

“One Happy People”

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Learn to distinguish joy from pleasure.

Psalm 126

November 17, 2019

(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Too good to be true

For the original readers of Psalm 126 the first two verses describe an event that evoked a response I could only describe as “giddy.” They were so happy they laughed and sang and thought they must be dreaming.

I’m wondering when in your life something happened that caused you to think or say, “This is too good to be true” or “This must be a God-thing.” I asked my Wednesday night Bible study to share stories like that, and the answers ranged wildly –

- A Mom went to her doctor expecting to hear she had had her second miscarriage, and instead learned she was bearing perfectly healthy twins.
- A vet talked about the joy of playing with six newborn puppies.
- A military Mom talked about her family getting ready to deploy overseas. Her 5-year-old son’s one wish was to meet NASCAR driver Kevin Harvick. She wrote to the driver expecting nothing, but her son’s wish was granted.
- Several shared major life events, from getting married to new jobs to experiencing the wonder of new life in Christ.

What is your personal example of “too good to be true”?

Then, now, and later

Psalm 126 is a “Song of Ascents,” the third in our November series of sermons that will stretch into December for Advent. There are a number of different theories

around these songs with actual titles in the Hebrew text, “A Psalm of Ascents.” The most common one is that they are pilgrim songs for Jews traveling to Jerusalem for one of three annual festivals. Some of these fifteen psalms certainly fit this theme better than ours, such as last week’s text – “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD” (Psalm 122:1).

I also like the theory that these are simply “songs that rise.” That could refer to their volume or to changing keys or rising notes. Each psalm is designed to lift you higher – lift your gaze to the Lord and off your current circumstances.

This is certainly true of today’s Psalm, 126. It may not be readily apparent, but this Psalm is not written during happy times. When you read it carefully, you notice that it is written during uncertain times, frustrating times, disillusioning times.

Psalm 126, especially the way it’s translated in the NIV, neatly divides itself into three tenses – past, present, and future. The theme of each tense is joy. Verses 1-2 are about the past, 3-4 about the present, and 5-6 about the future.

Joy Then (1-2). The first two verses recall joy from the past over a very specific act that was “too good to be true,” definitely a “God-thing.”

Verse 1 begins, “When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.” If you’re reading as I am from the *New International Version*, you might see that there are a couple of footnotes. The word “fortunes” can read “captivity,” as in, “When the LORD reversed the captivity” or “...restored the captives.” While it seems like “captivity” and “fortunes” are opposite words, what they have in common is the idea of “holdings.”

What we have here is the collective memory of one of those most stunning reversals in Jewish history – at least to that point. As we saw in our study of Ezekiel, the most humiliating and terrible event in the story of the Jews before Christ is the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Ezekiel and other prophets had declared it was coming. Few believed the prophets, because Jerusalem was God’s home, where God’s glory dwelled. They thought God would never, for any reason, stand by passively and allow his temple to be destroyed. But it happened, and all of Israel’s sense of identity and purpose was deported to Babylon with the survivors of that politically and spiritually cataclysmic event. They assumed that their story was permanently over.

Then the Persians overthrew the Babylonians and dominated the eastern Mediterranean rim. While the Babylonian philosophy of world control was displacement, the Persians believed if they let people live at home and worship as they will, they would be less likely to rebel. Cyrus decreed that the Jews could go home.

One can only imagine the emotions of the returning pilgrims. Some believe the Psalms of Ascent are all written about this specific ascent to Jerusalem – the return

home. Verse 2 specifically says the people laughed and sang as they traveled. Whereas they had been humiliated among their neighbors, now those other nations said, in effect, “Wow! Yahweh has done great things for them!” Those who came home were delirious and belted out “songs of joy.”

Joy Now (3-4). My Hebrew commentary describes this psalm as a psalm of disillusionment, a pathetic cry. I don’t agree with that summary, but vv. 3-4 is why he says so.

It’s not that the people have lost their joy. “The LORD has done great things, and we are filled with joy.” The Message paraphrase of verse 3 gave me my sermon title: “God *was* wonderful to us; we are one happy people!”

