

Enduring Persecution

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[0 : 00] Please turn your Bible to Psalm 129. And this morning we are continuing our sermon series in the Psalms of Ascent,!

in the Psalms of Ascent, which are comprised of Psalms 120 through 134.

And for those of you who are joining us for the first time this morning, the Psalms of Ascent are a group of Psalms, 15 of them, that the children of Israel would sing.

These Psalms were written by various Psalmists, but they were put together, almost like in a special songbook for a special occasion. That special occasion was the pilgrimages that they made to Jerusalem three times per year.

They would sing these Psalms. And it's very instructive to study these Psalms, because when you do, you find that these Psalms teach so much about God, about life, and teaches a lot about ourselves.

[1 : 17] And that's why we have embarked upon this sermon series, that we want to likewise benefit from these Psalms of Ascent. And so, please follow along as I read Psalm 129.

I'm reading from the English Standard Version. Let's read Psalm 139.

May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned 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, May the blessing of the Lord be upon you. We bless you in the name of the Lord. Would you pray with me?

Father, we bow our hearts this morning, and we are so grateful for your word and the privilege we have to sit under its preaching. Would you come by the power of your spirit, and would you superintend the preaching of your word?

[2 : 58] Would you superintend its proclamation from my lips, and superintend its hearing in our ears and hearts? And would you be glorified in all things?

We pray in Christ's name. Amen. Well, Psalm 129 begins in a very unusual way. The way it begins forces us to ask a question, and the question is this, Who are they?

I don't know if you're like me, but whenever I'm in conversation with people, I find that sometimes people would just start a conversation, but we talk about several different things, and then they'll say they, or he, and I'll say they who.

And I think that's what happens when we read Psalm 129. Three times in verses 1 and 2, the psalmist refers to they, but he doesn't identify who they are.

So who exactly are they? Who are those whom the psalmist refers to as they? Well, they are those who persecute God's people.

[4 : 17] They are the enemies of God's people. And this persecution was such that the psalmist wrote a psalm about it.

This was of a moment. This was a thing. This was real. This was not a fluke. This was something that was worthy of capturing in word and song that God's people incorporated into their singing, into their worship as they would make their pilgrimages.

They sang about it. And when we look at Psalm 129, one of the things that stands out to us is the fight was not a fair fight.

The psalmist says that his persecutors, his enemies, afflicted him from his youth. And so this was a lifelong persecution that was being faced.

And so the question this morning is, how do we, as the people of God, persevere in the midst of such lifelong, persistent persecution?

[5 : 34] How do we do that? Well, I think Psalm 129 tells us how, and it is this. We endure persecution by remembering that the Lord will preserve us and defeat our enemies.

That's how we're able to endure lifelong persecution from our earliest days.

We do it by remembering that the Lord will preserve us and defeat our enemies. And so let's consider this truth from Psalm 129, and I want to do so under three headings.

First, I want to consider our persecution. Look again at verses one through three. 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.

[6 : 44] They made long their furrows. The psalmist starts out in verse one and gives the impression that he's referring to himself, but it soon becomes clear that what he has done is he has personalized the people of God in a corporate sense.

He's unified them, referring to them with the personal pronouns of me and my. The psalmist is inviting all of God's people to reflect on this shared experience of being persecuted, not individually, but corporately.

And the psalmist calls them to consider the afflictions that Israel has endured. And this was Israel's lot from...

It was a young nation. A young nation enslaved in Egypt for 400 plus years. You can read the account in Exodus. And then when they were set free from Egyptian bondage, they faced hostility on the way to the Promised Land.

They faced hostility when they got to the Promised Land. Nations that were more ancient than they were, older than they were, established nations were hostile towards this fledgling nation that God had raised up.

[8 : 19] I believe most of us know that one of the longstanding rules of war is that women and children are to be protected. You don't see women and children as fair game in war.

That's a general rule in war. It's an atrocity when women and children are intentionally harmed. And yet the psalmist says of God's people, he says, from their youth, from their infancy, from their young, they were afflicted.

Ruthlessly and heartlessly they were persecuted. He says in verse 3, the plowers plowed upon my back.

They made long their furrows. He is using poetic license to say it is almost like the same way the oxen will come and bring the plowing instruments over the ground and dig these deep furrows to plant seeds in.

