Truth for Today
The Bible Explained

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast : 05/06 September 2026 **No.:** T1475 **Speaker:** Ian Britton

Things to think about on your way to Church
We're going to meet the God who gives us joy
Psalm 126

[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Psalm 126 is very short, having only six verses, so I'll start by reading the whole Psalm.

> When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.' The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad. Bring back our captivity, O LORD, as the streams in the South. Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.

Introduction
I am sure that other speakers in this series will have commented on why this group of Psalms are called Songs of Ascents. Whether we think of them as being sung by the Jewish people as they travelled to Jerusalem for one of the three great, week-long feasts of Jehovah (that is: The Passover, The Feast of Weeks, and The Feast of Tabernacles), or by the priests as they went up the temple steps in Jerusalem; they are definitely about going up to a central place.

Jerusalem is on a hill, so you do go 'up' to it quite literally, although travelling to the capital city of any country is always referred to as going up. But Jerusalem was not just a capital city, built on a hill; it was the earthly dwelling place of God. So, going up to the temple in Jerusalem was an upward journey in every sense of the word! What about your trip to church each week – do you think of that as 'going up?'

Regardless of the location of any church building, coming into the presence of God should always carry with it a sense of travelling upwards. Not that any building *today* is a special location for the presence of God. Christ lives in His Church, which consists of all Christians, so it is the people that make it 'church,' not the building. But perhaps you are not on very good terms with some of the people in your church. Maybe you struggle to get along with them, and this means that you do not come to church with a sense of joy and of 'going up.' You should think about coming to meet with God as travelling towards the centre of a large circle - certainly, God should be at the centre of everything for Christians. As we each move towards God in the centre of that circle, so we will be moving towards each other. The closer we come to God therefore, the closer we will come to each other. That is the first way today that God can bring us joy!

It's worth saying that all believers should come together with other Christians in a local church if that is physically possible. I understand that some of you may be listening to this talk as a radio broadcast because you are not able to get to a church: I am certainly not criticising you. But when

Hebrews 10:25 talks about, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together”, it means that we should not choose to not meet frequently with other Christians. The COVID lockdown caused many Christians to start meeting online instead of in person. While meeting in person was not possible, that was a sensible choice, and an online connection may still be the only option for those people who are isolated by health or by the remoteness of their location; but it is not an acceptable option simply because we find it to be more convenient. Where possible, we should be meeting together in person with other Christians when we’re going to meet with the God who gives us joy!

Outline of the Psalm
Getting back to the specifics of today’s passage, I want to talk about Psalm 126 under four headings, and every section will be about restoration or revival. That sounds like more good reasons for joy! The four sections are:

1. Remembering Restoration – vv.1-2a.
2. Relishing Restoration – vv.2b-3.
3. Requesting Restoration – v.4.
4. Weeping Before Joy – vv.5-6.

1. Remembering Restoration
The restoration we will be thinking about in each of the following sections could be individual, it could be in the local church, in the national church, or across the worldwide church. It was obviously a collective restoration that the unknown writer of Psalm 126 describes in verse 1 when he says, “When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream.” The English wording of this verse could be confusing. ‘[Bringing] back the captivity of Zion’ sounds almost as if the nation was being sent back into captivity again! ‘Brought back the captives to Zion’ or ‘Restored the fortunes of Zion,’ might make the meaning clearer.

Zion is another name given to Jerusalem, also called the city of David, in the Bible. Zion probably means ‘high point’ or ‘fortress.’ It initially meant one particular hill in the city, but later it came to mean the whole city, which was the capital of Israel and the dwelling place of Jehovah. But Israel had been exiled from that city, and the land, because of their repeated disobedience to God. They had been taken as captives to Babylon and held there for seventy years. Finally, God moved the Gentile ruler Cyrus to allow them to return to their homeland. You can read about these events in 2 Kings 24, Jeremiah 25, and 2 Chronicles 36. It is the return of the captives under King Cyrus that is remembered in Psalm 126. Recalling this event, the writer speaks about the dreamlike state that has resulted from such a joyful happening. They were so full of joy they could hardly believe it was true.

