

# Psalm 129 (PM)

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[ 0 : 00 ] It's really good to see you all. If you're here for the first time, my name is Aaron. I'm the Minister for the Service and come and say hi afterwards. I am going to presume that a good chunk of you watched the Euro Cup final last week.

Yep. I'm devastated. I'm absolutely devastated. I really wanted England to beat Italy, but Italy were the better team. I did notice, and you probably noticed this as well, after a shaky start, Italy did. It took them a while to get into their stride, but when they did get into their stride, they were clearly the superior team.

One of the great things about watching soccer is the singing. So the spectators sing a lot, and the English fans were singing a lot last week at the start of the game.

But as it went on, you would have noticed they got quieter and quieter. And there's actually a chant that supporters, soccer supporters sing, when they realise the opposing team's supporters have gone quiet, when things aren't looking good for them anymore.

And the song is called, You're Not Singing Anymore. And we're going to play some of it too. Here we go. So there it is.

[ 1 : 38 ] You're not singing anymore. There's a good reason for that. They're taunting the quietened supporters of this other team. You're not singing anymore.

And it's true. I mean, we do. We tend to sing when we're winning, and we tend to stop when we're not. People don't tend to sing when their marriage is in trouble, or when they're depressed, or when they're financially stressed, or when they've got difficult health news.

People don't tend to sing when they've got a bad exam result, or there's been a relationship breakup, or they lose a job. That's sort of the rule. But Christians are the exception.

We can always sing. We are loved by a faithful God. We have eternity with Jesus ahead of us. We have an imperishable hope.

We can always sing. We can sing at weddings. And we can sing with gusto at funerals. Psalm 129 is one of the songs that we can sing.

[ 2 : 45 ] It's a song written for difficult days. A song written for tough days. So we're going to dive into it, see what it says, and we're basically going to walk through it.

We're not going to look at every verse, but we'll catch most of it. So, verses 1 and 2. Greatly they have afflicted me from my youth. Let Israel now say, greatly they have afflicted me from youth, yet they have not prevailed against me.

So do you see what's happening here? It's almost like a back and forth bit of a liturgy thing. So there's one person's at the front, you can imagine, and they start the charts. We've been afflicted since youth.

And then he asks the people to repeat the line back. Yes. And everyone joins in. Yes. We have been afflicted since youth. Now, this is the Israelites singing on the way to the temple.

And you might think, oh, it's a bit, I mean, that's a bit overdramatic, I think, isn't it? You might say. We've been afflicted since youth. It's a bit negative. Let me remind you of a very brief history of the Hebrew people.

[ 3 : 48 ] Slaves in Egypt. Then they escaped that. Lots of drama in the wilderness. There always seems to be some opposing country wanting to destroy them.

The Assyrians, the Philistines, to name a couple. Civil war. Snap the country in half. Lots of super dodgy kings. Babylonians come in, level the place, and then remove anyone that's excellent or good at something.

They take them away. And after that ends, after the exile, they come back to their homeland, and it's all a bit lame. So this was the people that knew a lot about oppression.

They could sing. They could really sing, greatly have we been afflicted since our youth. For them, it was very real. And we get this brutal picture of what that felt like in verse 3.

The plowers plowed upon my back. They made long their furrows. Like trenches, you know. You dig these sort of trenches in a field.

[ 4 : 51 ] They are saying, do you know what it felt like? It felt like this. It felt like we're all just lying down on this field. And this farmer drives his oxen with the plow on the back just across us, back and forth, back and forth, across our backs, digging these long trenches in our backs.

It's a terrible picture. I mean, it sounds awful. It's the kind of oppression that would make you want to give up, wouldn't it? It's the kind of oppression that you would think would destroy a people, that would destroy a cause, that would stop dead a movement.

But listen to verse 2 again. Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me. That's some astonishing perseverance.

That's amazing resilience. How did they do it? How do you explain their stickability? How do you explain their survival? And that's what the rest of the psalm is about.

So let's hear it, because I think we want this kind of perseverance, don't we? We want to keep going with Jesus, even when it's unpopular, even when it's hard. I heard a guy speaking last week about a young woman he met at a conference, and she sounds like just an astonishing young leader.

[ 6 : 03 ] She was in grade 11 at a school, and she told the story of being the only Christian at her school, and how she decided to start a Christian club because she wanted to reach her friends for Jesus.

But she said it was just so hard. She talked about the incessant mockery. They vandalized her locker. She said people were just merciless. And the guy hearing this said, why did you keep going?

