

Living with a Long-Term Ache: Psalm 126

Ken Wilson 11.10.19

Series on Helpful-Healing Texts. Last week—our connection with loved ones who have died. Today: Living with a Long-Term Ache.

We're a sadness avoidance society: sadness often regarded thru pathology lens, how to fix it. Jewish understanding reflected in Scripture has a healthier relationship to sadness.

Ps. 126 has helped me. A year ago, missing my old friend Phyllis Tickle; started a pre-dinner prayer routine, using a prayer book she gave me, office of None [explain] NONE ... more days than not for the past year. [2 versions on handout, and end of these notes]

**When the Lord delivered Zion from bondage
it seemed like a dream.**

**Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
on our lips there were songs.**

**The heathens themselves said: "What marvels
the Lord worked for them!"**

**What marvels the Lord worked for us!
Indeed we were glad.**

**Deliver us, O Lord, from our bondage
as streams in dry land.**

**Those who are sowing in tears
will sing when they reap.**

**They go out, they go out, full of tears,
carrying seed for the sowing:
they come back, they come back, full of song
carrying their sheaves.**

When you spend time with a text--over many days/ weeks/ months, it can exert a SLOW-FIZZ effect. This prepare the way for a DEEP-DIVE effect (perception shift/experience something new)

SLOW FIZZ is about the feel of the thing: Something in the feel of Ps. 126 has appealed to me for a long time, even as aspects of the Psalm ambiguous, didn't quite make sense.

Poetry/lyrics, all about emotion—just enough meaning to carry emotion. OK BOOMER:
Knights in White Satin, Moody Blues—

*Nights in white satin, never reaching the end,
Letters I've written, never meaning to send.
Beauty I'd always missed with these eyes before.
Just what the truth is, I can't say anymore.*

YouTube: loved a girl in college, and I told her how I felt. Our lips touched and the passion was incredible. That very night she died at the hand of a drunk driver ... Please, if you love someone, tell them. I have bipolar problems and this song always calms me more down than my medicine ever did this song is the best medicine I've ever had

FEELING of this Ps 126: a sadness ache someone carries for a long time, alongside a hope of future happiness ... next door to the feeling of sorrow is the glad song on its way.

We all have different sadness aches we realize aren't going away soon: A relationship rupture; a loved ones illness; living under oppression owing to race or gender or sexual orientation ... loving someone who lives with that.

Sometimes we are so afraid of a sadness, we do counter-productive cover-up things that deplete us more than sadness would. Plus, it's still there. So we have to learn to live with the sadness while getting on with our lives, not being afraid of it.

Research: one of healthy things we do with sadness is listen to music that **connects to the sadness.** The music doesn't make us wallow in it so much as carries the sadness with us. And stimulates feelings of hope/meaning/purpose/company alongside sadness.

During SLOW FIZZ use of the Ps 126, most every day: able to **name** my own long-term sadness aches and experience them as a shared feeling with this Psalm, along with the hope that is woven into the Psalm, alongside the sadness, like a silver thread in a fabric.

For me the DEEP DIVE occurred when I **interrogated** an ambiguity/ confusion in text: *What's happening when?* Future-present-past are all mixed up in this Psalm.

Compare first stanza in each translation (vs. 1-2)

R. Alter: *Verb tenses (what indicates past/present/ future are fluid in biblical poetry. There is disagreement as to whether the verbs here and in what follows are to be understood as past or future.*

Is this a resolution that has already happened? They **were** in exile in Babylon, sowing in tears, and **now** they have been delivered, are back home in Jerusalem singing glad songs? Or are they **anticipating** a **future** return from exile? Robert Alter says they are in exile, dreaming of a future return ... as it has already happened.

Stick with me as I go into Hidden Brain mode for a minute. Memory, they say, is a function of what we would call the imagination. The part of the brain that **imagines**, is same part that **remembers** things.

Memory has a lot of power to comfort/console us. When we are physically away from someone we love, we can always call them to mind (remember them) and feel connected.

With **Gary Rosenberg**. I mentioned late wife Nancy, and Gary's face lit up: "Oh my God, Ken, Nancy Rozell—she was gorgeous! Out of my league! How did you score her? So smart and tuned in—Nancy would walk into the room with such energy!"

Such a comforting memory he shared with me. Memories can do that. And memory is a function of the imagination.

