this brief Psalm. In verse 2 you see, "our tongue was filled with joyful shouting," verse 2; in verse 5, "Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting"; and in verse 6, you go forth weeping, you shall come again with a shout of joy. So there is this exuberant happiness, this exuberant gladness that marked the beginning of their return from exile and he's remembering that time in a time of sorrow. He's looking back at that time of joy and saying, "Man, those days were great. That was a wonderful time, a time of loud celebration. We were going home." And so they were just giddy with delight over what the Lord had done with them, and so obvious was it that the favor of God was upon them as the exiles returned to Jerusalem, that the surrounding nations were forced to acknowledge that an act of the God of Israel was blessing them.

Look there in verse 2 with me. He says,

Then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."

The surrounding nations were stunned at their good fortune. When does it happen that a people is carried away for seven decades and then they get to go back to their homeland? And this was, you know, it's somewhat reminiscent in a different kind of way, but reminiscent of when the Lord delivered them all from Egypt, delivered the abundance of his people out of slavery from Egypt and brought them into the land. God blessed Israel. He delivered them from slavery. He delivered them from exile, so much so that the nations were forced to acknowledge it. There was no other explanation but the fact that the God of this nation was being good to his people. He was doing great things for them.

Now that was the memory of things, of what had happened in the past, and now here in verse 3 the psalmist affirms that God had done a work for them. He says in verse 3,

3 The LORD has done great things for us; We are glad.

So he's remembering what the Lord has done, he's stating a principle of gladness but it's with the backdrop of this past joy that was so exuberant, but as you go into the second section of the Psalm, you find that the mood changes rather rapidly and it's just so wonderfully helpful to read through your Old Testament and to know the historical

background of these things, otherwise these Psalms sometimes they don't make a lot of sense if you don't have some kind of context to understand them. Well, the second section of the Psalm provides a jarring contrast in this request for joy, and let me just stop here and say something that I have said multiple times. You know, the Psalms, the 150 Psalms, there is such a diversity of themes and a diversity of moods and a diversity of lessons that are taught. There are 150 Psalms and they're all different, they're all teaching us different things, and so it's important for us to read all of the Psalms to get a well-rounded picture of what worship looks like, you know, and not simply have a particular couple of Psalms that are our favorites and go to them, you know, Psalm 23, Psalm 100, or something like that. You know, of course we're going to have Psalms that are special to us but for us to grow in Christ and to benefit from the fullness of God's word, we need to know all of the Psalms and to see how they fit into different portions of life. Well, here in Psalm 126, you get a Psalm that is well-suited for those of you that are in hardship, that are in discouragement that is chronic, that is deep. Well, Psalm 126 has something to say to you. Psalm 126 is written from a perspective of tears, it's written from a perspective of hardship, and you see that as you read the final three verses.

So you look in verse 4 and there is this unexpectedly plaintive cry, this groan, as it were, that is expressed in verse 4,

4 Restore our captivity, O LORD, As the streams in the South.

And we'll go on in verses 5 and 6 in just a moment. Here you have the present setting of when the Psalm was written. The first three verses are a memory of the past, he's looking back. Now in these last three verses, he's writing about what is current, and what is current now is that the joy of the past has given way to the hardship of the present and there is nothing about him now in his circumstances to promote joy, to promote gladness, to promote laughing. All of that is gone and he's left with the sharp reality of what life is like now and that past joy is gone and he's left with the sorrow of today.

Well, if you want to read even more about the background and how all of this played out, you can read about the history of this return from exile in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, you can find the prophets speaking to the people in the books of Haggai and Zechariah, and so there's a lot of Scripture around this, it's Scripture that we don't get to as often as we do other portions of God's word, but when you read those what you find is this, is that the land had not been cultivated, they had to work very hard for a very meager existence when they returned. So all of the joy creating something of an expectation that it's going to be like this forever, or at least for the indefinite future, suddenly hitting up with the sad reality that life is much different. And you know, we know what that's like. We're going along, things have been great, and then something changes, events intervene and all of a sudden the things that we had rejoiced over have now changed completely and the joy that was premised on circumstance to begin with has changed.

