

The Lord is Righteous - *Psalm 129*

Introduction

- Today, we are going to be looking at Psalm 129, and I want to warn you up front. This is not an easy passage to deal with.
- There's a lot of stuff here that's difficult to understand. It is a beautiful passage, but not an easy one.
- It is a passage that gets right to the heart of two different topics that make us kind of uncomfortable when we see them in the Bible, and we don't really know what to do with them.
- But both of these topics are so important for understanding our world today.
- The two main things that it focuses on are suffering and justice.
- Again, those are two words that can make us a bit nervous when we see them in the Bible, but as difficult as both of these things can be, it's so important to see what the Bible has to say about them, because they're both things that we encounter on almost a daily basis.
- Really, what this Psalm gets at, is talking about how we process, and respond to suffering and injustice.

Psalm 129 teaches us to be honest about our suffering

- The Psalm has quite an abrupt start, and it's one that you probably wouldn't expect to find in these Psalms of ascent.
- We've pointed out before that all of these Psalms have started out in a pretty similar way. A few weeks ago I read a quote from Charles Spurgeon that talked about how every Psalm of ascent started with its focus on God, and with the intention of worshiping him.
- But when you look at this Psalm, it starts out quite differently, look at the first line of V. 1:

“Greatly I have they afflicted me from my youth” - Psalm 129:1a (ESV)

- It's different.
- So it's not starting here with looking up to God, it's beginning with a cry of pain from the Psalmist as he's looking into his past, and then he repeats himself, in V. 2, emphasizing what he's feeling

"let Israel now say—

“Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth,” - Psalm 129:1b-2a (ESV)

- You look at this abrupt start, and it almost feels like we kind of catch the Psalmist mid thought here.
- Like he’s been reflecting and thinking about these trials for a while, and it’s now just bubbling over and bursting out, this cry of pain and lament over the suffering and affliction that he’s experienced.
- And this is not just a personal lament for the Psalmist. There is an element of reflecting on his own personal suffering, but there is also an element of reflecting on corporate suffering or community suffering, the suffering of the nation.
- In this bursting out of emotion, there is also an invitation for others to join in with him. He is inviting all of God’s people to reflect on the suffering that they have endured at the hands of their enemies.
- You have that line there, *“let Israel now say”*. It’s been present before in the Psalms, and here we have it again. He’s saying, “This isn’t just for me, this is for all of us”.
- So we have in the beginning of this Psalm, a very emotional lament about the suffering that the Psalmist and his people have endured, and as we move on I want to point out two things that we learn about their suffering. Two observations.

Suffering can be long lived

- The first observation here is that the suffering that the Psalmist and his people have been facing has been going on for a very long time. Look at what he says there, *“Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth”*
- He isn’t looking back on something that happened just yesterday and struggling to make sense of it, this is something that has essentially been going on for an entire lifetime, and he is still struggling with it. This “affliction” has been very long lived.
- And this is true of the nation too. If you look back over the history of the nation of Israel, there are countless examples of them being oppressed, and afflicted by nations around them.
- It’s not really clear exactly what specific situation the Psalmist is referring to here, but the truth is that I don’t really think that it matters. What he’s communicating is that this affliction, and suffering has happened frequently and has been going on for a long time.
- And he’s struggling with the reality of this suffering that he has been facing for most if not all of his life.

Suffering can be intense

- The second observation to point out here about the suffering the Psalmist is facing is that it is incredibly intense.
- The imagery that is used here is incredibly graphic, as the Psalmist gives us a description of the suffering that he's faced for so long at the hands of these enemies. In V. 3 he says:

"The plowers plowed upon my back;

they made long their furrows." - Psalm 129:3 (ESV)

- This is brutal.
- He compares their suffering to the feeling of having someone drive a plow on your back.
- I don't know if you've seen the kind of plow that he's talking about, but it's sort of like this giant wedge shaped instrument that a farmer uses in the field to make these deep trenches or divots where they can plant their crops.
- He's capturing this idea of incredible pain and suffering that he and his people have endured at the hands of these enemies.
- Josh Moody looks at this passage, and the imagery that is being used here, and comments that the type of imagery that is being used here, is the kind of imagery you would expect to see from someone who's being tortured.
- This suffering is long lived, and this suffering is intense.
- So we look at these first verses, and we have to ask. What is this doing in the Psalms of ascent? And how do we deal with what we see the Psalmist going through here?
- Well like I said at the beginning, suffering is an incredibly uncomfortable topic, one we don't really like to talk about, yet it is so important.
- And what we're seeing here in this Psalm is that you're allowed to struggle when you face difficult times and suffering in this world.
- In this series, we've talked a lot about the faithfulness of God in a broken world. And that is so important, but I think that we can get in our mind that if we're going to trust in the love and the faithfulness of God, then we're not allowed to struggle with the suffering that we face, or that if we do struggle with something difficult, we have to deal with it relatively quickly and just move on. If we don't, we must not really trust that God is faithful.
- But that is not what we see going on here. We are seeing a very honest, and a very emotional struggle that the Psalmist is facing over the suffering that he, and his people have experienced. Again, when you look at the abrupt start to this Psalm, you see an emotional outburst, and lament coming from the Psalmist's reflection on his suffering. He's not sugarcoating this.

