

Things Are Never What They Seem

Psalm 129

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We're now two-thirds of the way through our series on the Pilgrim Psalms. This morning we'll be looking at Psalm 129. And after this, we have only five more psalms in the series.

For those who have not been with us, the Pilgrim Psalms are a group of fifteen short psalms grouped together in our canon—starting with Psalm 120 and ending with Psalm 134. Remember, Psalm 119 is the longest of all the Psalms. (It's the longest chapter in the whole Bible.) And Psalm 119 is followed immediately by this collection of short songs that are purposely grouped together.

These fifteen short psalms are essentially like a chorus sheet stuck into Israel's larger hymnbook, placed right after the longest hymn in the hymnbook. All fifteen psalms in the collection start with the same inscription: "**A Song of degrees.**" That's how the King James Version translates it. The word translated "**degrees**" means "steps going upward." And every modern version I can find translates it "**A Song of Ascents.**" These are the only psalms anywhere with that inscription, so they are clearly grouped together deliberately. They are songs for an upward journey—specifically the annual pilgrimages up to Jerusalem. That was a long, steep, upward climb for foot travelers, and these were the songs

you would sing along the way. So we're referring to them as "Pilgrim Psalms."

Let me say something about the structure of the whole collection. I don't think I have pointed out to you the symmetry of it yet. It's an odd number of psalms: fifteen. Four of them are attributed to David. One is labeled as a psalm of Solomon. (Whether it was written *by* him or *for* him is debatable.) And all the rest are anonymous. They are laid out with the Solomonic psalm (Psalm 127) in the center of the collection, and on either side you have two series of seven psalms, each with two psalms written by David and five anonymous psalms.

There are several recurring themes in the collection: fellowship, family, unity, community, and worship—along with every journeying mercy travelers would be concerned with: the Lord's protection, guidance, guardianship, blessing, sovereignty, and grace. Most of the songs contain some mention of either Zion or the city of Jerusalem.

That name "Zion" is itself a reference to the city of Jerusalem. It comes from the location of an ancient Jebusite fortress erected on a ridge adjacent to where the Temple Mount was located. By the time of the later prophets, the name "Zion" functionally became an equivalent name for the city of Jerusalem and its surroundings. Sometimes those who mentioned "Zion" were specifically referring to the Temple

mount. So whether these songs mention the city of Jerusalem or Zion, the point is the same. Pilgrims who sang these psalms were singing about their destination.

The whole collection of psalms follows a kind of upward progression. It starts, of course, with Psalm 120, which is a prayer of distress from someone who is far away from home, and it ends at Psalm 134 with a call to praise in the sanctuary in Zion. So these psalms are perfectly suited for the journey to Jerusalem. Some commentators think they are given in a specific order, coordinated with specific steps or way stations on the upward journey, or else arranged to align with key places of difficulty or spectacular scenery along the way.

I'm not so sure that's easy to prove. They definitely don't seem arranged to follow a consistently upward progression, because the last psalm we looked at, Psalm 128, is a triumphant song about the blessings of a prosperous family life, and this one, Psalm 129, talks about the pains of persecution and includes an imprecatory curse against those who hate Zion. So it doesn't naturally evoke the sense of a step up.

I don't think it matters a great deal whether these psalms were sung in a specific order or not. Hymnbooks and song-sheets generally aren't meant to be sung in order. They *are* usually are organized in some topical fashion so that all the songs related to one specific topic are found in close

proximity to one another. But you don't have to sing them in order.

Whatever the arrangement might have been intended to signify, these pilgrim songs clearly constitute a singular collection of short songs-for-the-road that go together. And it makes perfect sense that Psalm 120 comes first and Psalm 134 comes last in the overall collection. But I don't think there's any necessary significance in the way they are ordered within the collection itself. I don't want to read more into the order than is obvious. As I said, I don't see any obvious progression between Psalm 128 and Psalm 129, and I don't want to manufacture some kind of artificial connection. Both are songs stand alone perfectly well, and both are suitable for the pilgrim journey. But they are totally different in both tone and topic. So the order, it seems to me, is incidental.

