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## *The Climb of Your Life: The Triumph* Psalm 126

We have a big day coming in two weeks. Jubilee Sunday, one service, 10:00am. It will be one of the best church parties we've ever thrown. 50 years ago exactly on that day, Chapel Hill United Presbyterian Church was founded. This year is, as the Bible calls it, our Year of Jubilee. Every 50 years, all debts were forgiven, all land was returned to its original owners, all slaves were freed. It was intended to be a giant re-set button for Jewish society.

Most of you are well aware of our Jubilee. But this year is also the anniversary of one of the most significant moments in our nation's history. It occurred on January 1, 1863... 150 years ago this year exactly. Do you remember? On that day President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. This act freed about 3.1 million human beings. For the first time, it made the emancipation of slaves an explicit goal of the war.

Decades later, former slaves were interviewed about this moment in their lives. A man named Wallace Quarterman, said this about the one who broke the news of emancipation to him: *"And he call me and told me to run down in the field and tell Peter to turn the people loose, that the Yankee coming. And so I run down in the field and, and whooped and holler...he done told them Mr. Gaggles said turn the people loose because the Yankee coming."*

Tempie Cummins said this: *"Mother was workin' in the house... She say she used to hide in the chimney corner and listen to what the white folks say. When freedom was 'clared, master wouldn' tell 'em, but mother she hear him tellin' missus that the slaves was free but they didn' know it and he's not gonna tell 'em till he makes another crop or two. When mother hear that, she say she slip out the chimney corner and crack her heels together four times and shouts, 'I's free, I's free.' Then she runs to the field, 'gainst marster's will and tol' all the other slaves and they quit work."*

As I read these accounts and others, I realized the news seemed like a fairy tale to them. After spending their whole life in bondage... the idea that they were suddenly free was like a dream... an incredible mix of joy, disbelief, incredulity. But it was true; 3.1 million human beings were suddenly free.

We may never understand that sense of joy... of euphoria... but our psalmist did. His people did. As we continue in our journey through the Psalms of Ascent, songs that Jews sang as they made their hard pilgrimage back to Jerusalem from exile... we turn now to the most joy-filled book in the Old Testament. But watch carefully... it is a very interesting mix of great joy and deep sorrow.

On July 18, 1995, after a nine-hour climb from Camp Muir that started at midnight, Rich and Tom and I followed our Sherpa to the top of Mt. Rainier. I don't know if I had ever felt such a sense of personal accomplishment. I was exhausted, but I was almost giddy with joy. I wanted to share the news so I took out a newfangled contraption called a "cellular telephone" and called my wife, Cyndi. Guess what? She wasn't home. I got the answering machine! "Yeah... hi honey. I'm just calling from the top of Mt. Rainier. I was hoping to share with you one of the greatest accomplishments of my life! But I guess I'll talk to you later!"

That's the emotion in this psalm. The word "joy" appears four times... more than any other chapter in the Bible. Even more than Philippians, Paul's little joy-filled letter. But the joy in this psalm was not over something they had accomplished; they were jubilant because of what God had accomplished. He had set them free! He had brought the exiles back to Zion. After 70 years of captivity in Babylon, God had delivered them. He had released them from bondage and returned them home. It felt like a joy-filled fairy tale.

Unless you've served time in prison and been released, you might find it hard to relate to this psalm. But if you think that, it's only because you have forgotten or never really understood how God set you free from your own bondage. One of the struggles of American Christians is this: we really do not understand how desperately we needed emancipating. We think of Jesus as a helpful example of how to live a good life. If we follow his teachings and emulate his ways it will make us better people. And that's what it means to be a disciple of Jesus: to be more like him... to be a better person by trying harder.

I spoke with a man this week who knows he needs to turn his life in a different direction. But everything he said was about how much harder he has to try. His struggle for sobriety, his failed marriage, his attempts at being a great dad... if he just tries harder, if he just learns from his past he will do better the next time.

