



Turning God’s Blessings into a Witness

<p>Scripture</p> <p>Psalm 126</p>	<p>Main Point</p> <p>Our lives serve as a testimony for God’s heart for the lost.</p>
<p>Memory Verse: Psalm 126:3</p> <p>The Lord had done great things for us; we were joyful.</p>	<p>Supplies Needed</p> <p>Index cards White board or poster Memory verse printout</p>

Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Middle School Activity

As students arrive, pass out index cards and ask students to list the 5 coolest things that have happened to them since they have been in middle school. Encourage them to think about things that happen to them instead of things they have done themselves. After an appropriate amount of time, allow the students to share their experiences.

- What are some of the ways you have responded when these events have happened to you? (get excited, share it with others, write it down, etc.)
- What are some “cool things” that have happened in your life spiritually? (salvation, forgiveness, love, etc.)
- How does God want you to respond in light of these things?

High School Activity

As students arrive, write on a white board or poster, “What will be remembered?” Ask the students to brainstorm what events in the world (that have happened in their lives) that will be remembered in history? Create a list on the board.

- How did you determine if the events you suggested would be remembered in history?
- What makes world events significant?

- How is God involved in the events of our world?
- Why does it seem that God allows certain evil events to happen?

Main Point

We will see in our study of Psalm 126 that our lives serve as a testimony of God's heart for the lost.

- What does it mean that our lives are a testimony? What is a testimony?
- How should our lives reflect what God is doing in the world?
- What characteristics should the lost see in a Christian?
- How can we mirror God's heart for the lost?

Transition

More often than not, we tend to think these kinds of events occur, not as a result of God's intervention, but because of political, social, and/or economic situations. While we may not be able to say God intervened in these specific events, we can point to events in history in which God acted to bring about totally surprising changes. Today's study is the reaction of the psalmist to a specific intervention by God in the life of Israel that resulted in praise and thanksgiving to God. Through it we are reminded of God's heart for the lost.

Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what God's Word says and means for us. Use the commentary to teach through each of the passages.

Hebrew worshipers traveled to Jerusalem for worship at certain times each year. As they traveled, they looked forward to a special worship experience. Their anticipation led them to sing songs of praise and petition. The songs were pilgrim songs or songs of ascents. "Ascent" refers to "going up." Because Jerusalem was over 2,500 feet above sea level on a mountain, travel to Jerusalem meant literally ascending to reach the city. Psalm 126 is one song within a collection of 15 of these "songs of ascent," (Ps. 120-134). Songs of ascent encourage God's people to trust Him and to depend on Him (Ps. 127). These psalms also encourage His people to petition Him for help and mercy (Ps. 120; 123). These poems remind worshipers of God's activity on behalf of His people in the past (Ps. 124). Psalm 126 remembered what God had done in the past and sought His continuing restoration.

Read & Explain: Psalm 126:1-3

- God had warned His people that they would be exiled from their land if they did not turn from their sins (Jer. 7:3,13-15). How were God's mercy and judgment illustrated in the Israelites' captivity?
- Which words and phrases in verses 1-3 show the people's response to their restoration?
- Which words and phrases show the people's recognition and appreciation of God's intervention?

Have you ever been truly surprised by news of something wonderful that God did? Were you almost afraid to believe that it was true? The poet of Psalm 126 encourages us to embrace and celebrate the reality of the great things God does for us and to entreat Him to continue His work of restoration in our lives. The psalmist remembered being wonderfully surprised by God. The poet's community had been surprised when God brought back the captive ones.

- Share about a recent time when you have seen God's grace and mercy in action. (As the leader, be prepared to give an illustration of this in your life.)
- What impact did that event have on your relationship with Him?
- What impact did it have on your witness to non-Christians in your life?

The joy of renewed fellowship with God's people in the land God had promised to Israel was wonderful, but something even more important occurred as the released captives celebrated. The joy of God's people was so great that even other nations noticed what God had done. When the nations heard what the Lord had done for His people, even they recognized His hand in the restoration.

Read & Explain: Psalm 126:4-6

- How do verses 5-6 describe the experience of the Israelites?
- Can you think of any examples of "tearful sowing" either from Scripture or personal experience? (Jesus' crucifixion, broken family, loss of loved one, sickness)
- What about examples of "joyful harvesting"? (Jesus' resurrection, restored relationships, blessings in church family)

Tearful sowing and joyful harvesting may be connected simply by the idea that hard work can produce a good or bountiful result. Reading verse 5 with that thought in mind, we recognize that the difficult demands of the present are important if we are to experience the future that we want and that God wants for us.

