

What grows from persecution

Littlebourne - 2nd October 2022 - Psalm 129

■ *A Song of Ascents.*

So we have another of the Songs of Ascents - Psalms that were probably sung by those on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. I've mentioned before that one aspect of these Psalms is that they sort of ascend as a whole - we started with a Psalm that was lamenting being far from Israel, being oppressed and things have become more cheerful. The series of Psalms ends with some quite jubilant words.

But this Psalm makes a break from that and is a Psalm of lament and cursing - it's a Psalm that complains about Israel's enemies and calls on God to do something about it. So whilst on the whole, the Psalms of Ascent do have an upwards, positive trajectory, there are ups and downs along the way - this is a definite down.

v1-4

“Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth”—
let Israel now say—
2 “Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth,
yet they have not prevailed against me.
3 The plowers plowed upon my back;
they made long their furrows.”
4 The Lord is righteous;
he has cut the cords of the wicked.

So verse 1 and 2 start with this repetition - you might recognise the format from when we looked at Psalm 124. This repeating of the phrase, possibly for emphasis.

The author says 'me' but the context, the 'let Israel say', shows it's applying to Israel, it's personifying the whole people of God. The repetition making the point very clear and calling on all in Israel to join him in his prayer - he really wants us to know that Israel has been greatly afflicted.

Since Israel's birth - in Jacob - the history of God's people has been one of great affliction. It's been very up and down. Jacob had a hard time of things, and shortly after all his family are enslaved in Egypt. We know the story of the exodus and the hardships Israel faced in leaving Egypt, the years in the wilderness, facing enemies in the land they were to possess, the battles and trials of the time of the Judges. Israel has not had it easy.

Some think that this Psalm was written in the time of the exile in Babylon - Israel is far from home, has lost it's own sovereignty, temple destroyed, it's all seemingly over.

But verses 1-4 assert, with confidence, that God has delivered Israel before and will again - their enemies have not prevailed. As we know, their slavery in Egypt, their exile in Babylon, both came to an end.

It's no different with God's people in the past 2 millennia - the church has faced many dangers, it has been on the verge of disaster several times, but every time God rescues his church and not only does the church escape, but ends up stronger. Indeed Christ's church has gone through much worse than we will likely ever experience - even our worst expectations of persecution in these times are tame compared to what the early Christians suffered in the church's youth. But God's enemies did not and will not prevail.

Persecution is nothing new and nothing to be unexpected. It's the way of the world. The history of the world is the history of billions of deaths - since genesis and we've been dying ever since. The first death was the death of a martyr - Abel, who was righteous, murdered because of the jealousy of the unrighteous Cain.

Does this apply to us today? We might feel we're not really persecuted - we're not really facing things like other Christians do in different parts of the world, or in other times in history. We're not living as protestants under Bloody Mary or part of the underground church in China.

But this does apply to us here and now, because these things always apply. There is always antipathy between right and wrong, between those that are with Christ and those without. It may be less obvious to us, but it's always there in some form. If we look at the culture around us we can see clearly that there is great opposition to God's ways.

Let the Lord define what persecution looks like - what does Jesus say persecution is?
Matthew 5 verse 11:

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Notice there that persecution is sandwiched between reviling and uttering falsehoods. Things won't just go from nothing to full persecution - there is mockery and insult and lies in between, before it becomes physical. Jesus faced much 'talk' before they laid hands on Him.

Now we don't need to pretend we really have it hard because we don't in the grand scheme of things. But when society as a whole lies about Christians, when Christianity is mocked, that's the beginnings of something that can get much bigger. We can all see some of that, so what we read about persecution is relevant to us, this Psalm is relevant to us.

The Psalm does tell us that we will prevail over all that faces us - that God has cut us free from the cords of the wicked. We know that in the end, the whole world will be delivered from all wickedness and all those that oppose God will face his justice. Which brings us on to the next verses, as the Psalmist calls for those that have been doing this ploughing, that have been oppressing Israel, would face justice.

v5-8

*5 May all who hate Zion
be put to shame and turned backward!
6 Let them be like the grass on the housetops,
which withers before it grows up,
7 with which the reaper does not fill his hand
nor the binder of sheaves his arms,
8 nor do those who pass by say,
"The blessing of the Lord be upon you!
We bless you in the name of the Lord!"*

Verses 5-8 form an imprecatory prayer. When we read Psalms like this, that call on God to enact judgement, wrath, crush our enemies, that sort of thing, it often makes us uncomfortable. I don't think it's bad to be uncomfortable about these sorts of Psalms, after all, aren't we supposed to love our enemies and pray for those who oppose us? Well yes, of course we are - Jesus tells us as much at the end of Matthew 5.

