

Text: Psalm 126:1-6 (Pew Bible, pg.613)

Title: “Faith Sings ... When Captives Come Home”

INTRODUCTION

Before I begin today I want to take a moment to prepare us for Easter. This is our next great opportunity for inviting others to join us. Recent research has proven what we all instinctively know is true. A very high percentage of people (nearly three-fourths of those surveyed) said they would respond favorably to the invitation of a family member to attend church with them. Two-thirds of them said they would respond favorably if a friend or neighbor invited them. Research also revealed that this number was increased if that invitation came at time like Easter.

ILLUSTRATION – A few weeks ago in our staff chapel time one of our administrative assistants told the story of something that she observed with her children. They had gone to the park to play, and her little five-year old daughter struck up a friendship with another little girl at the playground. She asked, “Are you a princess?” And the other little girl said, “Yes.” The little five-year-old said, “Good, we can play together.” As they were playing, there happened to be a circle slide on the playground. As they slid down together they laughed and laughed. “Let’s do that again.” The little five-year-old girl stopped and said, “If you like a circle slide you need to come to my church. We have a slide just like this.”

When the women came on Easter Sunday morning to care for the body of Jesus they were met by angels who said...

**“He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. COME AND SEE the place where he lay.”
(Matthew 28:6).**

Make this Easter special for someone. Invite them to COME AND SEE.

Now let’s look together at Psalm 126 (Pew Bible, pg.613). The Psalms are “Faith Songs.” You’ll notice this is called a Song of Ascent. There are several of them right here in this part of Psalms. It is believed that the Jewish people would sing these Psalms as they made their way up the hill to Jerusalem to attend one of the feast days. So they are called “songs of ascent.” They sang these songs on their way to church. Read text.

So this song was written much later than most of the Psalms. As the people of God sang this song it caused them to think about something that had happened to God’s people sometime in the past. It was one of the darkest seasons in the history of Israel. Their rebellion and disobedience against God had become so awful that God had to severely discipline them. Israel had split into a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom (Judah where Jerusalem is located). The northern kingdom was carried off captive by the Assyrians. About 150 years later the southern kingdom was carried off captive into Babylon. The exile lasted about 50 years until when Cyrus, king of Persia, who had conquered the Babylonians, allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple.

And this is probably what this psalm has in mind. It says in v.1, “When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion...”

So the people who are going to church on this day are former captives ... former slaves ... former prisoners. Their sins had caused them to forfeit the blessings of God upon their lives, but that was in the past. Now they were free.

And we are all captives to sin until God sets us free. Jesus said, “Whom the Son (Jesus) sets free is free indeed. So God’s great quest is to set captives free; and when He does everything changes.

Now I want you to notice...

1. THE PRAISE OF RETURNING CAPTIVES (vv.1-3)

As these people traveled to worship at Jerusalem they were singing praises to God.

Psalm 126:1 (NIV) - When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed.

God had delivered them and it was like a dream come true. For those many years they languished under the discipline of God they would remember the days in the past when they walked with God and worshipped with clean and obedient hearts. But then they strayed and their hearts became hard. While they were in captivity they dreamed of the day when God would once again deliver them and set them free. And when the word came that their captors were setting them free the news was almost too good to be true.

Psalm 126:2 (NIV) - Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.”

Psalm 126:3 (NIV) - The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

What they had experienced was salvation and freedom. And it wasn’t something they could do for themselves ... “The Lord has done great things for us.” Even the pagan nations recognized that. So the people were ascending to the place of worship. And as they did their salvation was on their minds. And that’s the way it should be when we come to church. We should rejoice in the salvation and restoration that has come to us through Jesus Christ. God has done great things for us, and that should tune our hearts to sing God’s praise as we come to worship.

But there was still something unresolved in their hearts. Something was missing ... rather, someone was missing. We know from reading the OT that when King Cyrus released the Jews to return, many of them chose to stay in captivity.

So the praise of the returning captives gives way to ...

2. THE PRAYER FOR RETURNING CAPTIVES (v.4)

Psalm 126:4 (NIV) - Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev.

We don't know how long it had been since the return of the captives, but the psalmist knew there was still something they needed God to do. The restoration, the return, is not complete. When he prays, "Restore our fortunes," the word for "fortunes" is literally means "captives" or "captivity."

Israel was not all it once was. Some of the captives had returned home, but not all of them. The restoration of the people of God would not be complete until all the captives had come home.

He dreamed of something that would be like a flash flood of the mercy and the grace of God, setting more captives free. That's the picture here in v.4.

That part of the world, the Negev, is desert region, by and large. There were dry river beds everywhere. The only time they would have water in them is in the rainy season when rains came and suddenly those dry river beds swelled with a flood.

ILLUSTRATION – I remember when we lived in New Mexico I was driving down a highway one day and I noticed that several cars were stopped near a bridge on the highway. I stopped to see what was going on. The bystanders were watching something off in the distance. The bridge went over a dry river bed, like the psalmist mentions here. In the desert southwest it is called an arroyo. All of us stood there and looked up the way where there was a wall of water crashing down that dry arroyo. The sky was blue where we were, but somewhere up in the mountains the rains had begun, and the water rushed downhill turning that dry arroyo into a river.

That's what the psalmist envisions when he prays for captives to return who would come rushing home like "streams in the Negev."

When we come to church we should with praise on our lips because God has set us free in Christ. But we should also come with a burden for the people who are not here. They should never be far from our thinking and praying.

Someone has said that the church is the only entity that exists for those who are not yet part of it. That is true.

It isn't enough for us just to praise God that we have been set free. We must never lose sight of the captives who have not yet returned home. We pray for others to experience the freedom we know in Jesus Christ.