- This Psalm is essentially giving us permission to be honest with God about the struggles that we're working through, the suffering that we've faced, and the ways that they impact us.
- You don't have to downplay your struggles, or pretend that they're not as difficult as they are.
- It is not wrong to cry out to God and tell him that you're struggling, or that you're hurting. You can be honest with God about what you're going through.
- But it doesn't stop there.
- The Psalm is giving us permission to struggle through the suffering and the afflictions that we face, but it goes a step further than just that.
- Because there can be a danger, when reflecting on suffering, the way that the Psalmist is, to kind of get stuck there. To become overwhelmed and discouraged by what we're trying to struggle through.
- The important part to see here in this Psalm, what the next couple of verses address, is how we are called to respond, and processes those struggles that we face.
- We can be honest about our struggles, but we also need to understand how we're being taught to respond to those struggles. And that's what the Psalmist addresses in V. 4-8.

Psalm 129 teaches us how to respond to our suffering

- And again, I want to make two different observations about how the Psalm teaches us to respond to the suffering that we face.

We respond by trusting in God's Righteousness

- The first thing starts to show up in the second half of V. 2. I glossed over it a bit before, but I want to bring us back to it. This is what it says:

"Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth,

yet they have not prevailed against me." - Psalm 129:2 (ESV)

- So in the first half of this Psalm we see the Psalmist reflecting on his struggles, and we're seeing a really difficult, and honest response to what he's seeing in his cries and the graphic imagery that he's using in this lament, but an important thing to see is that this struggling is not leading him to a place of hopelessness or despair. He says "*greatly have they afflicted me*", "**YET** *they have not prevailed against me*".
- You see the Psalm does give us permission to be honest with God about what we're struggling with. We don't have to bottle that up or hide it, pretending that everything's fine. BUT, the

Psalmist, while reflecting on these struggles, is not letting himself wallow in his struggles, or get caught up in a “woe is me” attitude..

- He is honest about his struggles, but he is not overwhelmed by them. And he makes that clear with that line “*yet, they have not prevailed against me*”.
- And that leads right into V. 4, which is a really key turning point in this Psalm. Look at what it says:

“The LORD is righteous;

he has cut the cords of the wicked.” - Psalm 129:4 (ESV)

- So now we finally look up to God.
- Here we have the verse that we would have expected to start the Psalm with. We would have expected this to come first, that we’re being reminded of God’s righteousness first and foremost, to almost “soften the blow” of the struggles that come in V. 1-3, but rather it comes here. Right in the middle.
- And I think the placement of this verse is very intentional.
- We see it in the middle of the Psalm because it is teaching us, through the example of the Psalmist, where our struggles should lead us. And that is to a place of trust in God.
- As we’re tracking along with the Psalmist’s train of thought here, he started with lament, and this is where his lament has led him.
- We’ve seen a lot of intense and difficult emotion in the passage up to this point, and yet we still have these statements of trust that the author knows he will not be overcome by the suffering, or the enemies that he’s faced, because “*The Lord is righteous and he has cut the cords of the wicked*”.
- and when the verse says that God has “*Cut the cords of the wicked*”, what it’s essentially saying is that he has taken away all of their power over his people.
- But you’ll notice that this verse does not cancel out the ones that came before it.
- We have here both the intense human emotion, as well as trust in the righteousness of God.
- This statement of trusting in God’s righteousness, and the freedom found in him does not diminish the struggle, and the pain that the Psalmist experienced, or the lament that we just read. That brutal and graphic imagery is still there.
- But that pain, and that suffering, does not diminish or cancel out the faithfulness or the righteousness of God. At the end, even after reflecting on the pain that he has experienced, the Psalmist is led to this declaration that the Lord is Righteous.
- This verse reminds me of something that Jesus said to his disciples in John 16:33

“In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” - John 16:33 (ESV)

- Again, the reality of suffering is not lost here. Jesus assures his disciples that they will suffer. They will face struggles and tribulation, but he also tells them to *“take heart; [he has] overcome the world”*.
- Because of what Christ did on the cross, in his death and resurrection, he has overcome the power of sin, and the power of death, offering the gift of eternal life to everyone who follows him, which is something that no enemy could ever take away.
- No enemy could ever have any power over the Gospel.
- So while we will still face suffering in this world, and while we will continue to struggle through that suffering, we can confidently say, in Christ, *“The Lord is righteous, he has cut the cords of the wicked”*. Because of Christ, no enemy holds any power over us.
- This Psalm teaches us to respond to our suffering by trusting in God’s righteousness.

