

Ascend:
Peace and Perseverance for the Suffering
Psalm 129

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Introduction to Text: This morning we are continuing a series called, “Ascend.” This series is an expositional study of Psalms 120-134. Each of these Psalms has the heading “Song of Ascents.” Most believe that these are songs that worshippers sang as they made their way to Jerusalem for thrice annual special times of worship. If this is so, then we learn a great deal about what was on their hearts as they approached worship and thus understand what should be upon our hearts as we prepare to worship or just give attention to the subject of worship. We are considering one each Sunday for the weeks of this summer. Today, we are studying Psalm 129. Here is a Bible passage that helps us to think about peace and perseverance in the midst of our suffering.

Text: Since my youth they have often attacked me—
let Israel say—

²Since my youth they have often attacked me,
but they have not prevailed against me.

³Plowmen plowed over my back;
they made their furrows long.

⁴The LORD is righteous;
He has cut the ropes of the wicked.

⁵Let all who hate Zion
be driven back in disgrace.

⁶Let them be like grass on the rooftops,
which withers before it grows up

⁷and can’t even fill the hands of the reaper
or the arms of the one who binds sheaves.

⁸Then none who pass by will say,
“May the LORD’s blessing be on you.”
We bless you in the name of Yahweh.

Introduction: James 5:13 begins, “Is any among you suffering?” The term “suffering” is a rather general word. My Bible gives the editorial heading to this Psalm, “Protection of the Oppressed.” Suffering is a rather general term and a rather relative term. What one might consider to be suffering and oppression, another might say is not. So, rather than get into specifics, we can agree that people suffer. Beyond that, and perhaps more confusing than that, we can also say that the righteous suffer. You may be here today and could answer the question from James, “Yes, I am suffering.” How do we respond to suffering? The Bible passage before us today helps with that question. How do we maintain our peace and persevere through suffering?

Let’s look quickly at a general outline of this Psalm and then seek to make application to our lives from the explanation of this text.

The Problem of Suffering (1-3)

The worshippers of Psalm 129 sang of their suffering. You will notice again in this Psalm as we noticed in an earlier Psalm, 124, that the congregation is being led in worship by a main worship leader. There is a line in verse 1, then the admonition for Israel to say that line back, followed by their response. From this interchange, we can note two identifiable problems about their suffering. Maybe you can relate to the same problem.

- Suffering goes way back.

They can trace their suffering back a long ways. One commentator remarked about Israel's suffering that most nations tend "to look back on what they have achieved," but Israel tended to reflect "on what she had survived." (Derek Kidner)

- Suffering cuts deep.

The second note is a rather graphic description of their time as slaves. The continual effect of their hurt was deep. Suffering does that to us.

But, this is a song, so we are not left in the problems, but get a glimpse of the victory. There are two promises in these first four verses.

Two Promises in the Suffering (2, 4)

- We are still here.

Even though they have been often attacked, "they (the enemy) have not prevailed." They have been knocked down, but not out. (J. B. Phillips) They would have understood the words of Paul as recorded in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, "We are pressured in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed."

Something like that needs to be the rally cry of every believer.

- God is still here and righteous.

Verse 4 is without question the apex of this song. "The Lord is righteous."

A Prayer in the Midst of the Suffering (5-8)

Verses 5-8 are not for the faint of heart. Verses 5-8 contain what students of the Psalms have called across the years as imprecatory Psalms or maybe vengeance Psalms. Imprecatory is related to the idea of invoking judgment upon a person. A Psalm of this kind gives us the deep feelings that David or the author experienced. This is the author's honest feeling at the time. However, in no way does this give us the license to be people of vengeance, anger, or bitterness.

- Filled with Honesty

- Filled with Trust

Let me give you just one little note here before we move on to our application. When you think about these kinds of requests, you might think about all that David suffered at the hands of King Saul. It bears noting that even though this is the prayerful expression of David's heart, he never acted in this way, even toward, and most especially toward, Saul. He gave his enemy to God in prayer. In this case, Israel is giving their enemies to God. And in either case, they were able to leave their enemies in the hands of God. May we be able to do the same.

So What?

1. We must be confident even in suffering.

This is a song of confidence. You have a choice when it comes to your suffering. You can live as the perpetual victim or you can live as a powerful victor. Again, we might be knocked down, but not out.

2. We must cling to our faith.

The righteous will live by faith. The Psalmists are clinging to their faith.

Influenced by the writings of the Voltaire, the French philosopher, of the so-called Enlightenment Period, Frederick the Great, the king of Prussia, became a skeptic. He once questioned his chaplain by asking about the truthfulness of the Bible. Frederick the Great asked his chaplain in essence, "If the Bible is true, the proof ought to be so formidable that you could present its legitimacy and authority in just one word. No long arguments or proofs, just give me one word." After a moment, reportedly, the chaplain said, "Israel, your majesty. Israel." (From Beth Moore's *Stepping Up* as presented in Lifeway's Masterworks series, p. 73. Moore cites the story from commentary by Boice, p. 1131.)

3. We must cry out to God.

This Psalm reminds us again that we can do no better in any given situation of life than to cry out to God. Calling out to God is the evidence that we trust God in every situation. This prayer in verses 5-8 is the evidence that we can trust God even with our enemies.

For the last few months, I have grown fond of reading a daily cultural commentary by a gentleman from Texas named Jim Denison. A former Southern Baptist pastor, he now runs a ministry speaking to the myriad of cultural issues that we face. One day this past week, he wrote about the so-called Silent Minute in the days of World War II.

According to Denison, the Silent Minute was the initiation of British Major Wellesley Tudor Pole. His proposal was a simple one. He encouraged Great Britain to stop whatever they were doing each evening at 9:00 p.m. and pray for peace. After both King George VI and Prime Minister Winston Churchill endorsed the idea, the chiming of the hour from Big Ben began being broadcast by BBC every evening at 9:00 p.m. Roosevelt gave his endorsement of the Silent Minute.

When the war was over, a high ranking German Military Officer was asked under interrogation why he thought the Germans had lost. He said, "During the war, you had a secret weapon for which we could find no counter measure, which we did not understand, but it was very powerful. It was associated with the striking of the Big Ben each evening. I believe you called it the 'Silent Minute.'" (From Denison Report, July 27, 2016)

How do have peace and persevere in the greatest suffering? Have confidence, cling to faith, cry out to God. The Lord is righteous.