What then? Where do you go? What do you do? And this is going to be an ongoing challenge for us as long as we walk on this earth. You know, I think about these kinds of things a lot. You know, I'm past middle-age now and so are some of you so don't, you

know, don't hold that against me. But you know, I'm just mindful that the good health that I enjoy now is not always, you know, won't necessarily always be my lot, and the things that I've been able to do I might not always be able to do. Life is going to change sooner or later and what's going to happen then? You know, and if all of my joy is premised on good health and good circumstances, then I'm very vulnerable, aren't I, to change and to hardship just like all of you are as well.

So what we want to see here is how does the psalmist respond to the changed circumstances, what is his response of prayer, and you see it there in verse 4. Look at it again with me when he says, "Restore our captivity, O LORD." That word LORD, that name for God is the name Yahweh. It's the name that speaks of his covenant faithfulness to his people. He's a loyal God. He loves his people. He's a delivering God. And so he calls upon the nature of God to help them in their hardship and here we see it translated in the New American Standard which we use, we see it translated, "Restore our captivity." Well, he's obviously not asking to go back into captivity, that's what they just have been delivered from. The English Standard version that many of you use translates it, "Restore our fortunes." In other words, what he's praying here is, "God, bring us back to a place of abundance. Bring us back to a place of blessing. Bring us back to a place of restoring the way things were so that we can have that sense of joy again, because the present hardship is crushing us in our souls. So bring us back to our former prosperity."

And he uses a simile that is strange to our ears but would have been immediately meaningful to one in the original land, in the original situation. He says, "Restore our captivity, O LORD, As the streams in the South." So he's saying, whatever he's saying, he says, "I want you to restore us like this," right? He says, "Restore us as this happens." What is he talking about, "the streams in the South"? Well, if you want to look this up more later if you've got a good Bible dictionary or a Bible encyclopedia, you can read about this phenomenon. There is an area south of Jerusalem that is called the Negev and it is normally a very dry desert area, but when it rains, there will be an abundance of water that occurs in the spring rains and almost overnight what goes from being a dry, arid, brown place suddenly springs to life with fresh flowers and the desert is quickly transformed and where it looked like death, all of a sudden there is this great sense of life and vibrancy and colors that just totally rejuvenates it just overnight by the presence of water in the area. The water brings relief and so the Negev is often referred to and often discussed in this way, it's a picture of sudden transformation. So what he's saying here where he says, "Restore our fortunes as the streams in the South," he's saying, "Bring a sudden transformation to this, just like You suddenly transformed our situation when You delivered us from exile. Transform us now. Look at our meager existence, look at our sorrow and do something in order to transform the situation." He's expressing great confidence in the sovereignty of God. He's expressing great confidence in the love of God. He's saying, "God, look on us with mercy and bring showers of mercy that would transform our situation."

So what he's praying here, he's praying that God would rapidly transform their circumstances so that they could go quickly from sorrow unto joy. It's a confident prayer. It's a prayer of faith, asking God to intervene abundantly to help us so that our hardship

changes quickly. That's his prayer, "God, do something here quickly." Now, you know, I think we can all identify with that. We've probably never prayed in exactly this prayer. I would be surprised if any of you have used Psalm 126 as a model prayer and you've prayed Psalm 126 like you do the Lord's Prayer or something else, maybe people have done that. But here you see the psalmist praying for this sudden relief, this sudden coming of God to help them, and so he's praying and expressing his confidence in God's ability to do that but the way the Psalm ends, you get the sense that it's not going to be a sudden change but something that's more gradual over time.

