

Sowing in Tears

Psalm 126:1-6 A Song of Ascents. When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, We were like those who dream. 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, And our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." 3 The LORD has done great things for us, And we are glad. 4 Bring back our captivity, O LORD, As the streams in the South. 5 Those who sow in tears Shall reap in joy. 6 He who continually goes forth weeping, Bearing seed for sowing, Shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, Bringing his sheaves with him.

In 1992, the Queen of England gave a speech to mark her 40th anniversary as Queen and called the year that had passed “the annus horribilis”, which is Latin for the horrible year. It was a year of scandal and embarrassment for the Royal family, and she looked back on it with some shame and pain.

I don't know how you look back on the last 12 months, but as I said in my Christmas letter to the church, it was a year of pain. It was a year of great sickness and disability. It was a year of marital pain and crisis counselling. It was a year of devastating loss of life. There were certainly gains, and gifts, and compensations, but there was also much grief.

It is possible to come out of a year with a kind of anxious fear, a cautious dread of what might be around the corner. Or perhaps there is just the kind of numb heart, that is too weather-worn to hope, and too afraid to doubt, so it just sits inert, trying not to hope or fear.

God's Word has something to say to us as one year recedes and becomes memory, and as we enter another. And no psalm captures the heart we should have after last year, like Psalm 126. Psalms are written to get truth down from the head into the heart. Poems do more than deliver truth to our heads; poems grip our hearts with images. We remember those images, and they stay with us in ways that plain discursive statements do not.

Psalm 126 aims to do that. It wants to teach God's people, but it also wants to move God's people to a kind of response to God. Psalm 126 aims to recreate the experience of hope fulfilled to create perseverance. By the time we have finished the psalm, we should say, God can be trusted, even if we are life-weary right now. The psalm should embed in us the sense that Weeping may endure for a night, But joy *comes* in the morning. (Ps. 30:5) The psalm says “Hope in God” through the pain.

When you've come out of the valley, when you've come to a place of rejoicing, you don't need the reminder; it is when you are in the dark season that you need promises that they don't last forever.

So to do that this psalmist gives us a real life biographical experience of sadness turned to sorrow. He then gives us the explanation for his experience, the theology behind the history. And thirdly, he then gives an expectation of more of the same.

I. The Experience of God's People

A Song of Ascents. When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, We were like those who dream. 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, And our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." 3 The LORD has done great things for us, And we are glad.

We do not know who wrote this psalm, but we know which era he wrote in. We know what period of Israel's history this was written in. The psalmist was amongst the Israelites who returned from captivity in Babylon.

Israel's history comes in several eras. First we have the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. Second, we have the period of bondage in Egypt followed by Moses and the Exodus and the forty years of wandering. Then, third, under Joshua we have the conquering and occupation of the land. Fourth, we have the sad time of the Judges. Fifth, we come to the time of the kings, with Saul, a weak and

insecure king replaced by David. David truly unites all Israel under himself, and his son Solomon enjoys a kingdom of unparalleled glory. After the reign of Solomon, Israel is split into two kingdoms. In the north, the ten tribes of Israel, and in the south, the kingdom of Judah with Benjamin. In the years that followed, the northern kingdom experienced one wicked king after another, with no revivals, no repentance, no return to worshipping God. God warned them through the prophets Elijah and Elisha, Obadiah, and Hosea to repent or they would be removed from the land. They did not repent. In 722 B.C, Israel was conquered by the Assyrians, and its people taken into captivity. The ones that remained, intermarried with their conquerors, lost their Jewish identity and became the Samaritans. There was no return from captivity for the ten northern tribes. The kingdom of Judah did not experience such an unbroken period of idolatry. They also had good and godly kings amongst the bad. However, over time, the same thing happened to Judah. God sent them the prophets Joel, Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habukkuk, and Jeremiah. They warned them about their idolatry and injustice and spiritual adultery, but they did not repent.

Now it was unthinkable to the Jews in Judah that God would ever remove them from the land and destroy the Temple. Jeremiah had to rebuke people who had made a little mantra: “the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD” The people thought they had God in a corner. They could be idolatrous, but since they lived next door to God's Temple, God would never let a foreign people with a foreign god come and destroy His Temple. As far as they were concerned, they were permanently in the land: the covenant with Abraham, with David, the presence of the Temple.

