

Psalm 126

Boasting, Praying and Enduring because of God's Great Deliverance

1. Structure

The Psalm comprises two halves, each eight lines long. The statement with which the first half opens transforms into the prayer with which the second half opens, i.e. "When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion..." becomes, "Bring back our captivity, O LORD!"

So the Psalm is like a painting on two panels (see diagram below). Each panel shows the same scene, but in a different light or at a different season. In panel one we see the exiles coming to the ruins of Jerusalem, and their faces are shining as they sing the praises of God their Helper. And in panel two we see the same exiles in the ruins of Jerusalem; the reality of life as returnees is sinking in – their faces are tear stained and resolute as they implore God to send them help.

2. Old Testament Setting

Commentators agree that the opening words of the Psalm look very like a reference to the return of the exiles from Babylon. "When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion..." Even the commentators who demure, on the grounds that there is some ambiguity about the word translated "captivity" (it may be based on either the word that means "to turn" or the word that means "to take captive") admit that the opening line sounds very like the restoration of the Jews.

The restoration of the Jews was permitted by the decree of Cyrus: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him. Let him go up" (2 Chron. 36:23). "Let him go up" is appropriate to the "Songs of 'Going Up'"!

However, Psalm 126 does not attribute the restoration of Zion to Cyrus. This is the work of the LORD, in fulfilment of the promises he made through Isaiah (Isa. 44:24-28) and Jeremiah (Jer. 29:10-14).

The second half of the Psalm suggests the conditions that obtained after the return of the exiles. Only about 42,000 men returned at first. The city they returned to was burned and choked with rubble. The task of rebuilding was very formidable, and it stalled for about 20 years, until the ministries of Haggai and Zechariah stirred up the people to build the temple. However, the work stalled again, and 70 years later Nehemiah was appalled to hear about the conditions that continued in the city. It is not difficult to imagine the faithful among the Jews in Jerusalem who sang Psalm 126 using the second half of the Psalm as a prayer that God would send them a helper like Nehemiah to come and restore their fortunes.

3. New Testament Analogue

The Psalm mustn't be left in its OT setting. It is desirable to find the connection between the Psalm and the NT. The pattern of the Psalm (our confidence to endure today because of God's great commitment demonstrated to us in the past) is like the pattern of 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?" God's truly great work of restoration was accomplished in the Cross of Christ. If he is *that* committed to us, then we can be sure that he will maintain his commitment to us today and for ever.

John Murray comments: "If the Father did not spare his own Son but delivered him up to the agony and shame of Calvary, how could he possibly fail to bring to fruition the end contemplated in such sacrifice... So great is that gift, so marvellous are its implications, so far-reaching its consequences that all graces of lesser proportion are certain of free bestowment."

