

PERSEVERANCE

Psalm 129

September 6, 2009 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

The main thrust of this psalm is that Zion, as the people of God, is indestructible and so the believer can persevere in and through all things because God has been, is, and forever will be what He will be for His people.

I. Prayer of Remembrance for Their Deliverances (129:1-4)

The opening stanza of the psalm echoes that of Psalm 124, which begins, “Let Israel now say, ‘Had it not been the LORD who was on our side.’” At this point we see them doing that very thing as they celebrate or recollect what God had done for His people. ¹ “**Many times they have persecuted me from my youth up,**” Let Israel now say, ² “**Many times they have persecuted me from my youth up.**”

1. Their dilemma (vv. 1-3)

They reflect on the fact that they had been oppressed from the very beginning of their calling, and yet God continued to bear His mighty arm for them, often in spite of them.

Hosea 11:1-3 – ¹ When Israel *was* a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.

² The more they (the prophets) called them, the more they (the people) went from them; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning incense to idols. ³ Yet it is I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them in My arms; but they did not know that I healed them.

These were years of persecution and oppression. In their youth they were forced to serve Pharaoh in Egypt as slaves and then when they began to grow in numbers, even though it would have been advantageous to Pharaoh, he had the newborn male children put to death. And God rose up the man Moses to deliver them from Pharaoh’s excessive oppression.

But it was not only *in* their youth that Israel experienced suffering, but the psalmist writes twice for emphasis for the corporate community, “**from my youth up.**” The redemptive history of the people of God shows this. In the days of the judges the people were oppressed, again, often because of their sinfulness. We see a cycle in Judges that we see summarized in this psalm. When the people had a judge, all was well. The moment the judge died, the people sinned. Once things became unbearable, they cried out to God, and he delivered them and restored them. A new judge rose up, died, and the cycle continued. Then during the times of the kings, the monarchical dynasty, we see much of the same. Josiah was killed by the Egyptian invasion of Pharaoh Neco (2 Kings 23:29-30). We have the invasion by the Assyrians of the northern kingdom of Israel and captivity in 721 B.C. followed by the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

That is their history up to the time of this psalm. And the psalmist is quite graphic in his description of their sufferings, “**The plowers plowed upon my back; they lengthened their furrows.**” The picture of the plow in the field would be easily recognized by all. We in the South are familiar with it as well as often we see the well-tilled soil cut from the ground into nice, neat rows ready for planting. That is the metaphor the psalmist gives here. Eugene Petersen connects the metaphor with its purpose well:

Picture Israel, the person of faith, lying stretched out, prone. The enemies hitch up their oxen and plows and begin cutting long furrows in the back of Israel. Long gashes cut

into the skin and flesh, back and forth systematically, like a farmer working the field. Imagine the whole thing: the blood, the pain, the back-and-forth cruelty.¹

That is their dilemma. It is not just that there existed an enemy—that enemy was ferocious and inhumane. The plowing would have been painful enough, but their oppressors plowed, and lengthened the tines, and turned up the heat, and plowed, and lengthened, bringing more and more pain and strife. But the psalmist does not stop there—or we would all be most hopeless and helpless!

2. Their Deliverer (v. 4)

The psalmist hints at the hope the people have in the midst of all this in v. 2. The persecution was great. The attempts to destroy the people of God were intense and numerous. **“Yet they have not prevailed against me.”** Again, the **“me”** has a corporate identity as this is something that all Israel was to proclaim. Our persecution has been great and continual, **“YET!”** Why had the enemy not prevailed? Was it because Israel somehow bowed up? Was it because suddenly they had a better plan of attack than the enemy or a strategy that took their foes by surprise? What does the psalmist say? **“The LORD is righteous.”** Over and over again there has been trouble, but however great the trouble is, God is greater still. And that’s the great confidence and assurance of the psalmist. ? **“The LORD is righteous,”** he says.

Why is it that the psalmist draws comfort from that expression? You might remember that Martin Luther didn’t draw any comfort at all from the idea that God was righteous (at first, at least). In fact, in his commentary on Romans, he said that there came a time in his life when he hated the righteousness of God. Of course, Luther was to come to love the righteousness of God when he saw that the righteousness which God demanded was a righteousness which He provides by faith in Jesus Christ alone. So what is it that the psalmist is saying here? Derek Thomas suggests:

What the psalmist is saying here by saying, “The Lord is righteous,” is that the Lord conforms to a standard. That’s what righteous means: to conform to a standard. Well, what standard does the Lord conform to? He conforms to the standard of His own word. He conforms to Himself. He conforms to His promise. He conforms to His covenant - His promise and oath that He has given to His people. You see, that’s the thing that marked out God, the God of Israel, from all the gods all around—the gods of Egypt, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Philistines, the gods of Canaan... You couldn’t depend on them. But you can depend on the God of Israel. He’s utterly trustworthy. When God gives His word, when God gives His promise, when God enters into covenant, He keeps His covenant.²

Had God in fact given His word? Had God promised His children that He would always be righteous?

