

Psalm 126: A song of Witness

Theme: As we ascend to the house of the Lord, we will face times of trouble, but will also experience shouts of joy

Psalm 126

- 1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
- 2 Our mouths were filled with laughter then, and our tongues with shouts of joy.
Then they said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."
- 3 The Lord had done great things for us; we were joyful.
- 4 Restore our fortunes, Lord, like watercourses in the Negev.
- 5 Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy.
- 6 Though one goes along weeping, carrying the bag of seed,
he will surely come back with shouts of joy, carrying his sheaves.

Icebreaker: Have each member of the group answer the following questions. These questions allow the conversation to start off in safety and fun.

- If you could learn a new skill set, what would it be and why?
- What is your typical response when you discover something is broken at your house? (for example, ignore it and hope it will fix itself, bug your spouse to fix it, call a repair person, etc.)

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, Almighty restorer and reformer, help us to understand this week's psalm. Not simple to understand it in our head, but to feel in our heart and to live in in our lives. May it reframe our story and reshape our perspective as we walk with you and ascend to your house. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Opening Quote: Eugene Peterson:

Joy is not a requirement of Christian discipleship; it is a consequence... It comes to us when we are walking in the way of faith and obedience.

Opening Meditation: Listening Prayer

At the start of the session, you will read through Psalm 126 three times. You can use the version above (Christian Standard Bible), another version, or three different versions.

Have your group sit and listen. Invite them to listen for a theme in this Psalm. Listen for repeated phrases that are echoed in this psalm. Listen for words or ideas that resonate with them. Listen for God to speak to you through this psalm.

Discuss:

- What was something that you heard, felt, or experienced while listening to this psalm?
- Were there any word or phrase that resonated with you in this Psalm?
- What do you think is the central theme or message from this psalm?
- Did you sense any connection between this psalm and other scripture?
- What questions about this psalm came to mind as you listened?

Sermon Discussion: This past Sunday we explored Psalm 126 in worship. Take some time to review the sermon, discussing the themes, application, and questions

- What were some of lessons of Psalm 126 that were discussed during the sermon?
- How did these lessons connect with you and your spiritual life?
- How were you encouraged to apply the lessons from this psalm to your life?
- Share any questions of concerns that came to you from this week's sermon?
- How can the lessons from this Psalm help you on your spiritual journey?

Past, Present and Future:

We all have moment in our lives that define us, moments that we look back on and remember God's handiwork. We also have those moments that we look forward to, knowing that God will work again, to strengthen and restore is again. Psalm 126 is a song that remembers the works of God and longs for those works again. As the people of Israel sang, "When the Lord restored our fortunes," they thought of the mighty acts that God had done through their history to deliver their people. When they sang, "restore our fortunes, Lord." They longed for God to move again.

- How have you seen God at work in your past?
- How do you long to see him work in the future?
- Do you feel like you are caught between the moments of the past and the future?
- How does the past and future help you respond the present?

Selection of Psalm 126 1-4:

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Our mouths were filled with laughter then, and our tongues with shouts of joy... Restore our fortunes!

From *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

The center sentence in the psalm is "We are one happy people" (v. 3). The words on one side of that center (vv. 1-2) are in the past tense, the words on the other side (vv. 4-6) in the future tense. Present gladness has past and future. It is not an ephemeral emotion. It is not a spurt of good feelings that comes when the weather and the stock market are both right on the same day.

The background for joy is only alluded to here, but the words trigger vast memories: "when GOD returned Israel's exiles. We laughed, we sang... We were the talk of the nations-' GOD was wonderful to them! ' God was wonderful to us; we are one happy people." What happened that was so "wonderful"? On nearly any page of the Bible we find the allusions and stories...

Each act of God was an impossible miracle. There was no way it could have happened, and it did happen. "It seemed like a dream, too good to be true." We nurture these memories of laughter, these shouts of joy. 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.

The other side of "we are one happy people"-verses 4-6-is in 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 that 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.

Discuss:

- What does Peterson say about reflecting on the past and future joy?
- How do the stories in the Bible help us see the rich history of God's work for his people?
- What promises can we rely on, as we joyfully look to the future?

Tears of Sorrow, Reaps of Joy:

Read Psalm 126: 5-6 Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy. Though one goes along weeping, carrying the bag of seed, he will surely come back with shouts of joy, carrying his sheaves.

Discuss:

- How does the psalmist compare tears and weeping with shouts of joy?
- What images do these verses implant in your head?
- How might sorrow lead to rejoicing?
- How might the understanding of future joy, give you hope during a time of great sorrow?
- How does sorrow help us understand what joy truly is?

Quote by Eugene Peterson

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... 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.

- How does this help you understand the balance of joy and sorrow in our world?
- Why is it important to know that joy comes from God, not something we manufacture on our own?

Restore our fortunes, Lord!

Psalm 126 reflects on the past, when God's work of restoration occurred, and the joyful expectation that our heavenly father will do it again. While the theme may seem to be about God restoring joy and fortune, the central message of this psalm is not for the people of God, but for those who are watching God work in the present. It is a song of witness.

Read Psalm 126: 2-3

Our mouths were filled with laughter then, and our tongues with shouts of joy.

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

3 The Lord had done great things for us; we were joyful.

Discuss:

- What was the response among the nations as they saw the people of Israel "filled with laughter" and with "shouts of joy?"
- The people were to use their blessing from God, not for their own personal benefit, but to show others the glory of God. How would their praises of God's great things, bring others to him?
- Have you ever seen, in your own experience, how sharing God's blessings in your life have brought others closer to him?

- How can you use your story, to help others experience the shouts of joy that come from the Lord?

Quote by Eugene Peterson:

Joy cannot be commanded, purchased 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 poor needs. We can decide to live in the environment of a living God and not our own dying selves. We can decide to center 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.

Discuss:

- How can choosing joy be the witness people need of God's goodness and grace in our world?
- How can you choose joy this week?
- How can the group support and encourage each other in their decision for joy?

Optional Musical Interlude: Listen to Psalm 126 by Poor Bishop Hooper, reflecting on the words and music, allowing God to speak through this psalm into your heart.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xur0iUAciAg

Final Thoughts: From Timothy Keller's *The Songs of Jesus* (pg. 332)

Restoration. Israel had eras of great spiritual fruitfulness and vitality, marked by joy. But communities of faith often have times of great spiritual dryness. Sometimes a flood of God's spirit comes down powerfully and suddenly, like the streams from distant mountain rainstorms, and the community is restored dramatically. But there is also a slower path to renewal, "those who sow with tears" are those who have painstakingly prayed and wept over their sins and also over people without faith. As in actual farming, sowing does not show immediate fruit. But fruitful prayer and service will eventually bear fruit. The desert will become a garden.

Application: Reflect on times you sowed in tears, yet reaped shouts of joy. Share that experience with someone.

Reflect:

- What is something you discovered today during our study of Psalm 126?
- How will this psalm help you through life's journey this week and beyond?
- How can you apply this psalm to your life this week?
- How can you support the people in your group as they journey through Psalm 126?

Closing Prayer: Invite the group to share any prayer requests for the week ahead. Then have one person close in prayer or invite the group to pray for each other.