Psalm 126 *Engaging with Joy, Part 3: Live Joy*

***Wisdom from the Roman World***Cyprian of Carthage was born into a wealthy family in a nice part of the Roman Empire in the third century after Jesus. As a member of the aristocracy, he lived a life of privilege—enjoying garden parties, wine and philosophy while most of the rest of the world scrambled just to find a meal for that day. But, in spite of his life of luxury—or maybe because of it—he found his life to be empty and without meaning. Then, at the age of 35, he gave his life to Jesus. He gave away much of his wealth to the poor, became a priest, and was eventually chosen as Bishop of Carthage.

He was Bishop at a time when persecution of Christians was common, and he shepherded the church through two particularly severe persecutions. In the year 258, just 13 years after his conversion, he was put to death for his loyalty to Jesus.

Despite the short time in which he was a believer, Cyprian was a prolific writer and left behind a number of works that have survived to this day. One of his major works was called *Ad Donatum*, in which he imagines having a conversation with a friend from his former life in which he explains why he became a Christian. A later biographer summarized the letter like this:

Donatus, this is a cheerful world indeed as I see it from my fair garden, under the shadow of my vines. But if I could ascend some high mountain, and look out over the wide lands, you know very well what I should see: brigands on the highways, pirates on the seas, armies fighting, cities burning, in the amphitheaters men murdered to please applauding crowds, selfishness and cruelty and misery and despair under all roofs. **It is a bad world Donatus, an incredibly bad world**. But I have discovered in the midst of it a company of quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any of the pleasures of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not: they are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians,--and I am one of them.

When I hear Cyprian’s story, I’m struck by how his description of the world could be used to describe the world today. It’s a bad world, an incredibly bad world. Cyprian imagined climbing a high mountain and observing brigands on the highway, pirates on the sea, armies fighting, cities burning. If we could do the same, I imagine we would see much the same sorts of things: the rich taking advantage of the poor, violence in our cities, people on the opposite side of issues shouting one another down and vilifying their opponents, selfishness and cruelty and misery and despair. It’s a bad world. An unhappy world.

But Cyprian discovered a refuge in the midst of his bad world—a company of happy people who lived in joy despite the brokenness and sin all around them. He discovered the Christians—the Church of Jesus Christ—and it was that community of joy that changed his life.

In the same way, the Church today must be a refuge of happiness in the midst of a sad world. Our church should be a beacon reflecting the sunlight of heaven. The church is meant to be a place of joy where people can discover the joy of the Lord.

***Bring Joy, Experience Joy***Today is the final sermon in our three-part series called *Engaging with Joy*. Our mission statement here at Hope Church is: **We are here to bring joy to Jesus and to experience joy in Him**. We often shorten that to four words: Bring Joy, Experience Joy. It’s been our mission statement for a dozen years, but we thought it would be good if we took a little time to revisit it as a congregation, so that we could all be on the same page. Thus, the sermon series, our workshops between services, and the booklets.

We’ve seen that the mission statement has two parts. First, we’re here to bring joy to Jesus. That is: our first priority must be to honor and glorify Jesus. It’s about Him, not us. We want to do things that put a smile on Jesus’ face.

But, at the same time, our mission statement is making a sort of argument. Because we believe that when we are living for Jesus, we are living the best life possible. And so, as we bring joy to Jesus, we are going to experience joy ourselves. It’s like we’ve found the greatest, richest treasure imaginable.

And now, on this third week, I want to talk a bit about the difference this mission statement should make for us as a congregation. I want to talk about why I think it is so important for us to live out joy in our church—to be a joyful church.

The reason, I think, can be seen in that letter from Cyprian: because in a bad world the joy of the church is where the blessing of belonging to Jesus is seen by those on the outside. I’ll put it like this:

**The joy of the church is how the joy of belonging to Jesus
 is shown to a joy-starved world.**

Our joy as a congregation is our witness to the world. The only way people are going to get the good news of Jesus is if they see the good news in the church.

***Psalm 126***My scripture passage this morning is Psalm 126. It’s a relatively short Psalm, just six verses. **Let’s look at:**

**1**When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
    we were like those who dreamed.
**2**Our mouths were filled with laughter,
    our tongues with songs of joy.
Then it was said among the nations,
    “The Lord has done great things for them.”
**3**The Lord has done great things for us,
    and we are filled with joy.

