**Already and Not Yet**

Let’s look in on a house that is getting ready for a family gathering. It may be Christmas or Thanksgiving or a special anniversary. The house is company-clean. The decorations are up. The food cooking in the kitchen smells wonderful. Now the family begins to arrive. Here is brother along with his wife and children. Hugs all around and happy smiles. Next come the old uncle and aunt. Everyone agrees they look better than ever even though their hair is white and some of their joints are artificial. The house is filled with happiness—but not quite. Sister is still not here. She has just called to say that she is caught in traffic. The roads are icy and a semi-truck has slid across the median blocking all lanes on both sides of the highway. Will she make it in time for dinner? Will she come at all?

This family is living in the already and not yet. Already the feast is prepared. Already some of the guests have gathered, but some are not yet here. Because of the “not yet,” there is tension in the house. The happiness of the family is mixed with concern. When sister finds a back road and arrives just as the family is just sitting down to eat, then happiness is complete.

This a metaphor of the Christian life. We live between the “Already” and the “Not Yet”. Already we have many blessings and gifts of God, but the family feast will not be complete until we all arrive at the marriage supper of the Lamb. When 50,000 Israelites came back to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity, they too found themselves living between the “Already” and the “Not Yet.”

Last week, we looked at the anguish and anger of Israel at the beginning of the Babylonian captivity. Their misery and their cry for vengeance is vividly portrayed in Psalm 137. Psalm 126 describes their joy and excitement at the return from captivity. This joy, however, was muted by the fact that the returnees were a small percentage of the exiles. More had stayed behind than had come home. The returnees were happy to be back, but they did not feel complete. They looked with hope to a brighter day ahead. They were living between the “Already” and the “Not Yet.” Like them we live between the “Already and Not Yet.” What is our condition in this in-between state?

**1. We have the *triumph* of a present salvation**

*When the LORD brought back the captive ones of Zion, We were like those who dream. 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter And our tongue with joyful shouting; Then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." 3 The LORD has done great things for us; We are glad* (**Psalm 126:1-3**).

The Israelites had been captives in Babylon. Now they were free. From our birth until Jesus saves us, we are captives of sin and Satan. In Christ we are free. When the Lord delivers captives sometimes–

**A. The redeemed are *dazed***

We see that here in our text. When Cyrus gave permission for the Jews to return home, they were so happy, that they felt as if they must be dreaming. They were dazed; they were overcome; they were stunned by the sudden reverse of their fortunes. Then when they finally got to Jerusalem, even though the city was a heap of rubble, they wept and laughed for joy.

Sometimes we see this when people have been for a long time under the dominion of sin and Satan. Jesus saves them, and their attitudes and actions may change dramatically. I have heard them say, “I couldn’t believe I said that. I couldn’t believe that I didn’t get angry. God must have changed me.” They are overcome. They are almost stunned by what is happening in their own hearts.

When the Lord delivers captives –

**B. The Lord is *praised***

The exiles who returned from Babylon give all the praise and honor to the Lord: *The Lord has done great things for us. We are glad* (v. 3). It is quite clear to them that this great shift in their fortunes has come from the Lord. It was not the result of their petitions to the king or their political influence.

*The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes* (**Proverbs 21:1**).

God reversed the policies of the Assyrians and Babylonians. Both of those world empires dragged captive peoples away from their native lands and settled them elsewhere. Then along came Cyrus, the Persian king who conquered Babylon. He allowed the Jews to go back home. A hundred and fifty years before Cyrus rose to power, God spoke through Isaiah the prophet,

*It is I who says of Cyrus, “He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.” And he declares of Jerusalem, “She will be built,” And of the temple, “Your foundation will be laid”* (**Isaiah 44:28**).

This was God’s doing, so the people in Psalm 126 give God the praise. In the same way, none of us is strong enough to break the grip of sin and Satan over our lives. We cannot deliver ourselves. Jesus described Satan as the strong man who guards his possessions until one stronger than he comes along to plunder his house (Matthew 12:25-29). Jesus alone is stronger than Satan. Jesus alone is able to deliver us. We give praise to Him alone for rescuing us. We are on a long journey through this world to go to the Promised Land, and Jesus is the one who delivered us from captivity and who is leading us along the way.

