

Psalm 126

The Pilgrim Song

Songs of Pilgrimage (Prescript)

Song of Ascent may be also translated as Song of Pilgrimage.

There is an entire series of Psalms that are Pilgrim Psalms. (120-134)

These are songs we sing on our journey, the experiences of our journey.

And why does one sing?

To pass the time, to keep spirits up, to remember the destination.

This is the one of the most poignant of these songs.

There are two movements to this song.

A Joy Born of Grief (v.1-3)

Like those who dreamed – unreal, incredible, unbelievable.

The exile has no hope, they are doomed, they are lost.

No past and no future.

But this sudden reversal – this restoration of fortune.

This is the act of God.

We receive beauty for ashes.

And this is the lesson – the chorus of this song:

There is no greater Joy than the Joy born of grief.

Such joy is always a surprise.

And so it reminds me of C.S. Lewis

Who wrote a book entitled, "Surprised by Joy."

It is the autobiography of his early life and his conversion to Christianity.

(Chief among those who convinced him to follow Jesus was JRR Tolkien.)

The word "Joy" used by Lewis was his best rendition of a deep feeling.

"Sehnsucht" in German, meaning a deep yearning, CS – "Inconsolable Longing"

Yes, this is the joy of this Psalm – the intermingling of dreadful memory and present satisfaction that stings to be felt.

It is the song that wells up from the very pit of the soul.

The Hebrew word is rinna (root rannan) actually a cry both of joy and anguish.

A Hope Born of Longing (v.4)

But the song turns from past Sehnsucht.

There have been marvellous rescues in that past memory of God's people.

But we are in the now.
Here the cycle of fortunes have changed.
Is it exile again? Sickness, death?
The request is for restoration yet again.
Streams in the Negev – the desert.

Good times don't last.
What we take joy in now will fade.
Every flower, every sunny day...
All our loved ones will pass as shall we from those who love us.
So what shall we say?
That God is not for us?
That he has abandoned us?
Or does that indelible Joy yet remain?
The flickering flame carried by memory?
The longing. The Longing.
That you recall so that you can smile in the darkness
At the darkness.
You see the joy is tempered by pain and pain by joy.
It is the Sehnsucht, the rinna, the cry.

CS Lewis married an American woman who was a divorcee with 2 sons.
He signed a civil marriage contract of convenience so she could stay in England.
It was then discovered that she had bone cancer.
In time, Lewis changed – he came to love her and she, he.
So he married her in a Christian ceremony while she lay in her hospital bed.
She died four years later.
In his grief, Lewis wrote his thoughts and struggles into four notebooks.
He published them as a book entitled "A Grief Observed."
But it was too close to him and he used a pen-name.
In fact, some of his friend recommended the book to him for his grief.
It was not until after his death that his authorship was revealed.
And the name of the woman he dared to love and lose?
Joy.

And Us

Now you are prepared to understand the final verses.
Our pilgrim song engages simultaneously with deep suffering and deep Joy.

It is sustained by a longing that transcends the past, present and future.
It keeps us from wallowing in self-pity and doubt
and at the same time saves us from a fantasy that denies reality.

It does not dull the pain or ecstasy.

In fact, it allows us to be acutely alive.

To live with passion.

To live like Jesus.

For he knowingly and willingly suffered humiliation, physical torture and death

With the full knowledge of this paradox in full light of hope and joy.

And what did he do as he hung on the cross?

He sang. Psalm 22 & Psalm 31. Songs of suffering and of hope.

We are called to follow Jesus.

To be like him.

This is the paradox what it means to carry the cross and yet the burden is light.

Eugene Peterson writes: Joy is not a requirement in discipleship it is the consequence of discipleship.

It's about how you carry the cross and why.

William Nicholson who wrote, Shadowlands, a screenplay that tells the story of CS Lewis & Joy Davidson has the Character of Lewis say in the closing of the film:

"Why love if losing hurts so much? I have no answers any more. Only the life I have lived. Twice in that life I've been given the choice: as a boy and as a man. The boy chose safety, the man chooses suffering. The pain now is part of the happiness then. That's the deal."

The pain is part of the happiness then.

That is the heart of this psalm, this pilgrim song.

May we learn to sing it well as we journey together.