Then why do these middle verses point to a situation that has changed so much that it reflects disillusionment? Look at verse 4. It’s a prayer that reads, “Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the Negev.” The Negev is the desert in the south of Israel. You don’t have to travel to Israel or the Sahara to grasp what this verse is talking about. If you’ve lived in or traveled to Nevada, Arizona, or parts of Texas and California, you have seen what looks like stream beds that are bone dry 99% of the time. Until the exceptional rain falls. Then that streambed rushes with flood water.

The psalmist is comparing the current situation in Israel to a long, painful drought, to living in the wilderness where food and water are scarce. Thus the prayer at the beginning of verse 4: “Restore our fortunes, O LORD.”

It could be that this psalm was written after a partial return of the exiles. More likely, in my view, is that the return home proved to be disappointing. If vv. 1-2 are about the way up – the singing and laughter about expectation – vv. 3-4 are about the reality on arrival. The wall was still in ruins (Nehemiah 1:3), the temple had been rebuilt but was nothing like the glory of Solomon’s temple (Haggai 2:3), much less like Ezekiel’s even more glorious vision (Ezekiel 40-48).

Joy Ahead (5-6). That brings us to the last two verses, which are about future joy. Anticipation. These are words of confidence and hope, poetically framed for an agricultural society. “Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.” When you’re a farmer, the storehouses are emptiest at the time of planting. You don’t party and feast in the spring, because there’s little or nothing to party with. Don’t forget that we’re talking about pre-supermarkets, even pre-refrigerators. Harvest season may last for months while various crops emerge, but sowing time is meager. Sometimes it’s accompanied by heartache and tears, especially if last year’s harvest was inadequate.

The farmer plants anyway, looking forward to returning from the fields at harvest time carrying armloads of grain or fruit or fresh vegetables. Nobody sings happy songs as they plant; you will look in vain in our hymnal for songs about the joy of placing seed in the ground. You’ll find so many songs about the harvest.

When we look at this psalm, we see overall a rather stubborn kind of joy. “We are one happy people,” the psalm says, even though our current situation is dry and desperate. I’ve found that to be true of the Jewish people. When we were in Israel the first time, in 2011, we had just completed a tour of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum. Our tour guide, David Tal, stood outside that place and told us that the origin of most Jewish festivals is this: “They tried to kill us. They didn’t kill us. Let’s eat.” In other words, the Jews remember their most horrific histories with feasts.

Why? Because of memory and expectation. We remember the deliriously happy moments of the past when we sang at the top of our lungs. And when we’re not currently in party mode, we know we will be when the harvest comes. We remember joy and we expect joy.

This is why the Psalms of Ascents climb higher. Most often in the Old Testament, joy is associated with Jerusalem, with the temple, with worship. We “ascend” to Jerusalem. We ascend to joy. Jerusalem represents the presence of God, the glory of God. Even if I can’t feel God or notice him in my daily life, I expect to when I head to Jerusalem or even think about it. Jerusalem carries both memories and anticipation.

That was-is-will be approach to joy carries over into the New Testament. Joy is no longer about a place; it’s about a person. The angels announce the birth of Jesus as “good news of great joy.” Joy can go anywhere the believer in Jesus goes. That’s why there’s more about joy during times of suffering in the New Testament. The letter of Paul that speaks most about joy is Philippians, and Paul is writing it from jail. Paul says, “Whatever happens, rejoice in the Lord” (3:1).

For Paul, James, Peter, and especially Jesus, joy in the present is about what God did in the past and will do in the future. There is joy in our salvation through Jesus, which is past, present, and future. We were saved, we are being saved, we will be saved.

Joy and pleasure

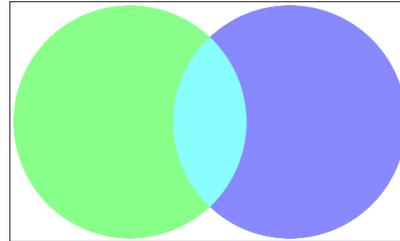
I’m going to suggest just one take-home thought from Psalm 126: *Learn to distinguish joy from pleasure.*

Eugene Peterson’s marvelous book on the Psalms of Ascents, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, prompted me to make this point. Commenting on Psalm 126, Peterson notes that in our culture,

We try to get (joy) through entertainment. We pay someone to make jokes, tell stories, perform dramatic actions, sing songs. We buy the vitality of another’s imagination to divert and enliven our own poor lives. The enormous entertainment industry in America is a sign of the depletion of joy in our culture.

