

Good Morning everyone. My name is Wayne, and I'm one of the pastors at Ambassador International Church over on Hong Kong Island. It's good to be with you all today and it's a privilege to share God's Word with you.

Let's pray together.

## **Pray**

In 2014, UC Berkeley, a university in the States, launched a free eight week online course, which turned out to be its most popular course in history. Since 2014, almost half a million students have enrolled in this course online.

The title of the course: "Science of Happiness." And the course description: "Learn science-based principles and practices for a happy, meaningful life."

Everyone wants to be happy. Everyone wants to have joy. Yet at the same time, in our culture, happiness and joy is something that is so temporary, so fleeting. It's here now, gone a moment later.

This understanding of happiness and joy starts early on in life.

Some of us may remember growing up with McDonalds happy meals, or for those who are parents, maybe we still buy them for our kids. And the idea is that while we eat our burger, munch on our fries, and play with cheaply made toys that aren't designed to last long, we are supposed to be happy. A happy meal.

When we get a little older, we move on from happy meals and we buy Nintendos and Playstations that come with this thing called joy stick. And the idea is while we play with animated characters on our TV screens, it's supposed to be a joy-filled time. A joy stick.

And in the States, when we finish from high school, get our drivers licenses, we borrow our parents' cars and take it out for a joy ride. The list goes on.

We are so used to the idea that happiness and joy is about what we experience here and now. But as long as our understanding of joy is tied to the present moment, it cannot last long. By definition, the present moment becomes the past, in the matter of an instant.

Scripture has a very different understanding of joy. Joy appears five times in the six verses of today's Psalm.

So as we look at God's word, let's find out. What is Christian joy? And how is Christian joy different from how the world sees joy?

## **Read Psalm 126:1–3.**

**A song of ascents. When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, (or in other translations, when the Lord brought back the captives to Zion), we were like those who dreamed. 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.” The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.**

The first three verses make up the first part of the psalm. If you notice, grammatically, these three verses are in the past tense. We *were* like those who dreamed. Our mouths *were* filled with laughter. We *were* filled with joy, as we reflect upon something that has happened in the past, as we reflect on something God has done.

### ***Main Point 1***

**So first, Christian joy comes with remembering God’s past works.**

### ***Explanation***

This psalm is a part of a group of fifteen psalms called the Song of Ascents. And these psalms were sung by pilgrims, as they made their way to Jerusalem, praising and worshipping God.

This particular psalm, if you notice verse one remembers a time when the Israelites returned home after years of exile as captives in Babylon.

Israel had been in exile for years in a foreign country, oppressed by Babylon, Persia. And finally, they are allowed to return home. But when the Israelites returned home, they found that it was in ruins.

Their houses were rubble, the temple had been sacked, and the land was occupied by foreign army. And so instead of a time of rejoicing, it actually should’ve been a time of grief and lament. People were about to face a hard life, both spiritually and politically.

So when we come to this psalm, we ask: In such difficult circumstances, how can people sing a song of joy?

Our culture’s understanding of joy, is that it is something experienced in the absence of tears, in the absence of suffering, in the absence of lament. But that is not the Biblical understanding. This Psalm says that in the midst of tears, in the midst of hardships, in the midst lament and despair, there is something that sets us apart from the world. Even in the midst of all these things, we can experience God’s joy.

### ***Illustration***

When I was in seminary in the States, we were each assigned a small group. Each group had around eight students, and two professors, and we were to meet each week for an hour to share and pray together.

In the first class, one professor told us that each student and professor was to take one full hour session to share their life story. There were only twelve weeks of class, and with ten people, it would take up most of the semester to get through with everyone’s story. I remember some people asking, “Why an hour? Isn’t that just a waste of time? Sure, I want to get to know everyone else, but can’t

we just each take ten minutes and get it done with?” Well, we went ahead and did it, each of us taking a whole hour each to tell our life stories.

But at the end of the semester, what each student and professor in my small group found, was that these one-hour stories each week, were not just times to learn about the other person. They were times that helped each one of us, reflect on how God used critical events in our lives to shape us, deliver us, to grow us, and to set us free. They were stories about how we got this far and what God has done.

The stories were amazing. How some came out of difficult family situations. How some were entangled in various sin and addictions. How some had gone through major losses and hurt. How some were so far from God.