He said, that's what they did to our back. We just laid down and they plowed over us again and again and again and again. That's the language that the psalmist chooses to lift up to give us a picture of how cruel and how severe the persecution was that came their way, how heartless it was, how ruthless it was.

[9 : 46] And why? Why were they doing this? Israel is a young nation. Israel had no armies. Israel had very little that they could fight back with.

They did it for one simple reason. They belonged to the Lord. They were the Lord's people. And so this hostility was directed towards them.

And really, this was part of a larger cosmic battle. It was the battle between God and Satan. This was a battle between good and evil. And sometimes, evil comes against God's people.

And I shouldn't say sometimes. Ultimately, evil comes against God's people because they represent God. I don't know if you've ever seen like maybe the best one that comes to mind, an angry wife or girlfriend and they can't beat the boyfriend or the husband and so what they decide is to beat and break up anything that represents him, his car, tear up his clothes, do whatever and that's to get back at the one who owns it.

And so we come into this cosmic battle as the people of God. Evil ultimately comes against the people of God because they belong to God, because they represent God.

[11 : 27] And this is a lesson that we really need to grasp as believers in Jesus Christ. there is a kind of persecution and evil that comes against those who belong to Christ, not personally but corporately for one reason, they are the Lord's people.

And so brothers and sisters, this is so important for us to remember that persecution comes to God's people because they are God's people. It's not unique to us, us.

It is common to all of us. And sometimes we encounter people who oppose us, people who persecute us.

And really, truth be told, they don't even know why they persecute us and why they oppose us. It's not because they don't like our face or they don't like our personality.

It's because they're instruments of Satan. And they persecute us and they hate us because they are doing what their father does, Satan, who hates God's people.

[12 : 49] And I think that understanding this persecution that we, the people of God, face is especially important at this time when there's so many false voices that are telling us quite the opposite.

Many false voices are telling us, well, if you're a Christian, you're supposed to live a trouble-free life. And if you have enough faith, you will live a trouble-free life. They say, as a Christian, everything is supposed to be victorious about you.

You're supposed to always live in the mountains and never in the valleys. But not so. The witness of Scripture says not so, and the witness of life says not so.

Psalms 129 is one of many places in Scripture where we are able to see that it is otherwise than the false voices tell us. Psalm 129 reminds us that God's people are persecuted and afflicted ultimately for one reason, because they are God's people.

And friends, we need to hear this again if we've heard it before, and if you have not heard it before, you need to hear this. Hearing this and embracing this will save you a lot of disappointment because when you buy the lie that life is going to be a bed of roses for you serving the Lord, that all your problems are going to go away, what's going to happen is you will get a double disappointment.

[14 : 25] You will get a disappointment that the lies believed were not true, and then you get the disappointment of having to face with what is very clear is the Lord of God's people throughout the pages of Scripture.

God's people. But that's not all the psalmist says in Psalm 129. Not only does he address the reality of our persecution as God's people, he also addresses the reality of our preservation in the midst of our persecution.

This brings you to my second point, our preservation. Notice in verse 2 that the psalmist does more than call God's people to reflect on how they've been persecuted and afflicted by their enemies from their youth.

He also calls them to reflect on a miracle. He states the miracle in the latter part of verse 2. He says, yet they have not prevailed against me.

Now that is a miracle. It's a miracle that we can easily overlook and read past. Brothers and sisters, the enemies of Israel did not prevail against them.

[15 : 43] That is nothing short of miraculous. Just imagine a very small young child. An adult after adult comes at that child and beats the child and has their way with the child.

The child doesn't have a chance. Not a chance of surviving. It would be humanly impossible for that child to survive. And that was Israel's lot.

Well-established nations like Egypt fought and oppressed Israel in its infancy as a nation. We had had no government.

We had no institutions. It just had a promise from God that he was going to make a nation out of them. They had no army.

They had no weapons. And yet Pharaoh and the Egyptians were defeated and forced to let them go. And as they went they gave them all the gold and all the silver that they could possibly carry out of Egypt.

[16 : 46] Why? Why did Israel prevail? How did Israel prevail over armies more powerful than they? Well the psalmist tells us in verse 4, the Lord is righteous.

