

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS FOR A NEW BEGINNING

## Psalm 126

The Mountain Valley Cathedral in a remote Swiss village was one of the most beautiful churches in the region. One of the features that attracted so many people to the cathedral was its beautiful pipe organ. People would come from miles away to hear the lovely tones of this organ. But one day the organ fell silent. Musicians and experts from around the world tried to repair it. No one succeeded. Then one day an old man appeared and asked permission to try to fix the organ. After working on it for several days, the community once again was filled with glorious music. Farmers dropped their plows, merchants closed their stores – everyone stopped what they were doing and headed for the church. When the old man finished playing, someone asked him how he fixed the organ. He answered, “It was I who built this organ fifty years ago. I created it. Now I have restored it.”

This is the message of **Psalm 126**. It is A SONG OF ASCENT – a hymn the Jewish pilgrims would sing as they traveled to Jerusalem for the holy feasts. Some scholars argue that these songs of ascents – **Psalms 120-134** – are postexilic; meaning they were written after the Lord brought Israel out of Babylonian captivity and restored them to their own land. This view has shaped how **Psalm 126** is translated and interpreted. It is read as a thanksgiving for deliverance from bondage and a prayer for the complete restoration of the Jews to Palestine. But this is only conjecture. Ultimately, we do not know the author of this psalm or the occasion that prompted its composition.

Older versions translates verse 1 to speak of the Lord bringing back the captivity of Zion. But it is more accurate to translate it more broadly to speak of God restoring Zion’s fortunes, which leaves the psalm to refer to any number of occasions when the Lord intervened for his people. In fact, the words used in verse 1 are also used in **Job 42:10**: “*And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he prayed for his friends.*” Likewise, **Psalm 126** is about some period of misfortune in Zion or Jerusalem in which the Lord stepped in and turned things around. This ancient hymn speaks to us to say that you can face life’s turning points with confidence that the Lord has intervened in the past and is able to do it again. It is said that the ancients sung this psalm to celebrate the New Year. That would be fitting as this psalm looks back to consider what God has done and looks forward with confidence that God can do it again.

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## I. LOOK BACK AND CONSIDER WHAT THE LORD HAS ALREADY DONE.

Verses 1-3 focus on a sovereign and gracious act of God: “*the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion.*” The emphasis of these verses is not on what happened or when it happened. The focused is on who did it. The Lord restored the fortunes of Zion. Whatever historical event this psalm celebrates, it was not the result of a wise decisions of a king, the heroic acts of soldiers, or even the spiritual devotion of God’s

people. The Lord did it. The same is true for us. It is the Lord's blessings that we now enjoy. **Psalm 115:1** says: *"Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!"* We can live and serve with great expectations as we look back and consider the good things and great things the Lord has done for us.

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#### **A. THE LORD HAS DONE GOOD THINGS FOR US.**

The ancient Jews sung this psalm in reference to some historical act of divine intervention. But as we read this Old Testament text with New Testament eyes, we cannot help but see a reference to the spiritual act of divine intervention the Lord has performed on our behalf through the Jesus Christ. The Lord has restored our fortunes. **1 Peter 2:9-10** says: *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."* The Lord has done good things for us through the Person and Work of Christ. It is enough that he saved us from the penalty of sin by his amazing grace. But **James 1:17** says, *"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."* The Lord keeps doing good things for us. Our text mentions two.

First, **THE LORD TURNS OUR DREAMS INTO REALITY.** Verse 1 says, *"When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, were like those who dream."* The people of God had prayed so hard, cried so much, and waited so long for things to change, that when the Lord intervened they could not believe it. It was more than a dream come true. It was a dream that they did not dare to dream. It was, as **Ephesians 3:20** says, *"far more abundantly than all that we ask or think."* God blew their minds! They were like the church members who met at Mary's house in **Acts 12** to pray for Peter's deliverance from death row. While they were praying, the Lord answered with a miracle and Peter was knocking at the door. Young Rhoda heard Peter's voice and told the prayer-band that Peter was at the gate. They thought she was out of her mind. But they were all amazed when Peter kept knocking at the door. God specializes in amazing pity, grace unknown, and love beyond degree. **WILLIAM COWPER** wrote:

**SOMETIMES A LIGHT SURPRISES THE CHRISTIAN WHILE HE SINGS;  
IT IS THE LORD WHO RISES WITH HEALING IN HIS WINGS**

In fact, this is one of the ways to tell if the Lord has done a thing or not. If you can explain it, God did not do it. The Lord turns dreams into reality. Likewise, **THE LORD TURNS OUR SORROWS INTO JOY.** Verse 2 records two results of the Lord's restorations of Zion's fortunes. The first result was joy. Verse 2 says: *"Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy."* This statement describes the dramatic way the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion. **Psalm 137:1-4**

reports the lamentations of God's people during their Babylonian captivity: *"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?"*

The children of Israel were so defeated, depressed, and demoralized that they deemed it to be wrong and impossible to sing. But when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, their mouths were filled with laughter and their tongues with shouts of joy. That's how good God is. The Lord is so good that it ought to make you laugh sometimes. That's what happened to Sarah in **Genesis 18**. The Lord showed up to warn Abraham about the impending destruction of Sodom, where Abraham's nephew Lot lived. And the Lord told Abraham that Sarah would have a son – even though they were beyond childbearing years. When Sarah heard it, she laughed. The Lord rebuked them, asking, *"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"* Sure enough, in **Genesis 21**, Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son. They named him Isaac, which means "laughter." Sarah explained, *"God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me"* (**Gen. 21:6**).

Indeed, God is so good that it ought to make you laugh sometimes. And God is so good that it ought to make you shout for joy. Not understanding the full implications of her words, one unbelieving critic of **CHARLES SPURGEON** warned, **"Ah, Mr. Spurgeon, if the Lord ever does save me, he'll never hear the end of it."** It ought to be that way for us. Because the Lord has saved – helped – delivered – strengthened – healed you, you should never let him hear the end of it. **Psalms 30:11-12** says, *"You have turned me from mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever!"*

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## **B. THE LORD HAS DONE GREAT THINGS FOR US.**

The first result of the Lord's restoration of Zion was joy. But there is another result. Verse 2 says, *"Then they said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.'"* The significance of this statement is found in the ones who made it. It was the **nations**, which refers to the Gentiles or heathens or pagans. It refers to the unbelieving peoples of the world who worshiped idols, defied Jehovah, and hated Israel. Yet what the Lord had done for Israel was so great that they said among the nations, *"The Lord has done great things for them."* **Psalm 42:1-3** says, *"As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for you, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, 'Where is your God?'"* In times of distress, unbelievers may taunt believers for having an absentee God. But the psalmist says the Lord had been so good that even the unbelieving nations had to acknowledge, *"The Lord has done great things for them."*

Lost people should acknowledge the great things the Lord has done. And we should acknowledge the great things the Lord has done. Verse 3 says, *"The Lord has*

*done great things for us; we are glad.*" I wish this statement had come earlier in the psalm. It seems kind of out of place that the nations would acknowledge the great things the Lord has done before the saints. But sometimes we fail to recognize the goodness of God right in the midst. When driving, we must be careful of blind spots. While focusing on what is ahead, we can fail to see the cars around us in the periphery. And you can become so preoccupied with our situation that you cannot see the goodness of God all around you. Other people can see the favor of God on your life as you are blinded to it. So let me advise you to look around and see the great things that have happened in your life. See that the Lord has done it all. And see that he did it for you and not against you. See the great things the Lord has done for you and be glad.