Isaiah 45:21-25 – ²¹ “Declare and set forth *your case*; indeed, let them consult together. Who has announced this from of old? Who has long since declared it? Is it not I, the LORD? And there is no other God besides Me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none except Me. ²² Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and

¹ Eugene H. Petersen, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 124.

² http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/Derek%27s_SERMONS/Psalms%20of%20Ascent/psalm_129.htm, accessed 09/05/2009.

there is no other. ²³ I have sworn by Myself, the word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back, that to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear *allegiance*. ²⁴ They will say of Me, ‘Only in the LORD are righteousness and strength.’ *Men will come to Him, and all who were angry at Him will be put to shame.* ²⁵ In the LORD all the offspring of Israel will be justified and will glory.”

Isaiah 51:22-23 – ²² Thus says your Lord, the LORD, even your God who contends for His people, “Behold, I have taken out of your hand the cup of reeling, the chalice of My anger; you will never drink it again. ²³ I will put it into the hand of your tormentors, who have said to you, ‘Lie down that we may walk over *you*.’ You have even made your back like the ground and like the street for those who walk over *it*.”

In this psalm the psalmist testifies that God has been righteous to His people just as He promised. He demonstrates that by another picture, **“He has cut in two the cords of the wicked.”** The cords were the straps that held the yoke on the neck of the beast. The cutting of the cords then caused the yoke to fall off, in effect bringing the plowing to an end. Suddenly, there is a realization that there is no more pain. The oxen are still tramping back and forth, the enemy still shouts their commands, but the plows are gone. Therefore, their opposition is worthless. They are wasting their time and energy. If they ever looked behind them (which they never do—their stiff necks make that exercise too painful), they would see that their attempts are having no results at all.

So these opening verses set forth the common refrain that we have seen in the Psalms of Ascent, that the people of God will suffer for the sake of righteousness, and that they can depend on the righteous God to deliver them. Therefore, we today are reminded that by faith we too can persevere through times of difficulty because God is on our side (Ps. 124:1).

II. Prayer of Judgment Upon Their Enemies (129:5-8)

The second stanza of the psalm is imprecatory, that is, it calls for God’s judgment on **“all who hate Zion.”** It is timely that we consider what these imprecations mean in times such as ours as I have heard such supposed prayers lately towards our president and our government. I say supposed prayers of imprecation because some fall within the bounds of Scripture and others are nothing more than ranting of hatred. For instance, some of you have probably heard about a sermon preached by a Baptist pastor in Tempe, AZ a few weeks ago bluntly titled, “Why I Hate Barack Obama,” his text being another of these of psalms, Psalm 58. In it the pastor revealed his desire for Obama, “I’m gonna pray that he dies and goes to hell when I go to bed tonight.” Further, he added that he hoped the president would “melt like a snail” with salt on it. When interviewed by a local television station, he said, “I hope that God strikes Barack Obama with brain cancer so he can die like Ted Kennedy and I hope it happens today.” Was this pastor being “righteous” in his imprecations? Was he preaching the Word in the Spirit of the Word?

Writers have spilled a great deal of ink trying to come to terms with Psalms just like this one, and some of them have drawn the conclusion that it is simply *not* the inspired word of God. They attribute it to the vengeance of a believer in the Old Testament who is reacting because of some personal spite or animosity: somebody has done him harm and he wants vengeance; he wants that person to be repaid with the kind of enmity that he himself has known and seeks to take vengeance into his own hands. So, they say, it just isn’t part of the word of God. Of course, we know that our sin nature can lead one to desire to take their own vengeance on their enemies—but any thought that this is *not* God’s inspired, inerrant, infallible Word is simply not acceptable.

Some have said, ‘Well, of course this is part of the word of God. It’s inspired, but it’s inspired in the same way that the words of Satan are recorded in the Bible. You have them in Genesis 3; you have it in Job 1, 2. They’re faithful recordings of what this psalmist felt, and the Holy Spirit inspired it to that extent. But what we have is nothing more than the sinful emotions of a believer.’ While that might be the case in some places where the Bible is brutally honest in recording the sayings of men, is it right to attribute these imprecations to the sinful emotions of men? Many of these in the psalms were uttered by David, praying that God would shatter the enemy—and God answered. Was David simply venting his sinful emotions?