When God told the prophet Habakkuk that He was going to use the Babylonians to do just that, Habukkuk couldn't believe his ears. The Babylonians conquered Israel in 598, and in 586 B.C. , they destroyed the Temple, and lead off thousands of captives to Babylon, where they lived as foreigners.

Now for many Jews, this was the unthinkable. It was the end. The Temple was destroyed, Jerusalem had been destroyed, the land conquered by pagans. Though they had the prophets Daniel and Ezekiel among them in Babylon, it seemed as if God had given up on Israel. For it was unheard of in the ancient Middle East that a nation which had been conquered and carried off to another country, would be released and settled back into their land.

But the one exception in all of ancient history were the Jewish people. In 539 B.C. King Cyrus of Persia issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to their own land, and even granted them funds, resources and protection to help them get back. They had lived in Babylon for 70 years, essentially a whole generation of Jews would have grown up under Babylonian and Persian rule. Many of them had no doubt given up all hope that they would ever go back to Israel. But Cyrus issued this decree, and it began happening. There were actually three waves of captives who returned. The first wave was just over 42 000 people who returned with Zerubbabel, and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, and the Temple was rebuilt. Then a second wave came with Ezra about 60 years later , and third wave came with Nehemiah about 13 years later.

Now we don't know which wave of returnees the psalmist was in. But whichever one it was, look at how he describes their mood.

When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, We were like those who dream. 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, And our tongue with singing.

As they walked those miles, it was like being in a dream. This was a journey of around 900 miles or 1500 kilometres. It took Ezra's group four months. They left on April 8, 458 B.C., and they must

have felt as if they were doing what their ancestors had done when leaving Egypt. It seemed too good to be true. We were wondering if we were suddenly going to wake up. "Is this really happening?" they must have asked each other. They were amazed, stunned. And they would shake their heads and begin to laugh, as we do when we are overwhelmed and amazed.

And it frequently turned into song. As they headed out of Babylon, it no doubt broke out. As they followed the course of the Euphrates northwest, it must have broke out as they imagined seeing home again. After several months of going northwest, when they finally broke south, their hearts must have been filled with joy. And on August 4th of that year, Jerusalem came into view, and praise broke out again. No doubt, for some time after that, they shook their heads, smiled and sang of God's goodness to them.

Now they were not the only ones amazed at God's goodness. When the surrounding nations saw this happening, when they saw this Persian-sponsored second exodus back to Israel, they began to comment.

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

The nations even used the name of Israel's God – Yahweh. They said, Yahweh has done great things for this people. His deliverance, His work was outstanding, and even those who did not exist in a covenant relationship with Him had to acknowledge His work. This was a testimony to the unbelieving nations. This had never been heard of before.

Nehemiah 6:16 And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God.

The psalmist agreed with what the unbelievers said. *The LORD has done great things for us, And we are glad.*

Yes, says the psalmist, God has done great things for us. And as we think on that, we are glad. Why are they glad? Because great things done by God for them reveals that God still loves them. He has remained a covenant-keeping God.

But now the psalmist gives an explanation for this experience.

II. The Explanation

5 Those who sow in tears Shall reap in joy. 6 He who continually goes forth weeping, Bearing seed for sowing, Shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, Bringing his sheaves with him.

The psalmist says that he and his returning Israelites are seeing a promise fulfilled before their eyes. The one who sows in tears, the one who goes out with a bag of seed, and sows while weeping, without a doubt, this one will come in again reaping with joy, bringing in his sheaves with rejoicing. The emphasis here is on a result: joyful reaping produced by a cause: sorrowful sowing. The psalmist is right now in the joyful reaping stage, but he wants his readers to know that something came before this moment.

When they left the land, herded like cattle by the Babylonian soldiers, they left in tears, praying for deliverance, repenting of their sins.

When they took up residence in Babylon, God told them through Jeremiah, ⁷ *And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace.* (Jer. 29:7) They must have done so with tears, with sorrow. But nevertheless, they obeyed.

When they tried to keep teaching the Word, even though their children were now speaking Aramaic – the language of Persia – they prayed in tears, but kept obeying.

