

SERMON TITLE- "The Psalms of Encouragement"

TEXT- Psalm 126

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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Today we complete our series on the Psalms. I hope it has given you an appetite for this part of God's Word and that you have found ways to add it to your spiritual diet. Just to review these are the categories we have covered-

- The Spiritual Diet- Ps 119
- Wisdom- Ps 1
- Remembrance- Ps 105-106
- Thanksgiving- Church Camp
- Royal Psalms- Ps 24
- Lament- Ps 22
- Pilgrimage- Ps 125

As I spent time listening to the Psalms it struck me that a category was missing. Of course there are 100s of possible ways to divide a topic like this so "discovering" another category is not particularly insightful. But as Ryan was preparing for his sermon on Pilgrimage Psalms, it came to me.

What marks off a pilgrimage? Invariably it is a long journey.

And what defines a long journey? Tiredness.

And what do tired people need? A boost of energy to keep on going.

In the diet of God's people, one of the roles of the Psalms is to be that energy bar that keeps us going- and there are, it seems to me, specific Psalms that really do focus on this.

And what kind of energy do they give?

Well, one could say, using the diet picture, that they give us the whole dietary package. For today, however, I am going to focus on one aspect and that is that boost of energy when we just run low on steam.

As I was preparing I realized that I had chosen a Psalm that fits nicely into Ryan's theme from last week. It is one of the Psalms of Ascent- one of the Psalms that the Israelites would have sung as they climbed to mountain up to the royal city of Jerusalem.

Now there is a particular piece of history that needs to be added to this Psalm. Most of the Psalms are either directly or indirectly associated with King David and the apex of Israel's history. That is the imagery that we bring to the reading. For the most part that is appropriate.

But today's Psalms are not from that time. They come from a period of history 500- 600 years after David. In 586 BC the Kingdom of Israel, as it had been established under King David, officially collapsed. King Nebuchadnezzar conquered and destroyed Jerusalem and carried the upper classes off to captivity.

And with them they carried the Psalms that had been so carefully ingrained into their beings. And they also wrote some new ones.

Here is one of the new ones they wrote while in captivity-

Psalm 137

**By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.**

**There on the poplars we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"**

**How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land?**

**If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill .**

**May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,**

if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy. Psalm 137:1-6

How could they sing? It was hard- but they did. Not because their captors demanded it but because singing the Psalms was something that had been ingrained into their very being. And this singing of the Psalms was one of the things that carried them through one of the dark periods.

Even in captivity God's people remained a people because they had their songs to sing.

#1. The Psalms Gave Them Strength To Survive

I think that Psalms and songs, engrained into our being still do that. When nothing else seems to help- we can still sing the songs of Zion.

When we were young, we were taught what we called “The Negro Spirituals”- the songs that slaves sang as they worked the fields.

One of the great audible memories I have is of the song that was whistled, in the movie Bridge over the River Kwai as the prisoners of war marched.

What did the movie depict the song as doing? Holding together a “people” even in the face of the most serious slavery. In this case the song didn’t even have words.

The songs, the Psalms of God’s people help them survive when times are tough and especially when they are sung together.

That remains the case today and the Psalms, like the whistled tune of the Colonel Boggy March, binds us into a unit that intends to survive the crisis of the moment.

And because they remained a people, there was a day when some of the people came back. They came in both major and minor groups but gradually they began to try to rebuild their once proud kingdom.

The task was overwhelming. The city and nation had been systematically destroyed. It was a very big job and once they started they must have realized that the old city had been built up over hundreds of years. You can’t rebuild something like that, even with a powerful push, in a couple of years.

So imagine how the wonderful hymns of Ascent must have sounded to these people? They would have had a different ring to them.

They continued to sing those old songs because the message in them was also timeless- but they also wrote new ones. What do those songs sound like?

We don’t have to imagine. We have one perfectly preserved for us.

Psalm 126- A song of ascents.