David was no stranger to the imprecatory psalm - he wrote most of them. Think about how David actually treated those he opposed. How did he treat Saul when he was being persued by him? David had every opportunity to kill Saul, but spared him. David was ferocious against those nations that were against Israel, he was a rigorous defender of his kingdom, but when he had a personal enemy, he was lenient.

This Psalm is not about personal vengeance. It is aimed at the enemies of God, as the enemies of God, and it leaves the justice, wrath and vengeance entirely to God. Imprecatory Psalms call for God's judgement rather than our own.

Look at this particular four verses - what is the Psalmist calling for? He starts with who he's talking about - verse 4 "all who hate Zion". These words are not for those that cut you off in traffic, or jump a queue, or anyone you have a personal issue with. It's quite specifically those that directly oppose God's people, because they are God's people. Those that not only lightly oppose but hate.

This Psalm calls on God to prevent their works from coming to fruition - 'may they wither before they grow'. Apparently, in Old Testament times, the custom was that when you would pass by a field with a good crop you'd say 'blessing in the name of the Lord' - you'd say how God has blessed the farmer/owner and may God bless more. Verse 8 is saying 'these people that oppose God, these that have ploughed their furrows in God's people, would their crop fail, would their crop come to nothing, in such a way that everyone walking past knows it'.

So we can pray with the Psalmist that God would confound the wicked, that the schemes of those that oppose the church, that oppose God's ways, would fail. We can pray that God enacts his holy justice.

It seems that God has two ways of dealing with those that oppose Him. First, there's the obvious way, the way of destruction and wrath, God's justice enacted. But there's also His way of transformation - God often transforms His enemies into friends. Think of Paul, who greatly persecuted the church, before being transformed into its greatest evangelist. Or the Babylonian empire that destroyed the temple and took away all the people of Israel, only to later pay for the entire reconstruction.

So we can pray that God's justice would be done, that he would deliver us from those that oppose us, and cause their wicked plans to fail. But we should be careful to pray understanding that God's justice is satisfied in whatever way he sees fit - whether it be destruction or transformation.

Conclusion

This metaphor about affliction being like ploughing, making furrows, might seem a little odd. But I think it's illustrative of what the intention of those that persecute is - when persecution happens, when God's enemies afflict God's people, they are seeking a crop - they are seeking to grow something.

When we return bitterness for bitterness, hatred for hatred, we help them grow what they want to. When we rejoice in the face of persecution, they don't grow the crop they intended. Our job is to not give them the crop they intended. Jesus says again in Matthew 5 (verses 11 & 12):

11 "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The Psalm tells us how God works in this - he lets them plough the field, but then he cuts the cords and lets their oxen run off - they prepare the ground but God doesn't let them plant. God intends a crop, but one of His own. Persecution, affliction, suffering, leaves fertile ground and God intends to grow in that fertile soil joy and gladness and to bring us closer to Him.

For example, Joseph tells his brothers in Genesis 50 (verse 20):

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

All the suffering and affliction Joseph went through ended up saving all Israel from the famine.

The early church suffered greatly - what we're read in Acts shows that the persecution they faced gave them resolve and clarity - they couldn't be nominally Christians. The history of the church is one where the periods of persecution lead to great revivals.

Of course, Christ is the ultimate victim of persecution. When Satan inspired the crowds to persecute Jesus, was he doing it so you would be healed? No. But what crop was the Lord growing? The salvation of the world. In the worst of persecution and suffering, God was at work in the most amazing of ways. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 2 (verse 8):

None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

What Christ's enemies intended, what Satan was doing, was intended to stop Jesus - but God used their actions, the greatest of sins, to bring about his great plan of redemption.

"By His stripes we are healed" - His suffering is ours. But also, our suffering is His - when the church is persecuted, so too is Christ - what is done to the body is done to Christ, who is the head of the body. When we who are united to Christ are persecuted, Christ is persecuted. Think of the road to Damascus moment - "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?". Jesus is up in heaven, Saul is down there on Earth doing his persecutions to

Christians and Jesus says that those persecutions are against Him. "Why are you persecuting ME?". What's done to the body is done to the head - if we are persecuted for being part of the body, they are really persecuting Christ.

So we can rejoice in our suffering as it says in 1 Peter 4:

12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. 16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

Our identity as Christians - our identity as being united to Christ is what helps us through suffering and persecution. It's because Christ is in all of it, He uses it for our transformation. The fertile ground created by persecution and suffering is the ground in which Christ grows our dependence on Him. So there is no suffering without meaning. God uses all our suffering for His purposes.