

Psalm 129

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Preacher: David Helm

- [0:00] Good afternoon. Our scripture reading today can be found in Psalm 129, which is page 518 in the Blue Bibles that have been provided for you.
- Please stand for the reading of God's Word. Psalm 129, a song of ascents.
- 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 off the cords of the wicked. May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward. Let them be like 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.
- [1:11] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, it's good to have you here today.
- And we arrive in our 15-week-long summer series through the Songs of Ascent to number 129.
- A perplexing psalm. And one unlike that of the previous weeks, which speak of this domestic tranquility and of the Lord watching the family and the family growing up as a heritage unto Him.
- As we look at the words of Psalm 129, I want to begin in this way. Words do at times fail. Left standing alone and under themselves, they can resemble a tattered and impoverished regiment.
- Incapable of marching victoriously onto the battlefield. Unable to capture the complete intention of the author.
- [2:39] They may contain deep truths, but words often in and of themselves are unable to rise against the opposition, which calls out against them.
- Words written down, even when done so well, do at times leave some rejecting them or others wanting more.
- And so it is with Psalm 129. I've come to think that the opening three verses, standing as they do unto themselves, leave the reader wanting more.
- While the closing verses, 5 through 8, leave many readers into an understanding of rejecting the Scriptures altogether.
- And I want to look then at this great perplexing psalm and the strength of its words. The psalm's pathos, verses 1-3.
- [3:53] They leave us wanting more because we're unfamiliar with the pathos of the psalmist. I'm going to speak on this for a few moments because I think it's not only true for Psalm 129, but true for many of the songs of ascents.

And so as you know that we have yet five to go beyond this week, I want to gather you around this little hymn book placed within the hymn book of Scripture.

What is the pathos of this psalm and of many of the songs of ascents? Interestingly, you and I live in a day when the church is fond of songs that possess a power that makes one excited.

Perhaps you come into church waiting for that kind of song. We live in that day. Younger people are more susceptible to that need than older because when you're young, you're always wanting power and excitement.

When you're old, you begin to think of God's faithfulness. But this psalm, these songs of today, you might come into a church and you might even indicate how poor the worship was because of the musical setting's inability to place within your soul some exuberant, growing sense of pathos.

[5 : 27] We're very used to that kind of song. Perhaps that in and of itself explains why so few of us have ever sat through a series on the songs of ascents because their tonal quality is so different.

Their tonal quality is not presently in vogue. And many in this series bear the imprint of a mature writer who has seen many things in life and much of it difficult.

So it's good for us to remember that the songs of ascents and this psalm 129 were written by members of the road-weary faithful.

The only reason I come up with why we don't sing the songs of ascents in church today in large part is because we're so far removed from those road-weary people, their own experiential witness.

These songs are rooted in the history of the Jewish people who pulled them out at least three times a year on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In which they were commemorating on two of those occasions the release from Egypt as they went to the great feast at the temple.

[6 : 56] And that feast, those feasts, were celebrating the release of 430 years of bondage. And so the songs of ascents resonated with their soul.

But it wasn't overwhelmingly exuberant or joyful. It was much closer to what we heard today in the tonal quality of the offertory.

To capture the musical pathos of Psalm 129, simply picture the overheated summer of 1963, the year in our country of the celebrated freedom riders, the resilient ones, the beleaguered ones who made pilgrimage from one southern city to the next.

I'm reminded graphically in my mind of the black and white cover on Taylor Branch's book, *Parting the Waters of the March on Selma*, with the opening three or four along this band of pilgrims, all equal in stride.

The American flag being held by someone back in the distance. Now remember, I'm trying to get you to understand the musical pathos of this song.

[8 : 22] There along the rural roads of Alabama, the students lifted every voice and sang. And on either side, there would have been harvesters in the fields who could hear their songs.

Simple songs, but mature songs. Penned under duress and filled with longings for a better day. And often using, as does the African American spiritual, a call and response that it might carry the pilgrim along.

Such is the musical pathos of a road-weary one. Look then at Psalm 129.

And all of a sudden, the very opening words, when you understand that they were written to be put to music and instrumentation, even the very letters, almost begin to rise in unison as a choir, and they give voice to the author's full expression.

And when you understand that, you're ready to hear it. Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth, says the caller. And then he asks for the response, Let Israel now say, Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth.

