

The History Of Suffering And Survival

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Date: 16 May 2021

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[0 : 00] So, the most important thing here is really the same kind of theme that we have in the previous psalm, and that is that God doesn't over-promise and under-deliver.

However, sometimes the circumstances of life can cause us to think that that is exactly how it appears to be, that God over-promises and under-delivers.

Yet, my argument would be, or rather the biblical argument would be, that as God makes these promises, then is God telling you that you must keep his word, but he doesn't have to keep his own?

And that's deeply challenging. When God says something that is a clear promise, and then we take it as though, well, it doesn't always work out like that.

It's more of a principle than a promise. And God is expecting me to keep his word, but he doesn't really have to keep his own. I think this kind of absence of faith, which ought not to be present, can be present.

[1 : 10] Now, of course, in a psalm like this one, you must hold dearly to the Lord, you must hold steadfastly to God, because he is the only one who can help, especially when you're surrounded by people who are not only your enemies, but are actually hurting you, causing suffering.

And throughout history, God's people, whether we're talking about the nation of Israel or the church, and this is talking about Israel, though it is spoken in like the first person, the first person is really imagine himself as Israel.

That when it says, these things have happened against me, he's identifying himself with the people of God, and therefore this has happened to us as a nation. In the same way, you might remember when Nehemiah comes before God, and he prays not only for his own sins, but the sins of his people.

And you might want to ask yourself the question, why would anyone do that? Why would Nehemiah be praying for sins he hasn't committed? Well, because he understands himself covenantally as belonging to the people of God.

God, that he wants to acknowledge that we are one people before God, and therefore I'm going to take responsibility, not for their sin, but I'm going to take responsibility as someone who belongs to that one people.

[2 : 34] Another way, if you remember Job, this is especially important for fathers with children growing up in the home, he goes out and offers sacrifices and offerings to the Lord, just in case his children have sinned against God in their heart and don't know anything about it.

Because the father knows that that is entirely possible, he knows those sins have to be brought before God. He can't wait for the children to grow up and recognize it themselves, because they're offending God.

And so he does it. And so that's the type of thinking that goes on in a lot of these Song of Ascent Psalms, or in many of the Psalms, is covenantal thinking.

And this is really important, because it means that you recognize yourself not just as an individual before God, but as someone who belongs to the people of God. And that while you can put your hand up and say, yeah, but that wasn't my sin, okay, fair enough, you may be innocent of that particular sin, but that is to divide yourself.

That's a bit like saying it's his fault, it's not my fault. Those type of things create division, rather than taking responsibility as a unit.

[3 : 47] I can remember my mother walking into the room after something got broken, and she would just punish us all. And we would say, well, hang on, it was his fault. And she would say, but you're a family.

I'm going to treat you as one. This is the way we do it. It may be one fault more than the other, but this is the way it's going to be. Now, whether that was right or wrong, it does fit in with this covenantal practice.

You know, there's a reason why Joseph was thrown down a well, because he was a tattletale. And Proverbs says that you shouldn't be a tattletale. Even though Joseph was right, and what he was saying, even though he was right, he was wrong in going back to his father and telling everything that his brothers were up to.

There has to be this covenantal unity. And as God's people, we recognize that this is how God wants us to think. And so he considers the suffering of the people of God as his own suffering. And so in the same way, the church is to remember those who are in chains. We are to sympathize and relate to the church that we are part of as one that suffers, not just rejoices.

[5 : 06] We're not to be, well, we're okay over here. Let's not pay any attention or pray for suffering to be removed just because we're not suffering. So this is how the psalm is encouraging us to think that while we may not be suffering ourselves, others might be.

However, in the book of Acts, we read quite clearly that the church will enter the kingdom of heaven, but it won't get there without a scratch. You're going to go through many, many hardships to enter the kingdom of heaven.

And we don't always know what those hardships come as or they come in the form as. Sometimes they can be personal hardships that are particular to you as an individual.

And sometimes there can be hardships that come upon the church either by, you know, a dictator within a country or certain political groups or certain rebel groups or whatever it may be, depending on what country you're in.

This is a church that suffers. So when we think of being the church and we need to think about how the church is suffering at this present time and how we can enter into their suffering in terms of praying for them and praying to God for them, even though we ourselves are not the ones who are suffering.

[6 : 26] So Psalm 129 is a, in many ways, is a summary, is a testimony. It's a history lesson. It's a song. And it's almost a deep breath of survival.

Like when you get through something and there's that initial deep breath is the breath that tells you that it's all over. The breath that it tells you that you can, you can finally sit back.

