

Psalm 129

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[0 : 00] Well, it's just great to be preaching here with all of you in the congregation. And we are coming towards the end of a series of the Psalms of Ascent.

And these are climbing psalms. They are psalms for the road, for the journey. They are about people singing as they're traveling from different parts of Israel to Jerusalem, usually by foot. And they actually climb up to Jerusalem, which rises above the valleys around it. And if you were a Jew living at that time, you would have made that journey three times a year for the major feasts of Passover, where it marks Israel's exodus from Egypt.

The Feast of Weeks, which is Pentecost, marking the giving of the law in Sinai. And then the Feast of Tabernacles, the wandering of Israel in the wilderness.

They were all reminders that the Hebrew people were pilgrim people. Now, that is a strange kind of word for us. We don't use it that much.

[1 : 12] Now, growing up in the United States, I thought of pilgrims only at Thanksgiving. And I thought of people coming a long ways from England to Plymouth Rock on the Mayflower. And they wore black and white with strange hats.

And they had strange-looking guns that they shot turkeys with for Thanksgiving. But pilgrims are actually anyone with a clear destination that they are deeply committed to.

Every time a family made that journey to Jerusalem, they were reminded that they were pilgrim people. They were deeply committed to going to a place that was not just the capital city.

It was called Zion, which means the place where God dwells with his people. It was a very important destination. They worshipped God at that temple, which is the foretaste of heaven come to earth.

So even though the 12 tribes had settled in different parts of Israel, their pilgrimage design reminded them that they were not permanent residents there.

[2 : 20] And just as they were on a physical journey, they believed that they were on a spiritual as well as physical journey where God is taking them one day to the heavenly city, the place of fellowship with God forever.

And as Christians, we know and believe that Jesus fulfills that hope. He has died. And he has risen to bring all nations into that pilgrimage, into that journey by the forgiveness of sins.

And he actually changes us in that journey to be more like him, like Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. There is change in that journey.

And he is the goal. He is the end of that journey. He will bring a new heaven and a new earth very clearly, our true home. And he will be revealed as the perfect judge who makes all things right.

And that means that everyone that follows Jesus is passing through this world. We are on a road. We have not yet arrived at our true home.

[3 : 32] And so all Christians are pilgrims. Now, one of the great descriptions of the Christian life was written in 1678 by John Bunyan. And it's called, this is the full name of it, The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which is to Come.

That's the name of the book. I found out this week that this book, Pilgrim's Progress, is the first novel written in English. And it is one of the best-selling English books of all times.

English books written and also translated in 200 languages. It's amazing. And I think it would be great for you to read that this summer, even if you've read this before.

Because in this book, you see that a pilgrimage, the pilgrimage, is both a deep blessing, but also there's great opposition and suffering described in the life of a pilgrim in this book as they travel to the celestial city, God's dwelling.

And he writes vividly about this, John Bunyan does, because he experienced both great blessing in his life, but also pain and suffering in many, many years in prison.

[4 : 47] And in the same way, if you were to look at Psalm 128, which is the psalm just before the one I'm going to talk about in a moment, you'd see that the pilgrimage has a deep blessing at the very heart of the pilgrimage.

Psalm 128 says, Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways. You shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. And then our psalm today, Psalm 129, is a profound psalm of opposition to our journey, opposition from outside forces to our pilgrimage.

It says that suffering is inevitable in the life of a pilgrim. Now, you might think, this is not going to be a very cheery sermon, Dan, to listen to.

However, there is great good in this for us today, because in the midst of suffering, in the midst of opposition to this journey that you experience, God works very powerfully, and he blesses, and he shows himself to us.

So that twin reality of blessing as well as suffering happens at the same time. This is central in the pilgrim life. And so I want to point out three things about pilgrim suffering from this psalm.

[6 : 06] The first, in the first three verses, is that pilgrims persevere under suffering. Secondly, pilgrims are transformed through suffering, throughout suffering, and that's in verse 4.

And then finally, the end part is that they are vindicated and even blessed in suffering. So let's look at verse 1, first of all.

It's a song, and I like the way we did this in the service, because it was exactly the way it's intended in Psalm 128. The cantor sings, greatly have they afflicted me from my youth.

And then he says, let Israel now say, all together, everyone sing, greatly have they afflicted me from my youth. Let's say that together, actually. Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth.

There you go. It's a reenactment of this psalm, the way it was sung. It's saying that Israel, from its very youth, its very beginning, their history is one of great oppression.

[7 : 09] They were slaves in Egypt. Even when they were released and brought into the Promised Land, they experienced great opposition within that land. And then there were threats from superpowers outside of Israel as well.

And we know that finally that they were deported to Babylon for a long time. Throughout the history of Israel, there's been oppression and suffering because they were the people of God.

So, why sing about that? You know, most countries sing about their victories. They sing about success. Well, it's because of verse 2.

It says there, Yet they have not prevailed against me. Literally, in the original it says, Yet they were not able.