- [9 : 48] Yet they have not prevailed against me. The plowers plowed upon my back. They made long their furrows. Can you hear the musical pathos?

That opening word, greatly, or as they put in the bottom, often, or as I took a good look at it this week, many, a multitude, many, says the singer, many, many afflictions from my youth.

Let all the people say, many from my youth. Words of amazing grace, through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come.

There is a pathos. There is a weight. There is a gravity to the opening three verses here that can only come from the reflection of someone mature in years who has seen much in life and at that, much of it, difficult.

Now, you don't set that to, you know, exuberant joy. Did we worship God today?

- [11 : 22] Because did I feel happy inside? But this is nevertheless a song of worship. A song to be sung. From my youth.

From my youth, says the psalmist. From the youth of Israel. Reminds me of Hosea 11.1. When Israel was a youth, I loved him, and out of Egypt, I called him.

And so as the pilgrims were walking toward Jerusalem, singing their songs of ascents, commemorating the three great feasts, two of which were rooted in the release from Egypt.

The Lord says in Hosea, when Israel was a youth, when he came out of Egypt, I called him. And so the singers of this song are reflecting upon years and years and years of history.

From their youth. From when they were but a small shoot in the field. They were birthed in duress.

- [12 : 35] Many. Many. You think of Israel's history. Israel's hardships. You think of those early days followed by the marauding Philistines during the days of the judges and even the early kings, both David and Solomon in some respects.

Many. Many. Many. Many. You think of the Assyrians and then the Babylonians.

Many. So too for the church throughout time. Whenever the cross of Jesus Christ is held high, the opposition will always respond by being on the rise.

It's true for the Christian. Peter writes, Though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials. But he goes on in the letter to indicate that it is necessary.

And that little while in chapter 1 is the little while of your life in chapter 4 and 5 of 1 Peter. Though now for a little while, through your life long, if you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, you will meet seasons of Psalm 129, Pathos.

- [14 : 04] Afflictions. The word is there. Greatly have they afflicted me. Verse 3, The plowers plowed upon my back. They made long their furrows.

It's almost as if in verse 1 you have the youth arising from the ground, this little shoot, and then the agricultural imagery is continuing. The plowers plowing upon the back.

This indeed is the indication of the whips on the Israelites' back. Kyle and Dalich with their commentary on verse 3 in the Hebrew.

They made long their furrows. It's an indication according to them. Debate will of course ensue amidst our Hebrew scholars in here. But it could even be referring to the turn.

The turn at the end of the field. Even that was going to be a long turn before the line was and the stripes were laid down once again.

[15 : 12] I think given that five minutes of pathos, the words which left unto themselves leave you wanting more begin to resonate within your soul 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. You ready to sing that when you come to church on Sunday? That's the experiential song of one who's weighed down.

And it belongs in the house of the Lord. I guess I want to say that to you today. It's okay to come to church and sing a song like this on occasion.

The church must recover this mature understanding of life if we are to be rooted for the coming day. Lest everyone here get the impression that when you arrive on Sunday you must be up all the time.

[16 : 26] You must be light all the while. That your experience in life and your labors must never be met with affliction or trial.

No, that's not the case in the church. How you doing today? Many. Many. That's okay. I'm glad you've come.

Because the psalmist knows the pathos of your heart. Yet even on those Sundays when you come in that sense you get a real sense from this psalm just as we did in the chorus of the Offitry.

You can read it again. You'll see it. It's undergirding. There's a sense of verse 2. Yet they have not prevailed against me. In other words, the psalm even in the many has an undergirding strength.

There is a faith. There is praise. And so it ought to be for us as well.

[17 : 34] Words left under themselves do at times leave some wanting more. But words left under themselves do at times leave some rejecting them altogether.

Look at verses 5-8. We're not dealing here anymore with the pathos of the psalm. We're dealing with the ethos of the people. What kind of people carry themselves in this way?

Look at the words. May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward. Let them be like 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 arm.

Nor do those who pass by say the blessing of the Lord be upon you. We bless you in the name of the Lord. These words cause many to reject the Bible outrightly.

Let me explain why. They're linked to a term that's referred to in a variety of psalms that would place them in something called the imprecatory psalms.

