

Sacred practice of joyfulness

Psalm 126

By pastor Ken Keyte

15th December 2016

Tena koutou katoa, bulla venaca, talofa, nihau, namustae, kumasta po kayo, selamat pagi, good morning everyone!

Psalm 126

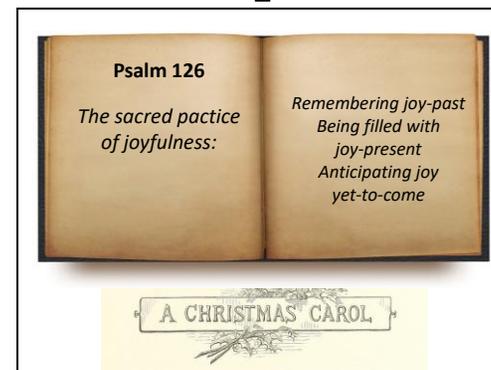
- ¹ When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed.
² Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."
³ The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.
⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev.
⁵ Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.
⁶ He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.

Psalm 126

A song of ascents.

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2



Psalm 126's tells us about the *sacred practice of joyfulness*.

According to Psalm 126, the *sacred practice of joyfulness* involves: *remembering joy-past, being filled with joy-present, and anticipating joy-yet-to-come*.

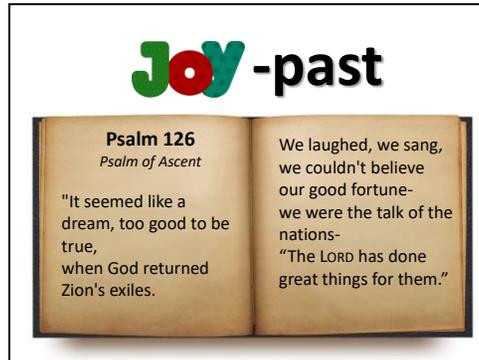
Back in 1843, Charles Dicken's wrote '*A Christmas Carol*', **2a** which tells the story of a bitter old miser named *Ebenezer Scrooge* and his *transformation* into a *gentler, kindlier* man after visitations by the *ghost* of his former business partner *Jacob Marley* and the ghosts of *Christmas Past, Present and Yet to Come*.

The story is based on *Charles Dicken's* childhood experience of poverty working in a *blacking factory*, after his Father was imprisoned.

What Charles Dickon's '*Christmas Carol*' and *Psalm 126* have in common is that *both* apply a process of examining the *past, present and future* in order to bring about *joy!*

The Spirit of Joy- past

3



Dickens believed the *best way* to communicate his concerns about *poverty and social injustice* in Victorian England during the Industrial revolution, was to write a deeply felt *Christmas story*.

According to *Wikipedia* (cos I haven't actually read this classic myself!), *The Ghost of Christmas Past*, takes *Ebenezer Scrooge* to Christmas scenes of Scrooge's boyhood and youth, which stir the old miser's gentle and tender side by reminding him of a time when he was kinder and more innocent.

Scrooge sees his past lonely childhood, his relationship with his beloved sister Fan and a Christmas party hosted by his first employer Mr. Fezziwig, who treated Scrooge like a son. Scrooge also sees his neglected fiancée Belle, who ends their relationship after she realises that Scrooge will never love her as much as he loves money. Then there is a visit later in time to the now-married Belle's, large and happy family on Christmas Eve.

By showing Scrooge these scenes from his past, Scrooge is reminded of instances of joy and sorrow and of the *joy he's missed out on* because of the way he's lived in the past!

Psalm 126 *does something similar*, taking the reader back to *revisit a time in the past* when the Israelites had been *exiles in Babylon* where they'd *suffered much sorrow* but how their *joy had been restored!*

The Bible records this sorrowful period of Israel's history when God's chosen people experienced the worst that can be done to any of us: rape in the streets, cannibalism in the kitchens, neighbours reduced to bestiality, a 900km forced march across the desert, the taunting mockery of their captors, decades of slavery in a foreign land, under oppressive rulers.

And then, incredibly *-joy!*

The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah had predicted it!

