

PSALM 126

INTRODUCTION TO PSALM 126

A Song of degrees

This psalm is generally thought to have been written by Ezra, or some good man returned from the Babylonish captivity, and on account of it: the inscription in the Syriac version of it, besides observing it to be a song of degrees or ascents, and without a name, is,

“it is said of Haggai and Zechariah, who came up out of Babylon with the captives; but spiritually; and it is an expectation of good things to come.”

It may have respect to redemption by the Messiah; and the conversion of the Jews in the latter day.

Ver. 1. *When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion*, etc.] Or returned the Jews from their captivity in Babylon; who are called Zion, from the city of David, built on Mount Zion, which was in Judea, and adjoined to Jerusalem, the metropolis of the kingdom; and because they were the godly who were concerned for Zion in a spiritual sense, or the church of God, and the interest of religion, whose spirits the Lord stirred up to come out of Babylon, upon the proclamation by Cyrus, when those that were more worldly and carnal stayed behind; as also because the chief mercy in returning the captives was the rebuilding the temple on Mount Zion, and the restoration of religious worship; which gave the religious captives in Babylon great concern, (¹³⁷Psalm 137:1-3). This deliverance of the captives, though it was by Cyrus as an instrument, yet it was the Lord's work; which he employed him in, and stirred him up to do, and therefore is ascribed to him. And though this is expressed in the past tense, yet it may be put for the future; and be considered as a prophecy of it, and which the following word seems to confirm; and especially the prayer, (¹²⁶Psalm 126:4); for the return of the captivity seems to require it should: and may not only literally respect the return of the captives in Babylon, but the conversion of the Jews in the latter day, and their deliverance from their present captivity; which is expressed sometimes by the Lord's bringing

again Zion, and returning the captivity of the Jews, and their being turned to the Lord, (^{<2818>}Isaiah 52:8 ^{<2818>}Jeremiah 30:3,18 ^{<4086>}2 Corinthians 3:16); and may be applied to spiritual and eternal redemption by Christ, of which the deliverance from Babylon was a type; and is sometimes expressed in the same language, (^{<3940>}Psalms 14:7 ^{<3822>}Jeremiah 31:22,23); and the people redeemed are often signified by Zion, and are by nature captives to sin, Satan, and the law; from whence they are redeemed by Christ, whose work alone it is, (^{<2317>}Isaiah 1:27 59:20);

we were like them that dream; or “shall be”^{f1763}; that is, as persons that know not whether they are asleep or awake; and whether what they see and enjoy is in reality or only a vision, as Peter’s deliverance from prison was to him, (^{<4423>}Acts 12:9); When the proclamation by Cyrus was first heard of by the Jews, and they had their liberty upon it, they could hardly tell whether it was a real thing or a vision, and could scarcely believe it for joy; it seemed too good news to be true, as the news of Joseph’s being alive was to Jacob, (^{<0456>}Genesis 45:26); and so the appearance of Christ, his resurrection, and redemption by him, were to the disciples, (^{<0241>}Luke 24:11,21,41). The Targum is,

“we were like the sick that are recovered;”

which sense the word has in (^{<8904>}Job 39:4 ^{<2386>}Isaiah 38:16); and will be the case of the Jews, when they are converted; who will be recovered out of the sick state and condition in which they now are, and have all their diseases healed, and sins forgiven; yea, their conversion will be as life from the dead, a resurrection of them from their graves, (^{<5115>}Romans 11:15) (^{<3571>}Ezekiel 37:11,12). The Septuagint, Vulgate Latin, Arabic, and Ethiopic versions, render it, “as those that are comforted”; and the Syriac version, “as those that rejoice”; each of the seasons mentioned being times of comfort and joy: Joseph Kimchi interprets it of the passing away and forgetfulness of affliction and trouble at the time of redemption, like a dream that flies away upon awaking.

Ver. 2. *Then was our mouth filled with laughter*, etc.] Who before mourned, and hung their harps on the willows, and could not sing the Lord’s song in a strange land; but now, as their hearts were filled, with joy, this was externally and visibly seen in their countenances, and expressed with their mouths and by outward gestures; it was so great, they could not contain it, to which respect is had, (^{<2350>}Isaiah 35:10). It may be rendered, “then shall our mouth be filled with laughter”^{f1764}; that is, when we awake,

says Arama; or rather when the captivity is returned, either in a literal or in a spiritual sense, both being matter of great joy: the Midrash says, this will be in the world to come, and not in this;

and our tongue with singing; the praises of God, and the songs of Zion;

then said they among the Heathen, the Lord hath done great things for them; it was taken notice of by the Chaldeans, among whom they had been captives, and by all the nations round about: and it was wonderful to them, that Cyrus, an Heathen prince, of his own motion and will, should at once, and without any price or reward, let them go, and send them into their own country to rebuild their temple; and with them the vessels of the Lord's house, that had been taken away by the king of Babylon; and order men to help them, with gold and silver, and goods and cattle, (^{4500E}Ezra 1:1-11). Likewise the conversion of the Jews, and the restoration of them to their own land in the latter day, will be observed by the Gentiles with wonder, and as the work of God, (^{265E}Ezekiel 36:35,36 37:21,28).

