



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

**Sermon for Lent 5**

April 3, 2022

## Sowing in Tears

### Psalm 126

*<sup>1</sup> When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. <sup>2</sup> Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.” <sup>3</sup> The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad.*

*<sup>4</sup> Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb! <sup>5</sup> Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! <sup>6</sup> He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.*

When Babylon, under King Nebuchadnezzar, conquered Judah, the southern kingdom, it was a pretty bloody affair. Many thousands were slaughtered and those who survived were carted off to Babylon as slaves. There was no hope they would ever return.

They had no hope because they had forgotten God and forsaken the one true Faith. For a time, they had even lost the Book of the Law. I mean, really *lost* it; they didn't know where it was! It seems strangely ironic that the very thing that brought on their captivity was forsaking the one thing that could have given them hope in it. The Lord allowed this captivity because they had despised His Word, *and* they were without hope because they had forgotten that same Word.

You could say that, in a way, we, too, have been taken into captivity – a spiritual captivity. We've been invaded by a Babylon of sorts. This Babylon is not a political one, not even a real nation in our day, but it's comprised of those who deny the truth of God's Word, those who defame truth in general, those who preach false doctrine, those who do violence to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And there are many casualties. Souls have been crushed by lies; their faith has been ripped from them by those who say there is no God. Minds have been darkened by false teaching. Many who have not yet succumbed are nonetheless held captive. Our unborn children are being sacrificed to the god of convenience, our elderly, together with the mentally and physically challenged, are being sacrificed to the gods of selfishness and laziness, our school children are being taught that God did not create their world, neither did He create them; both they and their world are “accidents of nature.” Many who claim to worship our God deny the truth of His Word and the importance of protecting it from those who would twist it and manipulate it for their own designs.

Have we, too, lost our hope? Have we forgotten God? Have we misplaced the very thing that can give us hope? Are we any different, essentially, than those in Judah who were taken into captivity in Babylon? Is there, indeed, any hope for us?



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Looking at our Biblical model, we're delighted to note that there is hope for us, after all. The Babylonian exiles eventually returned to their homeland. During their exile, God had already begun to restore them. The Book of the Law was proclaimed once again, respect for the Sabbath Day was revived, people heard again, for the first time in ages, the truth proclaimed in purity. Their faith was restored, and then, so too, was their nation. They were filled with joy, as our text says, "like those who dream," with laughter and singing. The Lord had done great things for them. They knew it; everyone knew it. It was a truly joyous occasion.

But, they didn't all come back at once, these exiles; they came back in waves. And those returning early prayed for those who were left. They prayed, as does the psalmist, "Bring back our captives, O Lord, like streams in the Negev." Now, this is an interesting metaphor. You see, the Negev, is a region in southern Judah, which, during the summer, is dry and barren. In fact, that's what its name means: dry and barren. In the winter, however, the region is riddled with little streams and brooks, due to the winter rains. The psalmist, therefore, prays for the "winter rains," the shower of the Lord's blessed deliverance. The restoration wasn't complete, so their celebration was tempered with a longing for the Lord to bring the remaining captives home.

We, too, have a peculiar admixture of celebration and longing. In a few short weeks we will be rejoicing with the arrival of Easter – Resurrection Sunday. But we're not there yet. We're still in a season of contemplation and rumination over our contributions to the sufferings of Christ. And, at a time of God's choosing, we know that we will either depart this life to go to Him, or He will return to us to gather us all together to take us to our heavenly home. But, again, we're not there yet. We still live in a world full of challenges for the child of God and the Church.

One of the great challenges for the Church, which has been with us from the very beginning, is the task of taking Christ to the uttermost parts of the earth. It's a daunting task fraught with peril. We've been carrying the gospel to the four corners of the globe for more than 2,000 years, and yet there are still those who've never heard the truth. Even in our own land, where the truth has been proclaimed for longer than we've been a nation, there are still those who don't know it. What complicates the mission is that there are those who, within and in the name of the Church, have taken the truth captive through distortion of the gospel. Some deny that the Bible is God's Word, some say God's truth in is there somewhere, but you can never be sure where, and some go so far as to say the Bible is merely a record of what God's people thought His truth was at the time. The age old question, posed to Jesus by Pontius Pilate, reflects a debate – not over what is true, but over the existence of truth itself. This has led to the woeful situation that in our day, there are some – I should say many – even within our own families, who couldn't care less about what is true or false or whether they're on a path to heaven or hell. They're slaves to their own passions, but they don't care. True freedom means nothing to them anymore.



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Back in the days when there were circuses, they used to tie an elephant's leg to a stake to keep it from wandering off. Now, you might wonder how such a small thing could stop a 5 ton elephant. Well, it can't. But, when the elephant is young, it will. So, from very young, these elephants are tied to stakes so that they learn the futility of trying to break free. Even when they're strong enough to do so, their training tells them that they can't. Many people in our world have been trained to think they're stuck in whatever circumstances they find themselves. We're taught from early on the futility of trying to buck the system. We think we're ruled by our emotions. We believe our sins are insurmountable. We're convinced that our lot in life is what it must be, and there's no changing it.

Brothers and sisters, I'm here to tell you that this is simply not true. God did not send His Son to this earth so that you would be destined to wallow in the mud. Jesus gave His life so that you would not have to be a victim of temptation. And He sent the Holy Spirit to take up residence in you and empower you resist the devil and his wily ways. You are not a slave. You are a child of God and a co-heir with Christ, who conquered sin, death, and the devil. We may often feel like exiles in this world, and at times we may well be, but we don't have to live like we're in bondage. Paul and Silas in Acts 16 were bound in chains, beaten, and thrown into prison. But there they were, in the middle of the night, praying and singing hymns for the joy that Christ had given them. Peter and John in Acts 5 rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ. We may all one day find ourselves in chains, but that does not make us any less the conquerors we are in Christ. We walk by faith, beloved, not by sight. You can't trust your eyes. Believe what God tells you in His Word. You are a conqueror! You are set free from bondage to sin by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And whom the Son sets free is free indeed!

This is the message we need to take to those who are still exiles, that they may be brought home. For the truest exile is the in which we are separated from God by unbelief. To bring the captives home, we must, first of all, *reclaim* the Word of God for ourselves, and then *proclaim* it in its truth and purity. We cannot allow the devil to steal it from us. We cannot allow the world to silence it; the Word of God must be heard – in our churches, in our society, and in our homes. We cannot continue to be sheepish about the truth. If there's anything to be ashamed of, it's not our belief in the Bible, it's our reluctance to stand up for that belief. God's Word, proclaimed in truth and purity, is the very thing that the Lord uses to restore exiles. When the Word is heard and believed, exiles are brought home.

Of course, we must remember: The work of restoration is the Lord's. He restores; we don't. This is not to say we don't have a role to play. We do. Ours is the task of sowing the seed. Sowing is hard work. We're never sure what sort of soil the seed will land on. We may rarely see that seed take root and grow. We have a tendency to be overly focused on results. We can't allow this. The results don't belong to us, they belong to God. But, we're sent out with the seed, all the same. Many tears will be shed in sowing



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of the seed, but that's our task, and sow it we will. And, after all the tears have been shed, after all the seed has been sown, the Lord will bring the harvest. And it will be like a dream come true.

Let us pray: Fill our mouths, O Lord, with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy. Bring back our captives, like streams in the desert. O Lord, let us say among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for us! The Lord has done great things and we are glad!" In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen