

Between Text & Sermon

Psalm 126

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We live in a world filled with profit and loss, victory and defeat, well being and suffering. Each and every person (and community) will walk through times of ease and times of trouble. This is the nature of life. Those who come to terms with this reality, who are able to wade through the difficulties and sail through the good times, have a hope-filled experience of life. Psalm 126 provides a description of the early Judaic community's response to their catastrophic experiences of life's ebbs and flows. This article will note how Ps 126 depicts the relationship between lament and praise as the psalmist petitions God for a future turn of fortune. The article will close with a description of how the message of this psalm might be applied to the contemporary Christian church.

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."
The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.
Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves. (NRSV)

The shifts in tense (past, present, future) and mood (description of past events, petition, expressions of hope) are very important for comprehending this psalm. One may find alternative depictions of tense and mood in various translations of this psalm, but the NRSV has done a nice job of depicting the shifts in the original Hebrew. The psalm begins in the past tense, with the community remembering the time when it was restored to Zion (Jerusalem) after the exile. The restoration, or the turn of fortune as the psalm depicts it, is described as a time filled with laughter and shouts of joy. While it was probably literally true that the Jews who returned to Jerusalem laughed and shouted for joy, the vocabulary used creates an allusion to the relationship between praise and lament. As a matter of fact,

Ps 126 is frequently categorized as a psalm of lament, even though there is no actual lament to be found in the psalm.

The language of laughter and shouts of joy in v. 2 depicts a time of celebration and praise that stand in contrast to the language in vv. 5 and 6. In the latter, we find the typical antithesis between lament and praise described as a shift from tears/weeping to shouts of joy. While vv. 1–3 describe a time in the past when God restored the fortunes of the early Judaic community and thus depict the people as filled with laughter, vv. 4–6 depict a current time when the community is weeping. Consequently, in v. 4 we find the petition “restore our fortunes O LORD,” and in vv. 5–6 the expressed hope that those who are weeping will once again have reason to shout for joy.

Through the shifts in tense and mood the author has created a rhetorical flow that reminds God and the community of the great restoration that took place the day the Jews were freed to return to Jerusalem. This reminder sets the stage for the following petition, “O LORD, restore our fortunes, like the watercourses in the Negeb.” The simile furthers the rhetoric: the Negeb is dry most of the year, but when the winter rains return each year its seasonal streambeds overflow with rushing torrents. Thus, the community and God are reminded that life ebbs and flows. By using the simile of rivers in the Negeb, the psalmist expresses life’s natural routine of turns of fortune.

Curiously, there is no reference in Ps 126 to the life circumstance for which they are weeping. The psalm creates the image that the community currently sows in tears, with the hope that they will one day reap with shouts of joy. What is being sown and why the community weeps is not specifically defined. But what is clear is that the psalmist has faith that God can restore its fortunes based on past experience (vv. 1–3) and the natural routine of life (v. 4).

The psalmist does not lament the current situation, provide a confession of sin, attack enemies, or accuse God of not paying attention—all of which are typical for a lament psalm (e.g., Pss 51, 69, and 89). There is no focus on the negative, only an emphasis on the positive hope that God will once again restore the community’s fortunes.

The implicit, non-spoken reality of Ps 126 is the crisis of the community. For Israel this crisis involved enemy attack(s), the devastation of their land as well as the loss of their nationhood. Yet, they were restored to their holy city as described in the first three verses. However, that restoration was not immediately complete. There were tough times ahead as the people struggled to rebuild the walls of the city and the temple. Yet, the psalmist shifts the emphasis off the anger and bitterness caused by the devastation (as is evidenced in many other psalms of lament) onto the hope for their restoration.

In the wake of the horrific tsunami in Southeast Asia as well as the recent hurricanes that have devastated the southern parts of the United States, Ps 126 contains an emphasis that can be helpful for contemporary people of faith. Instead of focusing on the negative aspects of these crises, of which there are many, this psalm can provide a fresh word of hope. This is not to suggest that grieving and lamentation are inappropriate, only that there

comes a time when it is healthy to move on, to focus on the hope of restoration. Psalm 126 can be used in such a time. The content of the psalm rises above the distress and anguish to focus solely on the hope for the future. This is not to suggest that lament will not, or cannot continue, only that there can be and should be moments when the rays of hope break through the clouds of despair.

Similarly, in the wake of 9/11 Americans have experienced the crisis of enemy attack, devastation of the land, and loss of loved ones. In the aftermath there have been many expressions of grief and anger, and rightly so. However, Ps 126 can be an example and a vehicle for shifting the attention beyond the pain and the anger to hope. We cannot afford as a people of faith or as a nation to get caught up into a never-ending downward spiral of anger that justifies ever increasing levels of violence. Anger and hope must work hand in hand to bring the new day, just as praise and lament worked hand in hand to sustain the Israelite community.

Israel understood and was liturgically prepared for the ebbs and flows of life. Their Psalter (i.e., liturgical hymn book) contained nearly equal amounts of praise (fifty-five percent) and lament (forty-five percent). Consequently, when adversity struck, they had the liturgical tools to lead the people through a process of grief and lamentation, and by so doing worked through their anger all the while expressing their faith-filled hope that God could and would bring restoration. This balance sustained the Jewish people of faith through several periods of extreme crisis. Yet, this balance has not been the emphasis of the contemporary Christian church, which has increasingly bought into a doctrine of prosperity that teaches individuals of faith to expect only good in their life, and condemns their lack of faith when bad things happen to them. Such a doctrine does not give credence to the idea that life is filled with positives and negatives, and that evidence of faith and faithfulness is exhibited in how people and communities respond to both sets of circumstances. Psalm 126 provides a model of a community of faith that recognized that times of weeping would eventually pass to be replaced with shouts of joy!



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