



Psalm 129 - Prayer for the Downfall of Israel's Enemies

A Song of Ascents.

Introduction

It is reasonable to call this song a psalm of confidence for the community, as it reflects on what God's people have endured and how God has sustained them. It could also be called a community thanksgiving, which celebrates God's sustaining presence, or a community lament, asking that God continue to sustain his people against those who would harm them. As a Song of Ascents, it is well-suited to remind the pilgrims never to take their privileges for granted. As the pilgrims came to Jerusalem to remember God's many past deliverances, such as in the festivals of Passover or Tabernacles, they prayed confident prayer in God's continued protection and the defeat of their many enemies. Derek Kidner commented, "Whereas most nations tend to look back on what they have achieved, Israel reflects here on what they have survived. It could be a disheartening exercise, for Zion still has its ill-wishers. But the singers take courage from the past, facing God with gratitude and their enemies with defiance."

Psalm 129:1-4 - Those Who Hate Israel Have Not Prevailed.

The opening section has God's people as a whole (the 'me' here) speaking, recalling that Israel has long endured people who have afflicted them, and yet they have not prevailed against Israel. They have done terrible things, but because the Lord is righteous, i.e. true to his promises, he has cut the cords which bound Israel to be subjects of the wicked, in this case, those who hate God's people.

- 1 'Often have they attacked me from my youth'
— let Israel now say —
- 2 'often have they attacked me from my youth,

yet they have not prevailed against me.

- ³ Those who plough ploughed on my back;
they made their furrows long.’

Psalm 129:1-3

Often have they attacked me from my youth. The psalmist presented this as the testimony of Israel, i.e. let Israel now say. The covenant descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have endured unique and evil affliction all their existence starting in Egypt: *<<Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them>>* (Exodus 1:11-14). Charles Spurgeon commented, “‘Many a time,’ Israel says, because she could not say how many times. She speaks of her assailants as ‘they,’ because it would be impossible to write or even to know all their names.”

The statement is repeated twice for emphasis, and rightfully so. The Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Philistines, the Syrians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Roman Catholics and other Christians, the kings of Europe, the Muslims, the Czars, and the Nazis all did their best to wipe out the Jews. Yet they remain: *<<I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob, I will gather the survivors of Israel; I will set them together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture; it will resound with people>>* (Micah 2:12), and: *<<So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace>>* (Romans 11:5). Spurgeon added, “These repetitions are after the manner of poetry: thus she makes a sonnet out of her sorrows, music out of her miseries.”

Yet they have not prevailed against me. This is the happy testimony of Israel. Jew-hatred has raged against them for centuries, yet the enemies of God and his people the Jews have never succeeded or prevailed against them: *<<They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you>>* (Jeremiah 1:19).

Those who plough ploughed on my back. The psalmist described the many afflictions upon Israel as if their enemies ran over their stretched out bodies with a plough. This is a vivid picture of suffering and subjugation, being utterly laid low before one’s foes. Spurgeon commented, “The afflicted nation was, as it were, lashed by her adversaries so cruelly that each blow left a long red mark, or perhaps a bleeding wound, upon her back and shoulders, comparable to a furrow which tears up the ground from one end of the field to the other.”

4 The Lord is righteous;
he has cut the cords of the wicked.

Psalm 129:4

The Lord is righteous. God promised to preserve his covenant people of Israel and his faithfulness in delivering them is a demonstration of his righteousness. The fact that the Lord is righteous means he has and will keep his promises to Israel. Kidner observed, “The survival of this people, so hated but so resilient, bore silent witness to their Preserver (as, one may feel, it has continued to do).”

He has cut the cords of the wicked. Israel’s foes were strong and clever: <<*The arrogant have hidden a trap for me, and with cords they have spread a net; along the road they have set snares for me*>> (Psalm 140:5), but not greater than God who could deliver. The ways the wicked restrained and enslaved God’s people would be cut in pieces.

Psalm 129:5-8 - May Those Who Hate Zion Never Prevail.

The second section prays that all such enemies who hate Zion should always fail in their purposes. The image of vv.6-8 is that of withered grass, which brings no blessing to others.

5 May all who hate Zion
be put to shame and turned back.
6 Let them be like the grass on the housetops
that withers before it grows up,
7 with which reapers do not fill their hands
or binders of sheaves their arms,
8 while those who pass by do not say,
‘The blessing of the Lord be upon you!
We bless you in the name of the Lord!’

Psalm 129:5-8

May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned back. The psalmist prayed that not only would Israel be delivered from their enemies, but that God would also apply his righteousness to Israel’s enemies: <<*Now many nations are assembled against you, saying, ‘Let her be profaned, and let our eyes gaze upon Zion.’ But they do not know the thoughts of the Lord; they do not understand his plan, that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing-*

floor>> (Micah 4:11-12). They should be shamed and turned back. Some take offence at the prayer the psalmist made against the enemies of Israel, yet there is really no basis for such offence. Spurgeon stated that this is, “a proper wish, and contains within it no trace of personal ill-will. We desire their welfare as men, their downfall as traitors. Let their conspiracies be confounded, their policies be turned back. How can we wish prosperity to those who would destroy that which is dearest to our hearts?”

Let them be like the grass. Grass that grows in the rainy season, especially on the rooftops of the ancient east which were made mainly from mud, quickly withers as the weather becomes warm and dry: <<***they have become like plants of the field and like tender grass, like grass on the housetops, blighted before it is grown***>> (Isaiah 37:27b). The psalmist prayed that the present green season of Israel’s enemies would be short lived.

Spurgeon commented, “Grass on the housetop is a nonentity in the world: the house is not impoverished when the last blade is dried up, and, even so, the opposers of Christ pass away, and none lament them. One of the fathers said of the apostate emperor Julian, ‘That little cloud will soon be gone’; and so it was. Every sceptical system of philosophy has much the same history; and the like may be said of each heresy.”

With which reapers do not fill their hands. The grass of the previous verse was useless for the reaper or those who gather grain, i.e. **binders of sheaves**. The psalmist wanted the uselessness of the wicked enemies of Israel to be exposed and evident to all.

While those who pass by do not say. The psalmist prayed that these enemies of Israel would not enjoy **the blessing of the Lord** upon them. He prayed that the pleasant picture of happy harvest work found in Ruth 2:4 would never be fulfilled for these enemies of Israel.

We bless you in the name of the Lord! The blessing of God is the greatest thing any human life can enjoy, giving goodness to every aspect of life: <<***Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord***>> (Psalm 118:26). The psalmist prayed that none of this goodness would be given to those who hated Jerusalem and Israel. Spurgeon observed, “In harvest times men bless each other in the name of the Lord; but there is nothing in the course and conduct of the ungodly man to suggest the giving or receiving of a benediction.”