

Psalm 129                    “A Song of Ascents: Awaiting Pentecost”  
Psalm 124, 126, 127, 128, 129  
Acts 2

June 12, 2011

Since I have already preached on Psalms 126-128,  
we move on to Psalm 129 today.

But Psalm 126 sets up Psalm 129 with its discussion of the harvest  
as an image of eschatological blessing.

Psalm 126 remembers how the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion in former days,  
and pleads with God to do so once again –  
and that day will be a joyful harvest day!

As such Psalm 126 sets up the theme of Pentecost –  
because Pentecost is the feast of firstfruits –  
the feast where you bring the first of the harvest to God,  
in anticipation of the whole harvest that will come at the feast of booths.

Psalm 127 then speaks of our utter dependence on the LORD.  
Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain.  
Unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

When I preached on Psalm 127,  
I pointed out all the Adamic language here:  
God “built” Eve from Adam’s side (the picture is of temple-building)  
and Adam was tasked with guarding the Garden of Eden  
(the picture is of the priests “guarding” the temple of God).  
And indeed, Psalm 127 speaks of “the bread of anxious toil”  
being the reward of those who forget the LORD!

But children are the inheritance from the LORD  
as we fulfill the command of God, “be fruitful and multiply.”  
In Christ, these children can be biological or spiritual  
(indeed, our journey through 1 Chronicles in the evening  
has demonstrated that the OT conception of “children”  
can be quite expansive!).

But the point of Psalm 127 is that honor will come to the one with lots of children.  
And our Lord Jesus Christ has the biggest family on earth!  
Therefore he has the highest honor – and the name that is above every name!

In Psalm 128  
the man is portrayed in his Genesis 2-3 role of tilling the ground  
(eating the fruit of his labor);  
the woman is portrayed in her Genesis 2-3 role of bearing children  
(a fruitful vine in your house with lots of little olive shoots around the table).

Again, we see God's sovereignty,  
as the blessing *comes* from Zion  
and the blessing *consists* in seeing the prosperity of Jerusalem.

When Jerusalem prospers, the people of God are blessed

May you see your children's children –  
the prosperity of Christ's church when you are old and grey

I will probably die without ever seeing our beloved Zion healed of any of her significant wounds.  
But I am an incurable optimist!  
Because Jesus said that the world would know that the Father sent him  
because of the love that his people would have for one another.

In the depths of the middle ages there were those who said that reform could never come,  
and that the only way out of the corruption of the medieval church  
was for Jesus to return.

It would be tempting to say the same today.  
This time it's too much.

But do you realize what such an attitude would really say?  
Such an attitude would say that the LORD does not really build the house.  
Such a mentality denies that the Holy Spirit is the watchman!

Do you believe that Jesus Christ *is Lord* of his church.  
Do you believe that the Spirit of God *really* works in history.

I do.  
Therefore I have hope.  
I cannot imagine how it will happen.  
But then again, in 1485 no one predicted the Reformation that emerged a generation later.

Today is Pentecost Sunday.  
The day that we remember that Jesus poured out his Spirit upon his church.  
On *this* day, we may not forget that the Spirit does what he wishes –  
and no mere man will thwart his purposes!

Sing Psalms 126-128  
Read Acts 2

### **1. The History of Israel Is “One Single Passion Narrative” (v1-4)**

There are echoes of Psalm 124 in Psalm 129:

both repeat the opening line,  
followed by “let Israel now say.”

In Psalm 124 it was,  
“If it had not been the LORD who was on our side –  
let Israel now say –  
If it had not been the LORD who was on our side  
when man rose up against us...”

Psalm 129 begins:  
<sup>1</sup>“Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth”—  
let Israel now say—  
<sup>2</sup>“Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth,  
yet they have not prevailed against me.”

The parallel opening invites a comparison between Psalms 124 and 129.  
In fact, there are a lot of parallels like this in the songs of ascents!

But the insertion of the call: “Let Israel now say”  
makes it quite clear that the Psalmist is calling Israel to take up this song on their lips.

