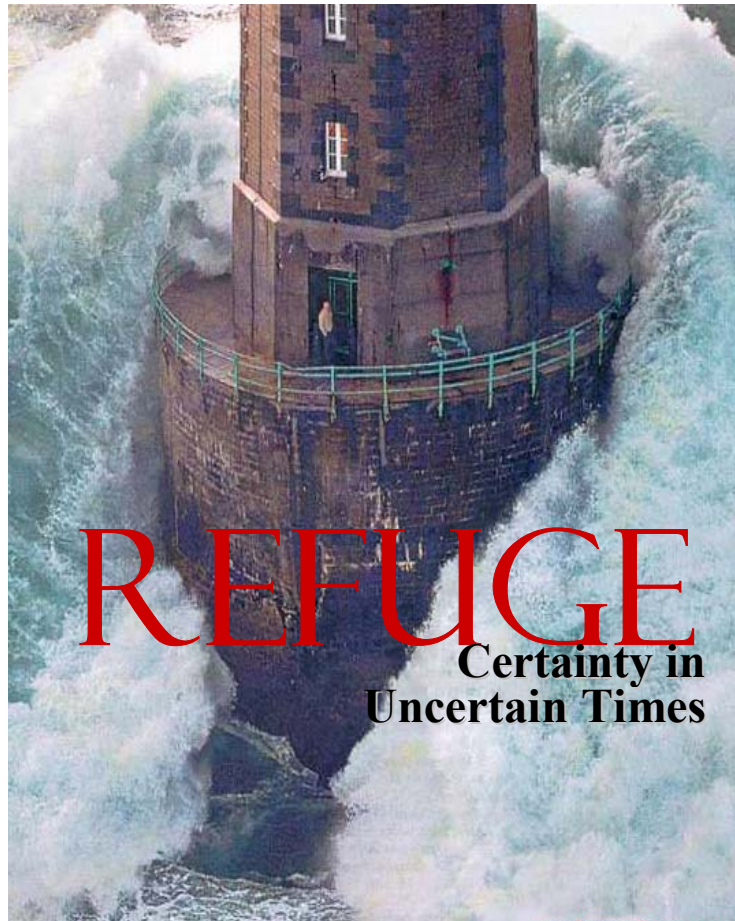


The Covenant Pulpit



Coming Home with a New Song
Psalm 126

Dr. Robert Petterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church
6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108
(239) 597-3464
www.covenantnaples.com

George couldn't win for losing. When he was fifteen years old, his eyesight began to fail. But he was so determined to realize his childhood dream to be a missionary in Africa that he began his theological studies even though his doctors had warned him that his eyes would deteriorate with too much reading. By the time he graduated, George's eyesight was fading fast.

At age nineteen he fell head-over-heels in love. But a few weeks before the wedding, his doctor told him that he would be totally blind within weeks. Upon hearing the news, his fiancée broke off their engagement. George never got over his heartbreak. He would remain single for the rest of his life.

It was at this time that blind George also realized that he was no longer fit to be a missionary in Africa. Having lost the love of his life, he now lost the dream of his life. No wonder he plunged into suicidal depression.

Somehow George climbed out of the pit of despair with a new dream to become a theological scholar. But it's a daunting task for a blind man to pursue graduate studies when he can't read books, take notes, or write papers. Then an amazing thing happened. His three sisters volunteered to take turns going to class with him and taking notes on the lectures. They would read his textbooks to him and write his papers as he dictated words to them. In an astounding act of sacrificial love, they even learned Greek, Hebrew, and Latin to help him through his rigorous theological studies.

Things were finally looking up for George. He was recognized as a rising star in academia. Then he wrote a book that was stunningly brilliant. But it also had some glaring mistakes because his research had been limited by his blindness. His book was panned by critics as shoddy scholarship.

After languishing again in the blackness of despair, he assumed the pastorate of a small church. George had finally found his niche in life. His pulpit ministry grew until he was preaching to hundreds of people. But he couldn't do it without the help of a sister who devoted herself to him. She was his housekeeper, cook, and confidant. Most of all she was his eyes.