It's really admirable, his desire to be a better man and better husband and better father. The problem is if he depends only upon his own effort he is doomed! Why? Because, he is not a free man. He is a slave. He is in bondage in the same way that every one of us in this room has been in bondage. As surely as Wallace and Tempie were born into captivity and lived under the yoke of their harsh master, so too were we born into captivity. What is the name of our master? Sin! Every single human being is born into the captivity of sin. Paul, in Romans 6, says it four times: We are "slaves to sin."

Some of us are more aware of our chains than others. My new friend comes from a difficult, broken family. He has struggled with alcohol and drugs for much of his life, something passed down from his parents. He doesn't need any convincing that he was in captivity. And thanks be to God, the more we talked the more he realized he needed saving... that it wasn't enough to just try harder. In fact, at one point in our conversation he blurted out, "I know Jesus has saved me. He's the only one who could do that!"

Exactly. But some of us, who are more refined in our sin, don't realize how spectacular was Christ's salvation for us, too. We are like house slaves. We are more domesticated in our sin—more refined, more clever—but the bottom line is, we are still a slave, we still need saving. Someone needs to rescue us and set us free. Do you get that?

When we get that—when we realize what God has done for us in Christ... how his death on the cross has set us free—then we discover that the psalmist is not just talking about Jews from 3,000 years ago. He is speaking prophetically to us, too! We were like exiles trapped in our own sin, and God, to our surprise, set us free! He sent the Great Emancipator to accomplish what we could not accomplish. And when we really get it, we should be the ones giddy with joy... who feel like we are living in a dream world!

When the Church really lives out its freedom the world notices. It can't help but notice. Did you see it in verse two? "Then it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.'" Another translation of "nations" is "heathen." In other words, what God did to emancipate his people was so obvious and so spectacular that, though the outsiders didn't even believe in Yahweh, they could not help but speak well of Him. Pagan non-believers gave glory to God because they could not deny His work in the lives of His people.

In fact, the testimony of the unbelievers was so powerful that the people took it up as their own song of praise. <sup>3</sup>"The Lord has done great things for us." Do you see that? It's almost like they saw themselves better through the eyes of outsiders. The pagans said, "The Lord has done great things for them." And Israel heard their words and said to themselves, "You know what... they are right! The Lord has done great things for us, by golly!"

Sometimes, we see better through the eyes of outsiders what God is doing in our midst. A woman who just went through our last membership class came up to me and said, "I still can't join the church because I cannot yet say these vows about Jesus with integrity." I said, "Then you shouldn't join yet. But will you continue your journey with us? We are not afraid of your questions." "Oh, I certainly will," she said. "Your people are incredible. My friends tell me that I am different since I began hanging around your people." Praise the Lord!

One of things I hope and believe has been true over our fifty years is that outsiders—those who would not call themselves Christians or church-goers—have had to admit that God, if there is a God, has done something significant and good in Gig Harbor through the people of Chapel Hill Church. After watching us, they have had to admit, “The Lord has done great things for them.” And by the way, that’s how outsiders become insiders! May it be so for the next fifty years, too!

So, the first half of this psalm is a glorious declaration of freedom and joy, thanks to the work of the Lord. But look at the second half. It’s a prayer, and it is an interesting mingling of joy and sorrow. “Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.”

So, what gives? I thought God set them free? I thought God brought them home? Hasn’t he already restored their fortunes? What do they have to cry about? Well, if you’ve been in exile for seventy years, even if you have been emancipated and brought back home, what are you going to discover? Fields overgrown with weeds; city walls torn down and carried away, and wild criminals threatening your chance at prosperity.

Just imagine the farmer who returns to his family fields for the first time in decades, ready to sow his seed crop. He is joyful for his freedom, but he is grieved by what he sees. He weeps and sows... weeps and sows... weeps and sows. He weeps over the land that used to be lush and beautiful and is now overrun with thorns. He weeps for the memory of what used to be. He weeps at the thought of lost opportunities. He weeps for his parents who died in captivity. It is a bittersweet experience. And so you have this powerful image of a farmer who fertilizes his crops with his own tears... weeps and sows, weeps and sows, weeps and sows.