So there is our praise and our prayer. But notice also...

3. THE PROMISE OF RETURNING CAPTIVES (vv.5-6)

Now what we're going to see is that it isn't enough for us to just pray that more captives will return ... that lost people will be saved. The work of salvation is the work of God. But bringing a person to the point of being set free by the love of Jesus Christ includes us. And there's a promise.

Psalm 126:5 (NIV) - Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.

The picture here is of what a farmer experiences when he plants his crops. He throws his seed into the soil with the anticipation that something below the surface, beyond his sight, will occur ... that that seed will begin to germinate and sprout and begin to push its way through the surface. It will grow and grow until the grain, the fruit, begins to appear. Then it's time for joy as the harvest comes.

Note: You will recognize a similar image that Jesus used. This figure of sowing and reaping was well known when Jesus used it in His parable of the sower, a picture of spreading the message of the kingdom (Mt 13:1–23).

Psalm 126:6 (NIV) - He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.

There are several keys to the harvest. There's something here about...

GOING

Psalm 126:6 (NIV) - He who goes out...

Again, the picture here is a very familiar one in the Bible lands. A farmer with a leather seed bag draped over his shoulder goes out into his field. He is walking back and forth in the field, reaching into the basket for the seed, and scattering it in the field.

That's what God did when He sent His Son into this world. Jesus proclaimed the Good News ... release to the captives. And those who follow Christ are challenged to do the same. On one occasion...

Luke 10:2 - He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.

Matthew 28:19 – "Go and make disciples of all nations..."

The farmer could lie in his bed all day long and wish that he had a harvest ... and he will be disappointed. No, he must get up and go ... go into the fields. And the same thing is true of us today.

Unless you are completely calloused in your soul, you probably think it is a great thing for people to get saved. You are for that, not against it. But for every person who is saved, someone went after them.

So there's something about going. But there's also something about...

WEEPING

Psalm 126:6 (NIV) - He who goes out weeping...

Now this may seem a little odd ... a farmer weeping. What's up with that? He's weeping because the work is hard. He's weeping because there is sacrifice. He's weeping because he's taking seed that he could use to feed himself and his family and he's throwing it on the ground.

And there's a powerful principle here about the task of evangelism ... of sharing Jesus Christ with others. I think this weeping represents at least two things:

- It represents repentance. The psalmist is weeping because he sees the condition of the people of God. And if we are real honest before God we will all need to repent of the sick condition of our souls. We have not obeyed God. We have kept the Good News to ourselves.
- It represents a burden. There are captives who have not yet returned. Does it keep us awake at night? Does it drive us to our knees? Does it drive us to our feet to go with the precious seed of the Gospel.

Jesus wept over a lost world. How can we expect to have any impact on lost people if we never shed a tear of concern for them?

There's something about going and weeping. There's also something here about...

SOWING

Psalm 126:6 (NIV) - He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow...

What is the farmer doing? He's planting seed. Of course, in NT terms the seed is the Word of God.

The seed is intended to be shared, not stored. It is intended to be planted, not pocketed.

Of course, the great sower is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He left the barn of heaven, if you will, with the seed of the Gospel in His bag. He stepped into the field and sowed the seed of the Good News by dying on the Cross for our sins.

And we are called to scatter seed everywhere we go.

There's power in that seed we sow. It contains life. That's why Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe."

Scatter that seed wherever you go.

APPLICATION – I'm reminded today of some very important people in our church who every week do this for precious boys and girls. As you are teaching them you are sowing the seed of the Gospel into their hearts, and that is a powerful thing.

So there's something about going and weeping and sowing. And there's something here about...

REAPING

Psalm 126:6 (NIV) - He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.

The promise is that there will be songs of joy when the task of sowing has been done and the crop has matured into a harvest.

It's a beautiful picture here. The harvesters are coming out of the fields singing, "carrying sheaves" with them. The "sheave" is something tied up. The grain that has been harvested is wrapped up, bundled and placed along the path. It will be carried to the threshing floor. There the grain will be extracted from the rest of the stalk.

And that's the way it is when any of us have the opportunity to help someone come to Christ.

ILLUSTRATION – I'll never forget the first person I got to help to come to Christ. I was a college freshman. God had done a fresh work in my life, and was beginning to understand I needed to share Christ with others. I had a burden for one of the guys that worked with me. The church where I attended was having a special evangelistic event. I invited him and he accepted. And as a result he came to Christ. I have never experienced such joy.

Jesus talked about the harvest:

John 4:35 - Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.

John 4:36 - Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.

John 4:37 - Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true.

That's the great thing about this. You will not lead everybody to Christ that you witness to. If you sow the seed and somebody else reaps you still get in on the rejoicing!

CONCLUSION

It starts with the determination to be obedient to Christ ... and to care enough for people who are lost to do something about it.

ILLUSTRATION – Perhaps you've been following the events in Japan surrounding the damaged Fukushima nuclear reactor. If so you know that there are 50 brave workers inside who are trying to get the situation under control. They are trying to stop something that could lead to the deaths of thousands of people. But the Fukushima 50, as they are called, know that there's no way they're going to come out of this alive. They will die sooner or later from the radiation they are being exposed to. Think about ... people willing to die for others.

Speaking tearfully through an interpreter by phone, the mother of a 32-year-old worker said: “My son and his colleagues have discussed it at length and they have committed themselves to die if necessary to save the nation. He told me they have accepted they will all probably die from radiation sickness in the short term or cancer in the long-term.”

That’s what Jesus did for us. And He calls us to follow Him and lay down our lives for Him and for others.