When we **dream** of a **future desired outcome** – you’re in a job you don’t enjoy and dream of one you will enjoy more, say—that dream is happening in realm of imagination too, same as memory.

So just as a memory can comfort/console us, a dream of a positive future outcome can do same. We could think of it as a **“Memory of the future”** in terms of how it affects us in present.

So you have Jewish exiles in Babylon—they’ve lost their homeland, deported North to Babylon, traumatized, living in a Jewish ghetto: **struggling, surviving, remembering**, but also **dreaming**, of a return to their homeland.

When the Lord delivered [past tense] **Zion from bondage**
it seemed like a dream [describing a dream of a future outcome]
Then was our mouth filled with laughter [though it’s a dream of the future, it feels so real, almost like a memory]
on our lips there were songs.

The heathens themselves said: “What marvels
the Lord worked for them!” [what a vindication when your enemies have to admit: wow! God is working for you!]
What marvels the Lord worked for us! [owning it as if it has already happened]
Indeed we were glad.

Then they slip into the present and speak from it

Deliver us, O Lord, from our bondage
as streams in dry land.

[image: wadi—a gulch-valley that dries up in summer months, all the wildflowers die, but their seeds are drought resistant. Finally rains come in October and the dried-out gulch now is a stream of water, and the seeds bloom, and it full of wildflowers again. [Planet Earth II has some great time-lapse images of this happening in Sahara region of Africa]

Sometimes joy-happiness is like one of those drought resistant seeds buried deep in our hearts—you think yourself incapable of joy again—and then there’s a shift in season, and it springs up.

**Those who are sowing in tears
will sing when they reap.**

What if we thought of our present sadnesses as a time when we are sowing in tears for a future time when we will sing as we reap? Our sadnesses would be more bearable, less frightening.

Now comes intensification through repetition...

**They go out, they go out, full of tears,
carrying seed for the sowing:
they come back, they come back, full of song
carrying their sheaves.**

What praying this Psalm has done for me:

First, helped me embrace fact I have a sadness ache that isn’t going away any time soon.

It’s not just personal/family issues, it’s state of things in our country. Ta-Nehisi Coates *Between the World and Me* [letter to his son] Granddaughter going to live in a world that is strained badly by climate change.

Happiness/sadness aren’t all-on or all-off states (as the lights are either on or off); happiness and sadness co-mingle.

This Psalm has helped me embrace that part of my experience. No feeling lasts forever. I feel happy, then I feel sad. Sometimes I feel both at the same time. Normal human experience.

Second, Psalm has helped me be on alert for good memories so I can treasure them. 4 of my 6 kids live far away, don't see 'em very much. Nearly every day during my pre-dinner praying, I name each child, hold them in memory. Connecting through imagination-memory.

Third, The Psalm has helped me be bold enough to let myself dream of a future when my sadness aches are resolved, or the sting has faded, or they are replaced by other joys.

QUIET REFLECTION

Pick a friend/loved one who is going through some difficult period, in the middle of a sadness. Take some time to call them to mind, picture them, sitting in a familiar setting, say. Imagine a ray of light, shining on middle of their body, slowly spreads through whole body, forms an orb of light that completely surrounds them.

*Weeping may tarry for the night,
but joy comes with the morning*

Psalm 126 Song of the Returned Exiles: A Pilgrimage Song

When the Lord delivered Zion from bondage
it seemed like a dream.

Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
on our lips there were songs.

The heathens themselves said: "What marvels
the Lord worked for them!"

What marvels the Lord worked for us!
Indeed we were glad.

Deliver us, O Lord, from our bondage
as streams in dry land.

Those who are sowing in tears
will sing when they reap.

They go out, they go out, full of tears,
carrying seed for the sowing:
they come back, they come back, full of song
carrying their sheaves.

Translation from *The Psalms, An Inclusive Language Version Based on the Grail*
Translation from the Hebrew

Psalm 126 A song of ascents.

When the Lord restores Zion's fortunes,
we should be like dreamers.
Then will our mouth fill with laughter
and our tongue with glad song.
Then will they say in the nations:
"Great things has the Lord done with these."
Great things has the Lord done with us.
We will rejoice.

Restore, O Lord, our fortunes
like freshets in the Negeb.
They who sow in tears
in glad song will reap.
He walks along and weeps,
the bearer of the seed bag.
He will surely come in with glad song
bearing his sheaves.

From the *Robert Alter Translation*