When the Lord delivers captives –

**C. The pagans are *amazed***

*Then they said among the nations, The Lord has done great things for them* (v.2). God intends for His name to be glorified among the nations, and one of the ways He does that is by protecting and preserving His chosen people Israel. He is the one who brought them back from Babylon. He is the one who re-established the nation of Israel in 1948.

God also intends to bring glory to Himself by His work in your life. He intends for you to be a special, redeemed people who cause others to be surprised.

*For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. 4 In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you* (**1 Peter 4:3-4**).

The exiles who returned from Babylon were living between the “Already” and the “Not Yet.” So are we. Like them,

* We have the triumph of a present salvation.

**2. We have the *tension* of a partial salvation**

By “partial salvation,” I refer to the fact that our salvation is not yet complete. We have not yet entered into our full inheritance as sons and daughters of God. Although I am not looking at it this morning, Romans 8 clearly describes the tension of our partial salvation. We see that truth in a picture form in Psalm 126.

*Restore our captivity, O LORD, As the streams in the South* (**Psalm 126:4**).

At first this seems like a strange prayer. They had already been restored from captivity. Yes, that is true, but many more Israelites were still living in a distant, pagan land. In addition, when the Jews came back into their own country, there was a lot of hard work to be done. They had to reclaim their lands. They had to rebuild the temple. They had to rebuild their houses. They had to rebuild the city. Much had to be done before their captivity was finally restored. So the Psalm uses a metaphor that we can aptly apply to ourselves.

**A. We live amidst *barren sands***

In this passage, the South with a capital S refers to the desert wilderness of southern Palestine called the Negev. It is a barren place of sand and rocks and canyons. After the joyful shouting was over, the returned captives looked at Jerusalem and said, *This place is a wasteland like the southern desert.*

Brothers and sisters, when the Lord saves us, our mouths are filled with joyful laughter, but very often we go through periods when we feel as if we are living amidst barren sands. We are saved; we are headed to heaven; we have the indwelling Holy Spirit; we have many good gifts from the Lord already, but we are undergoing great trials. The spiritual desert is a very common and normal part of our experience as believers. In desert times of life–

**B. We long for *blessed streams***

*Restore our captivity, O Lord, as the streams in the South* (v. 4).

The stream beds in the southern desert of Palestine are normally dry. Like the arroyos in the American south west, they are subject to flash flooding. The sky may be clear above the dry river bed, but when a heavy rain falls in the distant mountains, a wall of water may come rushing down the canyon with destructive force. Motorists frequently underestimate the depth and destructive power of a flooded roadway. More than half of the fatalities attributed to flash floods are people swept away in vehicles when trying to cross flooded intersections.

The psalm writer didn’t drive a car, and he wasn’t thinking about drowning in a flood. What he wanted was for the Lord to make a sudden change in his dry, barren surroundings. He wanted life and peace and joy and prosperity to return to Jerusalem along with a great multitude of fellow Jews.

As we live between the “Already” and the “Not Yet” we often long for refreshing streams to bring back the green vegetation along the banks of our desert canyons.

In this “Already” but “Not Yet” phase of our lives,

* We have the triumph of a present salvation
* We have the tension of a partial salvation

**3. We have the *tears* of a progressive salvation**

By progressive salvation, I mean that we are working out what our salvation means as we progress through life. We are walking on the basis of what we already have and moving toward what God has for us in the future. In order to see the progress we desire, we may have to spend ourselves and our resources with tears.

*Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting. 6 He who goes to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed, Shall indeed come again with a shout of joy, bringing his sheaves with him* (**Psalm 126:5-6**).

The Jews who returned realized that they had a great deal of work ahead of them before their nation became whole again. The psalm compares this work to a farmer sowing precools seed in his field.

**A. The sowing is marked by *pains***

The best commentary on these verses comes from an issue of *Leadership Magazine* a number of years ago. Some of you have heard it before.

