

Real Joy Psalm 126

Introduction – O What a Relief!

If you've lived a long enough time, you've experienced some real challenges in life. Some of them, in the moment, seem almost insurmountable. Diane and I were privileged to represent our church on a mission trip to Moldova in 1996. The Iron Curtain had just crumbled, people in the former Soviet states were open to the gospel, and we were on a mission to establish a sister relationship with a church in one of the major cities of that small country. Moldova is a poor, primarily agrarian, country southwest of Ukraine. In addition to our efforts to establish a relationship with a church there, we were also helping people with small medical clinics. Our traveling companion and leader of the group was a registered nurse and she had already visited the country a few months prior to our excursion. It was our first visit to a third-world country and it would indeed be memorable.

Our challenges began in Bucharest, Romania. When we arrived at the airport, we found out that our ground transportation had been detained at the border and we would have to wait until they were released. In those days (it may still be the same) authorities would close the border for any reason, at any time, and without warning. Evidently, the Moldovans had beaten the Romanians in a soccer match and the border closure was pay-back. Silly stuff.

We ended up waiting over eight hours in the airport. Now that's a real pain in O'Hare - where it usually happens to me – but it was worse in Romania. We had security guards harassing us about our luggage. If you wanted to leave your area to use the bathroom, you had to bribe another guard. That was our introduction to post-Communist culture in Romania. When our transportation finally arrived, we were exhausted. With the excitement of the 24 hour plane trip and the long wait at the airport, neither of us had had any real sleep for nearly 36 hours. When we arrived in our vehicle at the Romanian/Moldovan border we were detained and our luggage (which contained a large amount of medicine for the clinics) was sealed and quarantined by customs.



We finally arrived at our destination city and began ministry explorations. It was very exciting, but we were distracted because our supplies, including the medications necessary for the clinics were being held in customs. We struggled for several days with no success to have them released. On our third day of frustration – I’ll never forget this – one of the influential men from the church went to the customs office, went around to every official shaking hands and making small talk. Then he stepped into a private office. In two minutes our supplies were released and that challenge was taken care of.

We thought the Moldovans were difficult. The American Embassy was even worse. We had received permission from the Moldovan government to take one of their orphans home with us for medical treatment with a life-threatening condition. They granted permission with the stipulation that she would be accompanied by a

native Moldovan. We selected a young man who was a committed believer and fluent in English, Moldovan and Russian. We thought he would be a perfect candidate. But the American consul refused his visa application because he was unemployed and unmarried. She felt that he was too much of a risk to want to stay in our country. Moldova would not



release the orphan without him. Millions of dollars of medical aid from Northwestern Medical Teams was contingent on being able to use the little girl’s condition to raise awareness of the need in Moldova. With all of that at stake, the bureaucrat at the consulate would still not change her mind. We contacted our Senator’s office – Mark Hatfield, a committed Christian and very powerful – but they could not leverage any influence. We even considered enlisting Hillary Clinton’s sympathies. We were desperate. When Diane and I left the country, the matter was still unresolved. The situation was resolved in “an interesting way,” but that’s another story.

Getting out of the country was not that simple for us. By the time we arrived at the airport, we were emotionally and physically spent from trying to resolve our problem with the US Embassy. We were early, and customs wasn’t yet open to allow us to check our baggage so we sat down to

have a Coke and gather ourselves together. Forty-five minutes prior to our departure, we heard the propellers of an airplane warming up. We went down to check. Customs and baggage check were closed, but that was OUR PLANE leaving for our destination – FORTY-FIVE MINUTES EARLY! I'll never forget that feeling of panic!

They wouldn't check us in and they wouldn't hold the plane. Our connecting flight in Bucharest was leaving in twelve hours. If we missed it, we would be in big trouble. We got a refund on the tickets and went to a church to see if there was a driver who we could hire to take us to Bucharest. It was an eight-hour trip – with 12 border checks. You never know... And now our plane was leaving in eleven hours.