[18 : 42] That's a very difficult word. It comes from the Latin. It's not going to be helpful to most of us. But think of the word for prayer and then think of the word against and that's about what you have.

That this is a prayer against people. Imagine the ethos of an individual. The way they would carry themselves. Say you know what I want to happen to my enemies? I want them to be like grass that the guy can't even get a hold of.

I want them to be like grass on the roof that before it even grows up because it's so ill-rooted when the sun comes it's snuffed out. Let them be put to shame.

The imprecatory Psalms have caused many to see a great discontinuity between what the Hebrew Scriptures put forward here and even someone like Jesus what he puts forward where he says you have heard it said to love your neighbor and hate your enemy but I tell you to do what?

love your enemy but these are prayers against enemies. Look at the nature of the verses.

[19:52] May they be put to shame. That's the way the prayer is. Thus the perplexing nature of our song. You ever been told to come to church and let us all go to prayer now?

Lord may those who hate Zion be put to shame. May you snuff them out before they ever get going. You don't hear that much do you? I was thinking of this verse here.

Again it's all agricultural in its imagery isn't it? But I was thinking of verse 7 the other day with which the reaper does not fill his hand nor the binder of sheaves his arm. There's the image there of someone who's harvesting but coming up empty.

You know just a week ago I was in Wisconsin at my mother-in-law's house on the lake and one of the things I love to do is make sure that lawn is mowed. You know in the city I don't have to mow a lawn but there's something nice about the fresh cut smell of grass and lawns that look right.

You know. So I got up there and I started mowing that lawn. That wasn't a lot of lawn to mow. It was August.

[21:13] It had been dry. It didn't have much rain. After a while I felt like I was painting lines on the grass with the wheel treads. That's all I was doing. A little further on I felt like I was vacuuming the grass of all those little falling helicopters.

Thank God for the falling helicopter seeds because without them I couldn't have told where I had mowed and where I hadn't mowed. I got done with the whole lawn. Shook the bag out. Very little there.

That's what the psalmist is saying here. May the enemies of Zion, may they be like the grass that even when the reaper reaps can't even fill his hand.

Nothing to show for what they've cut down. What are we to make of this nature? What are we to make of the ethos of a people who would carry themselves in prayer in this way?

I want to make four simple statements and maybe some of the other aspects of the imprecatory psalms will come in through verse chapter 130 to 134.

[22:24] I'm not quite sure, but if you want to see the strongest imprecatory psalm, just turn over to page 137. You'll see the same kind of imagery put forward. This one is just unbelievable here by the Babylonian exiles as they write this.

And in verse 7, O daughter of Babylon, verse 8, sorry, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you've done to us. Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks.

That's an imprecatory psalm. That is a prayer against. What do we do with that when we find it in the Bible?

First of all, I want to say that imprecatory psalms are above all prayers for justice to be done. They are not prayers against justice.

They are not unjust. They are prayers for justice. Let me see if I can distinguish it for you in this way. This is a conundrum, these psalms, and I don't want to play light with it. But these are the words in a sense of one who desires vindication.

[23:30] They are not words that are vindictive. That may be some help in helping you think your way clear. You are not to be vindictive towards those who are your enemies.

But there is a heartfelt longing for vindication that you can make known to the Lord. Granted, you need to be in the right.

But they are prayers for justice. They are not unjust. Second, their strident tone is rooted in a concern for the name of God and His reputation, much more so than the individual Christian or follower of the Torah.

They are rooted in the concern for the reputation of God. Look again very closely, Psalm 129 verse 5. May all who hate Zion.

It doesn't say may all who hate me. May all who hate Zion. Now that's a key indicator on understanding the content of the prayer.

[24:37] Because Zion was the place of God's abode. Zion was in a sense equivalent with the presence of God in the world. So the prayers are for those who are trying to overthrow God's place in the world.

God's designed to reign in the world. God's rule over everyone in the world. May all of those who are lifting their hands and voices against God, may they be put to shame.

Why? Because the Lord is righteous. Whether or not you, His follower, are in every respect. It's very much like loyal subjects wishing ill against those who are plotting against their king.

The loyal subjects being that God's people are wanting God's name to be vindicated in the world. And all of God's enemies to be thrown down.