Psalm 137 describes tears they shed in Babylon. *By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down, yea, we wept When we remembered Zion. ² We hung our harps Upon the willows in the midst of it.³ For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song, And those who plundered us requested mirth, Saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"⁴ How shall we sing the LORD'S song In a foreign land?⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem, Let my right hand forget its skill!⁶ If I do not remember you, Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth-- If I do not exalt Jerusalem Above my chief joy. (Ps. 137:1-6)* And through their tears, they kept obeying, kept remembering the covenant, kept hoping for future deliverance.

The whole book of Lamentation is Jeremiah weeping over Jerusalem, seeing its agonies and its disgraces.

Jeremiah 9:1 Oh, that my head were waters, And my eyes a fountain of tears, That I might weep day and night For the slain of the daughter of my people!

When Daniel realised that it had now been seventy years since the captivity, he put on sackcloth and ashes and prayed a prayer of confession and repentance.

When Nehemiah heard that the walls of Jerusalem remained broken down, we read he “*sat down and wept, and mourned for many days;[he] was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.*” (Neh. 1:4)

The psalmist is mindful of all these tears as he thinks about them now laughing, entering into God's promises. The psalmist sees these tears as the time of sowing, and the laughter and joy as the time of reaping. He is in the rejoicing, reaping season, but before it came a season of deep tears for Israel, tears of grief, tears of longing, tears of fasting, tears of repentance, tears of prayer. And you can't help but think that the psalmist is writing this for those in the sowing season.

God's people are going to go through cycles of both. There is a season of sowing tears. Often these are the tears that flow as we experience heart-wrenching loss, children, spouses, parents, friends, taken from this life. Tears flow as disease and pain cripples, maims, weakens the body, confuses and distorts the mind. Tears flow as people walk away from the faith, teens rebel, marriages break up. Tears flow as income dries up, jobs are lost, anxiety grips.

But sometimes, the tears are not for what has come into our lives which we did not want.

Sometimes our tears are for things not in our lives that we do want. These are tears of longing, tears of desire. We pray for something we wish would come, we ask and ask again. The job, the healing, the child, the spouse, the conversion, These Israelites had tears for both – what they did not want – the captivity, and what they did not yet have, the return.

Tears by themselves do not have a promise. But tears accompanied by sowing do. The Israelites did not merely weep. They wept and obeyed. They wept and kept trusting. They wept and kept praying.

This image of sowing is picked up by the New Testament and is used in different ways. Jesus uses it to picture how the Word is preached and received by different hearts. Paul uses it to speak about financial giving in 2 Corinthians 9. He uses it similarly in Galatians 6. The image is one of putting something in which doesn't give you immediate results. You give money, you teach the Word, you preach the gospel, and it is like sowing seed. You don't see instant results. You have to wait, and pray and wait. This is acts of faith and obedience that believers perform for the glory of God.

Though you are in a season of loss, or longing, though you have something you did not want, or you do not have something you dearly want, when you keep pleasing God, keep persevering in Spirit-enabled obedience, you are sowing through the tears.

This is the wife praying for and witnessing to her unsaved husband. This is the mother working and praying and training the stubborn hearts of her children. This is the church seeking to be faithful to God and His Word in a culture hostile to holiness. This is the couple who keep obeying the commands regarding marriage though their marriage is suffering. This is the evangelist trying to plant Christians in the dry, hard soil of a worldly, secular, unbelieving culture. This is the parent providing for your family in a culture that is dishonest, ruthless, unscrupulous, unkind, that demands more than is fit to give, that calls on you to violate your convictions, your ethics, the Lord's Day. This is the Christian labouring to keep a prayer meeting or discipleship Bible study going when interest seems so little. This is the missionary who leaves home and familiarity and comfort to go and serve people across the globe, many of whom will be quite unreceptive and quite unthankful. This is the Christian battling a stubborn sin habit that seems like a permanent part of the landscape. It's the battle with bouts of depression and despair, or with chronic illness. This is the Christian battling a hard heart, a period of seeming silence from the Lord, a period of dryness and unhappiness.

It is when you have to and need to obey, but the odds seem against you, the results seem so little, the work seems so hard, success seems so elusive. Tears run down your cheeks as you invest, work, give, train, develop, pray, witness, build, teach. The whole thing is future-oriented, nothing here is immediate.