Not able to what? They could not. Even with all the loss and pain they inflicted, they could not destroy the people of God. They were not able, with all their power, to keep Israel from walking with God towards that destination that he has for them in their pilgrimage.

[8 : 17] Amazingly, they persevered. It is worth singing about. Now, when you think of your own perseverance, you might think, It would be so much easier to be a Christian if only I was not facing these very hard circumstances.

If only the people I work with were not so difficult to be with. If my family were not suffering so many problems. If my mental and my physical health was better.

If my parents understood me. If the culture around me was not so anti-God. If we had our own church building.

We could serve them so much better. If this pandemic were not so disruptive. I could be a much better Christian. And it may be that it was all you could do this morning to get here and walk to church.

Or maybe it was all you could do to click on that website on the internet to be with us today. But the question is not so much who or what your opponents are in your pilgrimage.

[9 : 26] But how is God dealing with you in the midst of that opposition? In the midst of that suffering? Can you place your trust in God and persevere?

That's the question of this psalm and all of the psalms of ascent. And the thing I love about this psalm is it's very realistic about those sufferings and opposition that we face in our journey.

It understands how painful and profound the losses can be. So Psalm 129 paints a graphic picture from the farm of Israel's sufferings over the years.

In verse 3 it says, The plowers plowed my back. They made long their furrows. You see what it's saying here?

That just as the plows cut deeply into the soil to cultivate, the people of Israel have literally experienced cuts in their backs by the whips of the Egyptians as they were in slavery.

[10:26] They have been cut deep into their souls by their grief and losses over the years. As though that plow kept cutting on and on in long, long furrows right through their lives.

You see, suffering deeply affects the life of every pilgrim, yet they are not overcome. They are people who persevere in the face of every attempt to destroy it.

How can this be? How can this possibly be the case? Well, it is because of verse 4, and this is our second point, that God transforms pilgrims through sufferings.

And so it says there, The Lord is righteous. He has cut the cords of the wicked. Now this verse, this little verse, is the turning point in the whole psalm.

He has been very realistic about enemies and suffering and opposition. And now he's realistic about God, who God is for you.

[11:31] And that changes the whole perspective for the pilgrim. It is critical. The word Lord here in the original is that covenant name of God.

He gave to his people when he brought them into a living relationship with himself. It emphasizes that. He has called Israel and you and me this morning to be his people, to belong to him so that he is our God, who loves us and who has chosen us.

And it says here that that God is righteous. Now that's not just an attribute of God that we just sort of throw away because we hear the word righteous a lot.

It means that throughout our suffering, and this real sense of being plowed under, he will act according to his character every single time.

He will keep his promises over and over again. He will love us. He will keep us as his own, even in the midst of the most fearsome opposition, the deepest pain.

[12:42] He will walk with us. We cannot be destroyed. We must prevail. It is because he is righteous. His powerful almighty will is for our good.

And it's something that we may need to be, I think, need to be reminded of over and over again.

And we are actually. So if you were to turn to Psalm 136, we don't have time right now, but I'll tell you there, there are 26 verses in that Psalm, and 26 times it says, the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever.

The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. This is his love for us. God's righteousness means that in all our suffering or oppression, he will act according to that character.

The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. Now, how does he show himself righteous? Well, look at verse 4.

He has cut the cords of the wicked. And this is a picture of God cutting ropes that connect the ox to the plow that has been cutting into his people's backs.

[13:57] God frees his people from oppressors. Over and over again in Israel's history, God has cut those cords. In his perfect timing, he freed his people from those who oppose God and who seek to stop them from that pilgrimage of God.

He puts a limit to that cutting pain. Now, what if, here's the question for us as we look at this, as we look at those people who are oppressed from the outside.

What if the opponent that rebels against God and tries to stop our pilgrimage was not just external, but it was within us as well?

Now, while I was writing this sermon at the office on Thursday, David came in on his bike all the way from East Vancouver. And because I was writing this, I almost said, how was your pilgrimage, David?

But instead I said, how did the trip go? And he said, very good. I only had one sin to repent of.

[15:04] Now, I didn't ask him what that sin is, so I'm sorry I can't share with you what it was. But that is an illustration that every pilgrim sins on the journey.

That within ourselves, there is an opposition and rebellion against what God has for us in our pilgrimage that can stop us from the pilgrimage.

And so the pilgrim wrote Psalm 130, which is the next psalm, as a companion to this. Because he knew that his own heart, even as one who is oppressed, was far from clean and blameless.

So he says in Psalm 130, verses 3 and 4, If you, Lord, should mark my iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? Who could stand?

But, and here's the pivot in this psalm, with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared. You see, God breaks the cords of our own sin that cut us and deeply block our pilgrimage.

[16:10] What a gift that is, that we can stand by his forgiveness. And this is the gift that is bought by Jesus Christ. So the amazing thing about Isaiah 50, which is about the suffering servant that God would send for us, which looks forward directly to Jesus.

