

On Weeping and Coming Home With Shouts of Joy

The Tears of *The Aeneid*, *The Confessions*,
and *The Divine Comedy* in terms of Psalm 126:6

Psalm 126

A Song of Ascents.

¹ When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. ² 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.” ³ The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad. ⁴ Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb!” ⁵ “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy! ⁶ **He that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.**”

In this earthly life, we are “like those who dream.” ⁱ We are pilgrims, tired travelers often distracted and confused by the allures of the world. We struggle to stay awake. We wander. We lose sight of the narrow gate and must periodically ask God to “restore our fortunes,” ⁱⁱ to forgive us and maintain our seat at His glorious banquet table. Step by step, our spiritual journey is “a song of ascents”: ⁱⁱⁱ a song that moves us upward through our personal tears as we “[go] forth weeping,” ^{iv} a lament that raises the tears we offer up for others as we “[bear] the seed for sowing,” ^v and finally a purgatorial cry that lifts the weight of sin so that we can “come home with shouts of joy.” ^{vi} First we cry alone, then we cry with and for others, and finally, we cry in the presence of God.

Our daily sorrows are like a church's tolling bells that reverberate, linger, and fade to silence in our bones, which then—with certainty and regularity—sound the hour again and again. They are the rhythms that chime *sunt lacrimae rerum*: tears, tears, “tears in things.” Yet, at the same time—when one is aware of the presence of God—there is a melody that declares *sunt carmina rerum*: songs, there are songs, there are sweet “songs in things.” In this lifting air, our tears—our very real, wet, and soaking tears—are seeds worth sowing.

Throughout the book of Psalms, numerous chapters are introduced with superscriptions that add detail and context. Some of these phrases ascribe authorship (such as “A Psalm of David” or “A Psalm of Solomon”), give musical direction (such as “To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments” or “To the choirmaster: for the flutes”), or provide context (such as “A Song at the dedication of the Temple” or the lengthy plot spoiler “A Psalm of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away”). Some of the phrases indicate form such as a “shiggaion” (thought to be a psalm composed under strong emotion ^{vii}), a “maskil” (a psalm “with a message so delicate that King David asks a special wise person to recite and interpret the words so that people may understand it better” ^{viii}), or a “miktam” (a term that is thought to emphasize that the verse is a psalm of lament ^{ix}).

The phrase “A Song of Ascents” is used with a subset of 15 psalms (Psalms 120-134). Some scholars suggest that these psalms were recited by the Levitical priests as they “ascended” the 15 stairs from the Holy Temple's courtyard to the inner section of the Temple. ^x Others argue that they were “traditionally sung by Hebrew pilgrims, who ascended the uphill road to Jerusalem to attend annual festivals in the Temple.” ^{xi} In light of these traditions, one can see how “a song of ascents” combines both the literal image of climbing stairs and walking on a pilgrimage with the abstract idea of spiritual progress. These verses are also known as the

Pilgrim Songs, the Gradual Psalms, and the Songs of Degrees.^{xii} These are fitting monikers: ascents—be they physical or spiritual—proceed gradually by degree. Our spiritual journey is the daily craft of writing our own pilgrim song.

Aeneas: As We Go Forth Weeping

The phrase “there are tears in things”—*sunt lacrimae rerum*—is from Vergil’s *The Aeneid*. Aeneas—fleeing the horrors and sorrows of Troy—has entered Carthage under the cover of a cloud. He wanders into a large shrine dedicated to Juno where he discovers a grand mural depicting “Troy’s battles in their sequence.”^{xiii} The scenes stir up memories of warriors killed and loved ones lost. Aeneas “halted, weeping”^{xiv} and “with steady sobbing and great streams of tears, / he fed his heart on shallow images.”^{xv} He states,

“sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.”^{xvi}

Or as Sarah Ruden translates,

“Even here is praise for valor / and tears of pity for a mortal world.”^{xvii}

Or, as other translators write,

"They weep here / For how the world goes, and our life that passes /
Touches their hearts."
(Robert Fitzgerald)^{xviii}

"There are tears at the heart of things."
(Seamus Heaney)^{xix}

Here, too, there are tears for misfortune and mortal sorrows touch the heart.
(H. Rushton Fairclough)^{xx}

Or, as a simple dictionary entry states,

There are tears for things : there is pity for misfortune; there are tears in things.
(Merriam Webster)^{xxi}

Hovering around all of these translations is an unavoidable sorrow connected to our mortality.

