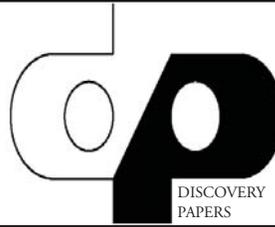


# SURPRISED BY JOY

**SERIES: ASCEND**



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Psalms 126 & 127  
6th Message  
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This message continues a series on the *Psalms of Ascents*—a collection of songs sung by Israelite pilgrims on their way to worship in Jerusalem. These songs were sung time and again as the journey to Jerusalem was repeated. One generation would instruct the next as they traveled together. Eugene Peterson has written a book about this section of the Psalter with a descriptive title, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Life lessons learned by repetition of truth in the context of worship challenges our culture's demand for instant transformation.

We are going to look this morning at two of these Psalms, each with an important focus. In Psalm 126 the theme is joy. In 127 it is rest. Each of these themes reminds us that God often wants to give us more than we are ready to receive. These are elusive gifts that we need to be trained to embrace as God gives them to us.

Psalm 126:

## *A Song of Ascents*

**<sup>1</sup>When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.**

**<sup>2</sup>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."**

**<sup>3</sup>The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad.**

**<sup>4</sup>Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb!**

**<sup>5</sup>Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!**

**<sup>6</sup>He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.**

God-given joy rises up like a tidal wave. It is a sunburst that dispels all darkness. "Our mouths were filled, with singing." Contentment and gratitude can coexist with disappointment, but not joy. Joy banishes disappointment. It rushes like a strong wind, grabs our emotions, animates

our bodies, directs our thoughts. Joy overflows in praise one moment, collapsing in a flood of tears the next—and then feasting, shouting, cartwheels, and cheering.

We read in Romans that the creation has been subjected to futility, waiting for the unveiling of the children of God. Isaiah 55:12-13 writes about the joy that will occur on that day—when the creation is set free from its bondage. "You will go out in joy, be led forth in peace. The mountains and hills will burst in song before you. And all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of thorn bush will grow the juniper, instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the Lord renown for an everlasting sign that will endure forever."

It is a remarkable picture isn't it? The hills burst forth in song. The trees, with their mighty branches, clapping their hands in joy that will never fade.

Consider another text, Acts 3:8-10—the account of a man who had been crippled from birth. He begged for alms outside the temple in Jerusalem until the day he was healed in Jesus' name.

"And leaping up he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God, and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him." Joy arrives on such occasions when God, at least briefly, removes the veil and displays his glory. Our mouths are filled with song.

Psalm 126 is a song that looks back to an earlier time of great gladness. It recalls the experience of captivity in Babylon brought to an end. It expresses the overflow of those days and teaches lessons about the nature of joy.

First of all we can see in Psalm 126 is that it is personal. Joy cannot be learned as a theory. It is expressed in particular time and place by real people (like you and me). "The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy."

Secondly joy is drenched in the presence of God himself.

This is what the Lord has done! Joy comes from God and from nowhere else.

Another observation we can make by looking at the first two verses of Psalm 126 is that joy is rooted in objective reality, not merely in subjective warm feelings. Onlookers bore testimony. Israel's joy was perceived by the nations who observed the freed captives. They declared, "The Lord has done great things for them."

A personal confession: I am often uncomfortable with exuberance—perhaps I am too fond of the illusion that I am in control. But there is a valid reason to be cautious about exuberance. Empty emotion sometimes masquerades as joy. Drugs can produce short-lived ecstasy. So can a raucous sports or entertainment events. And we may worry that an emotional explosion will lead to a crash when 'real world' chaos, boredom, and pain reappear after the wave has passed. However, God-given joy is rooted in eternal realities not passing emotions. It is this world's sorrows and disappointments which are destined to pass away, not the songs of joy which reflect the goodness of God.

In 1966 I was among about thirty students who worked at a summer camp, Young Life's Malibu Club, in British Columbia. The setting is one of extraordinary beauty and the goal of our efforts was to share Christ with unchurched high schoolers. Some great friendships were forged (including one that ended in marriage for Leslie and me). At the end of our stay they warned us about the need to leave 'the Malibu experience' behind in order to face the challenges of faith found in 'the real world.' The warning was useful but I have come to believe that the phrasing was wrong. The 'familiar world' is indeed antagonistic to faith, but it will not last. In fact the 'familiar world' is the one which will be left behind. The 'real world,' God's world, is more like Malibu—beautiful, honoring to Christ, a place of ministry and deep friendships.

But the 'familiar world' remains for now. The hills are not yet singing, nor the trees clapping their hands. What does Psalm 126 teach us about waiting for the experience of joy without end?

We turn to verses 4-6:

**<sup>4</sup>Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
like streams in the Negev!**

**<sup>5</sup>Those who sow in tears  
shall reap with shouts of joy!**

**<sup>6</sup>He who goes out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,**

**shall come home with shouts of joy,  
bringing his sheaves with him.**

The generation that was released from captivity in Babylon sang when they were freed. A later generation 'goes out weeping' and 'sows in tears.' The language of exuberance captures our imagination, but so must the language of sorrow. The Negev was a dry wilderness for most of the year and it serves as an apt metaphor for hardship. Life is pictured as a dusty riverbed in need of rain.