After seventy years in Babylon were completed, the LORD fulfilled his promise to bring the exiled Israelites back to their homeland. *King Cyrus* of Persia, made the incredible announcement in the first year of his reign: *that the Israelites could return to Jerusalem, to rebuild The Lord's temple there!*

After 70 years of misery in Babylon, *suddenly, miraculously, joyfully* they were *going home!*

Psalm 126 remembers how joy-past, had been restored; **3a**

"It seemed like a dream, too good to be true, when God returned Zion's exiles.

We laughed, we sang,
we couldn't believe our good fortune-
we were the talk of the nations-

"The LORD has done great things for them." they said.

The gospel of Luke remembers past events when Jesus was born when joy was restored.

Luke remembers the *misery* of *Zechariah & Elizabeth's childlessness* and how their was restored when an *angel announced* that Elizabeth would *become pregnant* in her old age giving birth to a son named *John*, who would *make ready a people prepared for the Lord!*

Luke also remembers the *misery of Israel*, under the foreign rule of *Caesar Augustus* who had decreed everyone must *return to their ancestral birthplace* for a census. Bringing back painful memories of when they'd been *forced to march off to Babylon*, now they were being forced to *march to their birth place to add their names* to the list of people under the *Roman Empire*.

But then Luke remembers what the *angel announced to the shepherds* when Jesus was born.

"I bring you good news of *great joy* that will be for all people. Today in the town of Bethlehem, a saviour has been born to you, he is Christ the Lord!"

Both *Luke* and *Psalm 126* teach us how the *sacred practice of joyfulness* stems from *remembering joy-past* when *joy was restored at by the Lord!*

We can do so too!

We nurture these memories of laughter and shouts of joy, by *filling our minds with the stories of what God has done*.

You see, *joy has a history!*

Joy is joining in the *verified, repeated experience* of those involved in what God has been doing in the past, and *is still doing today!*

And as we do so, we'll find *our present sorrows, restored to joy*, just like in Psalm 126!

However the *sacred practice of joyfulness* involves not only *remembering joy-past*, but also *being filled with joy-present*.

Joy- present

4



The *second spirit* to visit Ebenezer Scrooge, is the *Ghost of Christmas Present* who takes Scrooge to several different scenes – *a joy-filled market* of people buying what's needed for Christmas dinner, *celebrations of Christmas in various places* including a *miner's cottage*, and in a *lighthouse*.

And they visit *Bob Cratchit's family feast*, who introduces them to his youngest son, *Tiny Tim*, who is happy despite being *seriously ill*. The spirit informs Scrooge that *Tiny Tim will soon die* unless the course of events changes. Before disappearing, the spirit shows Scrooge two *hideous, emaciated children* named *Ignorance* and *Want*. He warns Scrooge to especially beware of *Ignorance*, and *mocks* Scrooge's concern for their *welfare*.

Right at the centre of Psalm 126 we encounter *joy-present*, where it says:

4a

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

What this verse, (in present tense) tells us about *joy-present* is similar to what the *spirit of Christmas-present* was showing *Scrooge*.

The psalm shows up the *tininess of the joy* that comes from *being filled with things from the world*, by affirming *the solidity of God's joy* that comes from the *great things God has done for us*.

It reminds us of the *accelerating costs* and *diminishing returns* of *pursuing pleasure* as a path toward *joy*.
Whereas *real joy* is the product of *centering our lives on the Lord!*

We try to get it from entertainment:
going to the movies, watching TV, searching the internet, listening to comedians, plugging into our favourite music, tweets from celebrities, watching sport,
all are attempts to *buy someone elses vitality and creativity*
to *divert and enliven our miserable lives!*

The reason why the *entertainment industry* has *grown so big* in the western world is because it's a *substitute for the joy* that's been *depleted* from our modern day lives!

