

Psalm 129

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[0 : 00] Psalm, Psalm 129. We stand for the reading of God's word. Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth. Israel now say, greatly they have afflicted me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me. The plowers plowed upon my back, they made long their furrows. The Lord is righteous. He has cut the cords of the wicked.

May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turn backward. Let them be like the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows up, with which the reaper does not fill his hand, nor the binder of sheaves his arms, nor do those who pass by say, the blessing of the Lord be upon you. We bless you in the name of the Lord. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated.

Well, good morning, dear family. I can't really express to you how great you look out on a day where there's a wind chill, 27 degrees out here. But I knew, I knew that if we tried to do this in the loft, we'd only put about 20 people here. And we are just multiplying over that.

And I'm just so pleased to see you. A special thanks, huh? You ought to give it up for all the musicians. Can you imagine trying to play and listen to that muffled clap? I love it. I love it. And a deep debt of gratitude to the Pastoral Search Committee, who has done such amazing work. And we are looking forward, hopefully, even perhaps within a week or two, of letting you know the candidate that would come before us.

[1 : 49] Well, Psalm 129. Across the centuries, people groups have taken to poetry to craft words, then set to music, and in many cases, then placed in songbooks that both celebrate hard-won triumphs and reveal the heart's inner longings. In the year 1711, Cotton Mather received one such songbook in the mail from none other than Isaac Watts, a number of collected Reformation hymns. Mather marked in his own personal diary that he wanted to learn those songs and teach them to many churches that they would be strengthened in their piety. Songs of victories won, songs of a future where justice must yet be done. Another such songbook was released in this country in 1867, two years removed from the

Civil War. This collection was titled Slave Songs of the United States. Three Harvard-trained abolitionists were behind the project, one of them named Charles Ware. During the Civil War, Ware lived among thousands of freed African Americans, and he listened to them sing.

Eventually, he would take their poetic lyrics and transcribe them, and then with the help of his friends, they transposed them onto sheet music, where we now have them in musical form.

The book ended up containing 136 spirituals. It was the first to preserve for us in musical form what was then known and even commonly called today the Negro spiritual. Some of those songs plead with God for help. Other of those songs are fixed assertions of a people's abiding hope.

Centuries before, ancient Israelites had done something similar. They too composed songs that were to be sung along the way. Songs to walk by, songs to work by, songs to sustain a people that were not always done right by. Psalm 29, 129 is one such song. I hope you have your eyes on it.

[4 : 30] It's a song that celebrates God as being righteous. That center line of gravitational weight opens verse four. The Lord is righteous. In particular, though, this song highlights two things that Israel's righteous Lord was known by, one, by what he cut Israel loose from, and two, by a justice that must yet be done.

Can you hear the song as it sits before us today? The Lord is righteous by what he cut Israel loose from, by a justice that will yet be done. My God is righteous, says Psalm 129. He cut us loose, and someday he's coming for them.

I may have been released, and I will be waiting on a reversal. I wonder this morning, am I speaking to anyone here, I'm sure all of us, who could testify to the righteousness of God by the things he cut

you loose from.

Think of the things that he has delivered you from. Do you desire a justice that's yet to be done? Then this song is rightly for you. So let's listen to it together and hear what it has to say.

[6 : 17] Verses one to four, God cut us loose. God cut us loose. Let me read it again. Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth, let Israel now say.

Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth. Yet they have not prevailed against me. The plowers plowed upon my back. They made long their furrows.

The Lord is righteous. He has cut the cords of the wicked. God had cut Israel loose. One of the most potent things about poetry is its ability to accomplish something that straightforward discourse cannot.

Poetry has the ability to convey a depth of feeling, not just by what is being said, but by how it is said.

And this song powerfully connects these theological ideas of the Lord is righteous. The ideas of freedom.

[7 : 30] The ideas of a future judgment. These strong, Principal ideas, But put forward in common images.

The images here are of a harvest yield. And of a farmer's field. Let me show you Just some of this. Verse 4. The Lord is righteous.

He has cut the cords Of the wicked. I don't know what comes to your mind when you see the word Cords, but these are not the cords that you might think of in the sense of Metal handcuffs or Iron clad Material.

Or even the rope. One and three quarter inch that you might buy at Elston Ace Hardware for a particular project. Rather, the writer chooses a word here that actually comes from a leafy tree. Think of it. We are to envision multiple strands of small entangled vines that wrap themselves around a precious plant and choke off its life.

[8 : 37] The kind of vines that you think you can pull free, but can't. It wasn't long ago we were in this very parking lot clearing it for gatherings such as this.

And there were a number of plantings all along that side. And I watched people pull. And you would think it would release quickly, only to find that as it loosened from the gravel, more was laid down yet underneath.

Choking off the life of all that was there. Choking off the earth. That's what he's saying by poetic lyricism.

The Lord is righteous. He has disentangled me from the wicked. Like the vines of a leafy tree that held me fast, that pressed me in, that wouldn't let me go.

My Lord, my God, he has cut me loose. In fact, that imagery was there from the opening line. Take a look at verse one.