It says about that suffering servant, your tormentors who have said to you, bow down that we may pass over, and you have made your back like the ground and like the street for them to pass over. You see, he has completely identified with our suffering. He has given his back to be plowed. And he has taken his, God in his powers made that horrific furrowing of Jesus' back.

He is suffering in his death on a cross to bring about incredible fruit. We remember this in our communion service today that many of us are having for the first time in a long time.

It says in that prayer, you gave your only son, Jesus Christ, to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption, for the cutting of our cords.

[17:25] You see, through his suffering, Jesus frees us by the forgiveness of our sins so that we can stand, so that we can walk in our pilgrimage. So you see that every circumstance in our life, the suffering, the opposition from the outside, from within ourselves, in all of this, God works through us.

God can always be dependent upon to be 100% fruitful, always and faithful to us, always stepping in to deliver us, doing what is right and what is good for us every single time.

This God is righteous. And I want to close with those last few verses of Psalm 129, verses 5 through 8, because thirdly, this tells us that there is vindication and even blessing in suffering.

Now here, the outcome of the psalm as the perspective change is the question, what happens to God's opponents who oppress his people?

What happens to them? Well, verses 5 through 8 are in the form of a prayer, but they can also be a simple future in the original, so that it says something that will certainly happen.

[18:45] And it says here in verse 5, they have set themselves up against God, who's all-powerful, completely committed to his people, so they will be turned back in shame.

And not only that, they will also have no permanence or success in verses 6 and 7. They'll be like grass. It started growing on roofs that were made out of soil, but they were shallow soil, and they flourished for a brief time and then withered away before it grows.

There's no harvest in them. There's no fruit in them. And finally, because they have cut themselves off from God, who is a source of all that is good, they will not hear God's blessing to them.

Here it is a harvest blessing that's described in verse 8. It's the blessing that is said by people who are going into the field to collect their fruit or to collect their grain, and they say to each other, the blessing of the Lord be upon you.

We bless you in the name of the Lord. God says that is a blessing they will not hear, but that you hear in the midst of your suffering.

[19:55] That blessing is one we hear from God as we persevere in our pilgrimage. It means that there is a harvest that comes in our perseverance.

It also means that we don't need to enact revenge on those who have mistreated us because of our faith in God. We actually trust God for his justice.

We let him bring it about. Now, a couple of days ago, you may have read this column by Rex Murphy, and he wrote it in response to the dozens of churches that have been burned in reaction to the news of unmarked graves near residential schools.

And the column was called Why is it okay to harm Christian places of worship in Canada? And he asked this question, where are the condemnations by our political leaders?

And then he says something very profound at the end of the column. He says this, he says, I will note one outstanding matter. Those who some would expect wrongly to most easily let these attacks pass, indigenous people, they have been among the strongest and most persuasive in their condemnation and disavowal.

[21:14] There's a combination of charity and resilience in some of their statements that is as rare as it is commendable. That too holds a lesson.

Those carrying the sharpest burdens sometimes have the widest hearts. That is profound. This is true. Wide hearts is the harvest blessing that God brings into the pilgrim's life through suffering and through oppression and opposition.

And the prayer in this psalm is that God will open wide our hearts to him and to one another through the hard things of your pilgrimage. This is the harvest blessing of suffering.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit. So why does God allow that suffering? Why does he allow that oppression of God's people? Because they are God's people. Well, very simply, it is to teach us to trust him and to persevere in the journey.

And you'll see that message over and over again right through God's word. It is that we would bear fruit, the harvest blessing to serve him with all our heart in his kingdom, to pray for those who are in your life, to weep with those who are weeping, and to rejoice with those who rejoice.

[22 : 41] May we persevere in this work to give a reason for the hope that is within you. Our destination is Jesus himself in the new heaven and the new earth where all will be made right and there is perfect, completed justice, his justice that we work for now.

And I want to end this by reading from the last chapter of this book, Pilgrim's Progress. It is about the pilgrim reaching the destination. And two of the main characters, Christian and hopeful, ask the angels as they come into the heavenly city, what must we do in this holy place?

What do we do here? And the shining ones, the angels answered, you must there receive the comforts of all your toil and have joy for all your sorrow.

You must reap what you have sown, even the fruits of your prayers, all your prayers and tears and sufferings for the king by the way.

In that place, you must wear crowns of gold and enjoy the perpetual sight and vision of the Holy One. For there you shall see him as he is.

[23 : 57] There also you shall serve him continually with praise and shouting and thanksgiving. Whom you desire to serve in this world, though with much difficulty because of the infirmity of your flesh, there your eyes shall be delighted with seeing and your ears with hearing the pleasant voice of the majestic one.

There you shall enjoy your friends again that have gone thither before you and there you shall with joy receive even everyone that follows into the holy place after you.

Here, dear friends, is our destination as pilgrims on this journey. It is our final and eternal blessing, the harvest of God's work in your life now and forever.

O Israel, O St. John's, each one of us today, hope in the Lord for with the Lord there is steadfast love, with him plentiful redemption.

He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities, hope in the Lord, from this time forth and forevermore. Amen. Amen.