

SHOUTS OF JOY

Psalm 126

(sermon idea from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* by Eugene H. Peterson)

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Amarillo, Texas
July 21, 2024

Today we come to a Song of Ascents – one of the songs from the section of the Psalter that begins in Psalm 120 and ends with Psalm 134, these 15 songs from a dog-eared songbook that ancient Israel sang as she went up – ascended – to Jerusalem to worship. Songs for the road.

I really don't know how people can determine that I'm a pastor. To be sure, I understand in Amarillo my face is recognizable, and I enjoy speaking with people who join us each Sunday by way of our television ministry. I appreciate their speaking to me. What seems to be terribly ironic is that I can be in another city, or even country, well beyond our tri-state broadcast area, and someone will say, "Are you a pastor?" I usually respond with, "Oh, I really hoped that it didn't show that much." On a plane from Dallas to San Antonio, a dear lady seated next to me asked—out of the blue – "What church do you pastor?" She was from Illinois!

That reminds me of the three men who were at the airport awaiting the arrival of the guest minister who would be preaching that Sunday morning in their church. Since they had never seen the man before, they looked over each arriving passenger very carefully, trying to find their preacher for the day. A tall gentleman in a dark suit came through the door, and the spokesperson for the trio stepped forward and asked him, "Are you our guest preacher for Sunday?" The man responded very quickly, "No, I'm not. It's my ulcer that makes me look like this."

It's true, sadly enough, by casual observation it is clear that many people are determined they are not going to enjoy their faith. They think that showing any kind of enjoyment or smile or laughter might tarnish their holier-than-thou veneer.

But laughter really is a gift from God. In Psalm 126 it is connected with songs of praise to the Lord, and through it the Israelites expressed their joy for what God had done and was going to do in their midst.

Indeed, sometimes life is too long, too hard, and too boring. So, how do we join the Israelites as they sing these Songs of Ascents – how do we, too, shout for joy?

There are a lot of options out there today. I once found a website called Dimmy's Joy and Happiness Purchase Page. It was a simple, one-half page of web material that said, "To purchase joy and happiness for life, please fill out the following form and submit it!!!" You typed in your name. You clicked on Visa or MasterCard or both. You typed in your credit card numbers. You described your credit limit as extremely high to broke, and then you typed in the dollar amount of the happiness that you wanted. Then you submitted it. There had been 146 people who gave Dimmy their credit card number so they could purchase some amount of eternal happiness.

Don't despair if that sounds too expensive and you don't like giving out your credit card. There is another way to buy joy. At the Kindness, Joy, Love and Happiness webpage you are asked the question, "Are you looking for Kindness, Joy, Love and Happiness? You can have Kindness, Joy, Love, and Happiness! To receive Kindness, Joy, Love, and Happiness! Just send \$1.00 to SSCC, P. O. Box 3886, Fontana, CA 92334." (www.geocities.com/Paris/Bistro/4230/)

I'm not kidding.

On the *Today Show*, they had a little excerpt of an expose of the happiness industry. There are people who, for a fee, of course, will help you be happy. One of them was an ad man who left his advertising business and started something in New England called the Options Institute. "I would like to be your happiness coach," he said to the host of the *Today Show* (Maria Shriver). "I can teach people how to be happy. They just have to make a decision not to take on all the stuff [crap] that the world gives them, and they have to decide to be happy." (Preaching Today, Tape 150, "The 'Whats' and the "Why' of Worship," Richard Allen Farmer)

But we know that, in reality, joy is not something that can be bought. *American Scientific Magazine* (May 1996) declared that even though Americans earn twice as much as they did in 1957, the number that are very happy has declined from 35 to 29 percent.

Money won't get the job done when it comes to joy.

A guy in Britain purchased a Ferrari – a \$260,000 Ferrari. He owned it for one hour, then wrecked it. I think he wasn't used to that speed or something. He ought to be happy, he walked away without a scratch. But he enjoyed that material good for one hour. \$260,000. I sure hope he had insurance before he drove off the showroom floor.