[9 : 45] Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth. The word afflicted actually carries the context within the Hebrew of being tied up, of being bound.

And then it says, from my youth, which is the word we find for a young plant, a shoot. And so what he's saying is, greatly were they binding me, entangling me, holding me fast, pressing me in.

From when I was nothing other than a young shoot coming forth from the ground. And notice how it builds in scope and intensity.

He goes on to say, let Israel not say, greatly have they afflicted me from my youth. In other words, it's not just the psalmist, but it's all the people.

It isn't just that you're to see a sheaf of wheat standing, but you're to see an entire people who have been held fast by the wicked ones.

[10 : 56] We are to envision all of Israel standing like a harvest field. I think of Auden, the poet, who once put these concrete ideas to images.

He says, as I walked out one evening, walking down Bristol Street, the crowds upon the pavement were fields of harvest wheat. See, this notion of crowds of people rising like wheat, waving in the wind.

But here they are hard pressed, not free, confined, entwined by those who would own them. And then, if there wasn't enough to be grateful to God for, the psalmist who now is among all the people rises, not just to speak of the harvest yield, but of a farmer's field.

Look at verse 3. The plowers plowed upon my back. They made long their furrows. The image shifts from the plantings in the farmer's field to the field itself.

That the sons of Israel were like the soil in which the plantings would come up from. Plowed, plowed, long furrows.

[12:25] I'm not a farmer. I don't know how many of you grew up in that arena. Not me, and perhaps not most of us. But did you know there's a family in this church who is from outside of Portland, and they farm, and they pull tractors, and they bale hay.

And so I talked to him this week, and I said, what does this verse really do? And he said, well, when you're going to plow a field, it's not just a disc that will cut through the soil.

You attach a plow on a tractor, and it will have hydraulic strength that will press the blade down into the ground.

And the plow is made such that as it goes into the ground, it will then dig even deeper and turn the soil over. He said it was like a violent turning of the earth.

Okay. A violent rending of the soil. These are all the images that the poet is bringing forward so that you would see how great is his praise.

[13:41] Now, now, now you're ready for the full power of the song to be felt. It isn't just that Israel was cut loose. It isn't just that they were unbound from something.

They were unbound from something that was horrific, something that was hateful, something that was hurtful of an entire people. Is there any then surprise that Psalms like this or Israel's history like this has immediate resonance within the African American community in our own country?

That is just that Israel. That Israel is a Christian. That Israel is a Christian. That Israel is a Christian. That Israel is a Christian. That Israel is a Christian. That Israel is a Christian. That Israel is a Christian. That Israel is a Christian. That Israel is a Christian. the first congregational setting in which this song of being cut loose would have been sung.

Can you open your minds with me? Can you see a band of Israelites marching along a rural road on the way to Jerusalem? Can you see them coming at the time of harvest? Young families and elderly saints in the thousands they came spreading out along the way. But now as they walk that road, the songwriter's mind turns back to days gone by of years when the yield had been little or worse yet in times past when their sheaves of wheat have been stolen out from under them by marauders from a distant land. All of a sudden there's an individual among the many who's remembering what the good book said. That Israel planted crops but the Midianites came and devoured the produce of the land. They're remembering the seasons all the way back to the Philistines where they took them through the time of the judges of Samson of himself who was bound but with cords cut would win a victory. And then in the midst of the marching, the march, a voice, a soul voice is heard rising among the soldiers.

Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth. Yet, oh, yet they have not prevailed against me.

[16:29] See, this is poetry in its strength. Strongest form.

And so let me say to you now, are you not on the road with them? Does your own heart not testify to some kind of release by the Lord who is righteousness?

Are there things that he has cut you loose from? Are there areas of life that once held you fast and hemmed you in and gave no way out, but now you are free from?

Have you, have you, have we nothing to look back on and praise the Lord who is righteous? That gravitational line in verse four is the centerpiece of the song.

The Lord is righteous. We ought to pause for just a moment though to concede a hard truth for Israel.

[18:04] For Israel, this song of praise contains a simple problem. For Israel, unlike many other people groups throughout history, history, who have been subjects of great oppression.

As you read the Old Testament record, they were not only victims of oppression, but in their case, in the Old Testament, often they were under the assault of others by their own sinful making.

In other words, they were to be a people called out holy to God, and in their disobedience of the law, God would bring in this oppression that they might turn their hearts back toward him.

So Isaiah chapter five says of God, let me sing of my beloved, my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines.

He built a watchtower in the midst of it. He hewed out of it wine vat. He looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

[19 : 15] Or verses five, and now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard says God. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

I will make it a waste. It shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up. I also will command the clouds that they not rain upon it.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are as pleasant planting. And he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed for righteousness, but behold an outcry. Oppression, at times, was the divine consequence of their own action. And at times, this problem was wedded in the scriptures to a promise.

A promise that God would nevertheless deliver. Listen to these words. How beautiful they were for the Israelites along the way.

[20 : 22] There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit, and the spirit of the Lord shall be upon him.

Listen to it. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. Or in Isaiah chapter 53.

Who has believed what he heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground.