But for each one of us, somehow, God made his way into our lives. They were stories of how the power of gospel set us free, from our own captivity to sin. Some were so honest, that they were hard to hear. Yet by the end, our response was that of gratitude and joy for what God had done.

### *Application*

The Israelites, even after they came back and found that their home was destroyed; they were able to have joy because they remembered what God had done for them. How God had delivered them from their captivity and brought them back home. And even though the present circumstances were difficult, their joy was based on what God had already done.

The truth is, for those of us here who know Christ, even in your seasons of lament, of grief, of pain, hurt, the truth is that the Lord has done something great for us.

The Apostle Paul says, in Romans 5: **“8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! 10 For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!”**

How well, how intentionally, do we remember what God has done for us?

In the book of Joshua chapter 4, God commanded his people to pile up stones after a miraculous event. People asked, why pile up stones? God replied, because in future generations, people will see them and ask, what is the meaning of these stones? And you would have to tell them, it is to remember what God had done for us in this place.

It’s so easy to forget to remember and to look back. We are so mesmerized by our culture that says joy is all about the here and now. But that isn’t true.

So do we have places and times in our church, in our home, in our personal lives to remember? Perhaps it comes during our time of Bible study, when we remember how God is faithful to his word. Maybe like today, it will come through a time of communion, giving thanks and remembering what Christ accomplished for us on the cross

Perhaps that might be remembering how God graciously answered our prayers. It might be sharing stories with others of how God has worked in our lives.

We can have joy even when we go through hard times, because the Lord has done great things, and he has done great things for us. And we can remember what Christ has done for us, how he has met us, and how he has been faithful to us.

### **So first, Christian joy comes with remembering God's past works**

But the psalmist doesn't stop in the past. If you notice, in the next three verses of the psalm, the focus shifts from the past the future. In this next section, the psalm gives us, two lenses, two images through which we look at the future.

#### ***Main Point 2***

### **So second, Christian joy comes with seeing our future through a different lens.**

I'd like for us to take a look at verse five and six first, and we'll come back to verse four at the end. This first image, the first lens, is that of farming.

#### **Read Psalm 126:5–6.**

**Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.**

#### ***Explanation***

Here we have a picture of a farmer, carrying grain, going out to the field, scattering seed into the soil, cultivating the crop. One reason there is weeping is because it is incredibly hard work. I have a few friends who are farmers and they all tell me that it is a life that demands intense, physical labor from sunrise to sunset. Yet in the midst of this hard labor, where the farmers found their joy is in looking forward to day of harvest. A day when their labor will be rewarded with sheaves, bundles of grain.

Another reason why there may be weeping is that in the ancient world, the seeds are all you have. It's everything you own. Sowing, is throwing all of what you have into the soil. And there's no guarantee that there will be no flooding or drought, or that there won't be pests that eat up all the crops. You may lose it all, everything you own. But amidst this risky sacrifice, for every farmer, there is hope that this year, there will be a bountiful harvest. This is a costly joy.

If you remember the story of the Israelites, this was true for them. After they returned to Israel, rebuilding their city and temple took more than twenty years. They were faced with various troubles and opposition, their work was suspended for many times, and very much like farming, it was incredibly hard and arduous, but at the same time, all of Israel looked forward to the day where the temple would be complete, the day where they finished what God called them to.

#### ***Illustration***

We live in a society that looks for instant return and results.

When I lived in the states, a few blocks down from where I lived in New York, is a convenience store. And interestingly, it was the most popular place on the street. But their most popular item is not a drink, or a snack. Their most popular item is a piece of paper: a lottery ticket.

This past week, an item that made the headlines on American news, was the US lottery. A grocery store sold the winning ticket, which was for a prize of \$315 million US dollars.

I can't even wrap my mind around that number. We all know the odds of winning are nearly impossible. Statistics say one in 175 million. But the promise of instantly winning millions of dollars with absolutely minimal work (which means going to the nearest convenience store), minimal investment (each ticket is a dollar), that promise was too hard for millions of people to turn down.

An article on CBS News said that on average, each American family spends five hundred dollars on the lottery per year, and truly believed that it was a practical way of attaining wealth. And if we pass by the Jockey Clubs on Mark 6 days, or on race days, we see the same exact thing.