Every Christian can look back to the time when they were set free from the captivity of sin. Our personal disobedience to God had separated us from Him. That separation would have lasted for far longer than seventy years: it would have been eternal. But God stepped in. He did not send us another Cyrus, to be a political, or a military saviour, He sent us His Son to save us from our sins. Our transformation from guilt to justification, and from slavery to liberty, was far more significant, and much more costly than Israel’s restoration. Perhaps we can remember a day when it seemed as if we were dreaming because of what we had just found through faith in Jesus Christ. We can think back to that personal restoration as we travel to church, and that should fill our hearts with joy from God.

There may also be blessings that we have enjoyed as a local group of Christians that we can look back on and rejoice in. In the UK we can look back to a number of revivals that have happened over the centuries and, further back still, to what is usually called the Reformation, when the most important truths of Christianity were clearly restated, and Christian liberty was more fully enjoyed again. We might go back even further to when the gospel first reached our country, or our continent. We had no

national or personal claims to God's blessings, but He gave them to us anyway. Perhaps we can look back, with a mixture of feelings, to a time when our Christian lives went temporarily 'off the rails.' But God picked us up again and restored the joy of our salvation to us. He restored us to the full enjoyment of fellowship with Himself and with His people. Every memory of this kind can be a reason for thankfulness and joy; a joy which God gives to us through our recollection of His goodness.

The outward evidence of the joy of the Israelites in their restoration was mouths "filled with laughter" and tongues occupied with singing. Anybody could have seen and heard how pleased they were. Laughing may not be a regular part of church services, but the joy that it represents should be. Singing has been a feature of the people of God right throughout history. The picture presented in Psalm 126 is of a people so filled with joy that it simply has to spill out publicly. Now I acknowledge that Christians have reasons for sadness sometimes, and that a certain solemnity is not out of place in the presence of the Almighty God. But the outcome of all three of the restorations described by the Lord in Luke 15 (the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son) is joy and rejoicing.

2. Relishing Restoration

I would hate to give the impression that all the joy and blessings of Christianity are in the past! As well as looking back to restoration that has occurred previously, we ought to appreciate what we have right now, and what we enjoy currently should have a visible impact on our lives. If God has restored us to the enjoyment of fellowship with Himself, either at our conversion, or by later calling us back from backsliding, then we are currently in active fellowship with Him! Not only had Israel been brought back from Babylon, a historic fact for which they could continue to give thanks, they had then been established in the land again. They could look back and give thanks for what God had done, and they could look around and give thanks for what he was still doing! "The LORD has done great things for us," the people said; adding "And we are glad" (v.3). They were glad in the 'here and now'! They could look around at the fig trees and the herds of sheep; all on the land which Jehovah had given their ancestors, and they could find in them reasons for deep joy – things that made them glad in that moment. As we ponder over matters on our way to church, we can contemplate the many spiritual and practical blessings that God has given to us and that we should be actively enjoying.

If we are going to church, we are about to exercise our privilege of coming into the presence of the Creator of the universe, and we are about to take our place among the Father's children; our brothers and sisters in Christ. We have a right to do so because Jesus, God's Son, gave Himself as a sacrifice to remove our sins and our sinful selves. We have the Holy Spirit living in us to illuminate these, and other, truths of the Bible for us. The Spirit also gives us the privilege of God living in our hearts – not just dwelling in unapproachable holiness in a tabernacle, or temple, which we could never enter.

On a purely practical level, we have the health and strength to get to such a gathering, or at least the technology to join in remotely if that is necessary. We have the liberty in our country to gather freely with other Christians to praise God. We have a place to meet and free time to be there. You could probably keep this list going at length. I am not suggesting that we forget, or ignore, the very real problems that there might be in our lives; just that, when we come into the presence of our Saviour, we should focus on Him for the time available, not on our everyday concerns.

The Gentile nations who lived around Israel recognised that, "The LORD [had] done great things for them" (v.2). In the same way, there should be outward evidence in my life, so that non-Christians can see that God has done "great things" for me too. They might not have much idea about what God has done for me, but they should see that there is something different about my life. Different from what I used to be before I became a Christian perhaps. Different from the other people they know. Different from what they know themselves to be. Not different in the sense of weird, or

unapproachable, of course; different in the difficult to define sense of displaying peace and joy, and a contentment that is rather unusual in the 21st century.