Look at verse 5 with me, verses 5 and 6, we'll just take them together in this way. There's another metaphor that's used here. It goes from this sudden transformation of the rains to the more drawn out process of sowing and reaping, an agricultural picture here, so that the answer to that prayer comes in verse 5,

5 Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting. 6 He who goes to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed, Shall indeed come again with a shout of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

The picture has changed here and in response to a prayer for a sudden transformation, there's a different kind of promise that is given to him here and it's illustrated with the principle of sowing and harvesting, and that's a different picture than sudden transformation, isn't it? Just think about, you know, just the nature of planting a garden or having a farm or whatever the case may be. You sow and it's difficult and it's hard work at the start, and what can you say at the end of the day? What do you see at the end of the day? You don't see any change at all really to speak of. You plant the seed, you plant grass seed or whatever the case may be, and there's not an immediate visible change in that. And of course, we understand, it goes without saying, which is what someone says when they're always about to say what they say would go without saying, that's always kind of funny to me, it goes without saying that we understand that there's a process, and that when we plant something there's going to be a process and we are going to have to wait in order to eat the fruit of our labors later on, and it may be months before we're able to enjoy the fruit of the work that we're doing on the day of sowing.

So farmers labor to sow and they plant their seed knowing that they're not going to see immediate results. The hard work – watch this – the hard work does not have a quick reward to it. What God does is he grants the harvest later. He does it after a period of sowing, after a period of waiting, after more cultivation. And so what we see here where the psalmist had prayed for a rapid change, the response indicated is that the joy will come but it will take time. There will be a delay to this and so the psalmist is doing this, he's making a comparison showing that tearful hardship is like planting, and for the people of God when we go through those times of tearful hardship, we have to understand that God's normal pattern is to restore our joy over a period of time, that there's going to be a process involved. God gives his harvest to the farmer in time. God gives joy to his suffering children in time, over a period of delay. And I think that that is really really critical to understand. We have been conditioned by 30 minute or 60 minute television programs to expect resolution of difficulties in an hour. We've been

conditioned by emotional teaching from pulpits over the years, trying to bring you to a point of an emotional crisis, an emotional release with the implied promise that if you get to that moment of release, that everything's going to be good after that and you just need to find that moment of crisis, that moment of release and then things will be good and will stay good after that.

Well, there's enough gray hair in this room for me to know that you know by life experience that that's not the way life works. You know, thank God that there are those moments, there are those seasons in life where joy is really abundant, but the reality of it is that, you know, things are restored over a period of time and that's what he's saying here. And look at it, there's a great promise here but there is an understanding of the timing that surrounds the promise that I want us to see. My beloved fellow Christians, brothers and sisters in Christ, as you walk through your own hardships here, you know something about sowing in tears, you know something about the difficulty and the hardship of life. I certainly do. I know what it's like to break down and cry in prayer and having a heart so burdened that you're just overwhelmed and, you know, tears become the only voice that you have before God. I've been there, I know what that's like and there's a promise here that God makes to us, makes to us, makes to his children that says when life is like that, when you are sowing in tears as a believer, a true believer in Christ, know that God's intention is to bring joy out of that, and that which has caused you sorrow and pain today, in the future God is going to transform that in a way that is going to rejuvenate your heart, encourage you in Christ, and bring you to that place of joyful shouting that causes all of the hardship that caused the tears in the first place to dissipate and go away. He will do that. He's faithful to us in that way, either we see it in this life and it's magnified even more in heaven, or if it's withheld, if the joy is withheld from us here in this life, in this particular season, there's always the promise that we're going to know that joy when we see Christ face-to-face in heaven and that's going to overwhelm with joy and glory everything that we've experienced in this life in a way that I am just completely persuaded that the sorrows of this life are just going to be utterly forgotten when we're in heaven.