You've got nothing else now to worry about. And that is almost how Psalm 129 is written. There is this deep breath of survival.

Israel is an afflicted nation. They are afflicted as individuals. They are afflicted as a nation. And the first two verses in Psalm 129 really speak to the idea of suffering and survival.

The very fact that the Psalm can be written is a testimony to the fact that the people of God have survived. But it's a testimony to the fact that the people of God have survived through suffering.

[7 : 29] They've come out the other end. Like the women that get me the most, always gets me every time I read the book of Ruth, is that when Naomi comes back to her own land, do you remember how she left with her husband and Limelech and her two sons, and her husband died, and her sons died, and she comes back, and Ruth comes with her.

The reason why they left Bethlehem is because it was a time of a famine. And we know that there was a famine because the people disobeyed God, as judges say.

So the famine was God's judgment upon the land. But even in God's judgment, he's able to protect his own people. And it's interesting that when Naomi comes back, she doesn't want to be called Naomi.

She wants to be called by a different name, Mara or something, because, you know, I'm bitter.

She's bitter inside. The interesting thing is, is she's recognized. There are women there who recognize her.

And that teaches us that they made it through the famine. So you have this suffering and survival. They made it through the famine.

[8 : 34] And that's really, in very many ways, the history of God's people. Verse 3, again, speaks to the affliction. And then in verse 4, we hear how the righteousness of the Lord is there.

And this is where we can understand that God does not over-promise and under-deliver. That the righteousness, his righteousness, cuts the cords of the wicked. It is God who brings an end to the suffering that God's people feel.

Then we read verse 5, those who reject the dwelling place of God, Zion, the place where people draw near to God. Remember, this is a psalm of ascent, where they're heading towards Jerusalem to worship the Lord God in the temple.

And then verse 6, ultimately it comes to nothing. Verse 7 and 8, there's no blessing prayed for and there is no blessing pronounced. This is quite a desperate situation. Now the Siamist here refers to the time of their youth, verse 2.

And this is taking us back to how Israel were really brought out of captivity and slavery within Egypt. That's their youth. The youth of Israel is not speaking of the young people or speaking of this man when he was young.

[9 : 53] But rather Israel's youth was how they were being formed as a nation within captivity. Do you remember how in Exodus they start outgrowing and Pharaoh's worried about the growth of the Hebrew nation.

They just can't stop having children. And there's loads of them now. What are we going to do? And that fear then led to the killing of children, the firstborn, as Pharaoh dictated.

And that there is the suffering within their youth. From their very youth, they were a nation who suffered. And then God, it says in Exodus, hearing their groans, hearing the groans, paid attention, did not overlook them, but paid attention.

And then, of course, as you know, it led to the Exodus and eventually God's people entering into the promised land. And the way they capture the promised land is through worship. You remember that they march and they sing.

They march and they sing. There's no war here. They march, they sing. And this, again, is testimony of what we read in Hebrews. That the way the world crumbles and is taken captive by God is through the worship of God's people.

[11 : 08] This is how it happens. This is how it is meant to happen. That God doesn't use the same tools that the world uses to accomplish things.

He uses different tools. And, of course, it says, I am the Lord your God. This is the first commandment who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

In other words, the people of God were to know that God is a promise-keeping God. He makes the promise to take them out. He takes them out. Then he tells them who he is to them.

Now, what do they need to know? Will you imagine 400 years in a place, though you're not going to live 400 years, where the chief God is the sun? The sun and the moon and the stars and you've got a few other idols as well.

You've got a thousand gods in Egypt. And this is why when you read the book of Genesis, you ask the question, well, who was Genesis written for? It was written for the people who were brought out of Egypt.

[12 : 07] It was written by Moses for the people who were brought out of Egypt. And the first thing they would have heard in the book of Genesis is, in the beginning, Yahweh, your God, is the one who created the heavens and the earth.

This is the God who has brought you out of Egypt. And this is what they're reading again in the first commandment. I am the Lord your God, Yahweh, who brought you out of Egypt, the house of slavery.

So they are formed by God, who is a promise-keeping God. Their whole relationship with God is based around the fact that God makes promises and God keeps promises.

Or put it in Old Testament terms, God makes covenant and he keeps covenant. He doesn't over-promise and he doesn't under-deliver. And so the second observation here, which is a pretty important one, is the fact that this psalmist, as I've already stated, considers himself as with that history.

That though he clearly could not have been one of those who were brought out of Egypt, given the time between the psalm and when that happened, nevertheless, he considers their history as part of his own history.

