

Ascend:
Worshipping Between “Past and Promise”
Psalm 126

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Text Introduction: We are considering Psalm 120-134 this summer. This is a collection of Psalms each bearing the heading, “A Song of Ascents.” The songs of ascents are a compilation of Psalms in the larger book of Psalms.

To what does this heading refer? Most believe that these are songs that worshippers sung as they made their way to Jerusalem (being on a higher plain) for thrice annual special times of worship.¹ If this is so, then we learn a great deal about what was on their hearts as they approached worship and thus understand what should be upon our hearts as we prepare to worship or just give attention to the subject of worship. This thought will guide us in the weeks to come. As we have been learning, this is not so much as a practical guide to the “how to” of worship, but instead a theological mine for what prompts earnest worship.

Our Psalm today is Psalm 126. Now, don’t let this thought wash over you—They are singing. This is a song. All is not well, but they are singing.

Text: When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

²Our 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.”

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

⁴Restore our fortunes, LORD,
like watercourses in the Negev.

⁵Those who sow in tears
will reap with shouts of joy.

⁶Though one goes along weeping,
carrying the bag of seed,
he will surely come back with shouts of joy,
carrying his sheaves.

Introduction: As you know, we do not know the exact background to these Psalms, but we can take some educated guesses which I think are helpful to the overall understanding of the emotion of these Psalms. I suspect that this particular Psalm has as its background the return after the exile. While there was praise for the return, things were hardly as they remember before the exile. The people of Israel,

¹ Other ideas include: Psalms that reflect entering the Promised Land the first time, re-entering after Exile, correlating to the climb up the steps to the Temple (one Psalm for 15 steps), and/or figurative for the journey back to God.

especially the faithful, rejoiced in the provision of God, but longed for a better day. They lived somewhere between the past realized provision of God and the future unrealized promises of God.

Here is where the story of Psalm 126 parallels our story. If we are believers in Jesus, the greatest, most life-changing experience has happened to us. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is that we were in need of forgiveness because of our sin, but God, in Christ Jesus and because of the cross of Jesus forgave us of our sin. When we confessed and repented of our sin, He cleansed us of all unrighteousness. Whereas we would be headed for Hell because of our sin, we are now headed for Heaven because of the unmerited favor of God. But, we are not home yet. And, until we get home, we will have tribulation. We will endure suffering. We live in a sin-sick and depraved world. We have the provision of salvation, but until then, we are continually exposed to the effects of sin in this world.

Moreover, we are aware of the news of the day. Our Presidential election process has reached controversial rhetorical levels perhaps unprecedented in history. Police involved shootings have brought tensions that rise to the level of anarchy. Lack of trust in government has reached historical levels. The term “active shooter” is almost a daily occurrence.

Perhaps your story is even more personal. Your marriage is failing. Your health is failing. Your children are in rebellion. Your finances are in recession. The list could go on and on.

And so we have to learn how to live and worship between the times. This text helps us to know how to do that.

This Psalm divides easily into two distinct parts. Verses 1-3 indicate the first part; verses 4-6 make up a second part. Let’s review this and then get to three points of immediate application for us.

Celebration of God’s Past Provision

Picture—God’s past provision is compared to a dream. You have heard the statement, “It is too good to be true.” For those saints who lived during the exile and now living after the exile, God’s grace was for them “too good to be true.”

Proof—Further, there are two proofs to God’s gracious act.

- Testimony of others—They were the envy of other nations.
- Our own Testimony—It is good for others to know your testimony, but you are in a better position to know the real story. You don’t know all that has happened to me, and I don’t know all that has happened to you, but for both of us, our testimony is the greatest proof our God’s past provision.

Praise—And, what was the result? They rejoiced. It is easy to rejoice when we think about the goodness of God.

But, in verses 4-6 we see a little different tone. The joy is gone.