3. Requesting Restoration

In the Bible I use, the typesetters have separated verse 4 from the beginning and end of the Psalm with extra spacing – and I can see why. Verse 4 strikes a slightly different note from what comes before and after it, when it says, "Bring back our captivity, O LORD as the streams in the South." Why is the Psalmist asking for the captivity of the people to be ended when that had already happened in verse 1? The people had either fallen into some further captivity, or they had stopped enjoying the liberty which God had given them. In this verse, the writer is not remembering a past restoration, or relishing the present restoration, he is requesting a further restoration that is now necessary.

It is never a bad time to pray for restoration and revival. Perhaps such a restoration is required in your own life, or that of your local church. Maybe you are praying for a regional, or national, revival in your country. What God has done in the past He can do again. This seems to be the thinking of the writer of Psalm 126, and it should be our way of thinking as well. National revivals start as local revivals which then spread. Local revivals start with the restoration and renewal of individual Christians in that area. All revival starts with people praying for it to happen. That is something to think about on your way to church next week!

The Psalmist asks for renewal to happen, "As the streams in the South" (v.4). That may require a little explanation. The word used for south is the Hebrew word Negev. This can simply mean that point of the compass, but it usually refers to the semi-arid region in Israel that is to the south of Judah. The northern part of this region supports some livestock, but the southern part is desert. This desert has riverbeds and stream beds that are dried up for most of the year. These dried-up water courses are called wadis. When the rains do fall, perhaps in the hills to the north, streams suddenly start to flow with water, bringing refreshment and life to the desert. The people living by the wadi might not actually see the rain fall, they just see the evidence in the flowing streams, and they rejoice in it. I hardly need to explain any further what the writer means by "streams in the South." He wants God to pour out a blessing that will 'fill up' the dry nation and bring it to life and health again. Since it is God, not man, who sends the rain, so it is only God who can bring about this restoration. It might start somewhere else, out of the sight of the writer, but he wants to see the results of God's blessings.

I am certain we all want to see the blessings of God coming to the areas where we live. Maybe your church, or your own life, has been experiencing a time of dryness and drought. God does sometimes allow those times to occur. It might be the result of failure, but it might just as easily be a part of God's plans and timings which we can know nothing about. God could be waiting for our prayers before He opens His heavens again and pours out a restoration, or a revival, that we have longed after for a long time. What a source of joy it would be to see God at work and to know we had a tiny part in it through our prayers! Do we have enough faith to ask for such things? It is this pattern of blessing following times of drought that carries us over into the final section of the Psalm, that is, verses 5 and 6.

4. Weeping Before Joy

"Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy" says verse 5. We might be tempted to think that we will start praying and working to spread the gospel once we see a bit more blessing in our lives and experience a little more joy. This verse reverses that order! We are to do the work of sowing the seed while we are still weeping – the joy will come with the harvest. I picture a farmer, perhaps in the more northerly parts of the Negev, walking slowly along, scatterings seeds from a cloth bag attached to his waist into dry, very unpromising soil. As he sows his seeds, he weeps over a previously failed harvest, or the bleak nature of the land which he owns and farms and is the only source of food and income for him and his family. Later, perhaps much later, the rains arrive and

water those seeds so that they germinate. Then further rains cause the grain to grow healthily and yield an essential crop. Now I picture him full of joy as he goes out with a sickle to reap the harvest he has been dreaming about!

If my imaginary farmer had been so discouraged by the state of the land, or the long-range weather forecast, he might never have sowed his seed corn at all! Then there would never have been any possibility of a harvest. First there had to be sowing, even if it was accompanied by weeping. Tears can be the foundation for joy! There is also a reference to perseverance at the start of verse 6: “He who continually goes forth weeping.” The idea is of a person going backwards and forwards repeatedly to do the sowing. It was not one quick stride through the field, throwing the seed as widely as he could to get the job over and done as rapidly as possible. There was a methodical, persevering, to and fro, in order to do the work thoroughly and systematically. We have all read stories of missionaries who have persevered for years, enduring much hardship, before God has finally blessed their work with fruitfulness; but most of us still secretly long for God to skip straight to the blessing stage in our work for Him! Methodical perseverance is not glamorous, and it is not exactly popular, but it can be very effective if we are persevering in the work God has given us to do.