After years of caring for him, his sister got engaged. George was so devastated that he refused to attend her wedding. While she was getting married he sat in the dark at home, consumed with self-pity over his blindness, the fiancée who had rejected him 12 years before, his inability to go to Africa as a missionary, the failure of his book, and now abandoned by his sister. Most of all, he wondered how he was going to manage as a blind pastor with his sister married and gone.

But during that evening of June 6, 1882 a light suddenly broke into the grieving soul of George Matheson. He took pen and paper, and wrote one of the great hymns in history: "O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go." In his journal he said that it was as if some inward voice dictated the words to him. In the hymn he realizes that although everyone else in life might abandon us, there is a love that will not let us go.

George Matheson never despaired again after that night. Soon after he became the pastor of St. Bernard's Presbyterian Church in Edinburgh, preaching to thousands of people each week. Today he is remembered as one of the greatest preachers in Scottish history. In Matheson's dark days he found his hope in Psalm 126: a God who would not let him go. His life is summed up in verse five: "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy." You could reduce the six verses of Psalm 126 to a single principle:

Tears may last for a night, but joy *will* come in the morning.

Psalm 126 is entitled, *A Song of Ascents*. There are 15 *Songs of Ascent* in the Psalms. These songs were composed for weary pilgrims to sing as they ascended the steep mountains to Jerusalem. George Matheson needed this *Song of Ascent* to keep on going when the way got too steep and he wanted to give up. Maybe you're facing a steep climb today, and feel like giving up. Then I offer you Psalm 126 as a *Song of Ascent* to remind you of the love that will never let you go.

I find it compelling that this is the seventh of the 15 *Songs of Ascent* in the Psalms. Seven is the Jewish number for perfection. Those ancient Jews, who put these *Ascent* Psalms in chronological order, placed Psalm 126 in the seventh place because they saw something perfect in this little *Song of Ascent*, and I hope that you will find it as perfect for you. How do we keep on going through the night of tears until we reach the joy of morning?

1. Be prepared to be *surprised* by joy. It often comes when we least expect it and most need it.

There is almost a sense of giddiness in this song. Verse one begins, "When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who had dreamed." In other words, "This can't be real. We must be dreaming." Have you ever experienced something so extraordinarily awesome that you said, "If I'm dreaming, don't pinch me. I don't want to wake up!"?

This *Song of Ascent* was written by Jews who had just returned from Babylon. Some seventy years before a Babylonian army under King

Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Israel, tore down the temple, and reduced Jerusalem to rubble. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were butchered in one of the most savage conquests in history. What was left of the population was carried off in chains to Babylon. Israel ceased to be a nation in 586 B.C.

Two hundred years before, when the Assyrians carried the ten Jewish tribes of Northern Israel, those Jews disappeared from the face of the earth. History remembers them as the *Lost Tribes of Israel*. In the whole of world history, only one nation that ceased to exist has ever been restored again.

Israel's resurrection, only seventy years after she died as a nation, is one of the greatest miracles in history. It was literally the impossible dream. No wonder they responded in verse two, "Our mouths were filled with laughter and our tongues with songs of joy." They were totally surprised by joy. Only God could have done this. I wish I had time to tell you the amazing confluence of events that reestablished Israel as a nation in 538 B.C. Even the pagan nations of the world said, "It's a miracle!" We read in verses 2&3:

"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."

Twice Israel has done what no other nation has ever done in history: first in 538 BC, and then after World War 2 when a modern exodus brought survivors of the Nazi holocaust back to the Holy Land. On May 15, 1948, almost 2000 years after Rome snuffed out Israel, she again became a nation. Political experts said that it was an impossibility. Historians still shake their heads in amazement. Only God could have moved geo-political events in such a way that this miracle of history could happen a second time. Psalm 126 reminds us that there is a love that will never let God's people go.

No matter how many times you are knocked down, you will never be knocked out. Like Israel, you will always come back. St. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:8&9, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed..." George Matheson writes about his despair on the day of his sister's wedding:

"But then a light came flooding into my grieving soul. Joy caught me by surprise. I remembered how God had never let me go. I began to trace a rainbow through the rain of my tears. And in less than five minutes I had written down the words of my hymn of praise..."