**O LORD MY GOD, WHEN I IN AWESOME WONDER  
CONSIDER ALL THE WORLDS THAT HANDS HAVE MADE  
I SEE THE STARS, I HEAR THE ROLLING THUNDER,  
THY POWER THROUGHOUT THE UNIVERSE DISPLAYED**

**THEN SINGS MY SOUL, MY SAVIOR GOD, TO THEE  
HOW GREAT THOU ART, HOW GREAT THOU ART!**

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## **II. LOOK AHEAD WITH CONFIDENCE THAT THE LORD CAN DO IT AGAIN.**

**JOHN WESLEY** wrote a hymn that says, "**Where is the joy I knew when once I saw the Lord?**" This is the question of verses 4-6. In verse 1, the psalmist joyfully remembers when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion. But in verse 4, the psalmist prays that the Lord would restore Zion's fortune. This sudden and dramatic shift from joyful remembrance to humble petition confronts us with the fact that times of celebration do not last – even when they are the direct result of the Lord's sovereign and gracious intervention. **JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE** comments: "**Exceptional joy usually doesn't last a long time. It can't really, because life is always a combination of ecstasy and agony, good times and bad times, joy and suffering.**" Our parents used to sing, "I'm so glad that trouble don't last always." But like it or not, the truth is that our triumphs do not last always, either. But know that the God who brought restoration yesterday is able to do it again. In verses 4-6, we see an affirmation of God's authority and a reminder of our responsibility in the process of restoration.

### **A. GOD'S SOVEREIGN AUTHORITY IS ACKNOWLEDGED IN A PRAYER FOR HELP.**

What should you do when you find yourself at life's dramatic turning points? This psalm answers in a word: Pray. In verse 4 the psalmist prays, "*Restore our fortunes, O Lord.*" This is the only prayer request in this psalm. It is a simple petition: "**Restore our fortunes.**" The same terminology is used in verse 1. There it is a celebration of what the Lord has done. But it is used here as a prayer for future restoration. Literally, the psalmist prays, "Lord, you have done it for us before.

Please, do it again.” He prays for restoration after restoration. The Lord had restored Israel to their land after the Babylonian captivity. Now they need the Lord to provide spiritual restoration in the place of physical restoration. This is the reality of life. There will be times when you need restoration after restoration. You will need God to deliver you to something after he had delivered you from something. You will need God to bring you into a new season after he has brought you into a new year. You will need God to heal you even though the doctor says you are healthy. You will need God to give you a stimulus package even though your finances are in order. But the good news is that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forevermore. The one who restored you in the past is able to do it again.

Notice how the psalmist describes this divine restoration. Verse 4 says, *“Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negeb.”* The Negeb was the desert south of Judea near Beersheba. During the summer, there would be no rain and the Negeb would be bone-dry. There was no water. But suddenly the rains would fall in the winter, and the Negev would overflow its banks with floodwaters. This dramatic picture declares that God is able to turn things around decisively, completely, and suddenly. So do not judge the outcome by how things look now. You may be at a dry place. Your physical health, family life, financial status, emotional state, or spiritual condition may be as dry as the Negeb. But the Lord can restore your fortunes like streams in the Negeb. The Lord can turn a desert into river. The Lord can bring water from a rock. **Isaiah 41:17-18** says, *“When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys, I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and they dry land springs of water.”*

**LORD I HEAR OF SHOWERS OF BLESSINGS, THOU ARE SCATTERING FULL AND FREE  
SHOWERS THE THIRSTY SOUL, REFRESHING, LET SOME DROPS NOW FALL ON ME.**

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## **B. OUR PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY IS ACKNOWLEDGED IN THE PRINCIPLE OF THE HARVEST.**

In verses 5-6, the picture shifts to an agricultural image that describes the process of sowing and reaping. Verse 4 tells us that God can bring restoration suddenly. But verses 5-6 tell us that there are times when God brings restoration seasonally. Streams in the Negeb are a sovereign work of God alone. Only the Lord can turn a desert into a river. But sowing and reaping requires partnership between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Our personal responsibility is acknowledged in the principle of the harvest. Verses 5-6 say: *“Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.”* These verses encourage us to look past the sorrow of sowing and look forward to the success of sowing.