Here we come face to face with the “Now” and “Not Yet” nature of our salvation. Many of the slaves who heard that Lincoln had set them free celebrated, and then went right back to work on the plantation. Some were told that they would have a share in the crop; they never did. They were swindled. One former slave named Joseph Holmes later said that it “took him ten or twelve years before he fully understood what his mistress meant when she told him he was free.” In many cases it was only when the Union soldiers arrived that the promised freedom became a reality for them. It was good news, bad news, good news. Good news: You have been declared free. Bad news: You are still on the plantation. Good news: Lincoln’s army is coming!

This is little different from what we experience as followers of Christ. And it is exactly as he predicted it would be. Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” His followers said, “Hallelujah!” And then they watched as their Messiah was murdered. Now, but Not Yet. On Calvary our Emancipation Proclamation was

delivered. But we continue to live in a not-yet-redeemed world full of thorns and chains. But one day, Jesus will return with his angelic hosts, the devil and his minions will be destroyed and all things will be made right. Good news: You have been declared free. Bad News: You are still live on the plantation. Good news: The King's army is coming!

In the meantime, then what do we do? How do we live in this in-between zone... between Now and Not Yet? How can we acquire the joy that feels like a fairy tale? Well, in our hard moments, we weep and sow! But when we weep—and all of us will weep—when the evil reality does not align with our declared freedom, when we weep our tears flow from eyes that are wide open, watching for God's deliverance. We weep and wait through pain that is bitter because we know the joy will be better! Because here's the truth of it: only when you have experienced pain can you really relish joy.

Augustine, one of the great fathers of the church, speaks to this: *"The victorious general marches home in triumph, but there would have been no victory if he had not fought, and the greater the danger in battle, the greater the joy of the triumph. Sailors are tossed in a storm which threatens to wreck their ship. They are terror-stricken at the thought of impending death, but when the sky clears and sea is calmed, their fear gives place to joy no less profound. ...It is always the case (he continues) that the greater the joy, the greater is the pain which precedes it."*

The friend that I spoke to this last week put it more simply, describing his own life and where he is now: "Only when you have had evil can you find real joy." One way to understand this verse is that despite our tears, one day we will reap a harvest of joy. Not yet. But soon! We can count on it. God promises it will be so. Great pain, great joy!

But there's another way to think about this, too. While we are still on the plantation—while we are living in the in-between times—we may weep, we may have pain, but we just keep sowing, anyhow. We may not feel like it. We may be discouraged or broken or heartsick. We may walk up and down the furrows of our lives with tears streaming down our cheeks, but we keep sowing because we believe that someday, these seeds, faithfully sown and watered with our tears, will reap a great harvest of joy. We may cry, but we will make our crying productive!

I have a friend who lost her husband. She gets up every morning and cries in the shower so that she will be ready to face the day and lead her children on to a hopeful future. There is nothing more to do... nothing better to do. Weep, sow and believe God for the harvest. You may weep tears of loneliness, but you sow seeds of purity. You may weep tears of addiction, but you sow sobriety. You may weep tears of poverty, but you sow generosity. You may weep tears of temptation, but you sow fidelity. You weep, but you sow and you believe God for his harvest of joy. Weeping and reaping!

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.

### **Sermon Questions**

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
  1. The Hebrew phrase in verse 1 and 4 can be translated as either "restore our fortunes" or "release the captives." Which interpretation do you think makes more sense for this psalm and why?
  2. The psalm is full of joy. Why? Particularly in part two, there is a powerful combination of sorrow and joy. Can you make sense of that?
  3. What does it mean to "sow in tears?" Can you think of a time in your life where you sowed in tears? Talk about that harvest.