In his book *Surprised by Joy* C.S. Lewis laments that God's people are sometimes so disillusioned by past disappointments that we no longer expect to be surprised by God's goodness. The God who will not let us go has all kinds of wonderful surprises in store for us. The writers of Psalm 126 discovered that, even when they cried their tears in Babylon, their best days were still ahead of them. We should live with a sense of anticipation. Don't stop dreaming of a better day tomorrow. If Israel can't be buried, than nobody can ever declare that it's over for any of God's children.

**2. Be prepared to be *stripped* of joy:
without losses there will be no gains.**

After three verses of almost giddy joy, we are jolted by a sudden change in mood: happiness becomes desperation. In verse 4 they cry out, "Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev." The Negev is one of the most desolate deserts on planet earth, its surface rutted with dried-out creek beds. But occasionally rains will fall on the Negev, filling those gullies with streams of water. In a miracle of nature, the floors of that barren desert are covered with delicate flowers and grass for a few precious days.

The people who have returned from Babylon are saying that the Israel they have returned to has become like the Negev. In the 70 years that the land was empty, fields had gone to seed, vineyards were uprooted, beasts of prey roamed the land, and cities were in ruins. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah tell of the difficulty these people went through to clear the land, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and build a new temple. It was discouraging, backbreaking work. The new temple was so inferior to the glory of the former temple that the old folks wept bitterly.

We have difficulty when seasons of joy turn to seasons of struggle. But our lives need changing seasons. Ecclesiastes 3:1-4 reminds us,

"There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance..."

In the last two verses of Psalm 126 we see the language of farming: sowing seed and reaping a harvest. We are reminded again that life is all about seasons: times of sorrow and joy; cycles of prosperity and poverty; seasons of success and struggle. We will not grow if we only have seasons of joy.

We don't like losing our joy, but we will have times of: 1) **Losing the joy of our salvation.** Verses 1&2 speak the words of salvation: "When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy." Do you remember when you were first saved and were filled with the joy of a captive set free? It's a terrible thing to lose that joy. In the words of verse four, some of us are desperately in need of a restoration of the joy we've lost.

2) **Losing the joy of spiritual victory.** Returning from Babylonian captivity is a great victory for these Jews. "Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy." But later the sense of victory is lost. How many of us have had great spiritual victories only to fall back in defeat. We think we've finally overcome some addiction and then suffer a relapse. We've overcome a grudge toward someone who's wounded us, only to have the bitter feelings return. We take two steps forward in some ministry, only to fall three steps backward after we celebrate our victory.

3) **Losing the joy of friendship.** When you read verses 1-3 you are struck by the *shared* joy. There is nothing like the fellowship shared in times of joy and sorrow. Later there was great conflict between those Jews as they struggled to overcome a land that had turned into a desert. Is there anything that destroys joy more than the loss of friendship? St. Paul wrote, "Demus for the love of this world has left me." As he agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus said to his sleeping disciples, "Couldn't you have prayed with me for at least an hour?"

4) **Losing the joy of a new project.** There is a great joy in taking on a new challenge, launching a new project, or beginning a new adventure. But somewhere along the line, the excitement turns to slugging it out in the trenches. For these ancient Jews the excitement of coming home to their old land turned into the reality of "sowing in tears" and "weeping while carrying seed to sow". Read the book of Nehemiah. Everyone gets excited about rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. But later, the bone-wearying work of lifting stones and battling those who try to stop the building caused them to lose their joy.

Maybe today you feel like these ancient Jews (or like George Matheson). Perhaps you've lost the joy of your salvation. Or you've had some setbacks where you counted on spiritual victories. Or you are discouraged about some relationship that's gone sour. Or the daily grind is wearing you out. You feel empty and discouraged. It's in these struggles that God is growing you. Remember, life has tough seasons. But tough seasons come to an end.