Or further, surely he has borne our griefs. He has carried our sorrows. And yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace. And with his wounds, we are healed.

[21 : 25] All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned away. Everyone to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed. And he was afflicted. Yet he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment, he was taken away.

And for, and as for his generation who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living. They made his grave with the wicked.

And with a rich man in his death. Although he had done no violence. And there was no deceit. In his mouth. This, this problem within Israel's history.

Yet this attending promise. That God would raise up one within them. Comes forward in prophetic ways through the very person of Jesus.

[22 : 30] Did you know that when Jesus was on the earth, he said, my, my judgment. My, my, my way to determine what's right or wrong in the world.

My judgment. Is just. And the word for just is righteous. My judgment is righteous. A righteous was a righteous one will come.

Jesus says, my judgment is righteous. Because I do not seek my own will. But the will of him who sent me. It was the same Jesus.

Who was bound. Bound. And led away. John 18, 12. It was the same Jesus who was scourged. Matthew 27, 26. By a flagrum, a short whip.

With braided hair, leather pieces of sheep bone. And small iron balls woven in. That came across his back bringing first contusion. And then cuts.

[23 : 30] And then deep lacerations. That would tear at the muscles. On his very person. Long furrows of bleeding flesh. And in his righteousness.

Righteousness. He would cut away. This is the gospel. That the. That the judgment of God. That is due. To his people. Was taken.

By his own son. That those who would. Put their faith and trust in him. Would be free. Cut loose. I thought I'd get it.

Amen. They'd be free. They would have forgiveness. Of sins. This is a song for you. This. This is what the Bible calls the good.

News. This is the gospel. Let me put it to you as clearly as I can. The gospel is the righteousness of God. Now revealed. And to be taken by faith.

[24 : 26] And you. And I. And we. Can grab hold. Of the phrase. The Lord is righteous. And has cut me loose.

From the wicked. In Christ. That we might. Know him. Well he's there.

Halfway through his song. And I'm about to take my seat. But the song. Moves doesn't it. Beyond. What they were cut loose from. To the necessity of a judgment that is yet to come. May I just read in your hearing again verses five to eight.

It's important that you hear it because today some people would call this. Hate speech. And I want to clarify how it is not. The psalmist writes may all who hate Zion be put to shame and turn backward.

[25 : 27] Let them be like the grass on the house tops which withers. Before it grows up with which the reaper does not fill his hand. Nor the binder of sheaves his arms.

Nor to those who pass by say the blessing of the Lord be upon you. We bless you in the name of the Lord. What's going on here. It's not hate speech.

This is poetic prophetic preaching. That basically says where righteousness exists. Justice must prevail.

The Lord is righteous. Therefore justice must prevail. It would be a terrible thing indeed. If righteousness existed.

But justice upon the wicked was never delivered. This is poetic prophetic preaching. The Lord is righteous. He has loosened us from the bonds of the wicked.

[26 : 26] And therefore we look for the day in the future. Where he will judge all those who hate him. Notice it isn't that they hate the people. They hate Zion verse five. They hate God.

They hate. They hate his righteousness. They hate his ways. And because of that they lash out against God. He will one day bring a full reversal of justice.

And notice how again the psalmist goes about saying it. He's still using the agrarian images of the harvest yield in the farmers field.

He's saying that they are to be put to shame. Which is literally let them be like dry land. And he's actually going forward in his psalm by speaking in contrast to the shoots in the ground.

May they be like grass that's just on the rooftops that goes down in the middle of August. Never growing strong. The escalating devastation of the final judgment is there with three negatives at the very close.

[27 : 28] May they be like the reaper that does not fill his hand. Nor the binder of sheaves in his arm. Nor those who pass by saying you have God's blessing.

In other words, may they be ever empty handed. May their arms be unfilled. May they be unheralded as they go on their way. And this too, the psalmist says, must come to pass.

Why must it come to pass? Because the Lord is righteous. And where righteousness exists, justice must prevail. And in Revelation 14, we have Jesus coming to harvest the earth sickle in hand.

My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord who is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.

Why justice? Because the Lord is righteous. Which is the Christian's hope this coming day. You ask me, when will that day come? You can have forgiveness today from all your sins.

[28 : 32] And the way you've oppressed others or fallen under the oppression of God. You can have forgiveness from that. But there will be a day, says the psalmist.

When the world will be made right. And the church ought to say hallelujah. As one preacher once said, you ask me, when will this be?

You ask me how long? I say not long. How long? Not long. For whatever a man sows, he will reap. Today, may you be free. Be free. From all that has entangled you. In life.

By walking away from the branch. Who is our Lord Christ. But if you will not have him.

[29 : 40] Then know this, says the psalmist. He'll be coming for you. For justice will be done. Our Heavenly Father.

These psalms of ascent. These songs to be sung along the way. These songs to walk by. And work by.

These songs that encourage those not done right by. May they minister to our soul. May some, even here this morning.

Place their faith in Jesus. For the forgiveness of their sins. And may they be disentangled. From that which held them fast. May they be held instead by you.

Oh Lord. Oh God. Hold. Us. Fast. Christ's name. Amen.