

Psalm 126

A Psalm of Ascents

In our world it is difficult to sustain interest and we are impatient for results. This affects the life of faith. It is one thing to say I am a Christian, it is quite another to be a mature disciple. There is a market for religious badges and religious experiences. Religion is a tourist site, a leisure experience. Friedrich Nietzsche noted 'the essential thing in heaven and earth is...that there should be long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.' But this long obedience is not encouraged in our world.

Scripture uses two words to describe people of faith: *disciple* and *pilgrim*. As *disciples* we spend our lives apprenticed to our master, Jesus always in a growing learning relationship. A disciple learns, not in a classroom but at the worksite of a craftsman, so we acquire skills of faith, not information about God. *Pilgrim* tells us we are people going someplace, going to God...Jesus says I am the Way, no one gets to the Father except by me (Jn14:5-6). Hebrews describes the program: 'get on with it, strip down, start running, and never quit. No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished the race we're in' (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Psalms 120-134 are a Hebrew songbook - the Songs of Ascents. They were likely sung by pilgrims as they travelled from their towns to Jerusalem for worship festivals. The travelling took time, it was uphill as much of life is, which gave you time to think, to remember your history and your identity...Singing passed the time, but also expressed gratitude for God's grace and quietened the stresses that accompany life.

The songs of ascents are songs for the road, good songs for those who travel the way of faith, they provide a way to remember who we are and where we are going. Let us not be tourists, but pilgrims, and may these psalms be as much our cheery travelling tunes as our practical guide as we resolve to have a long obedience in the same direction.

We Laughed, We Sang

Christians have sometimes been characterised as people who don't know how to enjoy life. [But]...one of the delightful discoveries along the way of Christian discipleship is how much enjoyment there is, how much laughter you hear, how much sheer fun you find.

Psalm 126 says 'We laughed, we sang, we couldn't believe our good fortune.'

This is the ...sign of those...on the way to salvation. Joy is characteristic of Christian pilgrimage. It is the 2nd of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal5:22). The first of Jesus' signs in the Gospel of John (turning water into wine)...This is not to say that joy is a moral requirement of Christian living. Some of us experience lives that are full of sadness and pain. Some of

us descend to low points in our lives where joy seems to have permanently departed. We must not...say 'Well, that's the final proof that I am not a good Christian..'

[For] joy is not a requirement of discipleship, it is a consequence...Joy is a product of abundance; it is the overflow of vitality. It is life working together harmoniously. It is exuberance. Inadequate sinners as we are, none of us can manage that for very long.

We try to get it through entertainment. We pay someone [else] to make jokes, tell stories...sing songs...The enormous entertainment industry...is a sign of the depletion of joy in our culture. Society is a bored, gluttonous king employing a court jester to divert it after an overindulgent meal. But that kind of joy never penetrates our lives, never changes our basic constitution. The effects are extremely temporary...When we run out of money, the joy trickles away...Joy cannot be commanded, purchase or arranged.

But there is something we can do. We can decide to live in response to the abundance of God and not under the dictatorship of our own...needs. We can decide to live in the environment of a living God and not our own...selves. We can decide to centre ourselves in the God who generously gives and not in our own egos which greedily grab. One of the certain consequences of such a life is joy, the kind expressed in Psalm 126.

Past, Present, Future

The centre...in the psalm is 'We are one happy people.' The words on one side...are in the past tense, the words on the other...are in the future tense. Present gladness has past and future...It is not a spurt of good feelings that come when the weather and stock market are both right on the same day.

The background for joy is only alluded to, but the words trigger Hebrew memories: 'when God returned Israel's exiles. We laughed, we sang...God was wonderful to us; we are one happy people.' What happened that was so wonderful? On nearly every page of the Bible we find...[reference] to the story of God's people in a long...servitude under the shadows of the Egyptian pyramids and the lash of harsh masters. And then, suddenly and without warning it was over. One day they were making 'bricks without straw' and the next they were running up the far slopes of the Red Sea, shouting...'I'm singing my heart out to God - what a victory! He pitched horse and rider into the sea! God is my strength. God is my song. And, yes, God is my salvation.' (Ex15:1-2)...

...We turn a few more pages and find the terrible story of Babylonian captivity. Israel experienced the worst that can come to any of us: rape...cannibalism...neighbours reduced to bestiality, a six-hundred mile forced march across a desert, the...mockeries of captors. And then, incredibly - joy. Beginning with the low, gentle words, 'Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak softly and tenderly to Jerusalem...that she has served her sentence, that her sin is taken care of - forgiven!' (Is 40:1-2). And then the swelling reassurance of help: 'When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you...Don't be afraid, I'm with you' (Is43:2-5). The sounds combine and surge to a proclamation: 'How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messengers bringing good news...Voices!

Listen! Your scouts are shouting, thunderclap shout, shouting in joyful unison: (52:7-8).
The gratitude and gladness build and soar. There is a sea-change into joy...

Each act of God was an impossible miracle. There was no way it could have happened, and it did... 'It seemed like a dream, too good to be true.' We too nurture these memories of laughter, these shouts of joy [we experience]. We fill our minds with the stories of God's acts. Joy has a history. Joy is the verified, repeated experience of those involved in what God is doing. It is as real as a date in history, as solid as a stratum of rock in Palestine. Joy is nurtured by living in such a history, building on such a foundation.

