

Psalms for the Journey

Like Those Who Dream

Psalm 126

Mark Vroegop

A SONG OF ASCENTS. 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. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb! 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 (Ps. 126).

There's a particular phrase that I'm prone to say, and it has a bit of a double meaning: "Living the dream!"

Now, when I make that statement, how does it land on you? Because I use it in different ways.

For example, I might be inclined to say "living the dream" when it seems that life is unusually good, positive, and happy. Used in this context, what I'm trying to capture is the fact that my present experience is far beyond what I deserve. In many respects it feels "dreamy," almost too good to be true. I might use it for circumstances that are so much better than what I would have expected. Or I might use it for situations that are really special, but I know they aren't going to last forever. Also, I've said, "living the dream" for those moments that I thought would be deeply meaningful—and they were.

Then there are times when I've used "living the dream" for other scenarios. A few weeks ago, I talked about being the parents of twins. Well, I've used the phrase during our parenting years when we looked a little worn out and people would ask, "How are you doing?" I've said the phrase in pastoral ministry when I've been working long hours, addressing lots of challenges, and I'm a bit overwhelmed. Now, when I use it in that context, it's not entirely positive. I'm not trying to be negative. But what I am trying to do is remind myself that this was part of my "dream" of becoming a dad and becoming a pastor.

Sometimes I use "living the dream" to describe something that is incredible and that I know isn't realistic. And at other times I use the phrase for something that is hard but totally worth it.

In this way, "living the dream" is both about both celebration and expectation. It captures what I'm excited about and how to reset my expectations. But there's another way to use it. "Living the dream" anticipates the future. It's forward-looking.

When you read Psalm 126, it's hard to miss the word "dream" in the first verse. It's not used very often in the psalms. But the other thing to note is the number of times the theme of gladness and joy appear in the text.

*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**. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb! 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 (Ps. 126).*

So, the concept of dream is connected to joyfulness. This psalm is about how to embrace joyfulness by looking back and by looking forward. It's a psalm about celebration and anticipation.

This is another Psalm of Ascent. It was sung as the people of God made their way to the city of Jerusalem. These psalms were opportunities for reorientation—a moment in time to reflect on the past and the future. Last week we focused on the phrase "If the Lord hadn't been by our side" in Psalm 124.

This week the central phrase is found in verse 3: "We are glad." Or as another translation says, "We are one happy people" (The Message).

Does that characterize you? Are you a joyful person? Do you long for more joy in your life? Well, this text gives us two ways for God's people to facilitate joy in their lives: (1) celebration and (2) anticipation. As we'll see, they're both important, and they're both rooted in the character of God. And they need to be embraced together.

1) Celebration

The text begins with a look back. The annual festivals were designed to reconnect the people of God to the historical events of their past. Passover (in the spring) remembered their redemption from Egypt. Pentecost (in the summer) celebrated God's constant provision. Tabernacles (in the fall) reminded God's people about the lessons of their wilderness wanderings.

Like you and me, they knew about these events and these lessons from the past. But one of the ways they kept the lessons fresh was full participation in these annual rituals. The events served as annual anchor points in their lives. And these were the songs they sang.

That's one of the reasons we're examining the Psalms of Ascent during Advent. The Christmas season is itself a tradition—a time for reflection. Those are important moments in our lives, especially with the constant flurry of activity and hurry that mark our lives so much of the year. These annual events help us to consider some bigger realities.

Some of you may be here today, and you're trying to figure that out. Maybe you feel like something is missing in your life, and you're searching. Maybe you are looking for some kind of certainty in a world

that has become really unsettled. You've made the right choice, and I hope you'll keep coming until you find a relationship with Jesus.

For others of us, gathering together on Sunday is part of our regular rhythm of life—as it should be if you are a follower of Jesus. You are here to learn, to grow, to be convicted, and to connect with other believers. But you are also here to be reminded of the importance of particular truths that changed your life. Don't neglect important spiritual traditions. We need daily and annual rhythms that aren't flashy, aren't quick fixes, and that sometimes we justify neglecting.