**4**Restore our fortunes, Lord,
    like streams in the Negev.
**5**Those who sow with tears
    will reap with songs of joy.
**6**Those who go out weeping,
    carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
    carrying sheaves with them.

The main verse here, the reason I chose it as my text, is **verse 2**:

**2**Our mouths were filled with laughter,
    our tongues with songs of joy.
Then it was said among the nations,
    “The Lord has done great things for them.”

That’s the argument of my whole sermon right there: when our mouths are filled with laughter and our tongues with songs of joy, then the nations—that is those who do not know God yet—will look at us and say: “The Lord has done great things for them.”

In other words, joy within the church is an advertisement for God to those on the outside. When people who don’t know Jesus see a joyful church, then they want to know more. Our joy as a congregation is our witness to the world.

Let’s look at the whole Psalm, and then I’ll talk about ways we can live joy at the end. There are two parts to the Psalm:

***Sowing in Tears***First, we need to see that **the world is hungry for happy**. There is a genuine, God-given longing for joy in our world. Let’s look at the second half of the Psalm, **verses 4-6:**

**4**Restore our fortunes, Lord,
    like streams in the Negev.
**5**Those who sow with tears
    will reap with songs of joy.
**6**Those who go out weeping,
    carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
    carrying sheaves with them.

We’re not entirely sure when this Psalm was written. It’s included in a section of the Psalter known as “The Songs of Ascent”, which means it was one of the Psalms that pilgrims would sing when they were travelling to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the major holidays. But we don’t know the specific situation in which it was written.

What we do know, however, is that it was written at a time of crisis. And we get that from these verses: this is a prayer for God to turn things around. There’s some sort of crisis—a war, a drought, economic upheaval, political unrest, something that has the people feeling dismayed. They are pleading with God to “restore our fortunes.” To make them like the streams in the Negev.

The Negev is the desert south of Israel, the barren stretch of land leading into the Sinai peninsula. For 11 months a year the Negev is dry, barren wasteland; pitted by dusty canyons and ravines. But for one month a year, when the rains come, those canyons become rushing streams and the barren desert becomes a stunning vista of green grass and bright flowers.

So the situation here is that the people see themselves as that barren desert, but they are asking God to bring the rains and restore their fortunes.

And I think that’s a pretty good picture of our world. Our world is hungry for heaven, for happiness. Everywhere you look it seems like there is bad news and sadness. The headlines that dominate our newsfeeds tend to focus on the partisanship that divides our culture, the random acts of violence at nightclubs and shopping centers and our school campuses, the acts of international espionage and the threats of terrorism.

More than that, there is a general sense of dissatisfaction in our culture. Journalist James Glassman declares that a “culture of complaint” has infected America. We complain about low incomes, high food prices, and the outsourcing of jobs. This, in spite of the fact that, adjusting for inflation, total compensation in the U.S. has tripled since 1947 and total food costs have gone from 1/3 of a household’s expenses in 1950 to just 1/7 today. More than that, Americans work fewer hours, have more cars per capita, and more children in college than at any other point in history. (Cited by Kyle Idleman, *Don’t Give Up*, p. 66) In a real sense, we have more material things than any other people ever, and yet people are still spiritually, emotionally, and physically restless.

There’s another picture given in this Psalm; one which, I will admit, I didn’t understand at first. In verse 5 the Psalm talks about those who “sow with tears.” Then, again, in verse 6, it gets repeated and expanded: “those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow.” It didn’t make much sense to me, I’ve never seen a farmer crying as he planted his crop.

But then I read a reflection by a missionary who served in the Western Sahara, in a climate similar to that of Israel. He noted that the growing season is very short, with most of the year being incredibly hot, dusty, and dry. When the harvest ends in August, the granaries are full and so are stomachs, But by December, supplies begin to diminish and families begin eating more sparingly. By February, people feel hungry. By March, food is being rationed to one-half meal a day. The missionary writes this:

April is the month that haunts my memory. The dust filters down through the air, and sounds carry for long distances. April is the month you hear the babies crying at twilight. Their mother’s milk is now stopped. …

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! Out in the hut where we keep the goats—there’s a leather sack hanging on the wall—Daddy, there’s grain in there.”

The father motionless. “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.”

