

West Van Baptist, July 19
Summer Psalms: Sadness into Singing
Psalm 126

I. Mixed blessings

Last week we started our summer sermon series in the Psalms. (How's that for a tongue-twister?) We began in Psalm 113, which points to the greatness and goodness of God and lifts our hearts in worship. I look forward to more moments of praise like that as we go through July and August.

At the same time, I added a reminder that the Psalms come in different flavors, speaking to all the different experiences of life. Some celebrate, and some are sad, because life has days that are delightful and days that are difficult. The truth is, few moments in life are absolute, pure joy (or complete and total misery). Most of our days involve a mix of the good and the not-so-good.

This is true even on those days when God steps in and does something miraculous for us.

Many years ago a friend of mine had an experience that illustrates the point well. I'll call him "John," though that's not his real name. One winter day, John was involved in a serious car accident. He was driving from one Saskatchewan town to another for a competition, and—as often happens during prairie winters—the roads got very icy. Something went wrong and his car collided head-on with another vehicle. It was a terrible mess.

A second car with other team members came up a few minutes later and found the accident scene. Everyone was relieved—and amazed—to see John unhurt, standing on the side of the road alongside another man they did not recognize. Since John was OK, they checked over the wreckage of the vehicle. A few moments later they turned back to check on John. He was standing by himself on the roadside.

"Where's that other man?" they asked. John's reply? "What other man? There's no one else here."

There wasn't anyone else. That person everyone had seen ... simply wasn't there. No one had come to help John. At least, no normal person. To this day, the group all agree that John must have been protected by an angel. How else could he walk away from that awful accident without a scratch?

It was an absolute miracle! A gracious act of God that no one forgot. But it was a mixed blessing. John was protected and spared. What I haven't told you is that several other people in John's car were killed instantly in the collision. That raises all sorts of nagging questions. Why didn't a whole team of angels show up and protect everyone in the car? Why a miracle for one and not for others? Why this mix of the good and the not-at-all-good?

Mixed blessings happen all the time.

- We pray for a family member with cancer. God does a miracle and she comes through an impossible surgery, has an amazing remission and several years of good health. Then cancer returns and this time she passes away quickly.

- We pray for a much-needed job. God provides in an amazing way. There's much to celebrate. Yet the job is good, not perfect, with aspects that are fantastic and some that are frustrating.

It's all very puzzling. God answers prayer and does wonderful, miraculous things, filling us with joy. But we wonder: why does He provide help in *some* ways, but not miraculously fix *everything* in the situation? Surely He could! So why is the good so often mixed with what isn't good? Why do amazing blessings so often come side-by-side with disappointments?

This actually keeps some people from trusting God. I think most people have at least some experiences in which God makes Himself evident in their lives. There are extraordinary "coincidences" and answers to prayer and moments when God feels near. But it's not always that way. Sometimes God feels distant and silent, and it's easy to overlook the evidence that He is present.

Christians can struggle with the same problem. Why did God seem so real on Sunday, and so far away on Monday and Tuesday? Why the amazing answer to prayer last year but not this week? Why protection for one but not another?

Even when we're not wrestling with questions, this affects our worship. Some days our hearts are full of joyful praise. Some days don't feel joyful at all. So the Psalms come in different flavors, teaching us to worship in all the experiences of life. It's important that we engage them all, so we can learn how to worship well whether we're seeing angels or attending funeral services.

That's why today we're looking at Psalm 126. This is a song about mixed blessings, designed to help us manage the tension between God's miracles and His silence.

II. Back from exile

Psalm 126 is introduced as a *song of ascents*—a song the Jews would sing when they hiked up the mountain to Jerusalem for one of the annual festivals. It was perfect for the occasion, because Psalm 126 is about returning to Jerusalem after a time of exile.

Here's a little background, in case the exile story is unfamiliar.

The family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob became a successful and prosperous nation under King David and King Solomon. Unfortunately, the people often broke God's law and failed to keep His covenant. This brought trouble, division, and defeat. Around 930 B.C. the nation split in two, becoming the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The Northern Kingdom was thoroughly evil, so God allowed it to be conquered and carried into exile by the Assyrian Empire around 720 B.C. The Southern Kingdom did a little better, but it too was defeated and carried into exile, this time by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.