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

It is probably impossible for people who have never experienced this to understand- but we have many stories like this among us. People who have had their wonderful lives torn away- and then coming to a place of restoration. Any person who has grown up

in a refugee family will have heard emotions like this. Those who arrive at the place they have dreamed about for so long- continue to wonder if the dream is still underway.

In the Book of Ezra this story is told in detail. It is the account of one of the first groups to return.

When they arrived at the house of the LORD in Jerusalem, some of the heads of the families gave freewill offerings toward the rebuilding of the house of God on its site. According to their ability they gave to the treasury for this work 61,000 drachmas of gold, 5,000 minas of silver and 100 priestly garments. Ezra 2:68-69

The first thing that the people did was begin the work on the temple and the story is quite detailed, as we can see but just as when we did our project last year, there was an enthusiasm.

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD:

"He is good;

his love to Israel endures forever."

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. Ezra 3:10-11

Anyone who has ever done a building project can understand the excitement. They were back from captivity, the temple was being rebuilt, life was good.

But there was another side to the story that is also part of this narrative-

But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away. Ezra 3:12-13

The reality is- you can never go back. There is a great saying by one of the great pre-Socratic Greeks, Heraclitus, that says, **“you can’t step into the same river twice.”** Interestingly he lives during

the post-exilic period of Israel. Trying to restore things seldom works out according to plan. Something new will have to emerge.

That was a very sobering fact that the post-exilic people had to come to terms with. They would not be able to restore the ancient kingdom. They would have to build something new.

The other sobering reality they face was- you don't build a temple that took 100s of years to build, in a couple of weeks, or even years. The job, of building something new is a long job and doing a long job requires a whole different package of preparation.

The reality is- from the metaphor of the Biblical diet that- the long haul requires a long haul diet.

In fact one could argue, and I would agree, that everything we have done so far is actually part of that long haul diet but there are Psalms which very specifically focus on the kind of diet needed for endurance.

Even the sorrowful sound of Psalm 137, is part of that because if you don't survive the down time, nothing else really will help.

Nonetheless, there are Psalms that build up the bones of God's people.

Another interesting factoid, for those who are interested. The same Hericlitus was supposed to have said-

Good character is not formed in a week or a month. It is created little by little, day by day. Protracted and patient effort is needed to develop good character.

He knows, as have thinking people from the beginning, that unless you have a diet that points you in that direction, a critical piece is missing.

Psalm 126, is one of these, one of the Psalm that the Israelites sang after the exile. The background imagery was no longer that of the magnificent Kingdom of David. The background was now the long tedious road of rebuilding.

For the sake of historical perspective this season would last nearly 500 years and from the Biblical perspective the end of that season was the coming of Jesus with the new Kingdom of God that He was announcing and delivering.

So what is the content of Psalm 126? We have of course been given the setting- post exile Israel. We can look back and quickly learn that this was a tough time. The temple whose foundations were celebrated with such enthusiasm was soon neglected. The old men and women who remembered the old temple had a premonition that things were not going to be the same. It proved accurate.

It was not until Nehemiah came back some ? years later that the job, modest by comparison as it was, was completed.

Those facts are important because without them the deep significance of the Psalm will be missed.

And what did they sing?

**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."

**The LORD has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy. Psalm 126:2-3**

#2. There Is Thanksgiving

There is a temptation, when the long road is seen for what it really is, to forget the blessings that we have. This principle is repeated over and over again throughout the Biblical story. The most graphic was the escape from slavery in Egypt. The escaped slaves had barely been freed when they started complaining about the food that they were eating on the journey to their new land.

One thing that the post exilic Israelites never seemed to forget were the blessings of being back in the land.

For many of them life in their new land was probably not as comfortable as life in Babylon had been- but they celebrated the fact that they were living in their land.

And so they sang songs of joy and celebration.