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! <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jimerwin/2017/06/26/psalm-1261-6-greatest-future-yet-come/>

That’s a pretty good description of what it means to sow with tears. Imagine, taking the last handfuls of grain your family has and throwing it on the ground—in the desperate hope that it will sprout and grow and bring a harvest.

That’s how so many people in our world feel, like they are searching in desperation for something that will make them happy. Something that will satisfy. And often their search leads them to scatter their hopes like so many seeds on the ground.

The promise of this Psalm, of course, is that there will be joy. That those seeds sowed in sadness will result in reaping with songs of joy. That’s the difference God makes. That’s the hope that comes from knowing Jesus.

***Mouths Filled with Laughter***And that’s where the church comes in. My second heading is **A showcase for God’s joy**. It is the joy of God’s people that directs a joy-starved world to find their joy in God.

Let’s look at the first half of the Psalm now. The second half of the Psalm gives us the historical context—the people are facing some sort of crisis. They are praying for God to restore their fortunes. And the reason they are asking God to do this is because He has done it before. That’s what the first half of the Psalm is about, **verses 1-3:**

**1**When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
    we were like those who dreamed.
**2**Our mouths were filled with laughter,
    our tongues with songs of joy.
Then it was said among the nations,
    “The Lord has done great things for them.”
**3**The Lord has done great things for us,
    and we are filled with joy.

Again, we don’t know the exact historical circumstances. Some people think verse 1 is a reference to the exiles returning to Jerusalem from Babylon. But it could also be a time when the city was delivered from a famine, or when a military disaster was averted, or any number of other times when God acted to save His people. The point is not to single one occasion out, but to recognize that God does this sort of thing on a regular basis.

And when it happens, the Psalm says, it is like a dream come true. It is like one of those moments when you can hardly believe what is happening. When you are tempted to pinch yourself to see if you are awake, because the blessings you are experiencing are more than you ever could have hoped for or imagined.

That’s how God is. That’s what God does for his people. As we talked about last week, that’s the incredible treasure that is found in Jesus. Forgiveness for the mistakes of our past, hope for our future, purpose for our present.

And so, the Psalm talks about mouths filled with laughter, tongues filled with songs of joy. This is the natural, appropriate response to God’s saving love

And the thing is, verse 2 says, when we display joy like this, the world notices. The nations—which is Biblical shorthand for people who don’t know God yet—look on as the people of God laugh and smile and display a sort of peaceful happiness that is completely out of keeping with the events occurring around them, and they begin to gossip among themselves. They say to one another “The Lord has done great things for them.”

That’s our mission as a church. That should be our goal, how we impact the community of Spencer and the surrounding area. There should be a buzz surrounding our church, people should notice our members when they are at work and at school events and interacting with their neighbors, when people find out you are part of Hope Church they should say things like: “Hey, something is going on with that church…I hear good things about that congregation…there is a happiness and joy there that can’t be found anywhere else in the world.”

There is a book that has been helpful to me throughout this series. It’s called ***Happy Church*** by a pastor named Tim McConnell. I discovered it after we had chosen the smiley face graphic for our series, and was pleased to see almost the exact same graphic on the cover. After I ordered it and read it, I was even more pleased to see that it is making the same argument that our mission statement makes: God is a joyful God; belonging to Him is a joyful experience, so churches should be joyful organizations.

McConnell writes:

In a world like this, people want to be part of something different. They want to be part of something bigger. They long to find a community devoted to a higher ethic, a higher cause, a different world.

They want the church. Their hearts were made by God, for God. God made them in such a way that praising him would bring them joy. Their hearts will be unquiet until they rest in Christ their Savior. What they want is a community to attest to this; a community of happy souls resting contentedly in the hands of Christ.

This being the case, we must ask ourselves why the dissatisfied and unquiet souls of our era have no interest in church. There are many reasons, but chief among them is that we Christians are not acting like those who know the solution. We do not present ourselves as people who know peace with God and who rest content in the midst of a discontented world. We don’t act like the happy church. Our behavior does not match our true identity.

And then he issues this challenge, which is **a challenge I believe every congregation** and every Christian should wrestle with:

If you don’t want to be happy for yourself, if you still find it ignoble to pursue happiness on your own account, then be happy *for* the world. The world needs to see the happiness of the community of faith. Be happy *for* those who are lost. Be happy on behalf of the miserable. They need to know there is a source of joy deeper than the wells of the world and its pleasures. Be happy *for* them so they can be found. They need it. They are looking for the light of heaven. (*Happy Church*, p. 158)

The church should be a display case for the joy of the Lord. Our laughter and songs of joy should be an advertisement and an invitation to those who don’t know him yet.