Eugene Peterson describes western society as being,
"like a bored, gluttonous king, employing a court jester to entertain him after an overindulgent meal! But that kind of joy", says Peterson, "never lasts for long because it doesn't penetrate our lives. Its effects are fleeting- lasting only for a while. But when the *show is over*, the *holiday ends*, or the *money runs out* - the joy trickles away", and we start *yearning for more!*

But there *is something we can do about that!*
We can, like *Psalm 126 verse 3* does,
decide to *live in response to the abundance of God* and *not under the dictatorship of our own wants and needs*.

We can decide to *live in the environment of a loving God who has done and will do great things for us*.

We can experience the joy *that fills us to overflowing as we centre our lives on God who generously gives*, and *reorient our lives away from our ego that greedily grabs!*

The *gospel of Luke* gives us some *glimpses* of this kind of joy in people who *centred their lives on God*.

Like the joyful song that Mary (while pregnant with Jesus) spontaneously burst into singing after meeting her Aunt Elizabeth (who was pregnant with John).

"My soul glorifies the Lord, (Mary sang)
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name!"

Although the occasion was vastly different,

I remember experiencing joy like that after being offered my first job with the NZ Dairy Board, after a long grueling three day selection process.
I'd been praying God would guide me to the right job, and when they offered me a position I had enthusiastically at said "yes!"

But as I drove home, I began wondering whether I'd done the right thing by accepting the job on the spot.
Suddenly I was filled with this sensation of incredible joy, that filled me up and overflowed out of my mouth.
I starting singing praise songs to God as I drove along the Wellington motorway in my Mum's Mitsubishi Mirage.

The lyrics of Mary's song describe very well the kind of joy I was feeling as I drove home from my job interview!

Both *Mary's song* and *Psalm 126* teach us the *sacred practice of being filled with joy in the present that comes from centering our lives on the LORD who has done great things for us*, and *who fills us with joy!*

Yet the *sacred practice of joyfulness* involves *not only* remembering *joy-past*, and being filled with *joy-present*, but also *anticipating joy-yet-to-come!*

Joy- yet to come

5



The third spirit to visit Ebenezer Scrooge, *the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come*, shows Scrooge a Christmas Day in the future.

The ghost shows him scenes involving the death of a disliked man. The man's funeral will only be attended by local businessmen if lunch is provided.

His charwoman Mrs. Dilber, his laundress, and the local funeral director steal some of his possessions and sell them to a criminal.

When Scrooge asks the ghost to show him anyone who feels any emotion over the man's death, the ghost can only show him the pleasure of a poor couple in debt to the man, rejoicing that his death gives them more time to sort out their finances.

After Scrooge asks to see some tenderness connected with any death, the ghost shows him Bob Cratchit and his family mourning the passing of Tiny Tim.

The ghost then shows Scrooge the man's neglected grave: the tombstone bears *Scrooge's name!*

Sobbing, he pledges to the ghost that *he will change his ways, to avoid this possible outcome!*

The closing verses of Psalm 126 express *joy-yet to come*:

5a

⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev.

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

⁶ He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow,

will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.

If the *joy producing acts of God* are characteristic of *our past as God's people*, they are also characteristic of *our future as God's people*.

What we have known of him *in the past* will be *our experience of him in the future*. Joy is nurtured by *anticipation of what is yet to come!*

Psalm 126 uses *two images* for this hope in *joy yet-to-come*.

The *first* is the anticipation of *seasonal rain returning* restoring the barren Negeb desert *into life*.

For most of the year this *vast desert to the south of Israel* is baked dry under the sun, but *when rain falls on it*, the desert *bursts into colour* with *glorious desert flowers*.

Our lives *are like that- drought stricken* for a season- then suddenly, bursting into colour by *God's amazing grace!*

The *second image* of joy yet-to-come is a *horticultural one*, and which should appeal to many of you.

It's the image of *going out to do the hard work of sowing seed* in an empty paddock, then *waiting for the seed to grow*, then finally *returning with arms fully loaded with the harvested crop!*

What the Psalm is communicating with this *sowing and harvesting imagery* is that all *suffering, all pain, all emptiness, all disappointment* is like *seed*.

Sow it *in God* and *he will*, as surely as the *harvest* comes after the *planting*, return a *crop of joy!*

Whoever wrote Psalm 126 was *no stranger to pain and suffering*. He knew *firsthand* what it meant to *sow in tears*.