Now, let's look at Psalm 129. This is a song of lament that contains a wonderful truth about suffering for righteousness' sake. There's not really a cheerful note in the whole psalm; the first half is a dirge about the scorn and affliction heaped upon the heads of the righteous by those who hate Zion. It bewails the injustice of suffering by the people of God at the hands of the wicked. The second half is an imprecatory prayer for divine vengeance against the oppressors.

Some of the imagery in this psalm is painful to the point of being grotesque (v. 3): "**The plowers plowed upon my back; they made long their furrows.**" The emotion from start to finish is full of deep resentment and righteous indignation against the wickedness of Israel's persecutors. Yet at the end of the day, the song highlights a triumphant truth. Verse 2 sums it up in a single statement, celebrating the fact that the enemy has not and will not prevail: "**Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me.**" And verse 4: "**The LORD is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked.**" But taken in context, we see that the tone even in those verses is more *defiant* than *joyous*. It's an expression of disdain in the face of so much torment, not really a sunny and jovial celebration of triumph.

This psalm is reminiscent of what the apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9 about the persecutions he suffered: "**We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.**" Just a few chapters after that, in Corinthians 11, He filled six verses with an inventory of his troubles:23-28:

labors . . . imprisonments . . . countless beatings . . . often near death. [He says,]

24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.

25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;

26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;

27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Paul recorded that catalogue of afflictions, not as a complaint, but as an act of praise. That's the spirit here in our psalm, too. This is an elegy about the sovereignty and justice of God. It's not an upbeat song, but it is triumphant.

The second half of the psalm is *imprecatory*. That means it is a curse or a malediction pronounced against the evildoers—a wish for their evil intentions to be foiled, frustrated, and brought to complete ruin. The psalm ends with a hope that the haters of Zion would be so thoroughly disgraced and so utterly stigmatized that no one passing by would think to pronounce even a casual blessing upon them. When we get to that verse, I'll show you there's a New Testament parallel to that idea as well. Some enemies of

truth and righteousness are so despicable that the only proper, godly response is to make known our disapproval. Hang on to that thought. We'll come back to it before we close this morning.

A word about the structure of this psalm: It divides perfectly into two stanzas. Stanza 1 (vv. 1-4) is all about the relentless sufferings of God's people. Stanza 2 (vv. 5-8) is all about the inevitable doom of those who persecute God's people. So again, although this is not a sunny song, its truth is actually triumphant.

Let me read the whole psalm. Psalm 129:

A Song of Ascents. "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.

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!"

The central lesson of that psalm is that in the spiritual realm—in the domain of God and the kingdom of heaven—the truth is rarely what it may appear to be from an earthly perspective. You can't look around and see who suffers versus who prospers and discern by that yardstick which person is truly blessed by God. The righteous *do* suffer, and the unrighteous often appear to prosper. In fact, you can take a snapshot of worldly affairs at almost any point in human history, and if all you see is what's happening on earth, it may seem like wicked people *always* have the upper hand. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Satan himself is called "**the god of this world**" for that very reason. We're told in 1 John 2:16 that "**all that is in the world [are] the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions**"—evil, self-centered passions and sinful lusts. Corruption reigns on earth.

But in reality, from the perspective of heaven, this world exists under God's curse. Furthermore, if we were truly sensible regarding our own fallenness, the goodness of God would lead us to repentance rather than making us feel smug and self-satisfied. The apparent prosperity of the wicked is an illusion; and the suffering of the righteous does not mean God has abandoned them. He may for good and righteous

reasons delay, but He *always* delivers His people. Verse 4: **"The LORD is righteous; He has cut in pieces the cords of the wicked."**

So things here on earth are not quite as it seems to the human eye, and that is always the case. This psalm celebrates that truth from two different angles.

Two stanzas, and I want to consider the distinctive message of each stanza with you. Stanza 1 is about The Righteous, and this is the point: *They suffer, but they are safe*. Stanza 2 is about The Wicked, and the point there is that *they domineer, but they are doomed*. So let's take those points one at a time, and we'll try to move verse by verse through the psalm.

