

Psalm 126

“Sow in tears ... reap in joy”
A Song of degrees.

Psalm 126:

At first glance the setting of this psalm appears to be the return from the Babylonian exile.

However, the description is so general that it could refer to any number of events recorded in the historical books in which Israel was under pressure from foreign powers.

In fact, two captivities seem to be in view in this psalm: one that was ended by God’s intervention (verses 1-3), and the present one, the subject of the psalmist’s petition (verse 4).

The psalm may be thus outlined: praise for a past restoration (verses 1-3), petition for restoration at the present (verse 4), and confidence in restoration in the future (verses 5-6).

Verses 1-6

See note on Psalm 120-1-7.

The author and occasion are not named in the psalm.

However, verse 1 points to a time of return from captivity.

Most likely this refers to the Babylonian Captivity, from which there were 3 separate returns:

- (1) Under Zerubbabel in Ezra (chapters 1-6; ca. 538 B.C.);
- (2) Under Ezra in Ezra (chapters 7-10; ca. 458 B.C.); and
- (3) Under Nehemiah in Neh. (chapters 1 & 2; ca. 445 B.C.).

The occasion could be:

- (1) When the foundation for the second temple had been laid (compare Ezra 3:8-10); or
- (2) When the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles, was reinstated (compare Neh. 8:13-14).

This psalm is similar to Psalm 85, which rejoices over Israel’s return from Egypt (but contrasts with Psalm 137), which laments the pain of the Babylonian Captivity.

- I. The Testimony of Restoration (126:1-3);
- II. The Prayer for Riches (126:4);
- III. The Wisdom of Righteousness (126:5-6).

Psalm 126:1 "When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream."

"Them that dream":

The actual experience of liberation, so unexpected, seemed more like a dream than reality.

This is a glorious redemption.

It is so wonderful that they are asking themselves, could it be true or is this a dream?

Remember, Zion symbolizes the church.

After the time of darkness and falling away, there will be a time when the spirit will be poured out on all the church, and all shall know the Lord from the least to the greatest.

This is not speaking of this being for all the world, but for the church (Zion).

Acts 2:17-18 "And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams:" "And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy:"

Verses 2-3:

"The LORD hath done":

First recognized by the surrounding nations (verse 2), and then the returning remnant (verse 3).

Psalm 126:2 "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."

Who before mourned, and hung their harps on the willows, and could not sing the LORD's song in a strange land.

But now, as their hearts were filled with joy, this was externally and visibly seen in their countenances, and expressed with their mouths and by outward gestures.

It was so great, they could not contain it, to which respect is had (Isa. 35:10).

It may be rendered:

"Then shall our mouth be filled with laughter".

That is, when we awake, says Arama; or rather when the captivity is returned, either in a literal or in a spiritual sense, both being matter of great joy.

The Midrash says, this will be in the world to come, and not in this.

"And our tongue with singing":

The praises of God, and the songs of Zion.

"Then said they among the Heathen, the LORD hath done great things for them":

It was taken notice of by the Chaldeans, among whom they had been captives, and by all the nations round about.

And it was wonderful to them, that Cyrus, a Heathen prince, of his own motion and will, should at once, and without any price or reward, let them go, and send them into their own country to rebuild their temple.

And with them the vessels of the LORD's house.

That had been taken away by the king of Babylon.

And order men to help them, with gold and silver, and goods and cattle (Ezra 1:1).

Likewise, the conversion of the Jews, and the restoration of them to their own and in the latter day, will be observed by the Gentiles with wonder, and as the work of God (Ezek. 36:35).

You can see in this verse, the separation from the non-believers and the church.

The non-believers are spoken of as the heathen.

When you have been freed from such great oppression as this is speaking of, it would cause great joy and laughter.

Joy in your heart will stimulate singing from a heart too full to contain the joy.

The world will look on, and think what wonderful things the LORD has done for them.

Psalm 126:3 "The LORD hath done great things for us; [whereof] we are glad."

These words are generally supposed to be the words of the Jews, taking up those of the Gentiles, and confirming them.

Acknowledging that the LORD had done great things for them indeed.

Which, had they not owned, they would have been exceeding ungrateful.

Had they been silent concerning them, the stones would have cried out, and the very Heathens condemned them.

But I see not why they may not be thought to be the words of those that were among the Heathens continued.

Declaring that the great things done were not for the Jews only, but for them also.

As the great redemption by Christ is of persons out of every tongue, people, and nation.

For he is the propitiation, not for the Jews only, but for the sins of the whole world.

And having this in view, thus they express themselves.

The work of redemption is a great thing of itself.

The produce of great wisdom; the effect of great love; procured at a great price, for great sinners, by a great Savior.

And is not only a deliverance from sin, Satan, and the law; but contains many great and glorious blessings in it, as justification, remission of sins, adoption, and eternal life.

"Whereof we are glad":

That those great things are done without us, finished by the Redeemer himself.

That they are so great and glorious, so rich and plenteous, so full and free, and suitable to us.