Ver. 3. *The Lord hath done great things for us*, etc.] These words are generally supposed to be the words of the Jews, taking up those of the Gentiles, and confirming them; acknowledging that the Lord had done great things for them indeed; which, had they not owned, they would have been exceeding ungrateful; had they been silent concerning them, the stones would have cried out, and the very Heathens condemned them. But I see not why they may not be thought to be the words of those among the Heathens continued; declaring that the great things done were not for the Jews only, but for them also; as the great redemption by Christ is of persons out of every tongue, people, and nation; for he is the propitiation, not for the Jews only, but for the sins of the whole world; and having this in view, thus they express themselves. The work of redemption is a great thing of itself; the produce of great wisdom; the effect of great love; procured at a great price, for great sinners, by a great Saviour; and is not only a deliverance from sin, Satan, and the law; but contains many great and glorious blessings in it, as justification, remission of sins, adoption, and eternal life;

[whereof] we are glad; that those great things are done without us, finished by the Redeemer himself; that they are so great and glorious, so rich and plenteous, so full and free, and suitable to us; and done for us sinners of the Gentiles, so unworthy of them, who are by nature children of wrath as others.

Ver. 4. *Turn again our captivity, O Lord,* etc.] This prayer for the return of the captivity shows that it was not as yet: though some think that this is a petition of those that were returned from captivity, for those of their brethren that stayed behind; who, enjoying the sweets of their liberty, pray for their brethren to come and share with them, that so the mercy and blessing might be completed. This may very well be considered as a petition; either for the coming of the Redeemer, and redemption by him from the captivity of sin and Satan, and the law; or for the conversion of the Jews in the latter day. Either of which would be

as the streams in the south; as great and wonderful a work as causing rivers to be in dry places, and as grateful and acceptable as brooks and streams of water in southern countries: or like streams produced by the south wind, which brings rain, and melts the snow from the hills; which, running into the valleys, cause flows of water in great abundance: and so may denote the abundance of those that should share in the blessings of conversion, redemption, and salvation; as well as the wonderfulness and acceptableness of them; (see ²³⁴¹⁸Isaiah 41:18 43:19 32:2). The Targum seems to understand it of the change made upon them, like that made on the earth by those; paraphrasing the words,

“as the land is turned, when streams of water flow out in a time of drought.”

The allusion seems to be to Judea, lying south of Babylon; and to the southern parts of Judea, which were dry; (see ⁶⁶⁵⁹Joshua 15:19).

Ver. 5. *They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.*] A proverbial expression, encouraging faith in prayer put up for the return of the captivity, whether in a literal or spiritual sense. Praying or seeking the Lord is sowing in righteousness, (²⁸⁰²Hosea 10:12); which is often attended with tears and weeping; the issue of them is not always seen soon: these, like seed, lie buried under the clods, but take effect and will rise up in due time: saints should wait patiently for a return of them, as the husbandman for the fruits of the earth; in due time they will produce a large crop of blessings, a plentiful harvest, which the praying saint will reap with joy; as those that prayed and waited for the redemption in Jerusalem; and as those that pray for the latter day glory, the conversion of the Jews, the fulness of the Gentiles, and the destruction of antichrist; the souls under the altar have been sowing in tears, but before long they will reap in joy, (⁶¹¹⁰Revelation 6:9 19:1,2). It may be applied to the state and condition of saints in

common in this life; now is their sowing time, and careful they should be that they sow not to the flesh, but to the spirit: and a sorrowful time it is, on account of inward corruptions, Satan's temptations, divine desertions, and the imperfection of their services; but before long they will reap life everlasting, reap in joy, and be in the fulness of it; now they weep, then they shall rejoice; now they mourn, then they shall be comforted.

Ver. 6. *He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed,* etc.]

Which he sows in tears. This is but a repetition and confirmation of what is before expressed in different words; and may be applied, as to a praying saint, so to a faithful preacher of the word. The word is the precious seed which he bears, which he takes out of the granaries of the Scriptures; and carries from place to place, and scatters and sows, (^{<BIB>}Luke 8:11); compared to seed, because of its meanness in the eyes of those that know it not; because of its generative virtue and increase, which it has from God, and which, unless sown in the earth, produces no fruit: and it is called "precious seed", because either bought at a great price, when grain is dear; or because it usually is the choicest wheat that is the sowing seed; and so may denote the preciousness and value of the Gospel, dispensed by Christ's faithful ministers, which is called a sowing of spiritual things, (^{<BIB>}1 Corinthians 9:11); which should be done plentifully and constantly, and with the same sort of seed or doctrine, and which requires art and skill; and is often performed weeping or with tears, because of their own insufficiency, through fear of success, and through want of it; and because of the badness of the ground, the hardness of men's hearts they have to do with. The allusion seems to be to a poor husbandman, that has got but little seed to sow, and this bought at a dear price; and which he buries under the clods, and fears it will rise no more; and weeps as he sows, because of the badness of the weather, or of the soil, doubting of success. Aben Ezra, by the words rendered "precious seed", or, as they may be, "a draught of seed"^{f1765}, understands the vessel in which the sower carries his seed, the seed basket, from whence he draws and takes out the seed, and scatters it; (see ^{<BIB>}Amos 9:13); so the Targum,

"bearing a tray of sowing corn;"

shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves [with him]; the seed he has been to and fro in sowing springs up under a divine blessing; and, beyond his expectation and fears, produces a large and plentiful crop; which he reaps, and returns home, not with his arms full of

sheaves only, but with his cart laden with them: so a faithful minister, sooner or later, is blessed with converts, who will be his joy and crown of rejoicing another day: (see ~~4:35~~ John 4:35,38) (~~5:19~~ 1 Thessalonians 2:19,20).