Like, how do you feel about all of this? And she said to him, Jesus is worth it. I'm on the winning team. I will go through this with him. Jesus is worth it.

I'm on the winning team. I will go through this with him. Isn't that wonderful? This is the type of perseverance the passage talks about. So let's dive into the second half of it here, starting at verse 4.

And this is kind of a line we would sort of skip over, but we need to stop and pause at it. The verse says, the Lord is righteous.

[ 7 : 03 ] The Lord is righteous. What does that mean? It's very important. The Lord is righteous. It's important because this is the reason that people persevered. The Lord is righteous.

Righteousness means it's your acting in a way which is consistent with a certain standard. And if the Lord is righteous, it's God acting in a way consistent with his character, with his holiness.

God always acts consistent with his holiness. He never acts out of character, which means everything he does is right. Whether it seems right to us or not, everything he does is right. Now think about the people of God in the Old Testament.

How is it that they could possibly survive everything that happened to them? How did they stay a people? Because God wanted it to happen. In God's holy and righteous will, he wanted it to happen.

So it happened. How was it that there is a church in the world today? Because God wants it to happen.

[ 8 : 10 ] In his righteous and perfect will, it happens. It maintains. And there is nothing that can overcome God's will. So when the singer in verse 2 says, yet they have not overcome us, it's not them gloating about some innate perseverance.

It's not them saying, and we did it. We had this. It's them celebrating the fact that God sustained them in impossible situations.

And look at one of the ways the Lord has protected and sustained them. Verse 4, the Lord is righteous. Second line, he has cut the cords of the wicked. What does that mean? The cord is the thing that held the oxen to the plow.

And he says here, he's cut it. Your enemies are plowing your backs. God cuts the plow from the oxen. In other words, what the oppressors are doing, seemingly freely, God will stop.

And you ask, yes, yes, Aaron, but has that happened? Like, does that happen? Yes, it has happened.

[ 9 : 28 ] And we know this because the people of God are like a thing. A big thing. The worldwide church still exists. And you might say, yes, brother, but it's not looking good though, is it?

You know, we feel a bit weak. And I kind of read somewhere that the church is in decline. Folks, no. The church is flourishing.

It is growing. It's just that in God's wisdom, the center of that flourishing has shifted east and south. It's shifted east and south. So we might hear grim stories about, you know, like, oh, you know, whatever, like the Episcopal church has gone down 20% in the last 10 years or something.

Sure. But the church worldwide is flourishing. The Washington Post wrote about this a little while ago. Here's a couple of quick quotes. Over the past 100 years, Christians grew from less than 10% of Africa's population to nearly 500 million today.

[ 10 : 35 ] One in four Christians in the world presently is African. And the Pew Research Center estimates that will grow by 40% by 2030.

And hear this. This is interesting. Today, the Christian community in Latin America and Africa. So that's just the Christian community in Latin America and Africa. Today is one billion people.

God has not allowed his people to be overcome. He will not do that. He won't. Now, when we get to verse 5 in our passage, the singing starts to feel like a prayer.

It starts to become a prayer. Verse 5. May all who hate Zion. That's just a fancy way of saying the people of God. May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward.

It's a prayer. It's a prayer that says, those who oppose what God is doing will be stopped. And then verses 6 and 7, pray that in the form of a word picture.

[ 11 : 38 ] Verses 6 and 7. Let them be like the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows, with which the reaper does not fill his hand, nor the binder of sheaths his arms. It's praying that the oppressors will be like, it's like they're like grass that grows like on a sidewalk crack or like on a rooftop.

There's not much dirt there. So just the first big lot of sun it gets hit with, it just kind of collapses. It fades. It can't flourish. It can't grow. It never becomes anything worth harvesting.

And if it's, in essence, it's praying that attempts to oppose God's people and what God is doing won't be fruitful. Now, again, as these pilgrims sing this, this is not bravado.

It's thankfulness. They are singing about what God has done. He has protected them. And he is praying that God will do it again. And that God will keep doing it.

There you go. That's basically the psalm. That's the gist of it. Now, I anticipate some of you will have two problems with this.

[ 12 : 47 ] The first problem is this. Come on. Christians aren't oppressed people. We're not oppressed. So don't give me that.

In fact, we're mostly the oppressors. And I will say, Christians have been on the oppressor side of the equation often.