Ancient empires like the Assyrians and Babylonians were very clever. When they defeated an enemy, they didn't destroy everything, burning it all to the ground. They wanted their enemy's resources, without the risk of rebellion. So, they carried off the nation's treasures, and they also

took its leaders captive—the royal family, scholars, wealthy business people, and other men and women of influence. These people were relocated to Babylon or to an important province and integrated into imperial society, letting the Babylonians benefit from their skills. Meanwhile, the ordinary people—the poor farmers and laborers—were left behind to take care of the land, raise crops, and pay taxes to their new masters.

The goal was to keep the conquered nation's economy running, while destroying its sense of national identity. Instead of fighting for independence, the nation now functioned as a province of the Empire.

This was an incredibly successful strategy. It brought great wealth to Assyria and Babylon, and it put out the fires of rebellion. It always worked. No nation ever returned home from exile—no conquered people ever regained their sense of national identity. Never ...

Well, almost never. There was 1 miraculous exception. Later in the 500's Babylon was conquered by Persia. Persia allowed some Jews to return to Jerusalem. Over time a small but significant number, including members of the royal family, priests, and some other influential leaders made the journey back to Israel. They rebuilt the temple, restored the city, and they re-launched Israel as a nation. (You can read some highlights of this return in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, along with the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.)

Israel's return from exile was an absolute miracle! This never happened! But God did it, and it's celebrated in Psalm 126.

*When the LORD brought back His exiles to Jerusalem, it was like a dream!
We were filled with laughter, and we sang for joy.
And the other nations said, "What an amazing thing the LORD has done for them."
Yes, the LORD has done amazing things for us! What joy!*

It was like having an angel protect you in a head-on collision on the highway. It was wonderful! Still, it was a time of mixed blessings.

- Though the nation of Israel was reborn, it was never independent again. It remained under Persian control. Later it would be ruled by Greece, then Rome, until it was destroyed in A.D. 70.
- Especially in the early years, those who returned were persecuted and attacked by nearby tribes. It was a dangerous and difficult time. When the people rebuilt the city walls, they posted guards, and all the workers kept weapons close at hand for protection (see Nehemiah 4).
- The temple was rebuilt. But compared to Solomon's grand, gorgeous temple, this was a small and second-rate building, and for some it was a source of tears rather than joy (see Ezra 3:12).

The return from exile was an absolute miracle. Perhaps some people thought God would keep on doing miracles: making everything easy, restoring all the nation's former glory and more. Instead, blessing was mixed with hardship and disappointment. So Psalm 126 continues with a prayer: *Restore our fortunes, LORD, as streams renew the desert.*

The rebuilt Jerusalem did not feel like paradise. It was a hard place to live, like the nearby southern desert, and the people longed for greater blessings to fall like rain, bringing help and hope.

III. Mixed blessings happen all the time

The Bible is full of mixed-blessing experiences. When God delivered Israel from Egypt they saw wonderful miracles. They also faced hardship and hunger and conflict. The kingdom prospered under David and Solomon, but not without enemies to fight and internal struggles to manage. Even heroes like Elijah, whose ministry was filled with miracles, also faced discouragement and frustration.

This continues into the New Testament. We celebrate the coming of Jesus, the One who fulfills God's promises to defeat sin and make all things new. So we should! Everything is different because of Jesus' death and resurrection. Yet Jesus' ministry came with an unexpected surprise. He didn't stay in our world, crushing the Roman overlords, destroying all evil and making the whole creation new. He went back to the Father, promising to come again to bring God's plan to completion when the time is right. No one expected this—and it confused and frustrated the disciples.

This, by the way, is why so much of Jesus' teaching is about *delay*. Think of all the times Jesus told stories of a Master who would be gone for a while, leaving the servants to wait patiently and work faithfully. He said the Kingdom is *now* among us because the King has arrived (Mat 12:28; Lk 11:20, 17:21); yet the Kingdom is *still coming* and will only be fully experienced when the King is revealed in His glory (Mat 16:28, 25:34; Mk 14:25; Lk 22:16-18). This is reflected in the final words of Jesus' last lesson to His disciples: "*I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world*" (Jn 16:33).

