

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

**Bereans Adult Bible Fellowship
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Psalm 126 — Sowing Tears, Reaping Joy

1.0 Introducing Psalm 126

- Psalm 126 is the first psalm in the third set of three psalms in the Psalms of Ascents. (cp. Pss 120 and 123). It focuses on the tearful labors of a pilgrim facing hardship. The chart presents the pattern of these psalms.

	I	II	III	IV	V
<i>Trouble – Problem</i>	Psalm 120 Anonymous	Psalm 123 Anonymous	Psalm 126 Anonymous Zion	Psalm 129 Anonymous <u>Israel</u> Zion Blessing	Psalm 132 Anonymous Zion Blessing
<i>Trust – Power</i>	Psalm 121 Anonymous <u>Israel</u>	Psalm 124 David <u>Israel</u>	Psalm 127 Solomon Blessing	Psalm 130 Anonymous <u>Israel</u>	Psalm 133 David Zion Blessing
<i>Triumph – Protection</i>	Psalm 122 David <u>Israel</u> Jerusalem “house of the LORD”	Psalm 125 Anonymous <u>Israel</u> Jerusalem Zion	Psalm 128 Anonymous <u>Israel</u> Jerusalem Zion Blessing	Psalm 131 David <u>Israel</u>	Psalm 134 Anonymous Zion “house of the LORD” Blessing

- ✓ The theme of Psalm 126: *Troubled travelers turn to God for a joyful outcome in place of tears.*
- At Thanksgiving and Advent (Christmas) many churches include Psalm 126 in the pulpit readings for a service due to the psalm's emphasis on rejoicing as the result of the great things God has accomplished on behalf of His people.

2.0 Reading Psalm 126 (NAU)

126:1 A Song of Ascents.

When the LORD brought back the captive ones of Zion,
We were like those who dream.

126:2 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.”

126:3 The LORD has done great things for us;
We are glad.

126:4 Restore our captivity, O LORD,
As the streams in the South.

126:5 Those who **sow in tears** shall **reap with joyful shouting**.

126:6 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*.

3.0 Understanding Psalm 126

3.1 Outline

Psalm Heading (v. 1a)

- I. Past and Present Joy (vv. 1b–3)
- II. Promised Future Joy (vv. 4–5)



3.2 Notes

- **v. 1** “brought back the captive ones of Zion”
 - The expression does not always refer to a return from exile. It refers to restoration to a former condition, as in Job 42:10.
 - Compare Psalm 85:1.
- **v. 1** “like those who dream”
 - If, as most commentators think, this psalm speaks of the return from the 70 years of the Babylonian Captivity, those Israelites who returned to the land were overcome by their turn of fortune.
 - It was like living a dream. It all seemed like it might disappear like a dream when awaking from sleep. They found it difficult to realize that their return to the land had actually, finally, happened.
 - Compare Isaiah 29:7–8.
- **v. 2** “joyful shouting”
 - This word occurs three times (vv. 2, 5, 6) as a key theme of Psalm 126.
 - See Psalms 30:5; 105:43; 118:15.

- vv. 2, 3 “The LORD has done great things”
 - Even the heathen nations around Israel marveled at this turn of events. They had to admit that God must have done great things for His people.
 - Compare Deuteronomy 10:21; 1 Samuel 12:24; Psalm 71:19; Joel 2:21.
 - *What are the great things that God has done for us?*
- v. 3 “We are glad”
 - These words come nearly at the center of the psalm. The Hebrew grammar focuses on something that is ongoing and continuous.
 - The Hebrew uses two words to conclude verses 1, 3, 4, and 5. Verses 1 and 4 are similes. Verses 3 and 4 are about joy. Verses 1 and 3 speak of the people’s reactions.
 - Words about gladness, joy, and laughter occur five times in the psalm.
- v. 4 “Restore our captivity”
 - Is this a different situation than that mentioned in verse 1?
 - ✓ After the initial joy of the return wore off, the people realized that their situation was still precarious. Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah all record their difficulties.
 - ✓ “The first days of the exiles’ return were certainly wonderful, but they had been succeeded by many days of dark discouragement and hard work.” — James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 3:1111.
 - Compare Psalm 14:7; Isaiah 52:8–10.
 - *What spiritual joys do believers sometimes lose?*
- v. 4 “As the streams in the South”
 - The winter rains filled the dry wadi beds in the Negev (in southern Israel). Even the summer drought comes to an end and the welcome rains of winter fall on the land and refresh it.
 - The Lord can suddenly intervene again to deliver His people.
 - Note that the sudden winter rains were not the result of the people’s labors.
- v. 5 “sow in tears”
 - Harvest is another inevitable occurrence in the cycle of the seasons. It comes as regularly as the rain, but not as suddenly.
 - Unlike the winter rains, the harvest comes after a long season of labor. God gives the harvest, but the individual must do the sowing, watering, weeding, and waiting.
 - Compare 1 Corinthians 3:6–9.