3. Sowing with joy: if we don't grow weary we will reap a harvest.

The *Song of Ascent* ends with a great promise in verses 4-6: "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." George Matheson said that it was this promise that got him up off the floor and kept him going each time he got knocked down. St. Paul promises in Galatians 6:9: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." Ecclesiastes 3 says that there are times of *dying* and *uprooting* and *weeping* and *mourning*. It's okay to go down, but not to stay down. If we do, we might miss the times of *birth* and seasons to *plant* and *build* and *laugh* and even *dance*. Do you need a harvest of joy? Here's what you've got to remember while sowing in tears:

1) The supernatural takes precedence over the sacrificial.

These people could have just settled down to the dreary tasks of their present life, laboring in a resigned, sacrificial way. Instead, they prayed in verse 4, "Restore our fortunes, O Lord..." We can hype ourselves up until we manufacture happiness, but we can't produce *real* joy. Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Only God can give us joy again. George Matheson couldn't explain where the joy came from that day of self-pity when his sister got married. But Matheson does remember crying out to God. What happened next defies explanation. An inexpressible joy filled his heart, and some voice from within dictated a great hymn which he wrote in only five minutes. It was clearly a supernatural visitation from the Holy Spirit. Desperate prayers tap into God's infinite reservoir of joy. Sacrificial Christians are sometimes the most joyless Christians. Spirit-filled believers will bubble over with joy.

2) No work for God will ever be entirely fruitless.

The Enemy of our soul knows that if he can discourage us, by making us think that all our work is in vain and nothing will ever come of our efforts, then he has won the battle. But verses 5&6 promise that if we sow, we *will* reap a harvest. If we go out carrying seed, we *will* return home carrying sheaves. Do you remember Jesus' parable of the farmer who goes out to sow seed? A lot of his effort is wasted. Some seed falls on hard ground where birds snatch it away. Some falls on shallow ground, comes up quickly and then dies because its roots have not gone deep into the soil. Some falls among thistles where it is choked out. Some of our efforts in life will be wasted. Others will show quick success. We will get excited, only to see our efforts wither and die. And we will see some of our dreams choked out

by things beyond our control. But Jesus says that some seed falls on good ground. There will a harvest if we sow. Of course, Jesus' parable is about sowing the seed of the gospel. But it could be applied to any work we do for God in this life. We can't let our failures discourage us from planting as much good seed as we can. We will reap a harvest if we don't give up.

3) Faithfulness is more important than fruitfulness.

When Jesus told his parable of the farmer, he says that some soil produces more fruit than others. When he tells the parable of the talents he says that some investments pay off better than others. The issue isn't in how fruitful we are, but in how *faithful* we are. The call in Psalm 126:4&5 is to sow the seed. In Galatians 6:9 St. Paul says we are called to two things: 1) "Don't be weary in doing good..." and 2) "...don't give up." But he does give this promise: "...at the proper time we will reap a harvest..." The proper time is *his* time. Our job is to do the work; his job is to do the miracles. We determine how we will work; he determines the results.

4) God is moved by our tears.

"Those who sow in *tears* will reap with songs of joy." "He goes out weeping...will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him." Tears move the heart of God. Psalm 56:8 says that God collects our tears in a bottle. The Hebrew word speaks of a bottle used to carry precious ointment. Our tears are precious to God. Over and over again we see in Scripture how God is moved by the tears of desperate people. When he comes to earth in the person of Jesus Christ, we see that he is often moved to tears himself. God views our struggles with great compassion. He will not allow a George Matheson to weep long before he brings him consolation and hope. And God is moved by our tears, my dear brothers and sisters.

This morning we come to the Communion Table. In it we see the principle of Psalm 126: Tears may come for a night, but joy will come in the morning. Jesus was planted like a seed in the ground. He died in a sea of tears. We will never know how many tears were cried between Friday night and Sunday morning. But the seed sowed in tears brought a resurrection of joy. Maybe you come to the Table with tears this morning, but St. Paul says, "Whenever you eat this bread and drink of this cup, you do declare his death until he comes again." You may be crying today, but there will be joy tomorrow. This God has a love for you that will never let you go.

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