On every other front we're told that joy and happiness are really inside of us, that they already exist there and we must simply choose to be happy or choose to be joyful. Pop psychologists today say that the joy that is real is the joy that is already within us.

What does scripture say about joy? About laughter? Actually, it says a great deal.

- In Nehemiah 8:10 we are told that the joy of the Lord will be our strength.
- Psalm 51:12 says "Restore unto me the joy of my salvation."
- In Luke 10:17, "the 70 returned with joy."
- In John 15:11, Jesus desired that our joy might be full.
- In Romans 14:17 Paul reminds us that the kingdom of God is joy.
- In Galatians 5:22, the "fruit of the spirit is joy."

Scripture is clear that in knowing the Lord we are to be a joyous people.

How many of us really enjoy God? I'm not asking if you believe in God. I'm not even asking if you've committed your life to Christ. I'm asking if you take joy in your relationship with God?

Look right there in the middle of the psalm, verse 3b. “We are glad.” The very center message of these ancient Israelites as they march to Jerusalem to worship God is that they are glad. Everything else in this psalm rotates around that simple declaration. “We are glad.”

Why are they glad?

First of all, the psalmist tells us they are glad because of what God has done for them in the past, and secondly he says they are glad for what God will do for them in the future. The psalm is broken up into two sections, with “we are glad” in the middle – glad for the past and glad for the future.

Real joy, we learn from the psalmist, doesn’t come from any purchase we might make. It doesn’t even come from within as the secular psychologists would tell us. Rather, it comes from God. It comes from living a life in response to God’s goodness.

I. Let’s look at how the psalmist was glad for the past.

Look at verses 1-3.

When the Lord brought back the captive ones of Zion, 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.

Yes, these ancient Israelites think back to what God has already done for them, and they rejoice. The great things that God had done for them are found in every page of scripture. There is the story of their enslavement in Egypt. How they had to make bricks without straw. How they hurt at the crack of the whip of the taskmaster upon their flesh. Then, suddenly, it’s over. God chooses to appear to a man named Moses in a burning bush and, all of a sudden, it’s over. And they remember the mighty acts of God. The plagues that punished pharaoh. They remember the deliverance. They remember singing the song of joy for the good things God had done. They shouted together a great song, “I will turn to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously. The horse and his rider, He has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation. This is my God, and I will praise Him. My father’s God, and I will exalt Him.” They remembered the drowning of the pursuing Egyptians as they fled to freedom.

That was a good thing. It was something that when they thought about it, it brought them joy.

Then there was David – David, the greatest king, who had been pursued by hot-headed Saul. A psycho – Saul. David, who had sorrow in his life as he tried to grope with the guilt of murder and adultery. Even in his old age he was chased from his throne by his own son, forced to set up a government in exile. But David’s song, in 2 Samuel 22:2, 47 and 30, starts with gratitude. “The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer.” It ends with confidence, “The Lord lives, and blessed be my rock.” In the center there is a rocket-burst of joy: “For by Thee I can crush a troop, and by my God I can leap over a wall.”

Yes, there are a lot of things that these ancient Israelites are remembering as they ascend to the holy hill of God. But even more than the Exodus (for this song), and even more than the great acts of King David, it is the return of the exiles. Assyria had carried the Northern tribes into exile in 721 B.C., and Babylon had done the same to the Southern Kingdom years later (587 B.C.). The author of this psalm is unknown, and the date can only be after the beginnings of the return from Babylon, as we have the joy coming home.

He begins by saying, “When the Lord brought back the captive ones of Zion, we were like those who dream.” Notice, it’s not Cyrus or some other king who releases Israel. It is Yahweh. It is God who releases her. Only He can set His people free.

Their state is dreamlike as they are shocked and dazed by the unbelief of what is happening. The gates are open, the bars are shattered, the captors lie slaughtered, and the road opens before them – calling them home.