We need moments that make us pause and use the word “when” like we see in verse 1. They are vital to our joy. You could think of it like a birthday party. It's a time to remind the person how much they are loved, and it's a reminder how much you love them. Good birthday parties increase the joy of the person who's a year older, and it's a time to increase the joy of people who love the person being celebrated. The celebration creates joy.

Verse 1 looks back at something glorious: “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.” Now, when we hear the word “fortune” we think about money and wealth. That could be the meaning, in one sense, but the Hebrew word can mean something even broader. It can be rendered as “a way of life or the general conditions of life.” Some scholars think this has in mind the return of the Babylonian exiles to Jerusalem. If that's true, then this psalm is pointing back to a particular moment where God uniquely cared for his people and fulfilled his promise to them. That could be the case.

Others take this psalm to be a more general statement that looks back to all the times in which the Lord fulfilled his promises to his people. Regardless of which is right, the point is the same.

The psalmist is looking back and rehearsing a time when the blessing of God or the fulfillment of God was so incredible, it felt like a dream. Whatever it was, it seemed too good to be true. Let me give you two examples from the New Testament.

The first is from Acts 12. Peter was imprisoned by Herod, who had just executed John's brother James. Herod was trying to please the Jews, so Peter's imprisonment was going to lead to his execution. While Peter was in the prison, the church was praying fervently. And in the middle of the night, Peter is awakened by an angel who led him out of the prison. Acts 12:9 says this: “And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.” That's the idea.

Another New Testament text would be Ephesians 3:20-21. “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

In both cases, what's being described here is something that is hard to believe because it's so wonderful and amazing.

Notice their response in verse 2. We find heartfelt expressions of joy:

“our mouth was filled with laughter” – They didn’t just laugh! Their mouth was filled with laughter. So, this isn’t just a chuckle. This is a belly laugh of gratitude and happiness. Can you think of a time when it just felt so good to laugh because of how hard life had been? That’s the idea here.

“our tongue with shouts of joy” – This is probably an expression of their singing. The people of God were so marveled with God’s goodness to them that they broke into singing or spontaneous praise. Maybe something like: “Isn’t God good!” “Can you believe it!” “He’s been so faithful!” When was the last time this kind of response characterized you? Sometimes joy happens because we can’t help ourselves. But at other times, joy is a by-product of remembering what we know is true but need to rehearse.

“they said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them’ – The people of Israel were not the only ones testifying of God’s blessing. Other people and nations were as well.

And then the psalm reaches its conclusion in verse 3: “The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.” What’s being celebrated here? In this respect, joy is the effect of something else. Joy is a response.

This is a key to true joy. It’s the connection, not to circumstances, but to the Lord. Remember verse 1: “The Lord restored the fortunes...” and verse 3 “The Lord has done great things for us.”

Eugene Peterson says:

“We cannot make ourselves joyful. Joy cannot be commanded, purchased or arranged....But there is something we can do. We can decide to live in response to the abundance of God and not under the dictatorship of our own poor needs. We can decide to live in the environment of a living God and not our own dying selves. We can decide to center ourselves in the God who generously gives and not in our own egos which greedily grab. One of the certain consequences of such a life is joy.”¹

How do we find joy? We need to celebrate the right thing. Or better yet, we need to celebrate the right person. It was the Lord who restored their lives. It was the Lord who did great things. When God’s people celebrated the Lord, it led them to joy.

No wonder the apostle Paul said, “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil. 4:4). And the conclusion of the psalmist is the conclusion that we should come to regularly: “The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.”

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, [*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*](#), Commemorative Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019), 91.

2) Anticipation

While God's people are called to celebrate, it doesn't stop there. Their celebration serves to help them when it's hard to celebrate. There are times when the rehearsing of God's past provision seems to be far away from our present experience.