In dry times, God's people pray—"restore our fortunes, O Lord". And then they act in faith—seeds are sown before there is evidence of rain or renewal. Requests for God's intervention lead to declarations of hope. The one who sows in tears will return carrying a harvest and singing a song.

Lets consider how the metaphor of seed sowing might pertain to us. Such sowing includes speaking the truth in love and confessing our sins to one another. Those who "sow to the Spirit" (Gal. 6:8) will care for the broken hearted and love their enemies and gather with the saints for worship. Every morning presents fresh opportunities, "Today, in a dry riverbed, I will live as Jesus' disciple, resisting temptation, delighting in the Lord, suffering opposition with grace." These choices are seeds that go into the ground, and all will bear fruit someday.

Psalm 126 has joy as its theme. Joy 'fills our mouths with song' when God reaches out in blessing, allowing us to glimpse the beauty of the 'real world.' Joy also beckons us to pray and to obey when the riverbed is dry and our tears flow freely. A marvelous song for pilgrims.

Our second text is Psalm 127:

*A song of Ascents. Of Solomon*

**<sup>1</sup>Unless the LORD builds the house,  
those who build it labor in vain.  
Unless the LORD watches over the city,  
the watchman stays awake in vain.**

**<sup>2</sup>It is in vain that you rise up early  
and go late to rest,  
eating the bread of anxious toil;  
for he gives to his beloved sleep.**

[This sentence is ambiguous and either means that he gives the gift of sleep to those he loves, or he gives gifts to his loved ones while they sleep.]

**<sup>3</sup>Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward.  
<sup>4</sup>Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth.  
<sup>5</sup>Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.**

Building a house and guarding a city are worthy endeavors, but when they are accomplished by human effort for the praise of men they are useless. It is vain (empty or foolish) to work ever harder to accomplish what is impossible. Apart from the presence and approval of God, no human being can gain anything that is worth having.

But we also note that God most often uses human builders and watchmen to bring about what he intends. He grants us significance—making our efforts valuable instead of vain. God partners with us to originate and to restore, to establish justice and create beauty. God's servants act with courage in crisis and with firm resolve in faithfulness over the long haul—all to the glory of God.

The fourth chapter of Daniel tells the story of King Nebuchadnezzar, conqueror of the known world, who stood on the roof of his palace and said "Is this not the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence by my mighty power for the glory of my majesty." In the next moment he was struck with a form of mental illness and spent years living as if he were an animal. Unless the Lord builds the house, and is glorified in it, the builder labors for nothing.

By contrast, Johann Sebastian Bach signed his musical masterworks, 'soli deo gloria'—to God alone be the glory. Bach's work was not in vain because it was not centered on himself.

Some years ago the movie *Chariots of Fire* won the academy award for best picture. It tells the story of Eric Liddell, a devout Christian who won a gold medal for Great Britain in the 1924 Olympics before beginning his life's work as a missionary in China. In one of the most famous lines in the movie Liddell told his sister, "I know God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure." It is vain to spend ourselves on ourselves. It is the highest privilege to 'feel his pleasure' in our labors, to write music (a form of house building) 'soli deo gloria.'

How can we keep from fooling ourselves? Vanity is

often observed in restlessness. We turn from doing what is really worthwhile to enter a race that has no finish line, discovering too late that no amount of effort will ever be enough. We fall victim to 'destination sickness'—getting what we have always sought and finding the achievement is empty and unsatisfying. The vain life described in Ps. 127 is spoken of by Jesus as well—"What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?" (Matt 16:26).

There is an alternative to the rat race (rising up early, staying up late, anxiously toiling for food without nourishment)—God given rest.

Jesus forbade his followers to worry, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? The birds don't worry. God loves you more than them" (Matt 6:25-27).

The apostle Paul writes in Phil. 4:6-7, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

The temptation to worry is persistent. The pilgrims who sang this song repeatedly as they made their way to Jerusalem were being trained to trust God. Mature believers helped younger ones believe that God gives good gifts when we sleep, but not because our anxieties have driven us to exhausting accomplishment.

Finally, Ps. 127 NIV ends with a word on relationships. "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children are a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are the sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies at the gate."

I want to call attention to one of the lessons these verses suggest. Old age can be a time of vulnerability, when we are no match for 'enemies at the gate.' This phrase may refer to people who intend us harm, but it also can be a metaphor for physical and emotional challenges, for economic uncertainties, for loneliness or doubt or other such struggles. The men or women who begin early in life to sacrifice themselves for others (as good parents do for their children) will find themselves surrounded by

protection when age and infirmity arrive. Like the builder who wastes his life in restless striving, the man or woman who does not value sacrificial love along the way will find they have traded short term gain for an empty quiver at the end of the day.

Ancient pilgrims sang Psalms 126 and 127—reminding themselves of important truths. And we cannot speak of God as he is without declaring the primacy of joy and rest.