Cry for God’s Promise

Pictures—There are two pictures in verses 4-6. The first is the waters of the Negev. The Negev is a desert, but experienced from time to time a flood.

The second picture is that of farming. The one who sows is going to reap. But the better way to see the analogy is that in order to reap, the farmer has to sow.

This cry of the worshippers is for God to act now as He has in the past.

What's missing? The Present. How do we worship between the provision of the past and the promise of the future?

So What? I think we can glean these applications from this text.

- **Live with the determination that your joy will not be tied to your present circumstances.**

Choose joy! Our joy cannot be tied to our circumstances. If our joy is tied to our circumstances, there is going to be a roller coaster ride in our joy. In fact, there will likely be in life more down times than high times.

Remember those described in Psalm 126 are going to worship. They are singing. They are singing about a better day. Here is the bottom line of our joy. If we are believers in Jesus, we have reason for joy. Our happiness from day to day may waver, but our joy cannot.

Think about how many of our songs across musical genre sing about Heaven.

A Stately hymn like "It is Well with My Soul"

And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.

A More Simple Hymn

On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,
And cast a wishful eye
To Canaan's fair and happy land,
Where my possessions lie.

A Southern Gospel Song

I'm kind of homesick for a country
To which I've never been before.
No sad goodbyes will there be spoken
For time won't matter anymore.

Beulah Land, I'm longing for you
And some day on thee I'll stand.
There my home shall be eternal.
Beulah Land, sweet Beulah Land

I'm looking now across the river
Where my faith will end in sight.
There's just a few more days to labor.
Then I will take my heavenly flight.

A Popular Song of Recent Days by Mercy Me

I can only imagine

What do all of these songs have in common? There is a better day coming. Our joy must be tied to our yet unrealized promises in Christ, not our present circumstances.

- **Live with dependence upon God.**

How do we live between these times? We live with dependence upon God. One of the reasons that God allows the suffering into our lives is so that we will trust in Him. I quote often 2 Corinthians 1:9, "We all personally have the sentence of death in ourselves, so that we will not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead."

Three months before it declared independence from Great Britain, the Second Continental Congress proclaimed March 16, 1776, a National Day of Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer. Their purpose in calling the nation to God: "That we may, with united hearts, confess and bewail our manifold sins and transgressions, and, by a sincere repentance and amendment of life, appease his righteous displeasure, and, through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, obtain his pardon and forgiveness." (Pulled from the Denison Report, July 5, 2016)

Do you believe this could happen again in these United States? Let me answer for you, "Probably not." And so, that is why we need to pray as those described in this Psalm, "Do it again, Lord! Do it again!"

Ezekiel was a prophet before the exile. He was the prophet that saw the Valley of Dry Bones. He was the prophet to whom God asked, "Can these bones live again?" Ezekiel gave the only answer he could have and should have given. "Only you know, Lord, only you know."

This kind of answer expresses the kind of dependence we should have in God.

- **Live with desperation that unless God moves, we are without hope.**

For the Psalmist, it wasn't as Charles Dickens wrote: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." It was just the worst of times. And these times made the worshippers desperate for a move from God. This begs several questions.

- How desperate are we for revival to come?
- What is the evidence in our lives that we are desperate for revival? In our praying? In our personal holiness?
- How difficult do things have to get before we get desperate?

Pray like you believe that it is all up to God, then work like it is all up to you.

A contemporary musical group, Building 429, sings:

All I know is I'm not home yet
This is not where I belong
Take this world and give me Jesus
This is not where I belong

I have heard the story of Sir Ernest Shackleton, a famous explorer, in the late 1800's and early 1900's. In an expedition to the Antarctic, Shackleton had to leave over 20 of his men under the command of Frank Wild. It was over 100 days before Shackleton was able to break through the ice to rescue his men. In his memoirs, Shackleton is quick to praise Frank Wild's leadership and optimism in the survival of the whole company of men. Wild woke his men every morning by saying "Pack your things, boys, the boss may return today."