***Living Joy***So what does that do to our picture of our church? How should this influence the way we carry ourselves as a congregation? I have three applications, three rules if you will, that should apply to how we live as a joyful congregation. For the sake of memorability, they all start with “C”:

First, **Choose Joy.** In our life together as a church, in our community of faith, we must choose to be cheerful.

Charles Spurgeon was the most popular preacher in London in the nineteenth century, the most popular preacher in the world. His church, the Metropolitan Tabernacle, was one of the first mega-churches and regularly attracted tourists—both believers and non-believers. Spurgeon knew people were constantly watching him and drawing ideas about Jesus from what they saw in his life, and he also knew people were watching his congregation. Would the church demonstrate the truth of the surpassing joy of knowing Jesus?

Spurgeon addressed the older generation of his church, encouraging them not to grow grumpy with age. He said: “Do not let the young people catch you indulging in melancholy, sitting in your chimney corner, grumbling and growling, but go about cheerful and happy, and they will think how blessed it is to be a Christian.” **He went on:**

You can lead us to heaven if you have got heaven’s sunlight on your face; but you will not lead us at all if you are cross and ill-tempered, for then we shall not care about your company. Make yourselves merry with the people of God, and try to live happily before men; for so will you prove to us—to a demonstration, that even to old age God is with you, and that when your strength faileth, he is still your preservation. (*Happy Church,* p. 159-160)

Joy is a choice. We can choose to focus on the things we don’t like, the weaknesses and shortcomings of our church and our lives; or we can choose to focus on the blessings, the strengths and benefits of being a part of the family of Jesus.

Second, **contend for joy**. This is along the same lines as choosing joy; but says it perhaps a little stronger. Whenever a group of people come together, there are going to be disagreements and differing points of view. In other words, things sometimes get contentious. That’s bound to happen; but let me urge you that if we are going to contend with one another, contend for joy.

In Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi he names two women: Euodia and Syntyche. He calls them both “fellow-workers” for the gospel. He says that their names are written in the book of life and that they have contended at his side for the cause of Jesus. He clearly cares about both Euodia and Syntyche and considers them both important members of the church.

But there is a problem, Euodia and Syntyche don’t get along. They have some sort of disagreement—we don’t know what—that is disrupting the whole church. So Paul pleads with them to “agree with each other in the Lord.” He urges them set aside their differences for the sake of the gospel. And then he says, in **Philippians 4:4**:

**4**Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

The best way for getting along in the church is to focus on joy. Mandisa has a song that contains these lines:

If we're gonna fight
Let's fight for each other
If we're gonna shout
Let love be the cry

I’ll say it like this: if we’re gonna fight in our church, let’s fight for joy. Contend for joy.

And then, third, **celebrate joy**. Let’s be a church that notices and encourages and talks about it when good things are happening.

Let me quote from Tim McConnell’s book *Happy Church* one more time:

I once met the pastor of a very active church in Welch, West Virginia, the seat of one of the poorest counties in America. The church was thriving. I asked him what they were doing right. He said, “Tim, when they called me to this church to be the pastor, I wasn’t sure I wanted to do it. I gathered the elders and told them, ‘I grew up in this town. When I was a boy, I got run out of all those grumpy churches downtown who didn’t want dirty coal-minors’ kids messing up their carpets and velour pews. Well, those grumpy churches are all empty now. I’ll be the pastor here, but it’s going to be different. It’s going to be noisy. It’s going to be messy, and there’s going to be a lot of kids!’”

I looked around. It was noisy. It was messy. There were a lot of kids. And they were happy! (165)

McConnell **summarizes like this:**

It is our duty—the duty of the church—to be the happy people of God. When we fight for this happiness, live into the joy won for us by Jesus Christ, the happy people of God shine in this world. The happy church once again will be a lighthouse in the dark night, a beacon in the fog. (164)

So, Hope Church, I urge you to fill your mouths with laughter, and to let songs of joy fall from your tongue. The world is watching, it is starved for joy, and it longs to see the joy of Jesus in you.