We respond by trusting in God’s Justice

- Then for the second response, after V. 4, we come into the most difficult part of this Psalm in my opinion. The section that makes us most uncomfortable, and we really struggle to know what to do with.
- I want to read these verses for you again.

“May all who hate Zion

be put to shame and turned backward!

Let them be like the grass on the housetops,

which withers before it grows up,

with which the reaper does not fill his hand

nor the binder of sheaves his arms,

nor do those who pass by say,

“The blessing of the LORD be upon you!

We bless you in the name of the LORD!” - Psalm 129:5-8 (ESV)

- So what we have in these verses is a cry for justice from the Psalmist, against those who have wronged him and his people.

- And it seems harsh. We have in these verses the same level of intense emotion that we had in the first verses as the Psalmist was struggling through the suffering that he's faced at the hands of his enemies.
- And what we see here is that he is wishing utter destruction and isolation on enemies, with the same level of graphic imagery that we saw before.
- Let them be like the grass which withers.
- Which the reaper will not fill his had with - referring to someone who would be harvesting grain.
- Let them not be blessed by those who pass by.
- So how do we understand a harsh cry for justice like this?
- Jesus taught his disciples in Matthew 5 that they were called to turn the other cheek. So how do we look at that, and understand this harsh cry for justice against the enemies of the Psalmist.
- Well I think it is important to see that this is not a personal cry for justice, and it is also not vindictive.
- We don't see here the Psalmist saying "You did something bad to me, so I want something worse to happen to you".
- Look again at the beginning of V. 5:

"May all who hate Zion" - Psalm 129:5a (ESV)

- He is not seeking vengeance for himself, or revenge against those who have wronged him.
- He is also not taking matters into his own hands here, calling the people to rise up against their enemies and those who have oppressed them.
- He is looking for justice against the enemies of the people of God. The justice that God promises to his people.
- Essentially what we have here amounts to another statement of trust in God. We've seen the Psalmist trust in the righteousness of God, and now he is putting his trust in the justice of God. That at the end of the day, no matter what suffering he has endured at the hands of his enemies, that God will act justly, and punish those who have oppressed his people.
- Because at the end of the day, our God is a just God, and those who choose to stand against him, and against his people will one day face that judgement. And it's not for you and me to take that judgement and justice into our own hands, but rather to trust in the justice of God.
- I love how Jamie Grant sums this up in his commentary of this passage, speaking to preachers:
 - *"In preaching and teaching Psalm 129 we may be inclined to "explain away" or "justify" the presence of the imprecations in the psalm. In doing so, however, we take attention away*

from the psalm's great theological claim—a just God is present in the midst of an unjust world.”

- And I love that, because that's what this amounts to. We live in an unjust world. A world where we will face trials and suffering that we do not deserve, and we will struggle to process that. It will be difficult.
- But in the midst of this world, so full of injustice, God is still just. And at the end of the day, his justice will be done. So we pray prayers like this, not angrily or vindictively, but full of trust that, as Jamie Grant pointed out, “a just God is present in the midst of an unjust world”.

Conclusion

- So where does that leave us?
- It may make us a little uncomfortable, and we may not like what we see in this Psalm, but we need what we see in this Psalm.
- We live in a time when our world is so full of injustice, and is so full of suffering. We live in a world where, in many countries, to even meet together as a church could get you arrested and killed.
- Injustice and suffering are all around us, and it is so important to learn about how the Bible teaches us to respond to what we experience, and what we see happening in the world around us.
- And if I could sum up the lesson of Psalm 129, this is what I would say.
- **Psalm 129 teaches us to be honest with God about what we're struggling with, but to respond to those struggles by trusting in his righteousness and justice.**
- And as I read through Psalm 129, I am reminded of something that Paul says in Romans 12:12

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” - Romans 12:12 (ESV)

- As Paul is telling the church in this verse to be patient in tribulation, and constant in prayer, prayers like this are the ones that come to mind.
- Honest and emotional prayers to God about the suffering and persecution that they are enduring, but also prayers in which they are able to rejoice in their hope, declaring *“The Lord is righteous, he has cut the chords of the wicked”*.
- Because of what Christ has done for us, we are able to rejoice in our hope, be patient in our tribulation, and be constant in prayer.
- We are able to be honest with God about our struggles, but we are also able to trust in his righteousness and justice, and cry out in the same way that the Psalmist does here *“The Lord is righteous”*.

- And I want to end with reading you a prayer about the justice of God, written by A.W. Tozer in his book, “Knowledge of the Holy”.
- *“Our Father, we love you for your justice. We acknowledge that your judgements are true and righteous alltogether. Your justice upholds the order of the universe and guarantees the safety of all who put their trust in you. We live because you are just and merciful. Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, righteous in all your ways and holy in all your works - Amen”*