I grew up in a preacher’s home in the little towns of Minnesota and South Dakota. I spent most of my free time with deacons’ kids on John Deere tractors, International Harvesters, Cases, Minneapolis—Molines. I learned how to drill oats, plant corn, and cultivate. And never once did I see a deacon behave like Psalm 126 says. What was there to weep about at sowing time?

I was always perplexed by this Scripture... until I went to the Sahel, that vast stretch of savanna more than four thousand miles wide just under the Sahara Desert, with a climate much like the Bible lands. In the Sahel, all the moisture comes in a four-month period: May, June, July, and August. After that, not a drop of rain falls for eight months. The ground cracks from dryness, and so do your hands and feet. The winds off the Sahara pick up the dust and throw it thousands of feet into the air. It then comes slowly drifting across West Africa as a fine grit. It gets in your mouth. It gets inside your watch and stops it. It gets inside your refrigerator (if you have one).

The year’s food, of course, must all be grown in four months. People grow sorghum or milo in fields not larger than this sanctuary. Their only tools are the strength of their backs and a short-handled hoe. No Massey-Fergusons here; the average annual income is between eighty-five and one-hundred dollars per person.

October and November...these are beautiful months. The granaries are full—the harvest has come. People sing and dance. They eat two meals a day—one about ten in the morning, after they’ve been to the field awhile, and the other just after sundown. The sorghum is ground between two stones to make flour and then a mush with the consistency of yesterday’s Cream of Wheat. The sticky mush is eaten hot; they roll it into little balls between their fingers, drop it into a bit of sauce and then pop it into their mouths. The meal lies heavy on their stomachs so they can sleep.

December comes, and the granaries start to recede. Many families omit the morning meal. Certainly, by January not one family in fifty is still eating two meals a day.

By February, the evening meal diminishes. People feel the clutch of hunger once again. The meal shrinks even more during March, and children succumb to sickness. You don’t stay well on half a meal a day.

April is the month that haunts my memory. The African dusk is quiet, you see—no jet engines, no traffic noises to break the stillness. The dust filters down through the air, and sounds carry for long distances. April is the month you hear the babies crying in the twilight...from the village over here, from the village over there. Their mothers’ milk is now stopped.

Parents go at this time of year to the bush country, where they scrape bark from certain trees. They dig up roots as well, collect leaves, and grind it all together to make a thin gruel. They may pawn a chair, a cooking pot, or bicycle tires in order to buy a little more grain from those wealthy enough to have some remaining, but most often the days are passed with only an evening cup of gruel.

Then, inevitably, it happens. A six-or-seven-year-old boy comes running to his father one day with sudden excitement. “Daddy! Daddy! We’ve got grain!” he shouts.

“Son, you know we haven’t had grain for weeks.”

“Yes, we have!” the boy insists. “Out in the hut where we keep the goats—there’s a leather sack hanging up on the wall—I reached up and put my hand down in there—Daddy, there’s grain in there! Give it to Mommy so she can make flour, and tonight our tummies can sleep!”

“Son, we can’t do that,” he softly explains. “That’s next year’s seed grain. It’s the only thing between us and starvation. We’re waiting for the rains, and then we must use it.”

The rains finally arrive in May, and when they do, the young boy watches as his father takes the sack from the wall...and does the most unreasonable thing imaginable. Instead of feeding his desperately weakened family, he goes to the field and—I’ve seen it—with tears streaming down his face, he takes the precious seed and throws it away. He scatters it in the dirt! Why? Because he believes in the harvest.

The seed is his; he owns it. He can do anything with it he wants. The act of sowing it hurts so much that he cries. But as the African pastors say when they preach on Psalm 126, “Brothers and sisters, this is God’s law of the harvest. Don’t expect to rejoice later on unless you have been willing to sow in tears.”

What might this painful, tearful sowing mean for you and me? For some it might mean giving sacrificially to the spread of the gospel. Some Christians are content with giving God a tip, like tipping the bell boy who carries your suitcases up to your hotel room. Others give so generously that they deprive themselves of some legitimate pleasure they might have enjoyed.

