

# RETURN TO JOY

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Incorporated non-profit in New Jersey, USA

## God's Restoration Returns Me to Joy – Psalm 126

By Peter Eng

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### Psalm 126:1-6 (NASB)

*A Song of Ascents.*

<sup>1</sup>*When the LORD brought  
back the captive ones of Zion,  
We were like those who dream.*

<sup>2</sup>*Then our mouth was filled with  
laughter*

*And our tongue with joyful shouting;  
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 captivity, O Lord,  
As the streams in the South.*

<sup>5</sup>*Those who sow in tears shall reap  
with joyful shouting.*

<sup>6</sup>*He who goes to and fro weeping,  
carrying his bag of seed,  
Shall indeed come again with a shout  
of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.*

Hallelujah! The dry spell has ended! God has restored the sinner! In this case, it is the nation of the Jewish people who sinned. They brought the calamity on themselves, but the Lord in his great mercy has forgiven them and restored them as a nation. Without Yahweh, they would not be a nation, called out of Egypt. But when they possessed the land, they immediately went their own way. Their rejection of Yahweh as God required God to show them the great evil of their idolatry.

They were not simply Jews, but they were “the captive ones of Zion.” They belong to Zion, but the captivity of their hearts to the idols of prosperity (in the worship of Baal, etc.) caused them to lose everything. God’s blessings were not enough for them, so they have to learn what life is like when separated from the blessing of the land God gave them.

Cast in Christian terms, they were like Christians who refuse to find joy in God’s blessings and become envious of what others have. They then pursued money, sex and power like the rest of the world, and chose idols rather than Jesus.

When we do that, we become alienated from God. We are like those who want to belong to the kingdom of God where there is freedom from sin, but sell ourselves to the devil because of the pleasures of this world.

The just course of action for God is to reject us for good. But God in his great mercy and forbearance towards us restores us. What joy!

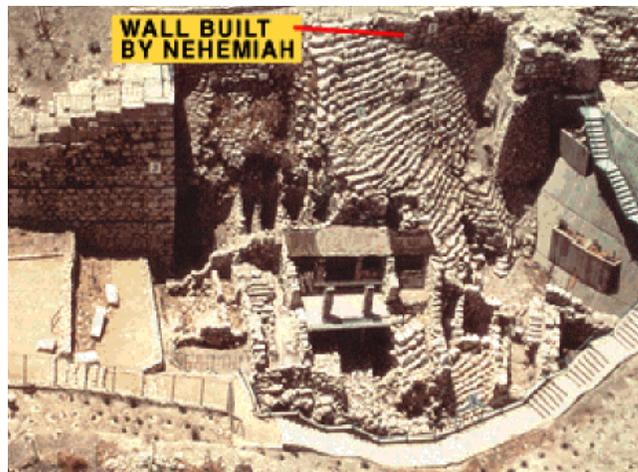
The immoral woman crept up to Jesus while he was dining at the home of a Pharisee. She poured out perfume at his feet, kissed them and wiped them with her hair. She knew she was not worthy to be a daughter of Zion. But she came humbly to seek forgiveness. And Jesus explained, *"her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."* (Luke 7:47).

The psalmist felt like he was in a dream. It's so good, it was too good to be true. *"Then our mouth was filled with laughter / And our tongue with joyful shouting."* They could now return to the Promised Land, the Kingdom where Yahweh rules.

There was, however, a sobering thought. The *Olim* (Hebrew term of those who immigrate back to Israel) were ecstatic. But they were fully aware of another reality. There were hard times ahead. They repurchased the land, but it had become barren. We have a powerful image in "the streams of the South." The South (Negev) is a dry area crossed by *wadi* (Arabic) or *nahal* (Hebrew). These are mainly dry river beds except for the occasional rain. The denuded land cannot hold water, and the rain runs off into these river beds. The water becomes a torrent that washes away land and fails to nourish it. When nobody owns the land, herders will graze their livestock on the land and denude the land of vegetation. This turns the entire area into a moonscape, quite unsuitable for agriculture.

The psalmist asks God to restore them from their captivity to the land. And may the scattered (diaspora) return as the torrential rain that fills the riverbeds in the South. However, they were looking to farm the land and use it, not abuse it. The water from the rain would be a destructive force because of the abuse of the land. But God's people will restore the land, preserve the water, plant crops, and will enjoy rich harvests.

*If we judge our spiritual connection with God by how well we live, Paul must be considered a total failure given the hardships in his life.*



*Wall built by the Olim under the leadership of Nehemiah*

The *Olim* will sow in tears, but they will reap in joy. This is just a poetic way of saying that they will face very tough beginnings with the abused land. They would have land back, but it had been rejuvenated. The starting will be extremely tough, but they will be rewarded.

Divine approval was seen in the return from exile. They were not to read the challenges of rejuvenating the land and rebuilding the city to be evidence of God's displeasure. God does not magically remove the challenges of life because we are in his will. We will see him leading us, but we will need to labor on with tears as we address the challenges one at a time. He will give us the wherewithal to see us through. There can be tough times even when we are obedient to God.

The apostle Paul was obedient to Christ. But he suffered rejection by the brethren, the physical hardship of travel, of hunger and cold, of shipwreck and stoning, of beatings and wrongful imprisonments. If we judge our spiritual connection with God by how well we live, Paul must be considered a total failure given the hardships in his life.

The psalmist talks of one who went to and fro sowing and doing it in tears. Sowing is not a tearful

task – ordinarily. And when the sowing is broadcasted, the going to and fro is much less than at harvest. What we have is a picture of sowing and re-sowing. The farmer sows but the seeds do not take for various reasons. He sows again, perhaps trying a different seed, or a different method to water the plants. He meets with partial success and sows again and again until he gets it right.

God does not suspend the laws of nature because we are obedient to him. He does not keep us from mistakes if our ignorance leads us to them. He does not auto-correct our mistakes. What he does is to give us the strength to overcome the challenges placed before us. And what we need to do is to enjoy walking in obedience to God.

There is another group of people not mentioned here, but they must have been very much in the mind of the psalmist. They were those who chose not to return to the land, but to remain in Babylon and Persia. If we compare the *Olim* when they had just returned, to those who remained behind, we can guess that the *Olim* did not fare as well. Perhaps some may even be tempted to question why they who return to the land to fulfill God's declared will for them were struggling while their brothers who took the easy route were faring a lot better.

It was not wrong to remain in Babylon or Persia. But those who returned were fired with a higher ideal, committed to a closer obedience to God, aligned their hearts to God's best for them in the kingdom. Yet they were worse off.

Some Christians ask why the Lord blesses the nominal, less committed Christian more than them. One error of such thinking is that they look at blessing only in material terms. There is great joy in obeying God and living out his plan for our life. The one who chooses to live for himself has a form of godliness, but has denied himself the power and joy found in one who is truly surrendered to God. At the same time, if we think

this way, it shows we are not surrendered to God, we give the appearance of surrender only because we want God's material blessing.

The psalmist does not end here. He tells us that those who sow in tears will reap in joy. And that is indeed true. In our day, we see Jews who returned to the land of their forefathers. The initial years were difficult, but they live in safety compared to their comfortable European Jews, who then suffered the wrath of Hitler or the pogroms of the Russians.

Things may look better for those who remain compared to the *Olim*. But they were thinking only in material terms. If they could foresee the sufferings of their children, they would have returned.

Jesus taught his disciples, "Seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be yours as well" (Matthew 6:33 own). While we must not measure God's reward to us only in material terms, we see that God is not our debtor. What will we give him that he will not repay in great abundance?

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