I'm sure that there were many trips to Israel when there was a deep need for more help and more restoration. In fact, most of our lives take place between the stories of God's deliverance. That's what Advent is all about, isn't it? We celebrate the arrival of Jesus (incarnation) as we wait for his return (consummation).

Verses 4-6 show us that this psalm is not only a Psalm of Ascent, but it's also a lament. It's a prayer in pain that leads to trust. It's a psalm that chooses joy as it acknowledges the pain of life while looking to God for help.

This is why the source of joy is really important. Remember that earlier I highlighted who was behind the deliverance? That's important because if your heart isn't trained in that way, you'll not know how to lament well. You'll only be interested in a change of circumstances. And that's not going to last or work.

Joy in the "valleys" requires knowing who is with us and anticipating his presence and help in the future.

That's what we see in verse 4. There's a painful appeal: "Restore our fortunes, O Lord!" Remember this is an appeal for life to be restored, not just financial gain or prosperity. It's an appeal for flourishing. If this text is tied to the return of the Jewish exiles in Ezra 1-3, then it could be that the people of God were amazed at their freedom while also being overwhelmed with what was left to rebuild.

This is the prayer of a people looking to figure out their "new normal."

Notice the vivid description in the second half of verse 4: "like streams in the Negev." This was an arid area in southern Israel that featured dried-up streams. When the infrequent rains appeared, these empty pathways filled with flowing water. The result was sudden growth of plants and flowers. Just Google "Negev in bloom," and you'll see what I mean. It's unbelievable!

And what a picture it is of what God's people are asking him to do. There are times when life feels like a desert with no life—dry and harsh. But just under the soil are plants waiting to spring up once the water comes. Our lives are like that, aren't they? There are long stretches of barrenness then God suddenly invades our lives with his surprising grace. This is what the psalmist is praying for.

The greatest example of this, of course, is the invasion of grace that came to us through the cross and the empty tomb. From a spiritual standpoint, we were dead. Just listen to Ephesians 2 and think of a stream in the desert:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the

desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:1-10).

Perseverance in the Christian life comes as we celebrate this truth and apply it practically when life is hard. It's Paul's argument in Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"

Anticipation means that I can look at the painful moment of my life differently. What do you see? A dry stream bed or a potential river filled with flowers just waiting for it to rain? Your perspective matters, Christian!

Look at verses 5-6 to see this. The psalmist shifts from a desert metaphor to farming. Let this statement marinate in your soul: "Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy." This is not only something that's true, but it's also a statement of faith. Based upon God's track record, the psalmist views the pains of life as seeds being planted that will one day reap a harvest of joy.

Verse 6 reinforces this truth with more words. It connects weeping with sowing and reaping with joy. This verse connects the faith-filled act of spreading seed with the hopeful anticipation of a bountiful harvest. Notice that the Christian life involves both tears and joy! Faithful discipleship involves lament and laughter!

They are very different emotions. They seem to come from very distinct parts of our being. But they have a common thread: God's grace. Underneath our celebration is the understanding that it was the Lord who did great things for us. "This wouldn't have happened without the Lord." And underneath our tear-filled anticipation is the understanding that it's the Lord who does great things for us. "This won't happen without the Lord."

We live on God's grace in the past, and we live on God's grace in the future. We celebrate his help, and we anticipate his help.

Do you know what that means?

- Christians need to regularly celebrate God's grace to us through the gospel and then apply that to every area of our lives.
- Don't neglect rehearsing God's provision in the past; and be sure your focus is on the Lord, not just the change of circumstances.

- Recognize that the Christian life involves both tears and laughter. Learn to fully embrace both of them in faith.
- Live by faith through your tears, knowing that they are not wasted. In fact, in the hands of God they are seeds being planted for a harvest of joy.

Listen again to Eugene Peterson: “The joy that develops in the Christian way of discipleship is an overflow of spirits that comes from feeling good not about yourself but about God.”²

Whether it’s tears or laughter, the hope of Psalm 126 is that because of who God is, we are always “living the dream.”

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² Eugene H. Peterson, [*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*](#), Commemorative Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019), 94–95.