And done for us sinners of the Gentiles, so unworthy of them, who are by nature children of wrath as others.

They are giving credit where credit is due.

The LORD delivered them, when they could not deliver themselves.

The joy and singing is coming from a thankful heart and directed to their Helper, the LORD.

Psalm 126:4 "Turn again our captivity, O LORD, as the streams in the south."

"Turn again":

A prayer to restore the nation's fortunes at their best.

"Streams of the south":

The arid region south of Beersheba (called the Negev), which is utterly dry in the summer, but whose streams quickly fill and flood with the rains of spring.

In this manner, the psalmist prays that Israel's fortunes will rapidly change from nothing to everything.

The joy they had been singing about, was remembering the wonderful things the LORD had done in the past.

Now they are asking the LORD to do it again.

Verses 5-6: "Sow ... reap":

By sowing tears of repentance over sin, the nation reaped the harvest of a joyful return to the land of Israel.

Psalm 126:5 "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy."

A proverbial expression, encouraging faith in prayer put up for the return of the captivity, whether in a literal or spiritual sense.

Praying or seeking the LORD is sowing in righteousness (Hosea 10:12).

Which is often attended with tears and weeping; the issue of them is not always seen soon.

These, like seed, lie buried under the clods, but take effect and will rise up in due time.

Saints should wait patiently for a return of them, as the husbandman for the fruits of the earth.

In due time they will produce a large crop of blessings, a plentiful harvest, which the praying saint will reap with joy; as those that prayed and waited for the redemption in Jerusalem.

And as those that pray for the latter day glory, the conversion of the Jews, the fullness of the Gentiles, and the destruction of antichrist.

The souls under the altar have been sowing in tears, but before long they will reap in joy (see Revelation 6:9).

It may be applied to the state and condition of saints in common in this life.

Now is their sowing time, and they must be careful they should be that they sow not to the flesh, but to the spirit.

And a sorrowful time it is, on account of inward corruptions, Satan's temptations, divine desertions, and the imperfection of their services.

But before long they will reap life everlasting, reap in joy, and be in the fullness of it.

Now they weep, then they shall rejoice; now they mourn, then they shall be comforted.

We must not stop sowing the seed of the Word, even though there seems to be no one listening.

Plant the seed anyway.

When the rain comes, the seed will sprout and grow.

There is joy in heaven over one sinner who comes to Christ.

Psalm 126:6 "He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves [with him]."

Which he sows in tears.

This is but a repetition and confirmation of what is before expressed in different words; and may be applied, as to a praying saint, so to a faithful preacher of the word.

The word is the precious seed which he bears, which he takes out of the granaries of the Scriptures; and carries from place to place, and scatters and sows (Luke 8:11).

Compared to seed, because of its meanness in the eyes of those that know it not.

Because of its generative virtue and increase, which it has from God, and which, unless sown in the earth, produces no fruit.

And it is called "precious seed", because either bought at a great price, when grain is dear; or because it usually is the choicest wheat that is the sowing seed.

And so, may denote the preciousness and value of the Gospel, dispensed by Christ's faithful ministers, which is called a sowing of spiritual things (1 Cor. 9:11).

Which should be done plentifully and constantly, and with the same sort of seed or doctrine, and which requires art and skill.

And is often performed weeping or with tears, because of their own insufficiency, through fear of success, and through want of it.

And because of the badness of the ground, the hardness of men's hearts they have to do with.

The allusion seems to be to a poor husbandman, that has got but little seed to sow, and this bought at a dear price.

And which he buries under the clods, and fears it will rise no more.

And weeps as he sows, because of the badness of the weather, or of the soil, doubting of success.

Aben Ezra, by the words rendered "precious seed", or, as they may be, "a draught of seed", understands the vessel in which the sower carries his seed, the seed basket.

From whence he draws and takes out the seed, and scatters it (see Amos 9:13).

So the Targum, "bearing a tray of sowing corn."

"Shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him":

The seed he has been to and fro in sowing springs up under a divine blessing.

And, beyond his expectation and fears, produces a large and plentiful crop.

Which he reaps, and returns home, not with his arms full of sheaves only, but with his cart laden with them.

So a faithful minister, sooner or later, is blessed with converts, who will be his joy and crown of rejoicing another day (see John 4:35; 1 Thess. 2:19).

Ministers, we must not worry about the harvest, or the growth of the seed (Word).

Our job is to plant the seed, God sends the rains, and after they are ripe unto the harvest, the LORD will send the reaper to bring the souls produced into His barn in heaven.

The harvest of the souls of believers is very near.

God is the LORD of the harvest.

We are told to look and see that the fields are ripe unto harvest.

When the wheat is harvested, then the rejoicing comes.

Psalm 126 Questions

1. What is verse 1 of chapter 126 speaking of?
2. What does Zion symbolize?

3. In verse 2, their mouth was filled with what?
4. Who are the heathen?
5. The joy and singing is coming from a _____ heart.
6. They that sow in tears, shall reap in ____.
7. What usually happens to the seed we sow in tears?
8. What is verse 6 saying to the ministers?