Sometimes sowing with tears means giving until it hurts, but I think that painful, tearful sowing more often means becoming so involved in the lives of others that you bear their sins and their sorrows on your own heart. You weep with them. You weep for them. You pray for them and you seek to help them. Sometimes you succeed. Sometimes you fail, but the pressure of caring for them is often very great.

Tearful sowing like that will not be empty and vain.

**B. The harvest is assured by *promises***

Notice what the psalm says.

*Those who sow in tears* ***shall reap with joyful shouting****. 6 He who goes to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed,* ***Shall indeed come again with a shout of joy****, bringing his sheaves with him* (**Psalm 126:5-6**).

Farmers take a risk when they plant their seed. Adverse weather or various pests may deprive them of a crop, but work done in Jesus name and in the power of the Spirit will not be forgotten by God.

*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. 8 For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. 9 Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. 10 So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith* (**Galatians 6:7-10**).

*Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord* (**1 Corinthians 15:58**).

Tired believer, your toil is not in vain in the Lord. Discouraged believer, do not lose heart. You will reap a good, God-glorifying harvest if you do not faint.

**Concluding Application**

*Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning* (**Psalm 30:5**). Therefore –

**A. *Praise* God by faith**

It is easy to praise God when everything is going well. It is easy to praise God when the dark night is over and the Sun of righteousness has risen with healing in His wings. God wants you and me to praise Him when we have a horrible day. He wants us to praise Him when the night stretches on and on and dawn seems as far off as ever. How can we do that? We can only do it by faith. Because we trust God and we know that our Father has good things in store for us, we praise Him for what we do not yet see. He has given us Jesus to save us. Will He not with Jesus also freely give us all the things we need for life and godliness? Will He not with Jesus give us heaven, and earth, and all the other things He has promised Jesus as His inheritance? We are joint-heirs with Jesus. That confidence enables us to praise God when we cannot see in the dark.

**B. *Persevere* with hope**

Because God’s promises assure us of a harvest, we can persevere. We can endure. We can keep on sowing good seed because we have hope.

*Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. 7 Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. 8 “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. 9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts. 10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, And do not return there without watering the earth And making it bear and sprout, And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; 11 So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. 12 For you will go out with joy And be led forth with peace; The mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you, And all the trees of the field will clap their hands”* (**Isaiah 55:6-12**).

We sow kindness. We sow generosity. We sow prayers. We sow helpfulness. Above all, we must sow the word of God. Kindness, generosity, prayers, and helpfulness are not enough. We must give people the word of God. Sometimes they will listen. Sometimes they will shove God’s word away. But always God’s word will accomplish what He intends. Sometimes it will bring judgment. Sometimes it will bring salvation. Sometimes it will bring correction or healing. Always it will succeed in the thing whereunto He has sent it.

We live between the “Already” and the “Not Yet.” We who believe in Jesus already have the forgiveness of sins, a righteous standing before God, adoption into the family of God, and the indwelling Spirit of God. Because we have these things, we have the certainty of inheriting the things we do not yet see. Praise God from whom all blessings flow, and don’t give up. Keep sowing the seed of righteousness and God’s word, perhaps even with tears. Living between the “Already” and the “Not Yet” is wonderful, exciting place to be. Let’s make the most of it.

**For additional study or family discussion**

Did the Lord speak to you today about Himself and His ways? Did He show you a duty you need to perform or a promise you need to claim? What was either encouraging or challenging in the sermon?

1. Romans 5:1-11

What aspects of our salvation do we already experience?

How does God’s present work in our lives increase our confidence in what is to come?

What part does the Holy Spirit play in stimulating hope for the future? (See also Romans 8:9-25.)

2. Isaiah 55:6-12.

Why should we keep on sowing the word of God even if we do not see immediate results?

3. Why is it good to praise God *before* we see the answer to our prayers?

(Note: Jeremiah’s prediction of a 70-year captivity is recorded in Jeremiah 25:11-12 and Jeremiah 29:10. Daniel recognized that the time was about up in Daniel 9:2.)