But we're going to get to the oppression thing in a moment. The second problem you might have with this is like, I just don't like the idea of praying that God would be against people. It feels funny. It feels distasteful. It feels like it's something beneath God or like, it'll make me a hateful person. I don't want to be a hateful person. Who wants to be a hateful person? Those are two problems some of you might have with this passage.

So let's just spend a couple of minutes dealing with those. Firstly, as you try and relate this today to us, translate it to Christians today, the people of God today, you might be sitting there thinking to yourself, I just don't believe the narrative that Christians are an oppressed group.

[ 13 : 55 ] And I would say, you think that because you're a privileged person living in a privileged country. We live in the West. We might get mocked. Some of that mockery is justified.

But we might mostly get mocked just because people don't want to have Jesus' authority over their life. I know people have lost a job because of their faith. But that's a bet.

We'll be fine. Generally, we'll be fine. But let's put Christianity in the context of the whole world.

Forbes magazine in January this year ran an article about Christian persecution.

It quoted a report that looked at persecution during a one-year period between October 2019 and September 2020. Let me read just a couple little snippets from that article. More than 340 million Christians were living in countries where they might suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination because of their faith.

Among this number, 309 million Christians were living in countries where they might suffer very high or extreme levels of persecution.

[15:03] During this period, 4,761 Christians were killed for their faith. 4,277 Christians were unjustly arrested, detained, or imprisoned.

1,700 Christians were abducted for faith-related reasons. This is not, again, this is not people died who happened to be Christians. These were people who were imprisoned or killed because of their faith.

On average, every day, 13 Christians are killed for their faith. 13. 12 unjustly arrested or imprisoned. 5 abducted. I also looked at a Danish study this week which supported those numbers. So different country, different people. Denmark supported those numbers but added this. And I thought this was quite interesting. Western culture tends to downplay or even silence the persecution of Christians around the world while persecution of other religious groups is highlighted.

Finally, a short note from the BBC. What we have forgotten in an atmosphere of political correctness is that Christians that are being persecuted are some of the poorest people on the planet.

[16:17] So, what am I saying here? You might not feel much harassment in your life, if at all. But the lived reality of literally hundreds of millions of your brothers and sisters around the world is extreme persecution.

And we should pray that God would sustain them. We should join the writer of Psalm 129. And we should pray that God would sustain them. And even though it might feel distasteful to you, we should pray that God would be against the oppressors.

That he would cut the cords of the wicked people who oppress them. And that their plans would wither like grass. That's a good prayer. Maybe you could make that one like a regular prayer. Lastly, you might not like all this talk about praying against people. It does. It feels distasteful. And you might think, I just don't want to be that person. I just don't want to be this kind of hatey. I don't want to turn into that hatey, angry person. I want to look at the example of Christ to finish here. Christ knew suffering, right? He could sing this psalm with gusto.

[17:32] When he was born, Herod, the most powerful man in his region, wanted to kill him. Straight out of the womb wanted to kill him. He had a price on his head at birth.

The family had to flee. He was an asylum seeker. At the beginning of his ministry, he was tempted by the most evil being in existence. During his ministry, the most powerful religious groups wanted to kill him.

And he was eventually unjustly arrested, mocked, spat on, tried in a sham court, tortured, whipped, scourged. This line in verse 3 that we've just read, written thousands and thousands of years ago, talks about plowing our backs.

They've been plowing our backs. Christ knew that, but he did not know that as a metaphor. He knew that as a reality. He suffered on the cross and he died. His heavenly Father sustained him through that, though.

God's plan for salvation was enacted, despite the hardship, despite the opposition. Now, here's the thing. What was Christ's attitude at the end of all that oppression?

[18:38] What was his attitude? What did that do to him? Did he become a bitter, angry, hateful man? No. At the end of his life of being oppressed at every turn, there was incomprehensible kindness.

He hung on the cross and he forgave the people that were doing this to him. Kindness and serenity, he said, he prayed, Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

Let me finish up here. Psalm 129. This is a song you can sing on really hard days, on bad days. Christians always have an excuse to sing.

We can always sing. It reminds us of God's plans that they cannot be stopped. In Psalm 29, it's a prayer we can pray when things look hard for us. It is not easy being a Christian in the West. You feel lame, you know. Pray that God will sustain you. Pray that God will sustain your children and your friends and your family. But also pray for your brothers and sisters worldwide whose oppression is far more acute than ours.

[19:48] Pray that God would keep them and that the efforts of the oppressors would wither. Amen. Thank you.

Thank you.