There will be nothing in heaven to diminish our joy and so these memories and these hardships that we go through, they're all ultimately temporary and that's the promise. You sow in tears, you'll reap with joyful shouting. But notice this, beloved, in terms of framing your expectations and framing your sense of what this is supposed to look like, that the picture that is used is one of sowing and reaping, and sowing takes time and there's a period of time where it has to develop, and only then does the harvest come. Well, whatever the timing of God is in your hardship, whatever the timing of God is in your sorrow, it helps to be realistic and to understand that it is the pattern of God to restore joy over time, not immediately so that this frees you in so many many ways. It frees you from chasing after false hope, chasing after false experiences that promise ultimate deliverance in a moment but never actually deliver and leave you more discouraged at the end. It frees you from that sense of wondering, "What's wrong with me? Why is it like this? Why don't I know the joy of the Lord?" Well, understand that after, you know, in a time of sorrow, in a time of deep profound sorrow, that there is a

process that's involved in God restoring your joy. It doesn't always come in a flood. It comes in bit by bit, drip by drip, shower after shower sustained over time.

So there is this promise of ultimate joy but there is this recognition that there is a process and that it won't happen necessarily immediately. What God does, what God does is this, God gives his people a harvest of joy but he gives that joy in his time. And in the meantime while you're waiting for that restoration of joy, your responsibility, your contribution to the process is to humbly go to God in his word, to read his word, to meditate on it, to pray and to continue in the fidelity of being in prayer, being in fellowship with his people like all of you in this room are tonight, and to engage the process just as the farmer sows, just as the farmer weeds the lot and prunes the fruit or whatever, I was never a farmer and I'm starting to show that right now, right? But you get the idea there's a process in farming before the harvest comes and the Lord gives the harvest but the farmer is responsible to do his part. Well, our part is to seek him in his word, depend upon him in prayer, come and be with his people, share in the ordinances of the church, and over time God uses that to restore and bring back joy.

So there's this principle of sowing and harvesting that stands in contrast to the psalmist's prayer, "Do it suddenly." The response indicates that it may be a process and that's okay, and you're freed from the sense of this has to happen right now. There comes a point where you just, you know, you just kind of step back and you say, "Okay, do you know what? The Lord has me in a time of sorrow right now. I'm going to embrace that. I'm going to embrace that and I'm going to sow toward the things that give joy and trust Him to deliver me in His time." So that you come to his word, you come in prayer and you say, "Lord, I'm just going to wait on You. I'm just going to patiently wait on You to help me. I know that You will. You've promised that those that are in tears, they will reap with joyful shouting. I'm just going to wait on You to do that, and while I'm waiting I am going to seek You and I am going to show forth the reality, the genuineness of my faith by seeking You even if there doesn't seem to be any immediate result, any immediate favor that comes from doing so." That's when you see faith being refined, faith being proven true.

So you go on in verse 6 then, and you see the promise, this guarantee of the certainty of the outcome. In verse 5,

5 Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting. 6 He who goes to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed, Shall indeed come again with a shout of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

So when the blessing comes suddenly in those rare times when it does, we rejoice and we give thanks to God. Sometimes, more often perhaps, the natural joy, the joy comes as a natural result of faithful labor. The principle is the same, that in the end God provides for his people and he blesses us with joy. So we are motivated, beloved, we are motivated as Christians not by the circumstances and how quickly the result comes, rather our stability, our hope, our light in the tunnel is the certainty of the promise of God that joy will come and the matter of when it comes is a secondary concern to us because we know

from God's word, we know from reading church history, we know from past experience, we know from the promise of Christ and the promise of heaven, the promise that Christ will return, he said, "I go and prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I'll come again and receive you to Myself," this is John 14, "so that where I am you may be also." That's the outcome for us, is that we are in the presence of Christ for all of eternity. That means something. That means something and changes our whole perspective on trials in this life. It means that the adversities that we go through today never have the final word with us. The one who has the final word in our lives as believers in Christ is our gracious God. The one who has the final word in our trials is our gracious Christ. The one with whom we are united in his death, burial and resurrection, the Christ who entered into the grave and came out on the other side, we who are united with him, that is the outcome for us, a glorious resurrection triumphing not only over trials but over sin and death itself. That's the outcome for us. That's the final word. That will be irreversible.