[13 : 26] And the church, likewise, today should consider their history going all the way back to Pentecost. This is our birth. This is when the church began.

And when we read about the persecutions that the early church came through, we can talk about how we suffered in our youth as a church, as the people of God, before God in this world.

And when you start thinking like this, it then begins to shape your appreciation of the current church. That is, you pray now for people who are persecuted for their faith.

That's our people. That's our body that's being persecuted. When you think about the sufferings that people have within the local church, you have illness, you have death, you have perhaps even persecution.

You can think of that as being part of that, though it's not happening to you, but it's part of who you are because you are now a body, you are now a church. You go through it in part, though perhaps not to the same extent that the individual goes through it.

[14 : 34] But in part, you go through it with them because you're a body, you're a church, you're a one people, it's considered by God. And this is what this psalm is getting us to see.

And most importantly, or at least as importantly, it allows us to see the future. The fact that the Lord is righteous means that his righteous dealing, or rather his dealings will always be righteous.

God doesn't let anyone get away with anything. God always will take care of his people. And he will cut the cords that cause the wickedness upon his people.

And that, of course, is what we read in verse 4. The Lord is righteous. Behold, verse 4. The Lord is righteous.

He has cut the cords of the wicked. In other words, the enemies don't win. Israel wins because God wins. Okay?

[15 : 39] Israel wins because God wins. Israel's deliverance is a deliverance by the hand of the righteous Lord. It is a divine deliverance. It is not due to their strength over their enemies.

It is actually due to God's strength on their behalf over their enemies. That God is able to cut the cords that cause the wickedness.

He's able to cut the hardships. He's able to cut the afflictions. The plowers who have plowed upon the back of Israel. Now, this is striking because cutting the cords and plowing are clearly meant to be understood together.

That God is the one, verse 3. Sorry, the plowers who plowed upon the back of Israel. They made long furrows. That there is the suffering.

And then in verse 4, God is the one who cut the cords of the plowers. In other words, we all understand that the plowing and the cords are images used to explain the suffering and the end of suffering here.

[16 : 43] Now, you just imagine the image of a plow running through your back. You know, that's a painful image of someone taking a plow and running it through your back.

Now, the plow has to be connected to cords, which have to be connected to something that pulls it. And God is the one who cuts those cords so that the plow can no longer be pulled through your back.

In other words, the suffering ends because the cords have been cut. And that's the image that you've been given here. You've been given a very strong and painful image of personal suffering, national suffering, suffering as a church, suffering as an individual, that this is tough.

And the Lord is the righteous one who cuts the cords of the plowers so they can no longer plow along your back. He brings an end to whatever it is that people are doing to you, to whatever it is that they are using to do whatever it is they're doing to them.

He cuts off those means so that the plow can no longer be drawn through your back.

[18 : 00] And the same way the plow no longer moves through the ground, if it's not connected to the animal that pulls it, it can no longer move through your back if it's not connected to the plowers that are there.

And this is the divine deliverance. This is how it is explained. This is how God brings an end, righteous end. The righteous Lord brings an end to righteous suffering. He doesn't take you out of it necessarily, but he cuts off the means of it continuing, whatever it may be.

So those who afflict God's people, we remember, do not get away with it. They're clearly not covenantal people. They're not people who are committed to God or people who are committed to the church.

And they do not understand that the God we serve is the God of the world. If they do, they still reject him. They are ones who will oppose and who will afflict.

Very similar to Jesus when he approached Paul, who was then Saul, asking him or telling him, why do you persecute me? Jesus identifies with the church so much that he considered the persecution

of the church as he himself being persecuted.

[19 : 19] And this is how we are meant to think about this idea of suffering and other people's suffering, even if we ourselves are not the one going through it. God will deliver.

God will cut the cords of whatever it is that causes that suffering. The question of why he doesn't cut them sooner, I can't answer. The question of why some suffering seems prolonged, I can't answer.

There are some things we just don't know why. But we know the things that we can be certain of are stated clearly. And so we pray to God and understand also that Jesus here identifies with his church.

That it's not as if we are going through it and Jesus isn't. It's not as if the church is being persecuted and Jesus is some kind of just stand back unaffected of what we go through.

Now it's quite clear when he confronts Saul with the words, why do you persecute me? That he is identifying himself within the persecution of the church.

[20 : 26] Because after all, we are the body of the church and he is the head of that body. So now we have, as it says in Hebrews, we belong to a Lord who is able to sympathize with all of our struggles, with all of our sufferings.

Not only because he himself suffered, but because now he's not absent from it either. Whatever you go through, you go through it with him.