He has cut the cords of the wicked. God did that. It wasn't about Israel. It wasn't that they were special. God did that and he set it up in such a way that anyone who was halfway looking and halfway thinking will know it isn't because of Israel that they were victorious.

The Lord who is righteous cut the cords of the wicked and he preserved Israel. And in many ways we see this truth being lived out even to this day surrounded by hostile nations.

Israel continues to be preserved and I believe for no other reason not because of their military prowess and skill but simply because of a God who doesn't repent of his callings.

the Lord cut the cords of the wicked because he is just and because no wickedness will go unchecked and unpunished forever whether in this life or in the life to come.

[18 : 20] And so brothers and sisters the psalmist calls us to bear in mind these two realities. It's the reality of our persecution for no other reason than the fact that we belong to the Lord and the reality of our preservation for no other reason than the fact that the Lord is righteous and he defeats the enemies of his people cutting their cords cords we never can cut.

Now I'm sure if it's left up to us certainly if it was left up to me I would not even allow the persecution to come but it's not left up to us and the Lord in his wise and good providence allows his people to be persecuted he allows the enemy to come against them and in his time and in his way he intervenes he intervenes when he is ready to cut the cords of the wicked and therefore he alone is our only hope and they would prevail against us if the Lord does not intervene but we can't read a passage like this and not remember the reality that some died we can't forget the reality that sometimes the persecution that comes the way of

God's people ends in death but even when persecution ends in death brothers and sisters the enemy has not won the reality is that death is appointed to all of us and unless the Lord returns sooner we will all die one way or another and so death by persecution is only one way to die but we will all die but here's what we remember we remember that our sovereign Lord superintends every single life and every single death there is no accidents with him in life coming to be and life ceasing to be and when it comes to the death of his own people here's what the psalmist says in psalm 116 verse 15 precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints there's a sovereign God who permits death to come even in persecution and it is precious in his sight when his saints die and so for the people of

God however we die whether by persecution or otherwise there awaits us a glorious resurrection and this is why death is never final for us death is never a defeat even if it results from persecution and the Lord will judge all of our enemies especially our arch enemy who is Satan and so brothers and sisters those who persecute us can only go as far as and for as long as the sovereign Lord allows and in the end they will not prevail over us even if our persecution ends in death because resurrection awaits us and resurrection is a part of God's power and his preservation of his people that we will not finally see corruption now I'd be negligent to say to us this morning if I didn't say to us this morning that even when the Lord does intervene in the situation and cut the cords of the wicked and the persecution lifts in that situation in a fallen and a broken world where there's still the enemy of our souls there's another one around the corner it'll be nice if it was once if it was one and done but it's not one and done it will come again again and also

I think it's important for us to be able to distinguish between persecution that comes our way because we belong to Christ and persecution and opposition that comes our way because of our own sinful conduct there's a distinction listen to how Peter makes that distinction in 1 Peter chapter 4 verses 14 to 16 he writes if you are insulted for the name of Christ you are blessed because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you but let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler yet if anyone suffers as a Christian let him not be ashamed but let him glorify God in that name brothers and sisters there is a distinction between persecution and opposition that comes our way because of our own sinful conduct versus that which comes our way because of righteous conduct and because we belong to the

[24 : 39] Lord there is persecution and there is suffering that comes to us because we belong to Christ and Jesus was honest about this from the very outside of his ministry he said to his disciples the world has hated me and the world will hate you he said in this world you're going to have tribulation but be of good cheer I have overcome the world he has laid this out plain he didn't hide it this is all part and parcel of what it means to follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord so friends let us accept it let us embrace it especially knowing that the Lord is sovereign over it and he preserves his people now I know that we all need to hear this truth this morning but I believe that there are some of us who especially need to hear it there are some of us who need to put our trials and our sufferings and our persecutions are the hands of people in perspective it is ultimately because you belong to

Christ it is ultimately because you belong to Christ that you are to be harassed and pressured in this world and scripture even says do you not know that those who live righteous lives will suffer persecution but the good news is that the Lord sees and he knows and he knows the time when he will cut the cords of the wicked and he will preserve you and even if he allows death to be your lot

death will not be the final word there awaits a glorious resurrection for you so Psalm 129 reminds us of our persecution of God's people our preservation as