So what does it mean “Greatly have they afflicted me *from my youth*”?  
The first time you hear it, you might think that the Psalmist  
is reflecting on his own personal experience;  
but when you hear him call “Let Israel now say” –  
you realize that *Israel* has been afflicted from *his* youth!

I like the way one commentator puts it:  
“the history of Israel is one single passion narrative.  
Continuously the chosen people were oppressed and harassed.” (Kraus, 462).

Think of Abraham – how he was wronged by Abimelech;  
or how Israel was waylaid in the wilderness by the Moabites and Amalekites;  
or how various nations invaded during the days of the Judges;  
or how the Philistines afflicted Israel until the time of David.

Truly Israel has been afflicted *greatly* –  
many times and in many ways.

God had said Israel is my son, my firstborn –  
and it is appropriate to think of Israel as the son of God,  
who had been afflicted since his youth.

The suffering of Israel models for us the passion of Christ.

And that suffering is graphically depicted in verse 3:

<sup>3</sup> *The plowers plowed upon my back;  
they made long their furrows."*

I am like a draft animal that not only draws the plow,  
but is "plowed" by the whip making furrows along my back.

No farmer in his right mind would abuse his animal like this!  
But "they" have thus afflicted Israel –  
"they" have brought horrific suffering upon us.

Amos 1:3 speaks of how Damascus had threshed Gilead with sledges of iron –  
the picture is of people being tortured by using farm implements  
to beat them brutally.

We have a hard time believing that anyone could be that cruel.  
Back in the 1960s, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a Russian author  
conducted painstaking research on the Gulag –  
the Soviet prison system.  
He wrote a massive three volume work entitled the *Gulag Archipelago*.  
Over the course of over 2,000 pages,  
he traces in meticulous detail  
the horrors of what some people did to other people.

At one point he takes a step back and addresses his western audience, saying  
Don't think that this could never happen to you.  
The Russian people are not monsters –  
at least, no more than you are!  
This is what *ordinary* people will do to each other.

I spent a week of my life immersed in Solzhenitsyn's three volumes.  
I would spend 8-10 hours a day glued to his detailed accounts of the horrors and tortures  
of the Soviet prison camps,  
and then I would walk around the campus of Westmont College in the evening,  
wondering if *these* people would do the same?  
Would I?

As Solzhenitsyn put it:  
*If only there were evil people somewhere committing evil deeds,  
and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them.  
But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.  
And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart? (I.168)*

Verse 4 then says:

<sup>4</sup>*The LORD is righteous;  
he has cut the cords of the wicked.*

I want you to think about this.

In the context of the brutal beating that I have received from “them”  
“the LORD is righteous;  
he has cut the cords of the wicked.”

Israel has endured continual assaults from his enemies –  
this “one single passion narrative” of Israel’s history as the son of God.  
And in the context of this cruel thrashing that Israel has received,  
what does it mean for the LORD to be righteous?

It means “he has cut the cords of the wicked.”

We can talk in the abstract about the “righteousness of God,”  
but Psalm 129 demands that we understand the righteousness of God  
in a very concrete way – in a very concrete situation.

What does it mean that the LORD is righteous?  
It means that he does what is right and just.  
He is the judge who renders just judgment.

And in this Psalm, Israel declares that when my case came before Yahweh,  
he set me free – he cut the cords of the wicked.

I have often spoken of how God brings us suffering through his “common wrath,”  
as God demonstrates what sin deserves;  
this can happen in a large scale  
through hurricanes, tornados, plagues, wars, etc.  
that affect thousands or millions of people;  
or it can happen on a small scale  
through cancer, a car accident, the death of a loved one.

Common wrath is often the answer to the question “why me?”  
Jesus gave that answer to those who told him  
about how Pilate had killed certain Galileans.  
Jesus replied, (Luke 13:1-5)  
“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners  
than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?  
No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.  
Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them:  
do you think that they were worse offenders

than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?  
No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Notice how Jesus speaks of the injustice of human rulers (like Pilate)  
as well as “natural disasters” (the tower falling)  
as “common wrath.”