But what is the promise? Believer, if your hope is in God, if you do what you do for the glory of God, for the sake of His name, then doubtless, this season of painful sacrifice and self-denial and unrewarded faith will be replaced by a season of abundance, joy, seeing and experiencing God's flood of answers.

This is rooted in the Gospel itself – in the very life of Christ.

Hebrews 12:1 *Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-2)*

It is what happened to Christ, who sowed in tears, and then reaped in joy. So, every believer in Christ must know that the servant is not greater than his Lord, and we must tread the path He has trod. The hope is this: God is faithful. Deliverance may tarry, but it will come. Prayer brings answers. Obedience becomes a habit. We need to do this even when our surroundings seem like a desert, and there seems like no hope that what we are doing will ever take root and become anything permanent. The principle is, God will turn the weeping into rejoicing. It's worth enduring and persevering in our hope in God.

The general principle of nature is, seed sown in the ground germinates and brings forth growth. Is God less reliable than the earth? Will acts of faith and obedience done because of Him, and through Him and to Him all come to nothing? No, God will make good on what is sown to His name.

Hebrews 6:10 *10 For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. Not a cup of cold water given in Christ's name will be forgotten.*

Tears shed in self-pity are just wasted water rolling down your cheek. Tears shed in proud selfishness are pain with no promise. But when you submit to God, make His priorities yours, love what He loves, hate what He hates, and you experience pain or longing in Him and for His sake,

suddenly those tears are saved by God.

Psalm 56:8 You number my wanderings; Put my tears into Your bottle; Are they not in Your book?

Matthew 5:4 Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted.

And even this psalmist, amidst all his joy, understood that. Because though he explained his experience as one of reaping after a season of sowing, he still had an expectation.

III. The Expectation

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

Now what is meant by this? Didn't the psalmist just say that God had brought them back from captivity? Why a request for God to do that?

As we saw, the return of Israel didn't happen all at once. Probably the writer is writing before all have returned, and he is asking God to complete this return. He wants more people to return from exile, more Jews to return and populate the land.

The streams in the south refers to an area south of Jerusalem called the Negev. In the summertime, the streams dry up completely. But when the early and latter rains come, those dry river beds gush with water and even flood. So the psalmist says, we are just a trickle of people returning to Israel. Bring a flood of people back, O Lord. Let crowds of Israelites come pouring in to repopulate and rebuild and regrow and restore this land.

The psalmist's present experience has been explained by the principle of sowing in tears and reaping in joy. But he hasn't stopped praying or waiting on God. He hasn't stopped hoping, looking to God for help.

He sounds like another psalmist:

Psalm 123:2 Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, As the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, So our eyes look to the LORD our God, Until He has mercy on us.

That's why Jesus taught us all those parables on prayer that does not give up. *Luke 18:1 Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart,*

So whether you are in a season of tearful sowing, or a time of reaping, you keep sowing.

Paul told us to keep sowing. ⁷ *Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.* ⁸ *For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.* ⁹ *And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. (Gal. 6:7-9)*

Are you still waiting on God for that unsaved spouse, for that hardened child? Are you still trusting Him for grace through the physical disabilities? Are you still looking to Him for the conversion of some hardened person in your life? Are you still seeking Him to turn the heart of our children towards you? Are you still praying for spiritual awakening in your own heart? Longing for that particular request? Or have you become a little jaded and cynical? Have you lost the childlikeness which Jesus said is indispensable, the childlikeness that believes Abba said He would, so we ask Him.

1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

According to Revelation 21, there is coming a day when He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. That will be the day of complete harvest, of laughter of feeling like we are dreaming. But that day is not yet. Our day is still one of sowing. Some partial reaping, to be sure, but much sowing.

Spurgeon said, "Weeping times are suitable for sowing: we do not want the ground to be too dry. Seed steeped in the tears of earnest anxiety will come up all the sooner. The salt of prayerful tears will give the good seed a flavor which will preserve it from the worm:.. Our heavenly seed could not fitly be sown laughing. ..We have heard of men who went to war with a light heart, but they were beaten; and it is mostly so with those who sow in the same style. Come, then, my heart, sow on in thy weeping, for thou has the promise of a joyful harvest. Thou shalt reap. Thou, thyself, shalt see some results of thy labor...When thine eyes are dim with silver tears, think of the golden corn. Bear cheerfully the present toil and disappointment; for the harvest day will fully recompense thee.