Stanza 1, consider:

1. THE RIGHTEOUS—THEY SUFFER, BUT THEY ARE SAFE

This first stanza describes the people of God, who are attacked by the world, but protected by heaven. Notice the phrase at the end of verse 1: **"Let Israel now say."** This is a short rehearsal of Israel's history, which is a long a story of persecution and trouble. Various threats, incursions, assaults, and captivity interrupted the peace of Israel throughout her history. The Egyptians, the Canaanites, the surrounding nations, and virtually every world empire—all of them tried at one point or another to destroy the people of Israel. By the time this psalm was written, the pattern was clear: God always stepped in and thwarted the plans of Israel's attackers in time to save the nation from what seemed like certain destruction. Despite what it looked like—regardless of how much they suffered—in the ultimate and eternal sense, Israel was kept safe by God.

The assaults against God's people were savage and continuous, and it was that way constantly and repeatedly from the very beginning. Verses 1 and two begin with the exact same words: **"Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth."** The King James and New King James Versions say, **"Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth"**—emphasizing the many waves of persecution the Israelites had endured, even from the very beginning, when the family of Jacob was living in exile in Egypt.

Now this is specifically speaking about Israel, but the principle it teaches applies to you and me as Christians as well. Second Timothy 3:12-13: "**Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse.**"

The truth of this psalm applies, I think, in a particular way to Christ as well. Remember that shortly after He was born, His family had to go into exile in Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod. He was hounded and hated and persecuted by the religious establishment for his whole public ministry and ultimately put to death at the hands of Roman soldiers, who were acting in collusion with "**both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the [religious leaders] of Israel.**" In other words, virtually the whole world conspired to try to destroy Christ. He is the ultimate embodiment of the principle this psalm sings about.

And the life and ministry of Jesus show us in the most graphic way how God can bring great good even out of unjust suffering—and why he permits suffering at all. If Christ had not suffered unjustly, there would of course have been no atonement for sin. It was His death as the spotless, innocent lamb of God that made atonement for the sin of the world. So it's clear (isn't it?) that God can make good even out of unjust suffering.

It's worth noticing, perhaps, that verse 3 of our psalm evokes imagery that is very much like what Christ literally suffered under a Roman scourge. The scourge was a deadly weapon—a short-handled whip with long leather strips, with bits of metal and glass attached to the thongs so that the flesh was literally torn from the victim's back—in long, deep furrows. I don't know about you, but I can't read the words of this psalm without thinking of what Christ suffered. And that's fitting, because (while I'm not suggesting that this psalm is primarily and specifically about the sufferings of Jesus) the principle taught here certainly applies to Christ's sacrifice. **"The LORD is righteous;"** He will make sure in the end that the wicked will not prevail against he righteous. A hint of that same principle is echoed in Psalm 16:10: **"You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption."** And *that* text clearly speaks of Christ. It's quoted in Acts 2:27 and Acts 13:35 as a prophecy of Christ's resurrection.

Now bear in mind that when this psalm was written, the mystery of the gospel had not yet been revealed. The psalmist certainly did not know the *full* extent of how God's righteousness would be fulfilled and totally vindicated in the sufferings of Christ.

Yet the righteousness of God is exactly where the psalmist goes in verse 4 as he considers the suffering of

God's people: **"The LORD is *righteous*; he has cut the cords of the wicked."** That drives home and reinforces the truth featured at the end of verse 2: **"They [the wicked] have not prevailed against me."** The Lord will totally cut their cords. The righteous may suffer, but they are safe.

That is an important truth for all believers to bear in mind—and it's a good, firm anchor to cling to in times of suffering.