One of the most *remarkable things* Christians learn as we *pilgrimage toward God*, is that *laughing in joy* does not *exclude weeping in sorrow*.

A common but *futile strategy* for *achieving joy* is trying to *eliminate things that hurt us*,
and *getting rid of pain by numbing our nerves*,
and *eradicating anxiety by removing risks*,
and *abolishing disappointment by depersonalising relationships*.
And then *trying to alleviate the boredom by buying joy* in the form of
vacations and entertainment.

According to Psalm 126 the sacred practice of joyfulness *doesn't involve any of that!*

Enjoyment, is *not an escape from boredom* but a *plunge of faith into God's exciting work* he has for us.
Although this kind of work often *involves pain and suffering*,
joy comes because *God knows how to wipe away tears*,
and in his *resurrection work*, creates the *smile of new life!*

You see joy is *not something we work up*,
but is *what God gives to us!*

It's the delight that *all things are working together for good to those who love God*.
This kind of joy is the *overflow of remembering joy-past; being filled with joy-present; and anticipating joy-future*,
all of which comes from God!

Zechariah the priest filled with the Holy Spirit said these prophetic words about his new born son John.

"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."

It's a *great example* of someone anticipating *joy-yet to come!*

But you don't have to be a *prophet or a priest* to *anticipate joy yet-to-come!*

Three weeks ago our son *Hayden married Georgia Clark*.

The wedding was held on a *farm overlooking the spectacular Matataa coastline* on the very same spot that many years earlier, *Georgia's grand parents* had been married.

As we lined up for photos afterwards, the gusty wind blew our hair sideways and ruffled our clothes *reminding me of our wedding*,
on windy day in Hawera.
A joyful memory for me, not only of our *wedding day*
but of the *joy God has brought into my life through Raewyn!*

But then as I looked around at the wedding guests,
I realised there were several family members *absent*,
because they had *died*.

I *remembered my Dad* who would've been standing by my Mum,
I *remembered Raewyn's Dad* who would've been standing beside her Mum,
And I remembered *my sisters eldest son* who would've been standing beside his Mum.

Yet God in each instance of sorrow God has gotten us through and has *restored our joy*.

That's joy-past!

As I stood watching Georgia and her bridesmaids one of whom was my beautiful daughter Ashley- walking down the aisle - I had tears of joy in my eyes and running down my cheeks, because God had brought Hayden and Georgia together and they were about to become husband and wife.

That's joy-present!

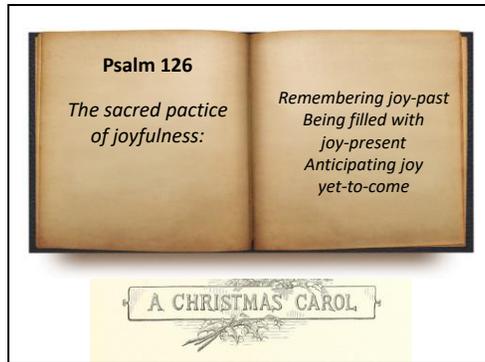
And then as I listened to their vows made before God to love and care for each other whether in happy times or sad. I hoped for a great future for them together living their lives for the Lord

That's joy yet-to-come!

So what happened to Ebenezer Scrooge?

Scrooge awakens on Christmas morning with joy and love in his heart. He spends the day with Fred's family and anonymously sends a prize turkey to the Cratchit home for Christmas dinner. The following day, he gives Cratchit a raise and becomes like another father to Tiny Tim. A changed man, Scrooge now treats everyone with kindness, generosity, and compassion, and now *embodies the spirit of Christmas joy!*

6



Psalm 126 teaches us the *sacred practice of joyfulness* which involves:
remembering joy-past, being filled with joy-present, and anticipating joy-yet-to-come.

It's the practice of *remembering and experiencing and anticipating* God's joyful activity in our lives as he *accompanies us* through happy and sad times, 'til we *arrive home*,
exuberant with armloads of blessing from the Lord!