That will help you in some sense when you come across these strange and perplexing psalms. Another accusation, of course, is that Jesus Himself goes so against this kind of song, this kind of prayer.

[25:57] I don't have time to explore this fully. You can do it with your own Bible later. But when all the data is in, it's amazing what Jesus says against His opposition. It's amazing what the New Testament...

The New Testament actually elevates a sense of retribution in the world. It actually puts it forward in this great cataclysmic final impending judgment on all the universe.

The New Testament actually rises as a whole. And Jesus Himself spoke of a far greater judgment that would come upon those who did not submit themselves to the ways of the Lord.

So we're underway. If you've never come across the imprecatory psalms before, you did today and you see why the pathos of this psalm, verses 1 to 3, is something we're not ready for.

The ethos is something many are not willing to claim. And so what logos is left? Verse 4.

[27:10] The Lord is righteous. He has cut the cords of the wicked. That's the word of the psalm. It's right there in the center.

The psalm's logos is the Lord is righteous and He has cut the cords of the wicked. I want to say a couple of things about this. I want to say as a Christian that I believe that these verses find their fullest expression in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

They point us to the manner in which salvation comes so that in the opening three verses many are the afflictions even from youth. Greatly have they afflicted me yet they have not prevailed against me.

The plowers plowed upon my back. They made long their furrows but the Lord is righteous and He has cut the cords of the wicked. I believe that these verses find their fullest expression in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The Lord is righteous. The very term that the servant that Israel is to look for is given. So the servant who will overthrow all of God's enemy is called the righteous one.

[28:30] And there are great echoes of these opening four verses in Isaiah the prophet which we also heard read from today.

Let me see if I can show you a couple of those echoes. Take a look at chapter 51 of Isaiah. We won't be long now. I know many of you who have young children with you who normally are in Sunday school.

Tell them it won't be long for ice cream now. Chapter 51, as you begin to look at Isaiah's prophecy, he's beginning now to say that the Lord is going to deliver his own people.

And he says in chapter 51, getting them ready, listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord. In chapter 5, you begin to see this thread that really begins to move through Isaiah's prophecy.

God says, my righteousness draws near. My salvation has gone out and my arms will judge the peoples. you can look even further at verses 7 to 8 of Isaiah 51.

[29 : 42] Listen to me, you who know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law, fear not the reproach of man, nor be dismayed at their revilings. For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool, but my righteousness will be forever, and my salvation to all generations.

God is promising to bring his righteousness into the world. So he says in verse 11 of 51, the ransomed of the Lord will return.

They will come where? To Zion. With what? Singing. And at that time with everlasting joy shall be upon their heads, and they will attain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

When is that to be fulfilled? And in whom? When you begin to look at the way Isaiah moves forward, it's through the suffering servant.

The righteous one will be the suffering servant. So that when you get to chapter 52, and it talks about that salvation which is coming, in verse 13 he says, Behold, my servant shall act wisely, he shall be lifted high, and shall be exalted, and then many will be astonished at what?

[30 : 56] His appearance which is marred beyond human semblance. Talk about many afflictions. He will sprinkle many nations.

He'll shut the mouths of kings. Who has believed this? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? Chapter 53, 2, this servant grew up before him like a young plant, like a shoot from his youth, like a root out of dry ground.

He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not.

Many, many, many. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we have seemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted, but he is wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.

You can almost feel Psalm 129, the plowers plowing the back of God's people. With his stripes we are healed. The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

[32 : 20] Verse 11, out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied. By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

Isn't that beautiful? The righteous one who cuts the cords of the enemies of God is, for the Christian, the righteous servant that Isaiah puts forward who will suffer, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus. These verses find their fullest expression in the person and work of Jesus Christ. So let me say that while this psalm recounts the hardships of God's people, it ought to rekindle our praise.

It ought to rekindle our praise. Jesus. Can you imagine that? Coming to this song that starts way down low. Low. As low as the cello can go.

And it rises in time through the righteousness of the Lord to rekindle praise in the hearts and souls of God's people who entered this song under the pathos of many.

[33 : 48] let's pray and then let us sing with this pathos in Christ's name. Our Heavenly Father, go before us even in our singing that it would reflect the right maturity, the right weight, the right longing, the right lack, but the right praise.

enrapture us in the love of Christ, we pray. Amen. Amen. Thank you.