

**Psalm 129**  
**Perseverance and Righteousness**

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In late summer, we began a series working through the songs of ascent, Psalms 120-134. These were the songs that were sung by the people of God as they made their way to Jerusalem for the annual feasts and celebrations. These were the songs that gave expression to their faith in the everyday, ordinary parts of their lives: their working and playing, their cooking and eating, their sleeping and waking, their welcoming newborns and burying the dead. These were the songs that were sung by pilgrims on their journey that moved them ever closer to Yahweh God. These were the songs that kept their eyes on the eternal living God during joys and sorrows, celebrations and challenges, shalom and suffering.

The Psalms have long been regarded as the prayer book of the church. And, in many church traditions, they are also the hymnbook of the church. Charles Wesley, a well-known hymn writer, put Psalms to music in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These Psalms have been spoken, prayed, and sung by the saints throughout the world for generations and generations. Yet I do not think all of these Psalms are prayers or songs that we should want to repeat in full, just as I do not think that we should seek to do everything that we read in the stories in the Bible. There are stories of men and women of great faith who have not always done what is right or good. Consider Noah's drunkenness, or Abram lying that Sarah was not his wife, or King David's adulterous relationship and participation in murder.

The Bible is God's Holy Word, and is the Christian's source of authority. But it does not mean that every story, every word, every thought, every emotion, or every deed in the Bible is good and right. That is why when we read the Bible, we must ask ourselves what it teaches us about God and what it teaches us about the human condition.

Psalm 129, the Psalm we will consider this morning, happens to be one of those Psalms with which I struggle to wholeheartedly pray or sing. Perhaps it is a Psalm that creates some confusion, or at least unsettledness, for you too.

The opening two verses of the Psalm tell us that life has been a terrible struggle. And this is not simply a cry from one pilgrim bemoaning the tragic state of his or her personal affairs, this is a cry from all of Israel, from the whole of God's people. It is not clear when this Psalm was written or what particular situation gave rise to write this Psalm. Yet many scholars and theologians agree that the opening lines "they have greatly oppressed me from my youth, let Israel say" refers to the long tumultuous history of Israel: from slavery in Egypt to wandering around in a desert for 40 years to fighting in wars to being exiled from their homeland. Israel has been oppressed and has known suffering for being God's people.

Verse 3 paints a vivid image of the experience of oppression and suffering. Israel, God's people, is on their back. Oxen are hooked up to plows and then the plowmen command the oxen to begin plowing. So the oxen trample, creating long narrow trenches in Israel's back. The oxen move up and down, left and right, systematically, methodically, intentionally, purposefully. The plows dig in to Israel's back: gouging, cutting, scraping. You can almost feel the pain, the hurt, the suffering endured. This is how the Psalmist describes the oppression endured by God's people.

Then the tone of the Psalmist changes abruptly. We hear a word of hope, a word of light in the darkness. Though oppressed, the Psalmist writes "but they have not gained the victory over me". Though having suffered, Israel has won. Though exiled, God's people are victorious. Though

persecuted, the faithful remain. Throughout Israel's long history, those who have created difficulty and frustration for Israel have not defeated God's people. Israel has remained victorious. I'm reminded that during our pilgrimage, our Christian discipleship, there are many experiences, interactions, observations which threaten to turn us away from the ways of Jesus. There are times when we doubt whether we're doing the right thing by obeying the teaching of Jesus when the world teaches something else. There are times when we wonder whether we make the right decision by coming to church to worship instead of all the other activities we could do on a Sunday morning. There are occasions where we wonder if persisting in the Christian faith will be victorious. Well, faith, this Psalmist says, is not defeated. "They have not gained the victory over me".

Why can the Psalmist so boldly and confidently proclaim that oppression has not defeated Israel? With this image of a bloody back, what is the word of faith to the Christian disciple? The disciple says "The Lord is righteous". This is why Israel is victorious even in the face of oppression: because the Lord is righteous. Righteous or righteousness is a word that is often used to describe the Triune God. It is a word that prophets, priests, psalmists, and the people of God use to refer to God's character. What does it mean? It refers to rightness and is about relationships. To be in right relationship.

"The Lord is righteous." It means the Triune God establishes a covenantal relationship with His people and does not abandon that covenant. It means the Living God acts rightly in relationship with his people. It means the Holy God is faithful in his relationship with his people. It means

that God perseveres in relating to us. It means the Eternal God makes a commitment to us and does not leave us. The Lord is righteous.

In this Psalm, what we see from the Lord's righteousness is His acting justly and righteously by cutting the cords of the wicked. He has cut the cords which attached the oxen to the plows. He has removed the source of oppression. He is righteous because he is faithful towards his people. And it is his faithfulness, his righteousness which enables us to persevere in the way of Christian faith too.

Our ability to persevere in faith, especially during circumstances of suffering and oppression, is rooted in this central commanding statement "the Lord is righteous". Perseverance in the Christian pilgrimage is not first because of my determination. Perseverance as a disciple of Jesus Christ is not first because of my grit. Perseverance to obey the Triune God and walk in His ways are not first a result of my actions. We are only able to persevere in this faith journey because the Lord is righteous. Because God is faithful. Because God is in a covenant relationship with us. Because God does not leave us. We are able to persevere as Christian disciples not because of our efforts but because of God's righteousness.

I know this to be true in my own personal faith story as well. There was a time in my life, several years ago where I was working through a few deeply painful and traumatic experiences that led to a deep wrestling with God. I had known oppression and suffering, felt the bloody wounds of oxen trample on my back gouging and cutting me. And I knew not how to continue in the ways of Jesus, how to persevere in the Christian faith. After all, I had earlier watched others close to

me struggle with pain and suffering and conclude the Christian faith is irrelevant, futile. So I did not want to abandon my Christian faith but knew that God had to do something for me to persevere in Christian faith. For years it seemed as though God and I were in a game of tug-of-war. But rather than having a thick rope between us, it was a very thin and fragile thread. I called that thread hope. I admit there were times I wanted to cut that thread because by removing hope it meant I no longer needed to persist in my belief that God was with me. Without hope, I could allow myself to be swallowed up by darkness and defeat. But the Lord is righteous. The Lord is faithful. The Lord is committed to his people. The Lord does not leave those he loves. Because God would not let go of that thread, I held on until that thread grew stronger. As that thread and my faith grew stronger those visible raw wounds became invisible scars that tell a story of God's righteousness. And because God is righteous and faithful, I am able to persevere as His disciple.

Then we get to verse 5. Verses 5 through 8 are not pleasant. They are harsh words. The Psalmist reproaches those who cause God's people to suffer, asking that they wither and die like grass that grows on a roof. Let those who oppose God's people be barren and futile. Let those who cause pain to God's children experience social isolation, be separated from friendship and fellowship, be left alone and not greeted by neighbours, not noticed by the community, not receive a blessing.

Are there not occasions where God's people react and respond in a similar way as the Psalmist?

When we suffer or when our friends suffer, we vent our feelings, we put forth vindictive speech, we express hatred and disgust and bitterness. We express our anger, wrath, sense of wrong and injustice, resentment.

The Psalmist desires that those who oppress God's people experience hurt and suffering. These are sentiments felt in the human heart, words uttered by the human mouth, and contemplated by the human mind. These are words not prayed by Jesus Christ, Son of God. These are words not spoken by God the Father, who is perfect and holy. These are words not given in prophesy from the Holy Spirit. So, how do we understand such human thoughts and emotions in relationship to the divine, to the Triune God?

Some excuse the Psalmist's words, explaining that these words were spoken before Jesus' teaching to love one's enemies. But there are many passages in the OT which teach about love, mercy and forgiveness. Yahweh God gave these commands to his people: *If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it. Or Do not hate your brother in your heart. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. Or Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice.* So I do not think we can excuse the Psalmist's words, citing that the Psalmist did not have Jesus' teachings available.

The Psalmist has spoken with authenticity and sincerity, with honesty and vulnerability. In our culture, such attributes are regarded quite highly: we're constantly told to be honest, be true to yourself, be authentic, be vulnerable. Mainstream media reminds us that it is healthy and right to express our true feelings and emotions in all circumstances. But is it always right and good to be authentic and sincere, honest and vulnerable? Are there occasions for the Christian, for the follower of Jesus, for the disciple of the Living God where authenticity, sincerity, honesty, and

vulnerability are not right? If our authentic feeling is anger, is it always right to allow anger to burn within our hearts? If our honest feeling is revenge, is it always right to speak vindictively?

I will remind you of something I have said a few times before. When it comes to matters of faith, our emotions, our feelings, what happens in our heart are not always good indicators of what is true. We may not feel loved by God but that does not mean we are not in fact loved by God. We may not feel that God is with us but that does not in fact mean God has abandoned us.

So, looking at this Psalm, I think it is important to think about what our feelings of anger, hurt, revenge, spitefulness have to do with faith. Because those very human feelings must have something to do with faith. After all, discipleship is about our everyday and ordinary, and that includes our everyday and ordinary feelings like anger, hurt, disgust, injustice. We all experience fatigue and weariness in the journey of Christian faith. We pray and work towards good but see no evidence of change. We all have interactions with people which result in anger and frustration. We are blamed when we do what is right. We are regarded with distrust or confusion when we choose to walk in God's ways rather than the world's ways. But should we, like the Psalmist, sing these harsh words towards those who cause us pain? Should we, like the Psalmist pray that our enemies suffer?

Here is another way of looking at the Psalm. If this Psalm is understood in the context of perseverance, then the response from the Psalmist reminds us that the way of Christian discipleship should be full of gusto and energy. Perseverance cannot happen when someone is

complacent, neutral, indifferent, lethargic, or sluggish. Perseverance as a Christian disciple means we maintain a clear sense of right and wrong, sin and grace.

And so this Psalm is an expression of such concern, an expression of concern for what is right and wrong, what is sinful. Secondly, these words of vindication and revenge are perhaps also an indication that the Psalmist has not yet reached Christian maturity. Consider your own story: when I was younger and less mature in my faith, I was more apt to respond in anger towards others (especially my sisters growing up). I was still a Christian in my adolescence, though I grew angry at my sisters or others. But as I am maturing in faith, my response has changed and I desire reconciliation and forgiveness. Although this Psalmist's prayer reflects a less mature Christian response, immaturity is not reason to quit being on the path of Christian pilgrimage. No, immaturity is reason to continue in the ways of Jesus so that we grow in maturity, to attain perfection, completion, wholeness. So I suggest we offer our anger to God and ask that he teaches us what to do, what to say, what to think, how to forgive, how to act righteously.

This song of ascent is a song that reminds us of God's faithfulness in the past. It's an invitation to us, especially when we want to give up in matters of faith to look at the long road behind us of God's righteousness towards his people throughout all time. This is the song we sing to keep going when things get tough. To remind ourselves the Lord is righteous and those who hurt us will not gain victory over us. We can persevere not because of our own wisdom or courage but because the Lord is righteous.

This morning we are invited by our Saviour, Jesus Christ, to come to the Lord's Table. We are invited here not because of our own doing, not because of our own perseverance in the Christian faith but because the Lord is righteous. Because the Lord is faithful. Because the Lord is committed to His people. When we participate in Holy Communion, we remember Christ's sacrifice and we are thankful for His covenant relationship with us.