It is hard to imagine anybody deliberately choosing to continually go forth weeping, but then the Lord often brings things into our lives that we would not choose for ourselves. The vast majority of us would, if possible, live a life without challenges or problems, and where nothing ever went wrong, or upset our plans. But then we would never have any opportunities to learn or grow, and we would have no reason to increase our faith in the God who has promised to stand with us when He sends us difficulties, and then to teach us more about both Himself and ourselves in the process.

When I read my Bible, I find that all the men and women whom God called and blessed had their fair share, and more, of the kind of problems that lead to tears. From Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament, to Peter, Paul, and the various Mary’s of the New Testament; there is no evidence that God sheltered His servants from every difficulty; in fact, quite the opposite. Problems in our lives might be an indication of God’s planned blessings for us. rather than the sign of His displeasure, or unconcern, that we often mistake them for. But the weeping in verse 6 is connected with “bearing seed for sowing”, literally carrying a bag of seeds for the purposes of sowing. So the picture is not just of perseverance, but of perseverance in the good work of planting life-producing seeds. That makes me think of the parable of the sower which Jesus told. When Jesus explained this parable to the disciples he said, “The seed is the word of God.” All Christians have a responsibility to sow the seed of God’s word.

Perhaps you think that sowing the seed is just the job of paid ministers and missionaries to foreign countries, but we should all be involved in this work. Simple, everyday conversations with family, friends, colleagues, and even complete strangers, are opportunities to say a little about our belief and trust in God. We don’t have to preach sermons to tell people something about Jesus and what He means to us.

Even in Jesus’ parable, the seed didn’t always bear fruit. A negative, or a disinterested response can be very disheartening, but we should not be discouraged by our lack of success. We might not shed actual tears over the matter, but we should feel encouraged by God’s word to continue, despite any setbacks, in such an important work for Him. The reassurance for us, if we are shedding tears while sowing the Word, is that those who do so, “Shall doubtless come again with rejoicing” (v.6). We go out and sow, possibly with tears, and we return with rejoicing, and this is “doubtless.” In other words, the rejoicing is guaranteed! The gap between the weeping and the rejoicing is not specified - the final outcome is, however, certain. For His own reasons, the Lord, may leave us a few hours, or many decades, before the ‘rejoicing’ phase, but it will come – He is the God who gives us joy.

Your walk to church is a good opportunity to reflect on what part of this cycle you are in currently, but you should remember that the cycle will end with rejoicing, because that is the kind of God we serve. The rejoicing is not without reason. The farmer is pictured as, “bringing his sheaves with him.” Sheaves, of course, are the crop that grows from the seeds which he sowed previously. They are the bundles of wheat, or barley, that come from a healthy harvest, and they are the reason for the rejoicing. We shouldn’t necessarily think that the sheaves represent lots of people who have been saved because of our witness. Remember that Noah was a “preacher of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:5) for many years, but only his direct family were saved from the flood.

God said, in Isaiah 55:11, “My word that goes forth from My mouth... shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.” We might not know what God intends our sowing of His Word to accomplish, or how He will make it prosper, but we can be sure it will yield the sheaves that He intends. This means that we can anticipate some of the joy that will come from seeing His purposes achieved, by knowing that it will certainly happen, even though we may not yet see how, or when, that may occur.

So, however you travel to church, when you next do so, you will do well to contemplate the God who brings us joy. Whether you choose to think about the joy that He has brought you in the past, the joy that He is bringing you right now, or the joy that He will certainly bring to you in the future, think about Him, and He will bring joy to your heart and prepare you to praise Him when you reach the church you attend.

Father, we thank you for placing us in Your family and for giving us brothers and sisters in Christ to have fellowship with. We give thanks for the freedom we have in our country to meet together in church and ask that You will cause this to continue. Whenever we are on our way to church, to meet with You and with other believers, please put that joy into our hearts that only You can produce, and fill our thoughts with the restoration you have, do, and will give to us, Amen.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk in the series Things to Think About On Your Way to Church, We’re Going to Meet the God Who Gives Us Joy, talk number T1475.

Please Note:
We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.