Whatever you go through, you go through it with him. Or maybe I can put it the other way around.

Whatever you go through, he goes through it with you. He is with you in it all the time.

And yeah, we ought to pray for it to be cut off. We ought to pray for it to... And ultimately, as we saw in Philippians, our first reading, one day it will be. One day it will be.

We'll have new bodies no longer containing the scars of what we felt and had to deal with. And that is, I would believe that to be scars within the memory, scars within the emotions, and of course, scars within your actual body.

[21 : 39] All of it goes when you are given a new body and you become glorious before the Lord. And of course, ultimately, here, the people are against Zion.

That is, they are against the fact that God's people, they hate Zion, verse 5. But such people will be put to shame and they will be turned backwards.

They will be like grass that comes to nothing. They are a people who cannot be sustained, who will not be sustained by God. They will eventually come to nothing.

Only the church survives in this sense. Only the church survives to the place where it flourishes.

Only you as a Christian are going or being the type of person that gets better.

That you're heading towards a time of flourishing, not a time of weakness and death. It may look like that. It may look as though everything's a struggle. But this is just the final end game, as it were, of this current situation.

[22 : 48] And what will happen is your cords that hold you to this present life will be cut. And then you enter into a new glorious existence with the Lord God.

But until that time, we have the problem of living alongside those who hate Zion. You remember the parable of the wheat and the tares?

How they grow together? And how we are told that they are to be left alone until the coming harvest? Until the reapers come and separate them at the final point when the Lord comes?

And when you read that parable carefully, you begin to realize that you have all this manner of evil and wickedness in this current world. And they are right alongside us.

Not being separated. We live with it. There is coming a day when all matters of sin and unrighteousness will be separated from us. And they will be removed and separated and then dealt with.

[23 : 52] But at this current time, Matthew 13, we live in a world where we live alongside those who create the suffering for those in the church.

If the suffering is that particular type of suffering. So the psalmist is saying that his situation is very much like the church's situation. That we live in a time where people may not be blessing you and saying, may the Lord be with you.

May the Lord bless you and keep you. They may be saying the very opposite of that to you. You may have neighbors that want nothing to do with God and therefore nothing to do with you because you belong to God.

You may have slightly more reasonable neighbors who want nothing to do with God but are quite happy with you. And in one sense, that's a better neighbor to have.

The point is we live alongside people who do not share our same convictions, who do not love the church, who do not love God, who do not love what God has created.

[24 : 55] And so the church enters the kingdom of God through hardships. It would be nice to say that as you get older, your life gets easier. It would be nice to say that as you get older, that all the difficult things are out of the way.

But they may be. But again, they may not be. And that's what we do. We don't know the type of hardships that can come our way.

What we do know is that God will separate us from them so that we will not have to suffer them any longer at some point.

So here's the exhortation. God's people, regardless of whether it be personal suffering, sort of an individual suffering, or that you suffer as a church, will always be sustained through that suffering. You will always be kept. It will never separate you. You will be kept and God will keep you until the day where you are finally separated from it. So you are sustained within the suffering until the time you are separated from it.

[26 : 04] You are sustained within the hardships until the time you are separated from them. And that's really going to be the history of the church until Christ returns.

Some hardships are easy to get over. Others are almost impossible. In many ways, all of God's people are afflicted in some way or other, to a lesser or greater degree, to a longer or shorter amount of time.

And so the thing to remember is that God will sustain you through all of it. And one day those cords will be cut. And maybe in some small ways they are already cut.

But ultimately they will be when you will finally be separated from this current world. So God does not over-promise and under-deliver. I can understand why it may look like that, especially in the midst of extreme hardship.

Or even temporal hardship that lasts for a long time, but you know that it's only temporal. God does not over-promise and under-deliver.

[27 : 18] We open the service with, In God whose word I praise, In the Lord whose word I praise, In God I trust, I shall not be afraid.

What can man do to me? God keeps his word. And if his word says we can trust God, then we can trust God.

And if his word says, What can man do to me? Then what can man do to you? Nothing. So God is not over-promising and under-delivering.

He's making promises. He's keeping promises. But he keeps those within the context that we find ourselves. Matthew 13, Psalm 129. That we live alongside those who give us the hardships that we have.

Whether it be a fallen world, with the illnesses, or whether it come from people directly, because we love Zion, because we love the church, because we love God, because we seek to worship him.

[28 : 22] So whatever the case may be, and wherever you find yourself emotionally, spiritually, faith-wise, understand that wherever you are, Jesus is there in it with you.

You will be sustained through it until the time you are separated from it. Amen.