We live in an in-between time. Our Lord has purchased our salvation. The New Testament often speaks of what Jesus *has* done, how we *are* saved now, how we can experience the presence and power of the Holy Spirit today. Yet the New Testament also looks forward to what Jesus *will* do when He returns, how we and the rest of creation *will be* renewed, and how we must be faithful and patient until then.

In other words, we can expect to see and know God's power, including answers to prayer, miracles, and wonderful experiences of His presence. But there will also be difficulties and disappointments. Sometimes an angel shows up and protects. Sometimes people die in the accident. Sometimes both happen on the same day, on the same road.

IV. Sowing in tears, reaping with joy

That takes us to the last 2 verses of Psalm 126.

*Those who plant in tears will harvest with shouts of joy.
They weep as they go to plant their seed,
But they sing as they return with the harvest.*

I've often said that the Bible combines messages designed for specific situations with truths from God that apply everywhere, all the time. The truths in Psalm 126 come to the surface in these last 2 verses. They tell us three things that we need to hear.

(1) There will be tears

In this world we will have trouble. There's no getting around it. Our world is not what God intended when He created. It's broken, and we are broken. So there will be tears. We have pain because of our own bad decisions and poor choices. We have pain caused by the actions of others. We have pain because all the pieces of our broken world are connected and we're just caught in the web.

I don't like this truth. John and his friends didn't like it after the accident. The psalm-writer didn't. Nobody likes tears, and we all want to ask: "Why, God? Why did You allow evil to happen? Why don't You resolve it all immediately, right now?"

The Bible doesn't give a full answer to that question. God reserves the right to wait and explain it only when He is ready. Sometimes He gives us hints, a partial understanding of the reason for the tears. Almost always He does this *after* the fact; rarely during the difficult times. Mostly He responds: "Trust Me. Trust that I love you and I know what I'm doing."

God has never promised that we'll make it through life without tears. Instead, He promises to walk beside us, sharing our pain, giving us tastes of His redeeming power. And He assures us that it won't always be like this.

(2) Sadness will ultimately turn to singing

That leads to the second, really important truth. God promises that for those who love Him, the tears will not last forever. He *will* turn sadness into singing.

This is the Bible's big message. Abraham may wait years for a son, but at the right time Isaac will be born. Joseph might spend time in prison, but in the end he'll be freed and exalted. Israel will spend more than a generation in exile, but somehow God will bring them back to Jerusalem. Most important: Jesus who died and rose for us *will* return to bring God's plan to completion. There will be a new heaven and earth, new life for those who have died and new bodies in place of these aging ones.

In this in-between time, not every slave will be set free. Not every exile will come home. Not every disease will be healed on this side of eternity, and not every accident victim will walk away unharmed. But it is God's nature to wipe away tears and replace them with joy. He will ultimately mend our broken world and our broken lives. In the end, sadness will turn to singing.

I could quote promises all day. Here are 2 examples:

Paul tells us: What we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory [God] will reveal to us later. For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who His children really are. ... We believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We ... wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as His adopted children, including the new bodies He has promised us. (Rom 8:17-19, 23)

The book of Revelation starts and finishes with the promise: *God will wipe every tear from their eyes. (Rev 7:17, 21:4.)*

(3) In between, we're called to live faithfully

The Bible's longest chapter on the hope of resurrection is 1 Corinthians 15. Paul ends that lesson with a practical application: *So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless* (1 Cor 15:58).

Psalm 126 closes with a very similar encouragement, set in the language of sowing and reaping: *Those who plant in tears will harvest with shouts of joy.*

What did most Israelites do from day to day? They farmed. Even people who lived in towns usually did some gardening. This wasn't just a hobby. They planted and harvested so they would have food to eat.

Don't miss the point of verses 5 and 6. Yes, there is pain in life; but we can't respond by curling up in a corner and doing nothing. Yes, God promises that there will be future joy; but we can't just sit and wait for it. We all have responsibilities that are part of our ordinary lives. Parents need to care for their kids. We need to work so we have something to eat and a place to sleep. Farmers need to plant and harvest. In this in-between world with its mixture of miracles and difficulties, God calls us to carry on faithfully with the ordinary tasks of life, including the ministry responsibilities He has given us. As Paul said, *Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.*

This requires faith. Today, if you and I plant a garden, we just go to the store and buy seeds. That's not how it worked in the ancient world. People like the psalm-writer gathered a harvest each year, used most of it for food, but set some aside to be planted in the next year's growing cycle. Planting seed was costly. It meant trusting that the grain you *didn't* eat—the grain you literally threw onto the ground—would produce more food later on. Planting was an act of faith. You did this ordinary work—faithfully—because you had faith that God was in control.