The “cords of the wicked” are still part of God’s common wrath.

Common wrath simply refers to all the bad stuff that happens in life  
because we live in a sinful, fallen world.

“It could have happened to anyone” –  
it just happened to you!

God is just and righteous in bringing this “common wrath” upon the earth,  
because our sin deserves far worse!

The wages of sin is death.

And because all have sinned (past tense)  
and fall short (present tense) of the glory of God  
therefore everyone deserves death.

And God is just to bring common wrath on the earth –  
and there is even a merciful component to it,  
as Jesus points out:

“unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

That may not be what you want to hear in the middle of *your* suffering,  
but since it comes from the lips of Jesus, you should listen to it!

When you are faced with death, suffering, and trial,  
you are a reminder to everyone who sees you  
that judgment day is coming.

This sort of suffering is common to the righteous and the wicked.

But with this difference:

for the wicked, common wrath will become “special wrath.”

In other words, in the day of judgment,

to say “the LORD is righteous” means  
that the wicked will perish (Psalm 129:5-7).

But for the righteous, the common wrath that we endure  
is transformed.

Because in the day of judgment,

to say “the LORD is righteous” means  
that the cords of the wicked will be cut –

and the righteous will be set free!

Why?

Because he is faithful and just!

For the righteous, even common wrath is transformed into sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

On the surface it can look the same:

two neighbors whose houses were destroyed by the same tornado –  
one who rails against God for taking away all his earthly possessions,  
the other who blesses God for taking away all his earthly possessions –  
so that he might cling to Christ – the only thing worth possessing!

Two husbands weeping over the graves of their wives –  
one who has lost all hope and joy,  
the other who still grieves, but as one with hope (and joy)  
because it was not for this life that their hope was built!

Two thieves hanging on crosses –  
one who rails against the third man, hanging between them,  
the other who turns in hope and says [please see the incredible faith  
that it takes to say this to a man who is about to die!]  
“Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Talk about common wrath being transformed into sharing the sufferings of Christ!

Here is a man who deserved to be crucified –  
a thief who was enduring simply the just penalty for his sin!  
But by faith, he was judged righteous,  
and our Lord said to him,  
“Truly, this day you shall be with me in paradise.”

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

Peter spoke of this in his sermon at Pentecost:

“this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God,  
you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.  
God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death,  
because it was not possible for him to be held by it.” (Acts 2:23-24)

The LORD is righteous.  
The wages of sin is death.  
Therefore death could not hold an innocent man.  
The grave had *no right* to Jesus.

He overcame the power of death and the grave  
by the power of an indestructible life. (Hebrews 7:16)

The resurrection of Jesus demonstrated the righteousness of God.

God is just because he raised Jesus from the dead.

The ascension of Jesus demonstrated the righteousness of God.

God is just because he seated Jesus at his right hand,  
therefore fulfilling his promise to David

“that he would set one of his descendents on his throne.” (Acts 2:30)

But at Pentecost – in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit –  
we see the righteousness of God toward us.

When Peter says “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain  
that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (2:36),

those who heard him were cut to the heart and said,  
“Brothers, what shall we do?”

And Peter replied,

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ  
for the forgiveness of your sins,  
and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (2:38)

In other words, the Lord is righteous.

He has cut the bonds of the wicked.

He has opened their eyes to the truth,

so that they might repent and be saved.

Therefore, those who repent and are baptized have been set free from the cords of the wicked.

Or to use John’s phrase,

“if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins,  
and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

But what of those who do not repent?

What about the wicked?

Verses 5-8 speak of the future of those who hate Zion.

## **2. The Future of Those Who Hate Zion Is Insignificant (v5-8)**

<sup>5</sup>*May all who hate Zion*

*be put to shame and turned backward!*

The Psalmist speaks in verses 5-7 of what he wishes for those who hate Zion.

Some would say that our first prayer should be that those who hate Zion would repent!