- **v. 5** “shall reap with joyful shouting”
 - The verse actually has a chiasmic arrangement:
 - A** Those who sow
 - B** in tears
 - B'** with joyful shouting
 - A'** Shall reap
 - “The psalmist acknowledges that sorrow sown in difficulty will reap joy in prosperity when God works mightily in their midst.” — Steven J. Lawson, *Psalms 76 – 150*, Holman Old Testament Commentary (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2006), 283.
 - Compare 1 Corinthians 15:58; 2 Corinthians 4:17–18; Philippians 1:6.
- **v. 6** “He who goes to and fro weeping”
 - This emphatic Hebrew construction is similar to that used to describe the movement of the raven in Genesis 8:7. Here, instead of “returning,” the second verb is “weeping.”
 - In other words, this is not just one day’s labor in the field. The days of labor are long and many.
- **v. 6** “Shall indeed come again”
 - Another emphatic Hebrew construction for which the translator has chosen “indeed” in an attempt to bring out its force.
 - The promise of the outcome is certain.



4.0 Singing Psalm 126

“When in His Might the Lord Arose to Set Us Free”

(Tune: “Rejoice, the Lord Is King”)

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|---|---|
| <p>1 When in His might the Lord arose to
set us free,
And Zion was restored from her
captivity,
In transports then of joy and mirth
We praised the Lord of all the earth.</p> | <p>2 The nations saw with fear the might of
God displayed,
When He at last drew near to give His
people aid;
Great things for us the Lord has wrought,
And gladness to our hearts has brought.</p> |
| <p>3 Again refresh us, Lord, with Thy
reviving love,
And be Thy blessing poured in mercy
from above;
By grace revive our hearts again,
As streams refreshed by copious rain.</p> | <p>4 Although with bitter tears the sower
bears his seed,
When harvest time appears he shall be
glad indeed;
For they that in the sowing weep
Shall yet in joy and gladness reap.</p> |

— *The Psalter*, 1912

“Bringing in the Sheaves”

1 Sowing in the morning, sowing seeds of kindness,
Sowing in the noontide and the dewy eve;
Waiting for the harvest, and the time of reaping,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.

Refrain

*Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves,
Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves,*

2 Sowing in the sunshine, sowing in the shadows,
Fearing neither clouds nor winter’s chilling breeze;
By and by the harvest, and the labor ended,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.

3 Going forth with weeping, sowing for the Master,
Though the loss sustained our spirit often grieves;
When our weeping’s over, He will bid us welcome,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.

— *Words:* Knowles Shaw, 1874
Music: George A. Minor, 1880

5.0 Praying Psalm 126

- Lord, I am overwhelmed by all that You have done for me. [vv. 1, 2]
- Help unbelievers to see the great things You have accomplished for me. [v. 2]
- Give me the perseverance to keep on laboring in Your harvest field. [v. 5]
- Father, let me experience the joyful outcome of Your harvest. [v. 6]



6.0 Applying Psalm 126

- Joy is characteristic of our Christian pilgrimage.
- God’s great deeds are the basis of both our laughter and our labor.
- Often God grants abundant joy only after we have labored and wept.

This psalm does not give us this joy as a package or as a formula, but there are some things it does do. It shows up the tininess of the world’s joy and affirms the solidity of God’s joy. It reminds us of the accelerating costs and diminishing returns of those who pursue pleasure as a path toward joy. It introduces us to the way of discipleship which has consequences in joy. It encourages us in the way of faith to both experience and share joy. It tells the story of God’s acts which put laughter into people’s mouths and shouts on their tongues. It repeats the promises of a God who accompanies his wandering, weeping children until they arrive home, exuberant, “bringing in the sheaves.”

— Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*
(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 97–98