Trouble and persecution are inevitable. Again, **"All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."** Jesus said in Matthew 10:22: **"You will be hated by all for my name's sake . . . A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household."** In John 16:2, He told His disciples, **"They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God."** This was the final point in the beatitudes (Matthew 5:10-12): **"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."**

In Jesus' last words of rebuke and condemnation to the Pharisees (Matthew 23:33-34), He said, **"You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town."** The persecution of His disciples was part of His plan. That's why when He called people to follow Him, He said, **"Deny [your]self and take up [your] cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."**

Christians today spend an inordinate amount of energy trying to avoid the world's disapproval. That is a fruitless exercise. Jesus said the world's contempt is inevitable. Only an unfaithful heart would try to adjust the message or find a way to win the world's approval anyway. I've said this many times before but it bears repeating: the one factor that has done more than anything else to weaken the church's testimony and obscure the true message of the gospel is this pathological hunger for worldly approval, academic stature, and cultural acceptance that seems to dominate the evangelical movement.

To even entertain the thought that we could win the world by getting the world to like us, or by making the Christian message more appealing—that's the very spirit of infidelity. It

is the fruit of too many minds that frankly don't believe Christ and aren't willing to submit to His teaching. The fact that such an attitude has flourished among evangelicals for nearly two centuries is a clear sign of widespread apostasy. Jesus said, **"If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you"** (that's John 15:19). And in Verse 20, He adds this: **"If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you."**

So if you are a faithful believer, you *will* suffer. But you are safe.

Jesus perfectly summed up the point of this psalm's first stanza in John 16:33, when He said, **"In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."**

Though the world mistreats you, Christ has already conquered the powers that rule this world. In the words of our psalm (v. 4): **"he has cut the cords of the wicked."**

Although you suffer, you are safe.

Now, before we move away from this first stanza, I want to point out some of the details. For one thing, notice the intensity of the sufferings the people of God have been subjected to. The sufferings described here are *constant*, *complex*, and *cruel*. It's a long-standing trial that began early (vv. 1-2): **"they afflicted me from my youth."** It's a relentless series of afflictions: **"Many a time they have afflicted me."** (The

repetition of that phrase in verses 1-2 emphasizes the recurrent pattern of assaults—persecution after persecution.) It's an unspeakably grievous ordeal (verse 3): "**The plowers plowed on my back; they made their furrows long.**" In other words, they extend the length of their lacerations as far as they possibly can. They want to amplify the pain and maximize the injury—and I think the language in this figure of speech also means to suggest that they took a perverse delight in laying on the affliction. This describes a savage persecution that is violent, persistent, and without pity—perhaps even carried out with a debauched sense of glee.

Notice also the use of a non-specific pronoun rather than the names of any particular persecutors: Just "**they.**" One commentator I read said, *The persecutors don't deserve a name. Like the rich man in the parable of Lazarus, they aren't worthy to be named.* Another commentator says that by refusing to name them, *"the Psalmist aggravates the greatness of the evil more than if he had expressly named the Assyrians or the Egyptians."*

Their hatred is inexcusable because it is without reason. "**They have afflicted me from my youth**"—before there was any reason to harbor such hatred. Verse 5 tells us they simply "**hate Zion**"—the place of worship, the earthly symbol of righteousness. Zion was earth's best visible reminder of

God's glory. John 15:25 quotes an Old Testament phrase found in at least 5 of the Psalms: "**They hated me without a cause.**" That phrase isn't repeated verbatim here, but it might as well be. That's the idea behind this. "**They hated me without a cause.**"

Meanwhile, the psalmist remains steadfast, defiant, staunch in the faith. Verse 2: "**Yet they have not prevailed against me.**" Satan might sift the believer like wheat, but if the person's faith is real—whether it's mustard-seed faith or childlike faith—that faith will not fail. *The righteous suffer, but they are safe.*

Let me point out one other thing, before we move on to stanza 2: As you are going to see, both stanzas feature an illustration, and both illustrations would be very familiar to anyone living in an agricultural environment. In stanza 1, it's the plowers with their long furrows. In stanza 2, you'll see, it's the image of grass growing on the roof of a building.

Now, I don't know about you, but it makes me wince to think of having my back plowed in deep furrows. I've had three surgeries on my back, so I know a little about this. The first time, it was supposed to be a minor surgery so that the doctor could take a small biopsy. But this particular doctor was trained by Nazis. He was straight out of a horror movie—a stone-faced guy with a harsh European accent who was rather obviously too delighted to take a sample of my

back. He used a thing like a biscuit-cutter with a razor's edge, cut a big circle, removed the epidermis about a quarter-inch deep, then stitched it all up with the ugliest, sloppiest, spider-shaped set of stitches. He used thick thread that looked like the stuff they use to sew the leather overs on baseballs. It left me with a really ugly scar and a permanent itch.

So I really don't like people plowing my back. Here's the thing about the furrows described in our psalm: We know from everything Scripture teaches about suffering that God never fails to use those furrows to sow blessings. What the persecutors mean for evil, God uses for good. Suffering is the prelude to glory. Romans 8:17: **"We suffer with [Christ] in order that we may also be glorified with him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."**

Remember at the start I pointed out that the apostle Paul echoed the first stanza of this psalm when he wrote 2 Corinthians 4:8: **"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."** The righteous suffer, but they are safe.

And then look more closely at verse 4: **"The LORD is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked."** The Hebrew word for "cords" speaks of thick, braided cables or lashes.

"The cords of the wicked" stand for their power over the people of God—a cruel, tyrannical, overtly evil and brutally violent supremacy. The "cords" signify all of that—everything that kept Israel in bondage and subject to persecution.

God cuts those cords. He cuts the harness that tethers the plow to the oxen. He cuts the thongs off the scourge. He cuts the rope by which the wicked hold the people of God in bondage. He cuts the ligature that the haters of Zion would use to choke the life out of Israel. He cuts the line that holds His people in a snare. He cuts the cords that bind the wicked together in their hateful purpose. He disables them in every way.

So although the wicked seem to flourish and thrive and overpower the righteous for a while, God always will utterly thwart their plans before they can accomplish anything lasting. Once more: The righteous suffer, but they are safe.

That brings us to stanza 2, which is about—

2. THE WICKED—THEY DOMINEER, BUT THEY ARE DOOMED

The enemies of God and the haters of Zion may seem prosperous for the moment, but they are fit only for destruction.

The second stanza of this psalm is basically an imprecatory plea—a prayer for God to frustrate the intentions of the evildoers and bring about justice where such gross injustice has ruled for so long.

Now we haven't studied many imprecatory psalms over the years. Frankly, they aren't easy to preach from. These curses that come in the form of prayers are not to be taken flippantly or read with a sense of superiority—because frankly none of us has any right to feel in any way superior to unbelievers. The first confession every authentic believer makes is an avowal of our own guilt, our unworthiness, and our desperate need for God's grace and mercy.

Jesus taught frequently on the subject of forgiveness, and He never failed to remind us that we have been forgiven much. What Jesus atoned for and God has forgiven is a much greater offense against the perfect righteousness of heaven than any earthly wrong we have ever suffered. So we must be compassionate and forgiving. Jesus said, **"If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."** He said, **"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."** Romans 12:14 says, **"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."** Wouldn't that seem to rule out any kind of imprecatory prayers?

The apparent disparity between that verse and the imprecatory psalms has been a stumbling block to many

people. Lots of people think God's moral law was revised between the Old and New Testaments—so while wars against one's enemies; curses against evildoers; and capital penalties for serious crimes were acceptable under the Old Covenant, they will tell you those things have been replaced with a new, higher principle under the New Covenant. That's why a man after God's own heart like David could write imprecatory psalms under the Old Covenant, they claim, even though we shouldn't pray any prayers like that.