What has God done for you in the past? What deliverance has He brought forth for you? You can rejoice, you can have your mouth filled with laughter, as the psalmist says, because God has loved you and sent Jesus Christ to die for you that you can be free from the guilt of your sins and bask in the joy of God’s Kingdom. Yes, we, like they, are glad because of what God has done in the past. God has created. God has delivered. God has made a way for us to be His sons and daughters.

Look again at “We are glad” at the end of verse 3. The verses above verse 3 tell us reasons to be joyful for God’s great actions of the past.

Eric Nolan writes:

Prompted by the Spirit, I was reminded of a simple, yet powerful mindfulness activity: find three things a day that you are grateful for and write them down. I committed to writing every evening before bed just to see what would happen. It took a little effort at first. Honestly, I struggled to come up with things that were positive. But, begrudgingly I started noticing the good things: I was glad for a good meal, a good drive home, etc.

Slowly, after a few weeks, things changed. I had trouble picking just three things to write down. My days seemed to overflow with gratitude. What’s more, the simple gratitudes seemed to grow richer, gaining weight. The sunrise on the way to work took on glory. The touch of my wife’s hand against mine was layered with memories and meaning. The air after a rain, fragrant with the smell of earth, was sweeter. I started to notice the brilliance of grace between all the darkness. As I looked for blessings rather than curses, my heart became attuned to God all around. I was inundated and overwhelmed, humbled to experience such grace.

Things shifted most distinctly for me when I considered gratitude as a practice rather than a feeling. It requires regular work, but the cultivation of gratitude allows our souls to unfurl – like the petals of a flower – toward our God. Blessedly, this is not something we do alone. The anointing of the Spirit, who co-mingles with our willingness, enables us to look at the

world in a different way. And it surprises me every day. (Eric Nolin, “Practicing a Weighty Gratitude,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 1/18/2023)

II. But in verses 4 to the end, he tells us there is even more reason for joy because of what God is going to do in the future.

Joy, in this case, comes from anticipation. God is not going to change the way He works with us. What we have known about Him in the past, we know about Him in the future. God is our hope and our joy in the past. God will be our hope and our joy in the future.

There are two images here. “Restore our fortunes,” some translations say, “as the water courses in the south.” In the south, in the desert, there were networks of ditches cut into the soil by wind and rain and erosion. For most of the year they are baked dry under the sun. But a sudden rain makes the dessert ablaze with blossoms. With such suddenness, the long years of barren waiting are interrupted by God’s invasion of grace into our lives.

The second image is that of those sowing tears but reaping shouts of joy. Don’t think for a moment that these ancient Israelites had happiness without sorrow, joy without suffering. Rather, it was even in the midst of their sorrow, their weeping, that they found the joy of God. Those who sing this song are no strangers to the dark side of things. They carried the painful memory of the exile in the aching bones, and the scars of oppression on their back. They knew what it meant to weep in the darkness of the night.

Joy for those who are Christians does not mean escaping from sorrow. Pain and hardship still come, but they are unable to drive out the joy of God’s people. Eugene Peterson has said “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 risk, get rid of disappointments by de-personalizing your relationships and then try to lighten the boredom of such a life by buying joy in the form of vacations and entertainment.”

But there is not a hint of that in Psalm 126. This laughter of the singing saints of ancient Israel is produced by seeing the great works of God. Christian joy comes even in the midst of pain.

Paul was our convincing witness that joy comes in the midst of suffering and loneliness and misfortune. One of Paul’s great words is the word “rejoice.” He says, “We rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been given to us.... We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation” (Romans 5:3-5, 11).

Even from Paul’s prison cell, he trumpets the conclusion to the Philippians letter. “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice. That all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand” (Philippians 4:4-5).

Are you a person of joy? Joy for what God has done for you in the past. And joy for what God will do for you in the future.

Research shows that children laugh an unbelievable 400 times a day on average, compared to adults who laugh on average 15 times a day. That may explain why Jesus said, "Let the little children come unto me." Children carry joy.

Is your life a life of joy, a life of spreading the goodness of God? We are one of two types of people. Either we bring joy into a room when we enter, or we bring joy into a room when we exit. Which kind are you?

We are glad...