We hired the driver and amazingly made it through the border checks without too much hassle. A bribe of a few dollars here, a bag of chips, a candy bar – seemed to be the currency that the guards understood. We thought we were going to be OK.

Until we ended up in the ditch at three in the morning with the car disabled. The driver had fallen asleep at the wheel. Oh my! It was June 22, our 17th anniversary. Happy day! We got towed, switched to a taxi – whose driver didn't know where the airport was, but eventually made it to the Delta Airlines gate just minutes before they closed it.

When we finally sat in our seats and were able to speak English with the flight attendant we heaved – I mean HEAVED - a BIG sigh of relief.

The Word: Psalm 126:1-3 – Experience in the Past

Sometimes experiences are so intense, the resolution doesn't seem real. Have you ever had that kind of experience? When it's over it seems like a dream.

That was the case of the Jewish nation when they returned to their homeland after spending seventy years in exile in Babylon:

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 they said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”

The Lord has done great things for us;
we are glad.

Psalm 126 is one of fifteen “psalms of ascent” – from Psalm 120 through 134. They offer a unique glimpse into the Jewish national soul. Psalms of Ascent were sung and chanted as the people made their way up to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem three times a year for the great festivals. They contain deep laments and raucous celebrations. They rehearsed the experiences of Jewish nation – not so much in historical detail – but in spiritual impact.

Aside from the Exodus from Egypt symbolized in the Feast of Passover, no other experience impacted God’s people deeper than their exile in Babylon. We can hardly imagine. After years and years of the cycle of apostasy and repentance, God’s prophesied judgment finally came upon them. You cannot tempt and play games with God and expect to prosper in the long run. God’s prophets would warn the leaders and the people to return to him or face dire consequences. Sometimes they did repent. But the overwhelming pattern of God’s people was to ignore and kill the prophets and continue in their rebellion. God’s judgment was severe in proportion to their continual rebellion. The city of Jerusalem and the Kingdom of Judah would fall to Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of Babylon, over the span of ten years. The final blow was a two-year siege of the city where the people were literally starved into submission. When the end came, the civic leaders were slaughtered, the city burned, and most of the people deported to Babylon. All that remained were the poorest of the poor, left to tend the fields and vineyards. The event deeply scarred the people of God. Psalm 137 expresses their broken hearts:

By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there
we hung up our lyres.
For there our captors
required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How shall we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand forget its skill!
Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy!

Psalm 137:1-6

It is true that joy, at the resolution of a trial, is in direct proportion to the difficulty experienced. So when the Jews, by a miracle of God's providence, were allowed to return home seventy years later, it seemed like they were “livin’ a dream.” Who would ever imagine that the sovereign ruler of a pagan empire would make a decree allowing his imprisoned subjects to return to their homeland with his full support and financial backing? But that is indeed what happened when Cyrus made his decree allowing the Jews to return. We cannot possibly imagine the joy after such a horrific humiliation and long exile. In the American experience, the closest we might come to understanding the joy that they felt might be V-E and V-J Day at the conclusion of World War II.

I love how the psalm puts it. Their change in fortune was so dramatic that even the nations around them recognized that God had done this for the Jews. “The Lord has done great things for them.” And then it is as if the people of God look at each other and nod and say, “Yes, the Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.” Have you ever experienced anything like that?

Where the work of God was so obvious that everyone else saw it, too? “The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.”

Hope for the Future vss. 4-6

Even generations after the exiles returned home, the joy of that Second Exodus was deeply imprinted on the Jewish national soul. The miracle that God had done in the past became the basis for hope for the future.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like streams in the Negeb!