That's really sloppy thinking. A lot of the pressure to read those ideas into the biblical text is rooted in Victorian modernism. Read any commentary or discussion on the imprecatory psalms from the middle of the 19th century, and you'll see that the Victorian sense of propriety really struggled with any kind of plea for justice in the form of vengeance, or prayers for divine retribution against evildoers, or even the idea of punishment for wrongdoing. That's when it became almost impolite even to mention the doctrine of hell. Victorian scruples just seemed to have a really hard time with the idea that justice sometimes entails punishment without mercy. And that attitude has remained a powerful force in the church ever since. But James 2:13 is clear on this: "**Judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy.**"

Furthermore, the turn-the-other-cheek principle deals with petty, personal insults and offenses on an individual level. **"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you"**—all of those commands are meant to teach us how to respond in the moment to individual *acts* of unkindness, harassment, mockery, insults, or indignities when we are personally abused, offended, maligned, trespassed against, or whatever. None of those commands suggest that we ought to make peace with wickedness, unbelief, or animosity against God—as if it were a good thing to wish that unrighteousness could be overlooked or even rewarded with blessing instead of being dealt with in a way that vindicates the righteousness of God.

Now this is a bit tricky, because we *are* supposed to love mercy and leave every kind of vengeance to the Lord. But the imprecatory psalms show us that there is also a place to plead with God for His righteous vengeance to prevail over evil.

No principle under the New Covenant renders imprecatory pleas such as you find in our psalm obsolete or out of bounds. In fact, we read in the final book of the New Testament that the souls of the martyrs in heaven itself are pleading with God for their blood to be avenged. Revelation 6:10: **"They [cry] out with a loud voice, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy**

and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" That very plea is what will unleash the final outpouring of divine wrath that culminates in the events described in the book of Revelation.

So there *is* a proper time to plead with God for justice, and we see one example of that right here in our psalm. Stanza 2 is entirely given to an imprecatory prayer against the wicked.

What are the characteristics of this kind of praying that distinguish a righteous plea of this type from an unrighteous plea for personal vengeance?

First of all, it's *not* personal. This prayer is not borne out of a brutish desire to see some specific person suffer mainly because he has made *me* suffer. Remember that the persecutors—the evil plowmen in this psalm—are not even named. They are referred to with a generic pronoun: "**they.**" It's *totally* generic on purpose, because it is inclusive of everyone who has any kind of stubborn agenda against God (v. 5): "**all who hate Zion.**" No particular individual is in the psalmist's mind. Verse 6 reverts once more to the generic pronoun: "**them.**" So this isn't a personal vendetta in any way.

Second, it's motivated by a love for *God's* righteousness and a desire to see *God's* justice vindicated for His glory—not some petty wish to see the wicked suffer. The high point of the whole psalm is verse 4: "**The LORD is**

righteous." That's the psalmist's central focal point, and He longs to see God's perfect righteousness on display in every sense. That includes, of course, the judgment of the wicked.

Third, I would argue that this is not in any sense a mean-spirited prayer. To quote Spurgeon, it expresses "*a proper wish, and contains within it no trace of personal ill-will. We desire their welfare as men, [but we desire] 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?*"

Incidentally, Spurgeon was not one of those Victorian modernists who shied away from imprecatory prayers. He said this: "*Study a chapter from the 'Book of Martyrs,' and see if you do not feel inclined to read an imprecatory Psalm over Bishop Bonner and Bloody Mary. It may be that some wretched nineteenth-century sentimentalist will blame you: if so, read another [imprecatory prayer] over him.*"

Now, granted, this second stanza of our psalm is definitely not a soft-and-gentle prayer for blessing. It's worded in a way that befits the ruthlessness of these evildoers. But it is, after all, a wish for the very thing the haters of Zion need most. Verse 5: "**May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward!**" Think about that from the right perspective and you'll see that *it is a prayer for their*

repentance. I'll confess to you frankly that the best thing that has ever happened to me was being put to shame and turned backward. Not just once when I first became a Christian, but on a few significant occasions since. This is what the wicked need: to **"be put to shame and turned backward!"** And whether God chooses to show them mercy by granting them repentance, or give them the ultimate judgment they deserve—either way—that is precisely what He will ultimately do with them: He will put them to shame and turn them backward.

