

THE PASTORS' PEN

articles from the elders of BBC

Jay London humorously recounts, "I told my therapist I was having nightmares about nuclear explosions. He said, 'Don't worry, it's not the end of the world.'"

That brings a smile to my face. And sometimes I need such a smile, especially when I feel like I'm in a nightmare. I need the occasional (and sometimes the frequently "occasional") reminder that "it's not the end of the world." The nightmare is just that: a periodic bad night, but a longer and brighter day is coming. In fact, if I persevere, I will see the nightmare turn into a dream.

Do you need such a reminder? Then perhaps this brief article will help.

In reading through the Psalms of Ascent recently (Psalms 120-134), I was struck by the literal ascent, the literal emotional and existential climb, of these psalms up to Psalm 126.

The first several psalms recount the challenges faced by the nation of Israel as she experienced captivity under the Babylonians. These initial psalms are filled with words such as "distress" and "arrows" from "enemies" who are at "war" with the writer. We read of cataclysmic "storms" and "floods" and "raging waters" such as "scorn" and "contempt." Emotional, relational, and spiritual nightmares, indeed. These were the very real trials faced by God's remnant in a foreign land.

You may remember that Jerusalem had been destroyed by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, and its temple torn to the ground. Most of the inhabitants, who had not been slaughtered, were carried away to Babylon. And in old covenant Israel, this was the worst of calamities. To be separated from Jerusalem was to be separated from God. And even if the city had not been destroyed, nevertheless, without the temple, there was no

presence of God. An absent God meant the absence of *shalom*—no wellbeing for the nation. They were living a nightmare. Would they ever awake?

Well, yes, they did, and Psalm 126 captures their elation. You see, God is true to his word. He had promised not only the chastening of Israel for their disobedience, but also a limit of seventy years for this trial (see Jeremiah 25:1-13).

When the seventieth year ended, the Jews were granted release, and eventually the city was rebuilt, along with the temple. These words record their elation, "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream." The

result was that "our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy" (vv. 1-2). Such joy because "the LORD has done great things for us; we are glad" (v. 3).

Theirs was the response of deep

relief—the nightmare had turned into a dream! This reminds me of a quote of Jonas Salk, the man credited with discovering the vaccine for polio: "I have had dreams, and I have had nightmares, but I have conquered my nightmares because of my dreams." That is very sage advice. It rings of the biblical truth concerning faith. You see, biblical faith empowers us to look beyond the immediate to the ultimate. As we are learning in 2 Corinthians 4-5, Christians focus on the eternal. Our Saviour assures us that we are in his hands, and this encourages us to trust him through the nightmare. Just as the disciples learned in their nightmare of a storm at sea (Mark 4:35-41), Jesus will get us through!

I find it instructive that there is little consensus about the composition date of Psalm 126. It is possible that it was written, not after, but during the exile. In other words, it was written with faith



in the eventual fulfilment of God's promise. The writer anticipated a dream amidst nightmare. That is helpful for us to contemplate. It is even more helpful for us to practice.

Jacob faced a nightmare in the wilderness, all alone, uncertain of the future, with a guilty conscience to boot! And yet he dreamed a dream of a ladder coming down from heaven. The message was clear: "Jacob, you are not alone. God will get you through this. The nightmare will end" (Genesis 28). Likewise, Daniel had a dream, one that would have encouraged him as he sought to live for the Lord amidst the nightmares of a pagan culture. In that dream, Daniel was assured of the final victory of Messiah over all the kingdoms of the world (Daniel 7).

The point is simply, and yet profoundly, that we are to cling to Christ and to his word, regardless of the nightmare. After all, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). Such a truth is bound to help you through your nightmare. Sweet dreams

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