Psalm 126 tells us there will be tears. It gives us hope that God will turn those tears to joy. And it tells us that in between, we must trust Him and go on living faithfully. That's one of the ways we worship.

V. So what? How do we respond?

How do we respond to this psalm? As always, the applications flow out of the truths we've found.

(1) Don't be surprised or discouraged by difficult days. We all need to have a healthy theology of sin, and a realistic understanding of sin's impact on our world. Creation is broken, and there *will* be tears. This isn't a sign that God has forgotten us; it's just part of the path we have to walk on this side of eternity. Knowing this won't make the painful days easy. On the other hand, they will be much harder if we have convinced ourselves that everything must always be pleasant because 'God would never allow anything difficult to happen to us.'

Preparing our hearts for pain isn't especially fun; but it's wise—and it is one of the reasons God has given us psalms like Psalm 126.

(2) Celebrate the blessings and miracles you receive. God does answer prayer, and sometimes He does amazing, miraculous things for us. God can bring exiles back home; and some days there really are angels who keep us safe. The problem is, pain shouts at us more loudly than peace. We tend to notice hard things while we overlook the places where God's hand is at work. So, we need to pay attention, to be on the lookout for God's work in our lives.

Be watching for Him all the time. Recognize Him in the good, joyful days when things are going well. Don't stop looking in the hard seasons. It's true that blessings often come mixed with disappointment. It's also true that mixed into in the darkness of our most painful experiences, there are often bright flashes of God's grace and help.

(3) Trust our Guide to get us to a good destination. God is a good Guide. It's His nature to turn sadness into singing, and we can trust Him whether His promises are fulfilled soon, or only in eternity.

Now, I know, some people will complain: "This is all just wishful thinking. You talk about eternity because it makes you feel better." Don't be led astray by bad logic. How we "feel" is not the test for what is true.

Two caterpillars were chatting on a branch. It was late in the season, and the leaves were almost all gone. Discouraged, one said, "I'm hungry. I'm going to eat that leaf, wrap myself in a cocoon, and die." The other responded: "Not me. I'm going to wrap up, then come back with wings and fly to another bush with lots of leaves." The first complained: "That's just wishful thinking. You only believe it because it makes you feel better." His friend disagreed. "It does make me feel better. But what matters is not how I feel. It's whether caterpillars do, or don't, miraculously turn into butterflies."

The God who created butterflies has promised to turn our sadness to singing. That's His plan, and we need to trust Him, in the happy times and the hard ones.

(4) Finally, worship by faithful living. We usually associate worship with singing songs, lifting hands, praying prayers of thanks and praise. Fair enough! We should worship in all those ways.

We also worship God by trusting Him when things are hard and the tears are flowing. By reminding ourselves—in faith—that our sadness will turn to singing in the end.

And, in this in-between life with its mixture of blessings and challenges, we worship God by doing the normal, everyday things He has called us to do—faithfully, joyfully, with the character of Christ and for the sake of His Kingdom. If you're a farmer, worship by hoeing and weeding, planting seeds, watering and tending them, then gathering the harvest. For the rest of us, let's worship as we care for our families, work at our jobs, engage our studies, live graciously among our neighbors, serve and fellowship at church, and do the other ordinary things our Lord calls us to do.

I hope that for most of us, our ordinary tasks are full of joy these days. I know that some are in a hard place, where tears are close to the surface. Sooner or later we'll all deal with the whole range of experiences and emotions in this broken, not-yet-fully-healed world. Wherever you find yourself this week, may our worship be helped by this wonderful psalm.

* * * * *

When God delivered us with wonderful miracles,
It felt like we were dreaming.
We laughed and laughed, and sang for joy!
People who saw it said, "What amazing things God has done for them."
He *has* done amazing things. And we are so glad.

But Lord, in many ways we're still sad and disappointed.
Please help us again.
Renew us like the rain brings new life to the desert.

Those who plant their crops now with tears
will one day harvest with songs of joy.
We may weep as we go about our work, planting seeds,
But in the end we will be singing as we gather the harvest.