Society is a bored, gluttonous king employing a court jester to divert it after an overindulgent meal.

Peterson is using “entertainment” the way I’m using “pleasure.” It’s not that joy and pleasure are total opposites. They often overlap, as in a Venn Diagram¹. But not always. You can experience pleasure without joy and joy without pleasure. I’m also not suggesting pleasure is always wrong. Pleasure, too, is God-given, but we still need to understand why it is not the same as joy. Pleasure is turkey on Thanksgiving Day; joy is the gratitude. Pleasure is Christmas presents; joy is the coming of Jesus. If you seek pleasure, you probably won’t find joy; if you focus on joy, your times of pleasure will be deeper and last longer.



Because we need to understand the difference, let me offer a few contrasts between joy and pleasure.

First, pleasure is fleeting while joy is timeless. We think we’ve tapped into joy at a football game or a sexual encounter or a concert – or even a church service – but pleasure dissipates like morning fog. It leaves us only wanting more of the same.

Joy, on the other hand, is rooted in a deep sense of identity and contentment that comes from being in right relationship with God and neighbor. It’s why Jesus could say to his disciples on the night before what would become the worst day of their lives, “No one can take away your joy” (John 16:22).

Second, pleasure is physical while joy is spiritual. By “physical” I mean those tingling senses that are the chemicals racing through your body. Once again, let me remind you that (a) those physical responses are not evil; they are God-given. And (b) joy and pleasure can overlap.

Joy is the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22). When the Holy Spirit gives joy, it will remain even when the endorphin level returns to normal.

Third, pleasure is personal while joy is shared. It’s not that people can’t experience pleasure with another person or even with a whole group. It’s that the measure of pleasure is whether this particular experience leaves me happy. Consider the crowd at a football game. There are lots of people experiencing pleasure in the same place, but only because they individually love the same team. If there are fans of the visiting team in the same stadium, they have no joy at all.

¹ John Venn introduced the idea in 1880. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/v/venn-diagram.asp>

Pleasure is self-centered while joy is other-centered. Pleasure enters into a relationship asking, “What can this relationship do to make me happier?” Joy asks, “How can this joy I have overflow to those around me?” Pleasure keeps. Joy gives.

Finally, then, pleasure results in happiness while joy prompts worship. Once again, it’s not that anything is necessarily wrong with happiness. It just will not last.

Notice how this psalmist looks to the past and sings, “When *the Lord* restored the fortunes of Zion.” The psalmist looks at the present and sings, “*The Lord* has done great things for us.” The psalmist looks toward the future and sings, “Restore our fortunes, Lord,” so that we can “return with songs of joy.”

This is a primary reason we worship. In a day when more people, even Christians, are prioritizing other activities on Sunday morning, we need to remind ourselves why we are here. One of the main reasons is joy. You can find more pleasure elsewhere, but not necessarily joy. Regular worship re-creates in a weekly rhythm the memory of the past and the anticipation of a future only God can bring.

Worship is where we can look back at our moments of greatest pleasure, those times that are “too good to be true,” and declare, “The LORD has done great things for us, and we are one happy people.” We turn our happiness into joy when we gather in worship. It’s not that the place is critical; the community is.

In worship we surround ourselves with others who believe the Gospel, so that even in our times of suffering and grief and loss we stand among those who strengthen us with our uniquely Christian defiance of the present wilderness. We refuse to believe that what we now see is the end of the story.

Like pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem in groups we embrace what Friedrich Schleiermacher called “the defiant nevertheless” that displaces any current lack of pleasure with a joy that Peter calls “inexpressible and glorious” (1 Peter 1:9). We say with Paul, “He who did not spare his own Son, will he not with him freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:32).

We’re stubborn that way. We’ve seen God do great things – especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and we believe that means we have even greater things to anticipate. In that reality, our pleasures evoke worship but our worship is never dependent on our pleasures. Our worship, our joy, is because of a person – our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen!