

# Finding Joy in Christmas

Psalm 126:1-6  
December 15, 2019

Jesus was born as a baby who would grow into a man. A man who would die to save us from our sin problem. THIS is why we find SUCH GREAT JOY at Christmas: our Savior has come! Psalm 126 helps us to think about this joy. Please open your Bible there now. As you open your Bible, you may notice that Psalm 126 is in two sections, verses 1-3 and verses 4-6.<sup>1</sup> The first three verses reflect back on the former joy of God's people. The last three verses are a prayer, pleading with the Lord to restore their joy in the future.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the CURRENT situation, in Psalm 126, is one in which joy was lacking.<sup>3</sup> Rather than expressing their current joy, God's people were reflecting back on their former joy and then also calling out for God to restore the joy that they had once experienced.

Notice how these first three verses reflect back: "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. 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." The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy." One of the ways that we'll find joy in Christmas is when we...

**1. ...reflect back on our former joy.** This makes me think about this week's ennealogy. On Thursday, the ennealogy will be complete. What's an ennealogy you ask? It's "a set of nine works of art that are connected, and that can be seen either as a single work or as nine individual works."<sup>4</sup> Some of you already know that I'm talking about the Star Wars saga. The first movie in this ennealogy was released back in 1977. I was 7 years old at the time. So, it's no surprise that I grew up playing with action figures (NOT dolls) like Dark Vader and Luke Skywalker. My childhood friend, Kevin, owned his very own millennium falcon. Well... a toy replica of it at least. It was SO cool! We had so many great times staging fights and various battle scenes. It was especially fun to throw in secondary characters like the bounty hunter, Boba Fett. After all, HE... had a real grappling hook! SO cool! I really enjoyed all of the Star Wars movies as a child and right on up through my young adult years. And now, even as a full-grown man, I must admit that the little boy in me comes out again. I am really looking forward to the 9<sup>th</sup> and final movie in the Stars Wars ennealogy, "The Rise of Skywalker." I've already bought my ticket. I am SO excited!

Now, Star Wars may not be your thing, but just about everyone probably has SOMETHING from their childhood that still fills them with that special childhood joy. Something that transforms you back into that time of wide-eyed wonderous joy. It might be toy trains. It might be baking Christmas goodies. For some of us it's trimming the tree while we listen to Christmas music (and dance around the kitchen!). It might be making a snowman or having a snowball fight. What is it for you?<sup>5</sup>

Reflecting back on our childhood joy is one way that we can remind ourselves of the kind of joy that Christmas should bring. The birth of Jesus is a wondrous reason for joy every year. So, ask yourself this question: Does the little kid in me still find wide-eyed wondrous joy at the thought of baby Jesus? At the thought of the Christmas story, with the angels and the shepherds and all the rest of it? Sometimes reliving our childhood joy is just what we need. A reminder, a reflection back on what simple, unadulterated joy feels like. Unencumbered by the worries and distractions of daily life.

Of course, we all realize that there are things that can make it difficult to find joy in Christmas. Whether it's the loss of a loved one or financial struggles or health struggles, or whatever other burden that may be weighing us down. And yet, despite these realities, there is still something to be

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<sup>1</sup> See discussion in Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008 reprint, pp. 474-476.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 126 is called a "Psalm of Ascent." This means that it was one of the songs that God's people would sing as they were traveling to Jerusalem which stood on top of a hill. They were on their journey up, up, up to the temple where they would worship God. So it's very appropriate for us to read Psalm 126 in our worship service although Bemidji isn't Jerusalem and our church isn't really on much of a hill. Even so, many of us travel to church in order to worship God. So worship Him as you read Psalm 126.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars aren't certain whether this current situation in Psalm 126 was connected with famine, siege, captivity and release, plague, or something else. See discussion in Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008 reprint, pp. 474-475.

<sup>4</sup> Google definition. Pronounced "eh KNEEL uh gee"

<sup>5</sup> And these are all good things. God has given us an amazing world filled with imagination and creativity and so many incredible things to enjoy. Consider 1 Timothy 6:17b and Ecclesiastes 2:24-25, 5:18-20.

said for reflecting on the joy we find in Christmas. To be clear, the joy we find in Christmas needs to be about something far greater than Star Wars or Christmas cookies or opening Christmas presents. Setting aside all of these lesser things, Christmas is one of the primary times in the Christian calendar, when we are intended to experience GREAT JOY as we worship God.

This Christmas, let's ask God to remind us of all the former joy we have experienced in Him. To remember all of the times that He has rescued us and forgiven us. How over and over again He has blessed us and faithfully provided for us. To marvel at His amazing grace and patience with us. To remember how He has faithfully restored us to Himself again and again. There have been SO many times in the past when the Lord has done things that have given us reason for joy. In the words of verse 2, times when our mouths were filled with laughter. When our tongues sang with joy. When the people all around us exclaimed, "The LORD has done great things for you!" Let's remember those days when we were filled with joy.<sup>6</sup> As we reflect back on our former joy, let's allow it to help us find joy this Christmas.<sup>7</sup>

After reflecting back on their former joy, the Psalm writer then switches to prayer. He asks God to restore their fortunes, to return the songs of joy that they currently just didn't have the heart to sing.<sup>8</sup> Psalm 126, verses 4-6 are a prayer, "Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them." Another way that we'll find joy in Christmas is when we...

**2. ...ask God to restore our joy.** Verses 4-6 give us two vivid pictures of restoration. The first picture of restoration is a reference to the Negev<sup>9</sup> in verse 4. The word "Negev" actually means dry or parched.<sup>10</sup> Think Arizona. The Negev is an arid region on the south end of the Israelite territory.<sup>11</sup> When the winter rains would come, these dry stream beds would swell with water and there was a resurgence of new life all around. Flowers would pop up and the animals would drink deeply. One could even say that joy was restored to these dry areas. This kind of transformation was sudden and intense, even startling! This lifegiving, nurturing overflow of water turns the dry desert wasteland into an abundant oasis. It's not a mirage, it's the real thing. God's blessing is quickly and suddenly restored.

The second picture of restoration is a reference to sowing and reaping in verses 5-6. While the first picture restores hope quickly, with a torrential downpour from heaven itself, the next picture is much more SLOOOW moving.<sup>12</sup> In fact, it's not only slow, it is tearful. As the farmers are faithfully carrying out their seed to sow, they go out with weeping. They sow with tears. The contrast between these two word pictures, illustrates that sometimes restoration doesn't happen quickly. Sometimes our joy is restored slowly, over time. After faithful, patient, hard work and a long period of waiting. Although we may *prefer* to have it rush in like a flood, that's not always the way restoration works.<sup>13</sup> This hints toward the necessity of faithfulness and trust on our part. Diligently doing the work today that will eventually lead to the harvest later. Even through the tears though, there is anticipation of the joy that will eventually come. Verse 5 is a DECLARATION of hope, hope that one day, they WILL reap with songs of joy. One day, songs of joy WILL return!<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The opposite of this is to have an attitude toward God that asks, "what have You done for me lately?"

<sup>7</sup> And then, let's respond with thankful hearts. Bringing God the honor and glory that He is due. Let's bring Him our prayers of thanksgiving, and our offerings and our songs of praise.

<sup>8</sup> Consider Job 42:10.

<sup>9</sup> Sounds like "NEH gev"

<sup>10</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008 reprint, p. 475.

<sup>11</sup> "Dry stream beds, caused by periods of drought, would become flowing streams again after a substantial rain shower." *The Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1161.

<sup>12</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2008 reprint, p. 475.

<sup>13</sup> Sometimes God quickly restores our souls. But other times, it's a long, slow process. It's the difference between installing a brand new, fully-charged battery or hooking up our old, weary battery to a trickle charger. Consistently and steadily, it restores us to full power over time.

<sup>14</sup> They'll be carrying sheaves with them. Sheaves are bundles of grain. The fruit of their labors, blessed by God with steady sunshine and rain. Some of you who are farmers can imagine the smell of the fresh cut grain. You can picture its bright golden yellow color. The rest of us may be better served by picturing large bags of groceries, overflowing with food. Although we go out weeping, we return with the trunk of our car filled with supplies and groceries. These sheaves demonstrate the Lord's kindness and provision. In answer to their prayer in verse 4, "Restore our fortunes, LORD," we see Him answer according to His perfectly sovereign timing.

Some of us probably have a deep longing for our former joy to be restored.<sup>15</sup> It's been a long time coming. We feel like we've been sowing in tears for far too long now. We've got the weeping covered; we're ready for the return with songs of joy! Some of us, may find it easy to relate to that dry streambed in the Negev. We are longing for God to send a torrential downpour to water our dry and weary souls. Please God, send Your rain! We may feel like our joy is only a distant and fading memory from our past. We may not even know how we lost our joy in the first place, or where it went. All that we know, is that we are striving to keep on sowing the seeds of faith, to keep living out an obedient life. To keep trusting God, while we wait for a great harvest of joy.<sup>16</sup>

Here's some good news: our God is a god of restoration. He has a steady track record of restoring joy to His people. He has done it SO many other times in the past, and He is certainly more than capable of restoring joy again. In fact, God is not only CAPABLE of restoring joy, He WANTS to! He is a God who desires for His people to have joy. Christmas is a great reminder of this. In fact, one of the main reasons that God sent Jesus to earth on that first Christmas, was to bring us joy.<sup>17</sup> Luke 2:10 declares, "But the angel said to them (the shepherds), "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people." We serve a God who wants there to be joy for all people. He gives every one of us a reason to find great joy in Christmas!<sup>18</sup>

The Psalmist declares that when the LORD restored their fortunes, "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." (Psalm 126:2) This verse reveals two main effects of the LORD's restoration: "(1) the people were filled with joy, and (2) the testimony of the restoration reached the nations."<sup>19</sup>

So here are two key reasons why as Christ-followers we need to keep finding our joy in Christmas. Not only does it fill our own hearts with joy, but it's also a witness to the watching world.

The Good News about Jesus coming to earth, is a cause for great celebration!<sup>20</sup> We should party! So let's make sure that we find great joy this Christmas! And let's celebrate that joy, so that the watching world wonders what all the commotion is about!

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji  
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<sup>15</sup> Read about God's gracious restoration in Psalm 107. It highlights how God rescues us from our folly. How He restores us and reverses our fortunes, even after we have rebelled or gone astray.

<sup>16</sup> Here's a good reason to keep trusting God, even when our joy seems far away. Earlier I mentioned that when those torrential rains flood down the dry streambeds, it causes flowers to bloom. Think about this: the flowers were already there. The seeds had been planted long ago. Even though they'd grown dormant and gone underground, they were never actually gone. Sometimes our joy is that way, just under the surface. Just waiting for God to send His refreshing, restorative rains. It isn't that our faith has died, but it may have dried up a little. We are just one good rain shower away from new growth and life-nurturing connection with our God.

<sup>17</sup> Here is why we can be certain of this. Take a look at Elizabeth's words to Mary, the mother of Jesus, in Luke 1:44, "As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb (John the Baptist) leaped for joy." The Greek word for "joy" here can be defined as "a piercing exclamation." (ἀγαλλίασις, Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 4). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.) In other words, even though John the Baptist was still in his mother's womb, he wanted to SHOUT for joy. Only, for obvious reasons, he couldn't. All he could do was leap! John the Baptist was literally jumping for joy! John's response leads right into Mary's response in Luke 1:46-47, "And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." (Consider 1 Samuel 1:1-10) That word "rejoice" is directly tied to joy. To rejoice means "to be exceedingly joyful, exult, be glad, overjoyed." (ἀγαλλιῶ, Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 4). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.) Luke 1:58 goes on to tell us, "Her (Mary's) neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy."

<sup>18</sup> And even when the realities of life or our own poor choices begin to drain away our feelings of joy, God comes along and restores our joy, again and again.

<sup>19</sup> *The Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1161.

<sup>20</sup> So, let's allow our memories of past joy, to help us hang in there if we feel like we are currently in a drought. Let's keep waiting on God and keep sowing seeds of faith, in anticipation of our joy being renewed.