The first part of the second half of the psalm is a prayer to fully restore the glory of Judah and Jerusalem. We don't know who the author of this psalm was or if there was an occasion for which it was written. But I can easily imagine that this psalm was written in Nehemiah's day, when the Temple service was reinstated and the walls of the city were rebuilt. But the conditions of the day paled in comparison to what it once was. I can just imagine the people of Jerusalem singing this psalm of thanksgiving and faith in Nehemiah's day and praying that God would fully restore their nation. The word picture that is used would have been clearly understood by every Jew. The Negeb is a desert region south of Jerusalem. It is a hilly and mountainous region cut by dry washes and stream beds. But when the spring rains fall, they come alive with rushing water that quenches a thirsty land. Great picture! On the basis of what you have done, come refresh and restore us.

After the prayer for restoration, the psalm expresses hope and faith based on God's actions in the past and their national experience:

Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!
He who goes out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,

bringing his sheaves with him.

They certainly sowed the seeds of sorrow as they were carried away into exile. But the depth of their sorrow was matched by the height of their joy when they returned home. David wrote of the same kind of experience that we read this morning in Psalm 30:

Sing praises to the Lord, O you his saints,

and give thanks to his holy name.

For his anger is but for a moment,

and his favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may tarry for the night,

but joy comes with the morning.

Psalm 30:4-5

One of the jobs of the preacher is to make God's word come alive for the congregation. Not only does the word need to be explained, but it needs to be illustrated with real life examples. I considered many stories of people throughout the years of the church who toiled under great difficulty and tears until they finally reached a place of fulfillment. There are countless missionaries and pastors who have lived this psalm. How many parents know its truth as well? "Those who sow in tears shall with shouts of joy!" But I think, for this text, you are your own best illustration. Over three years ago, we were torn apart by a church split. Some of our dearest friends and family left us. Heated words were said. We sowed a lot of seed in a flood of tears. We are experiencing, friends, a harvest of joy – a season of refreshment. Much more sowing remains. And, no doubt, some of that will be with tears. But the promise of joyful reaping will always stand for God's people.

Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of vss. 5-6.

Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of this psalm. No one suffered more through his death on the cross. No one gained more through the resurrection. The Scripture says of him, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of

the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2). And the joy that Jesus found, he gave to his disciples. He never promised to take away their sorrows, but to transform them into joy. Just before his crucifixion, Jesus told them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy...so also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (John 16:20, 22).

The promise of sorrows transformed into joy gives hope in any circumstance. But it is not for everyone. This promise is not the stuff of motivational speakers or infomercials. It is reserved for those who walk according to Psalm 1. Do you remember? It is the key to unlocking all the psalms.

[The righteous one – one who follows God] is like a tree

Planted by streams of water

That yields its fruit in its season,

And its leaf does not wither...

The wicked are not so,

But are like the chaff that the wind drives away.

Psalm 1:3-4

My burden – my mission – as a pastor is to help people find and follow Jesus. I would not deceive you. The wonderful promise of this psalm is for those who follow Jesus. If you are here this morning and you don't know Jesus, we want to help you find and follow him. We want to hear your story and share God's story with you. We can do that best in a conversation. There is a yellow card in the pew rack where you can indicate your desire to follow Jesus. Just put your name and contact information on the card and you can discreetly give it to me, an usher, or simply leave it face down on the pew.

But most of you here know Christ and are trying to follow him. If you're not following Jesus, then the tears you may be experiencing may be what God intends so that you might repent and return to him. Parents who love their children discipline them. The discipline of God is always loving, patiently drawing you back to him. Many others in this room, however, are living in

faithful obedience to God and yet you are burdened with an overwhelming challenge. The sure promise of this psalm is for you.

Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!
He who goes out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him.

I love Bill and Gloria Gaither's song setting of Psalm 30:

If you've knelt beside the rubble of an aching broken heart
When the things you gave your life to fell apart
You're not the first to be acquainted with sorrow, grief or pain
But the master promised sunshine after rain

*Hold on my child joy comes in the morning
Weeping only last for the night.
Hold on my child Joy comes in the morning
The darkest hour means dawn is just in sight.*