The songs of celebration are so important for God's people. We need to song them over and over again. They are not a denial of the challenges of life- they are balance when life's challenges are very real.

When people are rich and comfortable they enjoy the blues- when people face challenges they song songs to remind themselves of the blessings of God.

At church camp Ryan spoke about thankfulness. It is not just a nice idea that makes you pleasant to be around [which in indeed

does do]. The discipline of thankfulness, is a critical ingredient to the building of an enduring character.

I still remember Hilda McArthur. So far she hold the record for the oldest person to having been part of our church- she died at 100. One of her favourite songs was an old hymn, Count You Blessings, Count Them One By One.

I called, thankfulness a discipline because Biblical thankfulness is just that. It is an intentional discipline that God's people are to take on.

The post-exilic Israelites not only sang the great songs of thankfulness from previous generations- they also wrote new songs for their own situation and times.

But there is more-

Restore our fortunes, O LORD,

like streams in the Negev. Psalm 126:4

#3. Prayers Of Deliverance

I said earlier that the thankfulness of God's people is not a denial of reality. There is a recurring heresy within Christianity that states, we can never admit it when something bad happens. This is a heresy that has been around from the earliest records of Christianity and it ebbs and flows with astonishing regularity.

This is important to know so that we won't be surprised when we encounter it.

But it is a heresy in the fullest sense of the word. The Bible teaches no such thing- and in fact teaches directly the opposite.

We are not deniers of what is. The Bible meticulously records the good and the bad. We looked at the Laments. They are sad songs. They don't try to deny that bad things are happening and for all intents and purposes it looks as if things are not going to get better.

The persistence of this heresy is easy to observe in church history and it is one of the reasons that we are to work hard at studying the whole of the Scripture.

The prayers of deliverance are something that we have been given. We are commanded to ask God for help. This is not a suggestion that we can take or leave as optional.

One of the blunt statements of this comes from the Book of James-

You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. James 4:2-3

It isn't a pretty picture and by itself it could sound like, and has been taken to mean that, we can just ask for anything and we will get it. Nothing can be farther from the truth.

What is clear, however is, we are to ask God for help and for the things we want and need.

When time are hard, we pray with the post-exilic Israelites, "restore our fortunes."

But there is one more verse to this song-

Those who sow in tears

will reap with songs of joy.

He who goes out weeping,

carrying seed to sow,

will return with songs of joy,

carrying sheaves with him. Psalm 126:5-6

In this verse I think both sides of the equation are wrapped nicely together- facing the hard time we are to-

#4. Claim The Promises For The Future

When times are hard, we do lose sight of things. The same is true of course when times are good. As God's people the constant press for balance remains.

When times are hard. There is another great saying-

"Don't doubt in the darkness what God has shown you in the light."

God does promise to bless His people. That blessing is never promised to be some kind of ticket to health and wealth- but there is a promise. It is the same promise that a loving parent gives their child. "I love you and whatever happens that love is ready to enfold you. Ask what you will and I will response from that place of love."

God, of course is not a mortal parent- He is God- but that is the promise that He gives His people.

And what does that mean when the darkness settles in and the pain and frustration weigh down on us?

It means we remember that love and we remember that a "Long obedience in the same direction" pay dividends.

Those who sow in tear will reap with songs of joy.”

The idea of making thanksgiving, making requests of God and remembering the promises of God part of a package is what these Psalms of encouragement were all about.

That is a powerful picture and when sung among God’s people. In fact there is a song that takes this idea. We won’t sing it today because it is an old song and these songs put our worship leaders to the test sometimes.

But let me post the words-

**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.**

Refrain:

**Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves;
Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.**

**Sowing in the sunshine, sowing in the shadows,
Fearing neither clouds nor winter’s chilling breeze;
By and by the harvest, and the labor ended,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.**

**Going forth with weeping, sowing for the Master,
Though the loss sustained our spirit often grieves;
When our weeping’s over, He will bid us welcome,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.**