God's people and third and finally and briefly Psalm 129 reminds us of our petition as God's people we have in Psalm 129 an example of how we should pray for those who afflict and persecute us look again at verses 5 to 8 may all who hate Zion be put to shame and turn backward 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 those who pass by say the blessing of the Lord be upon you we bless you in the name of the Lord so what must our petition be our petition must be that those who hate Zion those who hate the corporate people of God those who hate those who belong to God will be put to shame and their schemes will be thwarted that they will be turned back in their tracks our cry should be oh

Lord don't let them prosper in their wickedness Lord let them be like the grass that starts to have promise but it goes nowhere it's the kind of grass that they had in that region that they all knew too well grass that would grow up in the house and as soon as it sprung up the sun would scorch it it would die it would not grow up to anything that could be reaped or harvested let their end be like that let their wicked deeds be like that and the psalmist concludes that God's people are to petition the Lord that their circumstances those who persecute them their circumstances will be such that nobody will pass by them and say the blessings of the

Lord be upon you they wouldn't bless them because of the wickedness it would be like passing someone who is breaking into a car and say the Lord bless you as you break the law brothers and sisters while Psalm 129 speaks to us as God's people ultimately Psalm 129 is not about God's people Psalm 129 is about God's son he is the one who was afflicted in the true sense of the word and persecuted in the true sense of the word from his youth even as a baby powerful King Herod sought him to put him to death and throughout his earthly ministry the people of the Jews and the religious leaders sought to kill him and in the end they succeeded with the help of Pilate and they crucified him and they literally furrowed his back they whipped him and they pierced his hands and his side and they struck him and they smote him and the

[30 : 26] Lord did not preserve him from it Isaiah says he was wounded for our transgressions he was crushed for our iniquity upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace brothers and sisters the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ was the most unjust act in human history because the perfectly innocent suffered at the hands of the guilty for the guilty he suffered as a criminal he suffered as a wrongdoer he suffered in such a way that anyone who passed by on that day would not say the Lord bless you indeed Isaiah tells us in Isaiah 53 that he was despised and rejected by men a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief as one from whom men hid their faces he was despised we esteemed him not as

Jesus hung on the cross people didn't even look at him they hid their faces from him it was such a hideous sight to behold because he was dying the death of a criminal he was dying the death of the wicked but we know he was not wicked he was taking the place of the wicked and so brothers and sisters as we face our persecutions as we face afflictions at the hands of the wicked let us remember the persecutions and the afflictions of the Lord Jesus Christ his death at the hands of the wicked for the wicked among whom we are included and in this world as we journey home as we share in the sufferings of Christ let us rejoice let us rejoice remembering that we we only get tokens of what he endured

I was thinking about it as I prepared and I imagine that we have all lived long enough to know the grief the pain of being falsely accused or surprisingly betrayed by a friend wrongly condemned for something that we're not guilty of and when we do when we experience that we get a small taste of what the perfectly innocent one enjoyed see you and I are sinners and when we experience injustice that whatever degree of righteousness that is in us that pales in comparison to the one who's perfectly righteous who deserved anything but the treatment that he received but when we do we get a small taste of the sufferings of

Christ and rather than those experiences turning on ourselves and looking to ourselves may we look to Christ and yet how did Jesus respond he didn't respond the way the psalmist did in psalm 129 5 through 8 instead he said father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing and when we experience persecution yes we should rightly pray that they do not prosper in their wickedness that they do not prosper in their persecution but we should also intercede for their souls we should also likewise pray as Jesus did for their forgiveness so how should we as God's people

respond when we are persecuted let us learn from psalm 129 but ultimately let us look to the Lord Jesus and his example of suffering at the hands of sinners let's pray father we thank you this morning that when we suffer in this world we get to share in the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ and we pray oh Lord that our persecutions and the sufferings that we endure will never be in a vacuum we would look to you remembering that you're the sovereign Lord over all of them and in your way and time you will intervene and you will preserve your people you will preserve us even if death comes to us the death will not be the final word and you will resurrect us but oh Lord may we like the Lord Jesus bear both in our hearts and on our lips words of forgiveness forgiveness to those who persecute us that you would forgive them for they do not know what they are doing we pray these things in Christ's name as you leave today the Lord bless you and keep you the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you may the [36 : 13] Lord lift his countenance upon you and give you peace through Jesus Christ our Lord amen amen