God works with us to put to death our sin and selfishness. He does that in order to produce a joyful harvest of godliness. You may also have heard this verse applied to witnessing. The idea is that tearful concern for others as we plant the seed of the gospel in their minds and hearts will in time bring the joyful harvest of a life given to God.

- What do these verses reveal about God's heart for the lost?

Because God's worshipers knew what God had done in the past, they were encouraged to believe that God would act again. God helped them to see and to trust that the painful present was not the end. Indeed, the present hardship could set the stage for a joyful future.

God restores His people because He loves them. He also restores His people so the message of His love, power, and purpose will go out to others with authority. God still turns dry places into rivers of blessing. He still rewards the demanding, difficult task of sowing seed with a joyful harvest. Are we doing our part to spread the good news of the gospel?

Memory Verse

Review previous memory verses:

- Matthew 9:37-38: Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is abundant, but the workers are few. Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest.”

Invest group time in helping the students learning this week’s memory verse. Have the memory verse printouts ready to place on the board. (As an alternative, write the verse on the white board and be prepared to selectively remove words.) As the leader, you will be setting a good example if you do this work with them.

Help students learn this week’s memory verse through the following steps:

1. Have students find a partner and practice reading the verse to one another out loud.
2. Bring the group back together and have them read in unison and out loud the memory verse as it is placed on the board.
3. Replace it with the second sheet that has a few words omitted and have the students recite the verse in unison and out loud together.
4. Replace it with the third sheet that has many words omitted and have the students recite the verse in unison and out loud together.
5. Remove the verse from view, and have the students recite the verse in unison and out loud together. Help whenever needed.

Encourage the students to recite the verse each morning and pray that God will use this verse to remind them that our lives serve as a testimony for God’s heart for the lost.

Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

As the group reflects on the study today, ask the following questions:

- The psalmist reflected on God’s work in his life as a testimony to His grace. How can sharing your story and what Christ has done in your life bring glory to God?
- Who is someone with which you would be willing to share this story this week?
- What is something you can do to reflect God’s heart of compassion for the lost?

Pray

Pray that the lives of group members will lead other people to say, “The Lord has done great things for them.” Pray that your lives would show others God’s compassionate heart for the lost.

Commentary

Psalm 126

The poet of Psalm 126 remembered what God had done in the past and sought His continuing restoration. Psalm 126 was probably written and used in worship after God brought His people back from captivity, or exile, in Babylon in the sixth century B.C. Although that may well be the historical setting during which God inspired the message of this poem, the words of the psalm remain relevant for God's people in every generation.

126:1. "Restored the fortunes" refers to the return of the Babylonian exiles to Jerusalem as an event that had already taken place (84:6; 85:1). The appeal in 126:4 to "restore our fortunes" is difficult since the verb assumes that the action has not yet occurred. While verse 1 refers to the return of Israel, verse 4 may refer to the restoration of prosperity and peace in the land (122:6-7). Like "those who dream" refers to those who eagerly anticipate the future.

The term "exile" is applied to the events in which inhabitants of the northern kingdom of Israel were taken into captivity by the Assyrians (eighth century B.C) and in which inhabitants of the southern kingdom of Judah were carried captive by the Babylonians (sixth century B.C.). The poet of Psalm 126 most likely referred to the Babylonian exile. The practice of deporting captives into other lands was generally viewed as a harsh measure utilized only after other methods had failed.

Among the earliest captives carried into Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar was Daniel. Daniel was transported from Judah to Babylon in approximately 605 B.C. A major deportation occurred around 597 B.C. when the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem during the reign of King Jehoiachin of Judah (see 2 Kings 24:8-12). Ezekiel, along with others, was taken captive to Babylon at that time. About 10 years later, God again used Babylon to punish Judah's sin. The 587-586 B.C. punishment was more severe as the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, burned the temple, and deported additional people.

The Jews remained in exile until the Persians conquered Babylon. In 538 B.C. Cyrus of Persia decreed that the Jews could return to their land and rebuild their temple. The exile was a traumatic time for God's people, but it was a time of growth, too. Through these events God helped His people understand that He was sovereign over all the world and over history.

126:2. God's intervention on Israel's behalf testifies to His omnipotence and superiority (96:3; 113:4; Isa 61:9; 66:19; Jer 31:10; Ezek 36:23).

126:4-6. In verse one, Yahweh restores Zion as the political and religious center, but verses 4-6 focus on the productivity of the land. The watercourses in the Negev refer to seasonal streams or wadis, which occasionally blessed the land with a sudden overabundance of water. Along with sudden bounty like a wadi, God also made use of methodical processes and hard labor like agriculture. The person who remains humble before God will surely enjoy God's blessings in the land.