**LOOK PAST THE SORROW OF SOWING.** Verse 5 says, *“Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!”* Imagine a farmer who has suffered a drought last season. He

sowed his seeds. But because there was no rain, his entire investment was lost. When time comes to plant again, he only has a limited amount of seed. And last season's crop failure left him unable to purchase more seed. So he sows what he has. He has no choice. But as he sows, tears flow from his eyes. But the psalmist says, *"Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!"* Notice the intermediate period between sowing and reaping – and all that goes along with it - is omitted. The verse starts at the beginning and leaps to the end. The farmer sows in tears. Then he reaps with shouts of joy! This little proverb is filled with hope. It says to us that no matter how difficult the present season may be, if you trust God with the seed you have sown, a harvest is on the way. **Psalm 30:5** says, *"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."*

**LOOK FORWARD THE SUCCESS OF YOUR SOWING.** Verse 6 says, *"He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him."* This verse emphasizes the proverb of verse 5. Here the psalmist describes the one who sows in tear as, *"He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing."* **"Seed for sowing"** is precious or costly seed. There is a famine in the land. The ground is unresponsive. And the farmer's family is hungry. This seed could be used to make bread and feed his family. But the farmer has taken a step of faith and decided to sow the seed into the unresponsive ground, trusting it will produce a harvest that will feed his family in days to come and prepare him for next season. But as the farmer considers the risk he is taking by sowing his precious, costly seed, he weeps as he goes out. Verse 6 says he *"shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him."*

The language of the text only indicates one trip. The farmer goes out weeping to sow his precious seed into the unresponsive soil. But while he is out in the field, God intervenes. And by the time he comes home, he is bringing in the harvest. This verse describes a miracle that declares there is nothing too hard for God. These closing verses of the psalm have been a great encouragement to soul-winners. Many times missions and evangelists and witnesses sow the good seed of the word into heard hearts. And they do so with tears, because people are unresponsive. But this psalm says don't give up! You may reap in tears but you can reap in joy. Maybe you find yourself at a place where your faith is tested, your love is rejected, your kindness is unappreciated, your labor is criticized, your sacrifices are forgotten. Don't give up! You may go out weeping but you can come home rejoicing.

**SOWING IN THE MORNING, SOWING SEEDS OF KINDNESS  
SOWING IN THE NOONTIDE AND THE DEWY EVE  
WAITING FOR THE HARVEST AND THE TIME OF REAPING  
WE SHALL COME REJOICING, BRINGING IN THE SHEAVES.**

The ultimate proof that God can restore you is the Lord Jesus Christ himself. He sowed in tears. In **Matthew 23:37**, Jesus lamented, *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!"* Later, in **John 12:24**, Jesus said, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain*

*of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”* Indeed, Jesus sowed his life for us in tears. But on the third day there were shouts of joy as he rose from the dead to give the fruit of eternal life.

**My father used to tell of sharecroppers who labored in a valley. The rains would become floods in the valley that would wipe out their crops. At one point, the son said to this father that he was leaving. He could not take it anymore. But the father encouraged him to hang in there a little longer. Something had to change. And it did. The owner of the land came by one day. And as he saw their field in the valley, he told his foreman that it was impossible to grow anything there. Put them on the hill. You may be in a valley. The floods may wash your best efforts away. You may feel like giving up. But I have good news for you. There is one who sits high and looks low. And if you hang in there, he will promote you from the valley to the mountain.**

**I'M PRESSING ON THE UPWARD WAY,  
NEW HEIGHTS I'M GAINING EVERY DAY  
STILL PRAYING AS I ONWARD BOUND,  
LORD, PLANT MY FEET ON HIGHER GROUND**

**MY HEART HAS NO DESIRE TO STAY  
WHERE DOUBTS ARISE AND FEARS DISMAY  
THOUGH SOME MAY DWELL WHERE THESE ARE FOUND,  
MY PRAYER, MY AIM, IS HIGHER GROUND.**