The article went on to say that instead, if each year, that five hundred dollars were invested into an index fund, each family would have twenty four thousand after twenty years. But twenty years, for us, is a long time.

We don't like to wait long. But won't you agree that most things that are worthwhile take time? And won't you agree that most things that are worthwhile take sacrifice?

### *Application*

When I talk to couples that have been married for a long time, I find that most of these couples would say, the first few years were the hardest. It was when they fought the most. It was when they tried to figure out each other, learned to trust each other, and worked to develop healthy habits and a foundation in Christ. But after that hard work, then, you start to see fruit. It gets better, richer.

I'm sure parenting is similar. It's hard work. It's hard especially here in Hong Kong where many parents both work. The early years when you come home tired from a day of work, it's difficult to spend energy to teach, care for, and love your children in a God honoring way.

And for Christians who continue to battle with sin, striving to live righteously in a way God has called us to live. It's hard work.

For students working hard now, spending hours studying. Even for pastors who invest their time and energy and heart into the ministry. And for the Israelites, who worked hard for years to rebuild.

These things are difficult, and we might even be tempted to ignore them. But in light of the farming imagery, the focus is not on the present hardship, but on the future harvest. Joy comes in the hope that one day, after all the work, all the toil, there will be harvest.

However, and this is an incredibly important "however," the harvest is dependent on one condition. And that condition is God's grace.

**Let's go back to v. 4. Read Psalm 126:4.**

**Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev.**

### *Explanation*

The Negev is a part of Palestine, a part that's mostly desert. For much of the year it's arid, without vegetation. The river bed is completely dried out. But once a year, during the rain season, the sudden, intense rain falls. The dry river bed gets filled with running water. And around the streams and rivers, wild flowers spring up, resulting in a panorama of green, of vegetation, of flowers, out of nowhere.

In this image of the Negev, there are no farmers, no cultivating, no sowing. It's all the work of nature, all an expression of God's grace. I'm glad it is in this Psalm because, even non-Christians understand farming: everyone knows that we need to work hard if we want to have a harvest. But the Negev is a picture of nothing but the sheer grace of God, offered to his beloved children.

### *Illustration*

In the New Testament, we meet a boy who brings five loaves and two fish, humbly offering it to Christ. And Jesus, takes the elements, blesses it, and does a miraculous work of feeding with it.

In the same way, Jesus uses twelve common folk, called to be his disciples. Most of them were just fisherman. But as they followed Jesus and obeyed him, God, by his grace, used them to spread the gospel to peoples of different tribes and nations. And even we who are here today, are here because God, in his grace and mercy, used his people, who are often weak, sinful, inadequate, for his miraculous work. And to do his kingdom work.

### *Application*

As Christians, as we think about future, this should bring us joy. Here is something small I am offering, something I have worked hard at, and labored for. My children. My marriage. My service. My work. My relationship with God. This is the farming part.

And yet, God takes our small offering and blesses it, and does unfathomable things with it. He even blesses others with it. This is the Negev part.

There are no guarantees that after all your work, you'll get the expected return or result that you anticipated. In First Corinthians 3, Paul reminds us that we do the planting, watering, and sowing. But it is not up to us to bring results. It is the Lord of the Harvest who grows things. And when we see what he can do, just like bring beauty to the desert of the Negev, that should bring us joy.

### *Conclusion*

Some of us have come to church today amidst a lot of challenges, with heavy hearts. And I'm sure many of you are in much more painful and difficult circumstances that I can tell. Many of us are in places of sorrow. When we look at our circumstances, sometimes it's hard to sing songs of

thanksgiving in worship, because that is not our experience in life. If we were honest, many of us would rather sing songs of lament. And there is a place for that in our Christian life.

But we are reminded in this psalm that in spite of what culture teaches, Christian joy is not defined by the here and now. It's about what God has done for us in the past, and our ability to remember and tell it to others.

As we celebrate the Lord's Table later on in the service, we are reminded that it is true. The Lord has done great things for them. The Lord has done great things for us. And that gives us joy.

But it's also about what's ahead. Yes, it will require hard labor as we sow and do what God has called us to do, but our future picture needs to include God's grace of the Negev. The hope that as we work and toil for God's kingdom, God in his mercy and grace will bring the harvest. And ultimately, we anticipate that one day, Christ will return, and bring his kingdom fully, here. And that gives us joy.