Joyful Expectation

The other side of 'we are one happy people' is the future tense. Joy is nurtured by anticipation. If the joy-producing acts of God are characteristic of our past as God's people, they will also be characteristic of our future as his people. There is no reason to suppose God will arbitrarily change his way of working with us. What we have known of him, we will know of him. Just as joy builds on the past, it borrows from the future. It expects certain things to happen.

Two images fix the hope: The first is 'bring rains to our drought-stricken lives.' The Negeb, the south of Israel, is a vast desert. The watercourses...are a network of ditches cut into the soil by wind and rain erosion. For most of the year they are baked dry under the sun, but a sudden rain makes the desert ablaze with blossoms. Our lives are like that - drought-stricken - then, suddenly, the long years...are interrupted by God's invasion of grace.

The second image is: 'So those who planted there crops in despair will shout hurrahs at the harvest / So those who went off with heavy hearts will come home laughing, with armloads of blessing.' The hard work of sowing seed in what looks like perfectly empty earth has, as every farmer knows, a time of harvest. All suffering, all pain, all emptiness, all disappointment is seed: sow it in God and he will, finally, bring a crop of joy from it.

The one who wrote the Psalm and those who sang it were no stranger to the dark side of things. They carried the painful memory of exile in their bones and the scars of oppression on their backs. They knew the deserts of the heart and the nights of weeping. They knew what it meant to sow in tears.

One of the most interesting and remarkable things Christians learn is that laughter does not exclude weeping. Christian joy is not an escape from sorrow. Pain and hardship still come, but they are unable to drive out the happiness of the redeemed.

A common but futile strategy for achieving joy is trying to eliminate things that hurt: get rid of pain by numbing the nerve ends, get rid of insecurity by eliminating risks, get rid of disappointment by depersonalising your relationships. And then try to lighten the boredom of such a life by buying joy in the form of vacations and entertainment. There isn't a hint of that in Psalm 126.

Laughter is a result of living in the midst of God's great works...Enjoyment is not an escape from boredom but a plunge by faith into God's work...There is plenty of suffering of both sides, past and future. The joy comes because God knows how to wipe away tears, and, in his resurrection work, create the smile of new life. Joy is what God gives, not what we work up. Laughter is the delight that things are working together for good to those who love God, not the giggles that betray the nervousness of a precarious defence system. The joy that develops in the Christian way of discipleship is an overflow of spirits that come from feeling good not about yourself but about God. We find that his ways are dependable, his promises. sure.

This joy is not dependant on our good luck in escaping hardship, it is not dependant on our good health and avoidance of pain. Christian joy is actual in the midst of pain, suffering, loneliness and misfortune. St Paul is our most convincing witness to this. He is always, in one way or another, shouting out his joy...out of his prison cell we hear him trumpeting to the Philippians: 'Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean *revel* in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up at any minute ! (Phil4:4-5). There is no grim Greek Stoicism in that; it is a robust Welsh hymn, striding from sorrow into song. It is the end result of the hope: 'So those who went off with heavy hearts will come home laughing, with armloads of blessing.' The witness is repeated over and over again, through the generations, and has scattered representatives in very community of Christians.

The psalm...shows up the tinniness of the world's joy and affirms the solidity of God's joy. ...It introduces us to the way of discipleship, which has consequences in joy. It encourages us in the way of faith to both experience and share joy. It tells the story of God's acts, which put laughter into people's mouths...It repeats the promises of a God who accompanies his wandering, weeping children until they arrive home, exuberant, 'with armloads of blessings.' It announces the existence of a people who assemble to worship God and disperse to live to God's glory, whose lives are bordered on one side by a memory of God's acts and the other by hope in God's promises, and who along with whatever else is happening are able to say at the centre, 'We are one happy people.'

May you know this to be true as you travel with Jesus on the pilgrim's way.

Chapter 8 - A Long Obendience in the Same DIRECTION - Eugene Peterson

Summary

Psalms 120-134 are the songs of a pilgrim travelling the hill from home to Jerusalem for a festival of faith. It is a song for the road, a song of joy, a way to remember we belong to the God who acts for his people and will do so again. Christian joy is built on history, it is the result of the repeated experience of God's goodness and faithfulness.

In a world of instant gratification, the Psalms of Ascents 120-134 challenge us to a life of long obedience in the same direction, even if it is uphill, and the days between

celebrations are ordinary. It calls us not to misery and groaning in the walking, but to songs of confidence and determination because of what we know and who we know. We are delightfully reminded that things are working together for good to those who love God, that his ways are dependable, his promises. sure. The centre of the Psalm is 'We are one happy people.' On one side are words are in past tense, the words on the other are future tense. There is plenty of suffering on both sides of past and future. The joy in the present comes because God knows how to wipe away tears and create smiles in his work of new life.

The psalm shows up the hollowness of the world's joy and tells the story of God's acts, which put laughter into people's mouths. When we decide to live in response to the abundance of God toward us, to centre ourselves in him who generously gives, one of the consequences is the joy of Psalm 126. It repeats the promises of a God who accompanies his wandering, weeping children until they arrive home, exuberant, 'with armloads of blessings.' It announces the existence of a people who assemble to worship God and disperse to live to his glory, whose lives are bordered on one side by a memory of God's acts and the other by hope in God's promises, and who along with whatever else is happening are able to say at the centre, 'We are one happy people.' May you know this to be true as you travel with Jesus on the pilgrim's way. *[courtesy E.Peterson]*