Here's one more reason we shouldn't shy away from proper, thoughtful imprecatory praying: When the psalmist writes this prayer, he is in full agreement with God. Every desire expressed in the second half of this psalm is a wish that reflects what we know is the will of God. Cutting the cords of the wicked (v. 4) demonstrates God's righteousness, because it sets the righteous free from an unjust bondage and releases them from persecution.

Verse 5: **"May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward!"** Listen to God Himself in Zechariah 1:14: **"Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion."** And at the end of that same chapter, the Lord declares that He will **"cast down the horns of the nations who lifted up their horns against the land of Judah to scatter it."** So when the psalmist prays that God will put to shame those

who hate Zion, he is merely praying for what God himself says he *will* do.

Ditto for every request in this stanza. Verse 6: "**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.**"

Now: that's the second word-picture based on country life in this psalm. You had the plowing of long furrows in verse 3. This time it's grass that grows on the roof.

What kind of parable or word-picture is this? Here's the point: When you have a flat roof covered with hard-baked clay or anything else that might collect a layer of dust, in the rainy season, even the thinnest layer of damp dust is capable of sprouting seeds that might blow up there. (My dad was a roofing contractor, and I've spent a bit of time on roofs. It's not unusual to see a dirty patch or a crevice on the roof sporting a cluster of weeds. There's not enough soil for grass to really flourish up there. Once it sprouts, it is doomed to die, but as long as the moisture remains, it will *appear* to be vibrant, fast-growing, even lush. Because there's no depth for roots, most of the growth is leafy.

So you have this grass in an artificially-elevated position that may *look* even more green, leafy, and luxuriant than the grass in a field. It gives the distinct *appearance* of health, prosperity, abundance—great promise—or so it seems to the

undiscerning eye. But there is no possibility that grass will really thrive and bear fruit up there. The same sun that gave it that extra-green look will very shortly dry it out and kill it. That will happen as soon as the water evaporates.

That is a perfect metaphor for the apparent prosperity of the haters of Zion: at the moment, they domineer, but they are doomed.

Despite the false promise you think you see because of their present place of dominance, those who hate God, despise His people, and detest Zion can never amount to anything. Like grass on a rooftop, they are worthless for anything.

In reality, a house is no better with a patch of grass growing on the roof, and no worse off if that rooftop grass dries up. There's absolutely nothing useful or salvageable there. When the reaper goes by, he won't even pause to gather that grass for a bale of hay to feed the livestock. There's not enough substance there to bother with.

The wicked are just like that. They are not at all what they appear to be.

In fact, as the last verse suggests, those who hate Zion and torment her citizens are not even worthy of a blessing. Verse 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!'**" That was a standard form of casual greeting, and still is in parts of the

middle east. It was a kindness even strangers would typically show to one another. You see it, for example in Ruth 2:4: **"Boaz came from Bethlehem. And he said to the reapers, 'The LORD be with you!' And they answered, 'The LORD bless you.'"** Even that sort of general courtesy is ultimately withdrawn from the stubbornly wicked.

Again, this is not any kind of warrant for unkindness or personal spite. It echoes 2 John 10-11, which commands us to withhold any kind of blessing from anyone who comes in Christ's name but with an agenda that opposes what Christ taught. The point, both here and in 2 John, is not to respond with ill-will or unkindness. But the most loving thing you can do to a determined enemy of righteousness is make clear to him that he has cut himself off from God's blessing. What we hope for most is the evildoer's repentance, but if not, God's will is going to be done anyway, through the perfect justice of divine punishment.

So I hope you see what I mean: this is not a particularly cheery psalm, because it's not really a merry subject. But it is a triumphant truth. Martin Luther summed it up best, I think. He said that *the faithful, in suffering, always prevail and overcome; but the wicked who oppress them are overthrown, and they miserably perish*. Luther also pointed out that *all the histories of all times and ages bear witness to this fact*. Though the righteous suffer, they are safe; and though the

wicked domineer, they are doomed. Things in the spiritual realm are never quite what they seem from an earthly perspective. And that's just one more reason to fix our minds and hearts in heaven.