We will die. The people we love will die. Our treasures in this life are “shallow images,”

fleeting things that fail to leave their mark on eternity. To say “there are tears in things” is akin to saying “there is meaning in things” when “there is love in things.” However, the knowing and the loving of a thing always involve some kind of sorrow, some kind of wound—a pierce, a sacrifice, a loss, a moment when we cry out, echoing St. John of the Cross, “O sweet cautery, O delightful wound!”^{xxiii} In Aeneas’ statement—*sunt lacrimae rerum*—we see a man blessed with a waking moment, a moment of clarity where he sees that to be human is to “go forth weeping” because we go forth loving. It is the pilgrim’s first spiritual step: seeing that there are tears in things.

Monica: Bearing The Seed for Sowing

Considering again the idea of earthly pilgrimage as song, the steady pulse of our daily sorrows is so repetitive as to become a beat; the tears we shed for ourselves ring like notes of a dirge and these tears tempt us to be like “those who dream.” However, the tears we offer up for others can be a stirring cadence, rousing our souls and lifting our pilgrim feet on the middle way of our pilgrim journey.

Consider Monica and her “son of tears.”^{xxiii} St. Augustine recalls,

Yet throughout those years my mother [...] was no less assiduous in her weeping and entreaty, never at any time ceasing her plangent prayers to you about me. Her pleas found their way into your presence [...].^{xxiv}

Monica’s “free-flowing” tears for her son are loud and plaintive. They are her “heart’s blood”^{xxv} that “day by day [bedew] the ground.”^{xxvi} With vigor and intensity, “she redoubled her prayers and tears”^{xxvii} imploring God to make haste with his help. Augustine writes, “she offered me to you upon the bier of her meditation, begging you to say to this widow’s son, *Young man,*

arise.”^{xxviii} In these phrases, we see Monica’s tears rise. Her prayers ascend with confidence to God, she lifts up her cares, and her day-to-day petitions inspire perseverance in prayer. We come to appreciate that “bearing the seed for sowing” is bearing our wounds for the giving of our “heart’s blood”—our tears.

After his conversion, the Son of Tears writes, “and that was why I wept the more abundantly later on when your hymns were sung: once I had gasped for you, but now at last I breathed your fragrance.”^{xxix} This is the transformation of tears when shed in the presence of God. These are the moments when we know that—*sunt carmina rerum*—“there are songs in things.”

Dante the Pilgrim: As We Come Home with Shouts of Joy

In between the abysses of the *Inferno*—where the shades are wailing and crying—and the heavenly spheres of *Paradiso*—where the lights are singing and smiling—lies the mountain of *Purgatorio* where souls weep while singing. In this middle ground of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante’s Purgatory is “the realm of God’s mercy where the souls of the dead travel to salvation.”^{xxx} The souls are pilgrims on “the arduous ascent of a mountain, [...] a realm of temporary punishment, [...] and a place where all the souls have hope in the certainty that they will eventually go to Heaven.”^{xxxi} The tears spilled on this final spiritual ascent are sorrowfully shed for the atonement of sins, but at the same time, gladly shed with the knowledge that they shall soon be face-to-face with the presence of God.

Consider the following lines from the *Purgatorio* and how they dispel the idea that sorrow/delight, grieving/singing and grief/joy are pairs of opposite words:

And—there!—“*Labia mea, Domine*”
was wept and sung and heard in such a manner
that it gave birth to both delight and sorrow ^{xxxii}

All of these souls who, grieving, sing because
their appetite was gluttonous, in thirst
and hunger here resanctify themselves. ^{xxxiii}

I am Arnaut, who, going, weep
and sing; with grief, I see my former folly;
with joy, I see the hoped-for day draw near. ^{xxxiv}

In these lines, instead of opposites, the words are fellow pilgrims. They are united, companions on the spiritual journey. Sorrow and delight are siblings born at the same time. We find it logical that while grieving, singing should erupt. In the third excerpt, Arnaut’s words proclaim *sunt lacrimae rerum* and *sunt carmina rerum*: I am Arnaut, who, going, weep and sing...with grief...with joy. In all three passages, Dante makes the wolf (our tears and sorrows) a guest of the lamb (our joys and our songs). Purgatory—the promise of heaven and eventual ascent into the presence of God—tempers our tears. Here, the soul is at journey’s end at the threshold of Paradise. Singing, the soul can “come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him”^{xxxv} — a pilgrim’s song of ascents.

His Presence

In the midst of our sorrows, when we are overwhelmed by the tears in things, let us remember that there are songs in things. The French poet, Paul Claudel, wrote, “Jesus did not come to remove suffering, or to explain it away. He came to fill it with His presence.” There are

songs in things when we place our tears in the presence of God. May our tears fill the desert watercourses ^{xxxvi} of our lives. May we see that “the Lord has done great things for us.” ^{xxxvii}

And, lastly, may we “come home with shouts of joy.” ^{xxxviii}

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ⁱ Psalm 126:1.

ⁱⁱ Psalm 126:4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 126 is one of the “Songs of Ascents.”

^{iv} First phrase in Psalm 126:6.

^v Second phrase in Psalm 126:6.

^{vi} Third phrase in Psalm 126:6.

^{vii} “Shiggaion.” *Bible Study Tools*. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/shiggaion/> accessed April 27, 2024.

^{viii} Mizrahi, Tara. “What is a ‘Maskil’? Are Some Things Beyond Our Understanding? Psalm 74 Explains.” *Sefaria.com*. <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/248026?lang=bi> accessed April 27, 2024.

^{ix} Moen, Skip. “What is It?” *Hebrew Word Study*. <https://skipmoen.com/2009/04/what-is-it/> accessed April 27, 2024.

^x Paley, Yaakov. “The Secret of the Fifteen Steps.” *Chabad.org*. https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/429856/jewish/The-Fifteen-Steps.htm accessed April 28, 2024.

^{xi} Kalu, Madeline. “What are the Songs of Ascent in the Bible?”. *Christianity.com*. <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/bible/what-are-the-songs-of-ascent-in-the-bible.html> accessed April 28, 2024.

^{xii} *Ibid.*

^{xiii} Vergil. *The Aeneid*. Translated by Sarah Ruden. Yale University Press, 2023, Book 1, line 456.

^{xiv} *Ibid*, Book 1, line 459.

^{xv} *Ibid*, Book 1, line 464-465.

^{xvi} Vergil. *Aeneidos*. Project Gutenberg. <https://gutenberg.org/files/227/227-h/227-h.htm>, accessed April 28, 2024, Book 1, line 462.

^{xvii} Vergil. *The Aeneid*. Ruden translation, Book 1, line 460-461.

^{xviii} Nicolae Babuts, *Memory, metaphors, and meaning: reading literary texts*, Transaction Publishers, 2009, p.173

^{xix} Seamus Heaney, *Virgil's Poetic Influence*, an essay broadcast on [BBC Radio 3](#) as part of the Greek and Latin Voices series, July 15, 2008 (23:00).

^{xx} “Aeneid.” Wikiquote. <https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Aeneid> accessed April 28, 2024.

^{xxi} “Sunt lacrimae rerum.” *Merriam Webster*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sunt%20lacrimae%20rerum> accessed April 28, 2024.

^{xxii} St. John of the Cross. “The Living Flame of Love.” *EWTN*. <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/living-flame-of-love-12524> accessed May 2, 2024.

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- ^{xxiii} Augustine of Hippo. *The Confessions*. Translated by Maria Boulding, O.S.B. New City Press, New York, 1997/2012, Book III.12.21.
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid*, Book III.11.20.
- ^{xxv} *Ibid*, Book V.7.13.
- ^{xxvi} *Ibid*, Book V.8.15.
- ^{xxvii} *Ibid*, Book VI.1.1.
- ^{xxviii} *Ibid*, Book VI.1.1.
- ^{xxix} *Ibid*, Book IX.7.16.
- ^{xxx} Dante. *The Divine Comedy*. Translated by Allen Mandelbaum. Everyman's Library, 1995, p. 625.
- ^{xxxi} *Ibid*, Notes, p. 626.
- ^{xxxii} *Ibid*, *Purgatorio*, XXIII, lines 10-12.
- ^{xxxiii} *Ibid*, *Purgatorio*, XXIII, lines 64-66.
- ^{xxxiv} *Ibid*, *Purgatorio*, XXVI, lines 142-144.
- ^{xxxv} Psalm 126:6.
- ^{xxxvi} Psalm 126:4 reads, "Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb!"
- ^{xxxvii} Psalm 126:3.
- ^{xxxviii} Psalm 126:6.