So as politics come and go, as personal fortunes come and go, as sorrows and joys come and go in this life, we are anchored in knowing what the outcome is rather than being anchored in the shifting circumstances and our impatient demands for immediate change. God would have us learn patience in our trials, he would have us embrace even our weaknesses in a way that teaches us the sufficiency of his grace. That's what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12 as I alluded to it earlier, "My grace is sufficient for you for power is perfected in weakness." Well, if we want to know the power of God in our lives, apparently somewhere along the way we're going to need to know the weakness of tears, sorrow, and even for some disability, some the loss of loved ones, some separation from loved ones. God brings us into these things in order to teach us greater aspects of his grace and to teach us to trust his promise for ultimate future joy. So we watch and we work, we pray and we wait. We have responsibility, we do not, we do not passively let go and let God. If you pick up one of those older books that are promoting that Keswick theology, "Let go, let God," throw it in the trash. Just throw it away. It can only hurt you and mislead you.

Look over at Philippians 2, kind of going off script here for just a moment, but I want to say this. We're not looking for this point of such utter surrender that everything changes instantly. No, it's not like that. Philippians 2:12, "So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling." You belong to Christ, you have been saved, you have been completely saved, but now that you are in that position, work out the implications of that. You have a responsibility to follow through on, and so we are not passive in working out our sanctification even as we are relying on God ultimately to do the final work, as it says in verse 13, "for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." God is at work in you. God has made promises to bring you to joy, and because God has done that, therefore you are to pursue the things that promote that. So whether our deliverance is sudden or gradual, the provision comes from the Lord and, beloved, you should have it nailed in your mind, you should have it anchored in your soul, you should have it anchored in our perspective that there will be a

certain harvest for you if you are pursuing Christ and trusting him for the outcome in the midst of your sorrow.

So just kind of wrapping this Psalm up and taking an overview look at it again as we close, you and I, we don't know what it was like coming back home from exile but if you're in Christ, you know something about having had joys in your past, you know something about the exhilaration that comes when God did a special work in your life. For some of us, you know, our present adversity makes those happy times seem awfully remote. Now it's just clouds and, you know, it's the clouds that have hidden the sun of providence from you, and those past happy times seem awfully remote. Well, if that's you, take heart in Psalm 126. You're sowing in tears now, it's been, you know, the past month, the past months, the past year, years, have been difficult and full of hardship and sorrow and it almost seems unbroken, well, take heart in this Psalm, take heart of the promise that God makes to his people. Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting and, you know, if sowing in tears means a greater harvest of joy, well, there's something to be said, there's something to be said for having a lot of sorrow in life, planting a lot of seeds of sorrow in life so that the harvest at the end is even greater so that if you have had an abundance of tears lately, understand that God is promising a harvest of greater joy to come. And in the economy of God and in the grace of God, knowing that his harvest is always going to far surpass and more than abundantly repay the seeds of tears that went into it, shouts of joy are still ahead, beloved. The God who has blessed you once will bless you again because that's what he does. Just you wait and see.

James Montgomery Boice said this about Psalm 126, he said, "In most situations in life, the rewards only come after much hard work, even when we know that God is the source of the blessing. So remember the past and be encouraged by it. Keep praying and keep working because the Lord who gives us work to do also sends the harvest."

Let's pray together.

O Lord God, full of compassion and faithfulness, we thank You for the assurance of Your ultimate goodness to us, that even though some of us walk through the valley of the shadow of death even now, some sowing in tears, Father, the outcome in Your hands will be a harvest of joyful shouting. And so I pray for each one here that You would sustain them in the midst of their difficulty, in the midst of the adversity, sustain them and bring bright light to their soul with the promise of the restoration of joy that will come. Father, we've known joy in the past, we've seen such great things from Your hand in the past, in the midst of hardship today we ask You to bring us that joy again even in greater measure as an expression of Your love and faithfulness to us. We thank You, Lord, for our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You for the One who shed His blood for the remission of our sins and we pray that Your Spirit would call to Yourself each one here tonight who has not come to faith in Christ, call them out of sin, call them out of spiritual death, call them into new life in Christ, we pray, that they might enter into this joy themselves as we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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