Certainly, it is appropriate to pray that they would repent –



but it is also appropriate to pray that they would be  
“put to shame and turned backward!”  
After all, this is no personal vendetta here.  
I am not angry at these people because they have “offended me”!

These people *hate Zion* – which is another way of saying,  
they hate the LORD and his people.

If you love the LORD and his people,  
then you cannot be complacent about those who hate Zion.

You must pray that they would be put to shame.  
That God would turn back all those who seek to do harm to his people.  
What does it mean to be ‘put to shame’?  
It means to lose face.  
It means that someone who was thought honorable  
now is deemed insignificant.  
When a star basketball player gets “schooled” by some nobody –  
or when a Congressman is derailed by scandal –  
  
when someone who was “big stuff” gets “taken down a peg” –  
*that* is what it means to be “put to shame.”

In the movies, the punch line always starts with, “don’t you know who I am?”  
And the retort invariably puts the bigshot to shame!

Now the Psalmist puts the wicked to shame,  
by cursing them with insignificance:

<sup>6</sup>*Let them be like the grass on the housetops,  
which withers before it grows up,  
<sup>7</sup>with which the reaper does not fill his hand  
nor the binder of sheaves his arms,*

They think they’re big stuff –  
but they are like grass –  
and not ordinary grass!  
Ordinary grass is here today and gone tomorrow –  
(Psalm 103 speaks of the transience of grass)  
but ordinary grass is useful!

And so the haters of Zion are not like ordinary grass!  
They are like the grass on housetops!  
(in earthen houses, where packed earth is used for the rooftops,  
there would usually be some straggling grass that would grow briefly,

but in the heat of summer, lacking water, it would quickly perish).

So Psalm 129 gives us an example of a godly curse against the haters of Zion:

“Let them be like the grass on the housetops,  
which withers before it grows up,  
with which the reaper does not fill his hand.”

“You’re so useless you’re not even any good for cattle feed!”

In Psalm 126 there was joy in the harvest when the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion.  
In Psalm 129 the haters of Zion are so insignificant, they don’t make up a handful.

<sup>8</sup>*nor do those who pass by say,  
“The blessing of the LORD be upon you!  
We bless you in the name of the LORD!”*

We know from Ruth 2:4 that during the harvest a passer-by would say,  
“The LORD be with you”  
And the harvesters would reply,  
“The LORD bless you.”

Verse 8 seems to recount this sort of exchange.  
But for the harvest of the haters of Zion,  
there is no blessing.  
The harvest is so insignificant –  
their honor has been turned to shame –

and so those who pass by the haters of Zion,  
there is only silence and dishonor.

I have a slight quibble with the quotation marks in verse 8.  
I think (in light of Ruth 2) that this is supposed to be a call and response.  
There are two voices here:

“The blessing of the LORD be upon you!” is the call.  
“We bless you in the name of the LORD!” is the response.

Why is this important?  
Because there is a way in which Psalm 129 concludes with a blessing.

It is true that the psalm ends with a *non-blessing* on the haters of Zion  
and their insignificant harvest.  
But the implication turns around on the lovers of Zion as well.

When the LORD restores the fortunes of Zion,  
we will sing for joy – when the blessing of God rests upon his people.

And in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (the feast of the first-fruits)  
we have a joyful message of the blessing of the LORD –  
as the Holy Spirit has been poured out as the firstfruits  
of the inheritance – of the full harvest – that will be brought in  
at the final Day.

To paraphrase Leslie Allen:

“Psalm 129 is no trite statement of an easy faith or a shallow optimism.”  
The song of confidence is an outgrowth of the prayer of complaint  
in which distress is tearfully brought before the LORD.  
As we sing this song, we are painfully aware not only of past ordeals  
but of present threats.  
We have learned both from history and from experience  
“that the light of salvation lies at the end of a dark tunnel of suffering.”  
We sing this song in the night, as it were.  
By faith, rather than sight we cling to God’s past revelation of himself  
as a “champion of a particular city and people.”  
With the courage that springs from true faith  
we dare to assert “that the divine help in ages past”  
is our “hope for years to come.” (Allen, 190).