

Psalm 126 Sermon on last Sunday of church year

A song of ascents.

¹ When the Lord restored the fortunes of^[a] Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.^[b]

² Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.
Then it was said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”

³ The Lord has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

⁴ Restore our fortunes,^[c] Lord,
like streams in the Negev.

⁵ Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.

⁶ Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.

Dear congregation,

The days in November are all about transience and death in nature. But in some places we can already sense a new beginning, for example when we see buds on bushes or trees. The last Sundays of the church year take up these thoughts: We hear about the transience of all living things, about death and decay. But there are also hopeful signs: We hear about a new heaven and a new earth and about the eternal glory in God's presence. Psalm 126 also belongs in this context. It directs our gaze from the present transient life to the future and to immortality.

The psalm is entitled: "A song of pilgrimage". In older Bible editions one could read instead: "A song in the higher choir". The corresponding Hebrew word cannot be clearly translated. But let's assume that the translation "A pilgrimage song" is correct, then we already have a good indication of the whole psalm: In all probability it was a pilgrimage song of people on the way to Jerusalem. People went there to appear before God and to be close to God. And they took part in the services in the house of God with joy. There are many places in the Psalms where the worshiper longs to be in the temple, to be with God.

This 126th Psalm is not just a pilgrimage song like some other Psalms. It is about another pilgrimage to heaven. The Christian church understands this Psalm as a pilgrimage song on the way to the heavenly Jerusalem. And now let us allow ourselves to be completely absorbed in the thoughts of this Psalm. Let us simply listen to the message of the glory of eternal life:

"When the LORD shall redeem the prisoners of Zion, we shall be like those who dream."

When we have very dramatic experiences, we ask ourselves at first: "Is this real, or did I just dream it?" We will feel the experience even more strongly when God raises us to eternal life. We will feel like dreamers. At first we will not believe what all we are seeing and hearing is possible. This is so because we will then be in a completely new world: "No eye has ever seen, no ear has ever heard such joy!"

We had not previously been able to imagine what eternal glory will look like. We will feel like people who are released from captivity and are now incredibly happy. They will experience the new happiness as if in a dream. And the knowledge will sink in slowly that the days of captivity are finally over.

What kind of captivity is actually meant? What is the psalmist talking about? Perhaps he was thinking about Israelites' captivity in exile: their homeland was so far away that they were unreachable. In the meantime, children and grandchildren had grown up in foreign lands and had never seen their homeland with their own eyes. They could not imagine what life without foreign rule would be like, a life without threats and violence, without hunger and deprivation. They did not even know what it was like to worship in the temple. They only knew everyday life in captivity with fear and lack of freedom. How could they have imagined under these circumstances what it meant to no longer be a prisoner and to be free?

It is similar for us too: none of us can imagine what it will be like in eternal glory. For we all only know life in captivity: every day we are threatened by death, never sure whether we will live to see the end of the day. Every day we are threatened by the devil and sin, and have no prospect of getting rid of this dominion. This is how every person lives in captivity - even if he is the greatest and luckiest person in the world: he is imprisoned in his life - birth and death are determined by someone else; worldly greatness and earthly happiness can be taken away from him in the next moment.

God wants to redeem us from this captivity. It will be a dream: "Our mouth will be full of laughter and our tongue full of praise." We will say: "The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad!" That is the happiness of those who are redeemed; literally: "whose captivity God has turned into freedom," turned to good, turned completely around to the glorious freedom of the children of God. That is the goal to which God wants to bring us. That is the goal of our faith: eternal joy and glory.

At this point, Psalm 126 contains a short prayer. It simply asks that God bring us to this goal:

"Turn our captivity, O LORD, like the streams of the South." That means: "Please bring about the great redemption. Rescue us from captivity. Bring us to eternal joy and glory!"

We understand this wish. But what does the postscript mean: "Like the streams of the South?" The word for "South" in Hebrew is "Negev." That is still the name of the desert in southern Israel today. There are no streams flowing in this hot desert. And yet God can perform a miracle: He

can make rivers flow in a dry land. That is a thought that no one could have imagined at that time! Water in the desert - one would have thought of a dream, a mirage. "Yes, LORD," the prayer is made here, "let what now seems like a mirage to us humans become reality: turn our captivity around, deliver us to eternal life!"

One last time, this psalm draws the connection between our life now and eternity: "Those who sow with tears will reap with joy. They go and weep and scatter their seed, and come with joy and bring their sheaves." To understand this, one must know that sowing in the ancient times was considered a time of mourning: the seed was scattered in the ground, buried in the ground; and - according to the view of the time - it then died in the ground. In the New Testament, Jesus also talks about how the grain of wheat dies in the ground. But then a new plant grows out of the dead seed; new life emerges, much more than just a seed. That is why the harvest time was experienced as a time of joy: the stalks were cut, bundled into sheaves and then the sheaves were brought home with joy.

This event of sowing and harvest is interpreted in our psalm as referring to our present and future life: Our present time of life is sowing time; it is a time of strain in captivity, marked by all kinds of illnesses and hardships, by pain and tears, a time of death and decay. But even in this time there is hope; the farmer is already expecting the harvest time in the sowing time. This is our situation now: we are waiting for the harvest time, for the time of joy. Yes, this comparison of sowing and harvest wants to say even more: it wants to give us confidence that we should firmly expect that he who sows will also reap.

This insight from our psalm is repeated several times in the New Testament. In view of our life, there is repeated talk of hardships and sorrows, of distress and suffering, of sighs and tears, of endurance and death. It is not only about the burdens that all people have to endure, but also about the particular sadness that believers have to endure: because they are mocked or persecuted, because they are sad about their sins, because they feel their failure in good works. Paul says: "We must go through much tribulation into the kingdom of God." Suffering is part of the sowing season.

In a Christian song from the 20th century, God is addressed as follows:

"So that we can truly grasp your glory, you cast suffering upon us and lead us down dark roads."

The darkest road is death. But we also want to understand our death using the example of "sowing and harvest": the cemetery was also known in the past as "God's acre." This means: our body is sown in the earth like a seed; but this happens with confidence and expectation. We await the harvest. We await new life in eternity. Yes, we are sad and cry when we sow loved ones in the acre of God; but we expect the resurrection to eternal life for every believer. That is why in the song just mentioned, God is spoken to like this:

"So we will be at peace and trust you in faith.

For after the pain we shall see all the heavens."

Our Psalm says: "Those who sow with tears will reap with joy." And in Revelation we read: "God will wipe away all tears from their eyes, and death will be no more, neither will there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore; for the old things have passed away. And he who sat on the throne said: Behold, I make all things new!"

Let us believe this promise of our God! After the sowing time, he will also bring the time of harvest. He can turn our captivity around, just as he can make streams flow in the desert. He wants to do great things for us. Our mouth will laugh happily and our tongue will praise God gratefully. We will be like those who dream. We cannot imagine how beautiful it will be:

"No eye has ever felt, no ear has ever heard such joy. We rejoice and sing you there and sing Hallelujah forever and ever."

Amen.

Sermon by Pastor Mahlke Hermannsburg. From Selk Sermon Downloads.