Others suggest that this is just what you might expect in the Old Testament day as part of the old covenant where God tolerated it in the same way that He tolerated polygamy in the Old Testament. But now in the New Testament and the new covenant things are different. When you look at the Sermon on the Mount, you read the teachings of Jesus about turning the other cheek and forgiving seventy times seven, and if somebody asks you for your shirt, you give him your cloak as well; you go the second mile. And there in the New Testament you find a deeper, a more profound personal ethic.’ Of course, the problem with that is that far from being embarrassed by such Psalms as these, New Testament writers actually endorse them. Psalm 109, for example, is quoted by Peter in Acts 1, applying it to the case of Judas, upon whom the curse of God had fallen as a fulfillment of an imprecatory prayer. Or, you turn to the book of Revelation and see in Revelation 6:10 the cry of the martyrs before the throne of God for vengeance: that God would arise and destroy His enemies.

So how are we to take these psalms? Is it wrong to pray God’s judgments on those who persist in evil? If not, how and what should we pray? We certainly should pray that such would repent and be converted. But we should also pray that they would not prosper, and that lies at the heart of these imprecations. James Montgomery Boice put it this way:

For all the controversy over the imprecatory portions of the psalms, it is striking in this case at least how mild these imprecations are. The psalmist is not asking that those who have harmed Israel be sent to hell, or even that they experience the same sufferings they have inflicted on others. He asks only that they and their designs might not prosper.³

1. No honor (v. 5)

Israel’s enemies sought honor and fame in crushing Israel, often through military victories. Here the psalmist prays that the enemies’ military pursuits would be frustrated, that they would know shame and dishonor in defeat rather than victory literally on their backs.

We too should pray that the enemies of God would be defeated and that their failure might be known. This is not to pray the flames of hell on them in hatred. Being opposed to wickedness for righteousness sake does not authorize us to hate in return. But we should pray that evil would be thwarted and that evil men would be exposed to their own shame for the glory of God. This helps us through times where it appears that the wicked are prospering.

2. No success (vv. 6-7)

The psalmist prays that the enemy might be **“like grass upon the housetops, which withers before it grows up.”** In Israel’s day the houses had dirt roofs where seed could take root in shallow soil. Because the soil was shallow and there was no way to water the seed on the

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, vol. 3 Psalms 107-150, 1133.

roof (which would sort of defeat the purpose for the roof anyhow), the grass quickly withered and died under the heat of the sun.

However, as Boice points out, even dried grass can be of some use. The withered grain of the field could be harvested and used for fuel. Not wanting the enemy to have even the appearance of success, the psalmist prays in v. 7 that their plans so completely fail that the reaper will not even have enough to fill his hands or gather in his arms to carry home. Connected to that is...

3. No blessing (v. 8)

It was common practice to bless those who worked in the fields at harvest time with the words, “The Lord be with you” (see Ruth 2:4). Here, the psalmist withholds this prayer of blessing on the wicked, saying that those who pass by those with evil intents do not pronounce blessing.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon said, “If this be an imprecation, let it stand, for our heart says ‘Amen’ to it. It is but justice that those who hate, harass, and hurt the good should be brought to naught. Those who confound right and wrong ought to be confounded.”

So where the opening verses of the psalm serve to remind us to *reflect on what God has done in delivering us from evil*, the second stanza reminds us to *rest in what God will do for His people now and in the future in delivering us from evil*. It is to pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.” When God’s kingdom really does come, not only will His people be saved, but His enemies will also be destroyed. It is all right to pray as Paul prayed in 1 Corinthians 16:22, “If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed.” You can only pray that prayer if you are seeking first and foremost the glory and the integrity and the honor of God, and that’s what the psalmist does here and what the pastor in Tempe failed to do.

Conclusion

1. What we see in our sufferings is but a microcosm of that which Christ faced.

Isaiah 50:5-7 – ⁵ The Lord GOD has opened My ear; and I was not disobedient *nor did I turn back*. ⁶ *I gave My back to those who strike Me*, and My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting. ⁷ For the Lord GOD helps Me, therefore, I am not disgraced; therefore, I have set My face like flint, and I know that I will not be ashamed.

Isaiah 53:3-8 – ³ He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. ⁴ Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. ⁵ But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being *fell* upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. ⁶ All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. ⁷ He was oppressed and He was afflicted, *yet He did not open His mouth*; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment He was taken

away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke *was due*?

2. Those in covenant with God will win the battle because the battle is already won in Christ

Matthew 16:18 – Upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

1 Corinthians 15:55-57 – ⁵⁵ “O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?” ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; ⁵⁷ but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the meantime, may we remember the words of the Apostle Paul:

2 Corinthians 4:7-11 – ⁷ But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; ⁸ *we are* afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. ¹¹ For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.