



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 129

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Introduction

- This Psalm is another of the series of fifteen Psalms titled *A Song of Ascents*
- As the pilgrims came to Jerusalem to remember God's many past deliverances (such as in the Feasts of Passover or Tabernacles), they prayed confidently for God's continued protection and the defeat of their many enemies
- The author is unknown
- It is a Psalm of an older and tested individual, who looks back upon a life of affliction in which he suffered from his youth
- It matches in length and style of its contents, to Psalms 124



Introduction

- Israel is introduced as the speaker in both Psalms
- Some think that both Psalms may have been written by the same author in the same period, with reference to the dangers which threatened the community in the time of Nehemiah
- However, this Psalm could be applicable to many periods of the Jewish history, and it is not of such a nature that it can with certainty be referred to any one of them
- It was clearly composed during a time of trouble, of war, or of persecution, and the main purpose of the psalmist was to refer to the fact that the same thing had often occurred before, and to find consolation and support in that fact



Introduction

- The principle on which it is founded is, that there is nothing to be feared as the result of trial, if we have passed through the same form of trial before, and we have not been defeated but have been endured
- Psalm 129 is about persistence and perseverance through pain
- Psalm 129 is about strong faith – trusting God to get us through the hard times, even when the pain is intense and the suffering is long
- It is one of the Psalms of the Eleventh Hour Psalms of the Agpeya, the Prayer Book of the Hours



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- Enduring Through the Pain 129:1-4
- Praying Through the Pain 129:5-8

Enduring Through the Pain

129:1-4



- The history of Israel is often compared to the life of an individual
- *from my youth*, Here, of course, not the youth of a person, but of the nation
- This may be understood of literal Israel, the descendants of Jacob; whose youth was the beginning of their constitution as a nation
- The psalmist recalls the long years of suffering Israel has experienced going back even to their early days as a nation
- They experienced slavery in Egypt, the wanderings in the wilderness, the various battles in Canaan, continual fighting with the Philistines and other nations

Enduring Through the Pain

129:1-4



- And then eventually exile under the Assyrians and the Babylonians
- The history of Israel was one conflict after another
- The psalmist, by a spirit of prophecy, might have a further respect to the distresses of Israel in the times of Antiochus and the Maccabees, when the temple was profaned, the altar demolished, and the daily sacrifice made to cease, and many good men lost their lives
- Or their affliction by the Romans, the greatest of all
- The psalmist presented this as the testimony of Israel, *let Israel now say*

Enduring Through the Pain

129:1-4



- The covenant descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have endured unique and evil affliction throughout their history
- Yet Israel persevered
- Even though wicked men had greatly oppressed her, they had not gained the victory over her
- The preservation and perseverance of the Israelites are proof that God's Word is sure, *"I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* (Genesis 12:3)
- Even though many have sought to destroy them, as the Psalmist said, *they have not prevailed against me*

Enduring Through the Pain

129:1-4



- Israel has had to fight many battles and God has promised to preserve them, but He never said they would not suffer
- This may be applied to the church, which, in its infancy, and from its youth upwards, has been afflicted, many times, and by many enemies
- To tell us how the church has endured affliction from her youth, St. Augustine presents to us living examples like Abel, Noah, and the people of the old
- The prophets saw in the people coming out from the land of Egypt, the church in her youth, as it came in Jeremiah and Ezekiel

Enduring Through the Pain 129:1-4



- St. Augustine says, “Then the church started to exist in the people of Israel, who endured the Pharaoh and the Egyptians ... For this reason, and lest someone may have doubt in the church, he who intends to be a good member in her; let him listen to what the church, his mother, says to him: Do not marvel to hear these things, O my son, “Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth”
- And it may be applied to Christ who was, “*A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*” (Isaiah 53:3), all His days, even from His youth
- He was hunted by Herod in His infancy, Matthew 2:13; and obliged to be carried into Egypt for safety

Enduring Through the Pain 129:1-4



- And ever after was more or less afflicted by His enemies and at last endured great sufferings, and death itself
- The repetition in verse 2 emphasizes the fact of Israel's long and bitter suffering
- The Egyptians could not prevail against literal Israel; the more they were afflicted, the more they grew and multiplied
- In the times of the Judges, one after another were raised up as deliverers of them; neither the Assyrians, Chaldeans, nor Romans, nor any other, have been able to cut them off from being a nation

Enduring Through the Pain

129:1-4



- Psalm 124:1-2 says, *“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 men rose up against us,”* (Psalm 124:1-2)
- The Psalms of Ascent continue to reflect each other and build upon each other
- And the enemies of the church will not *prevail against* her, *“on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”* (Matthew 16:18)
- Perseverance is required of all of God’s people
- All can say: *Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth,... Yet they have not prevailed against me*

Enduring Through the Pain

129:1-4



- St. John Chrysostom says, “Although the enemies often on the attack, yet they were not strong enough to overcome, and have never achieved an ultimate victory over Israel. They might have won many battles, have taken them captives, and transferred them to far away lands, ... But their conquest was not because of their power at that time, but because of the sin of Israel. They did not prevail up to the end, for they did not actually have the power to wipe out the Jewish race, and destroy the city altogether; but, by God’s allowance, they conquered for some time, then were defeated. How were they defeated?! By the return of the people of Israel to their past prosperity.”

Enduring Through the Pain 129:1-4



- *The plowers plowed on my back*, A strong metaphor for cruel maltreatment
- The psalmist described the many afflictions of Israel as if their enemies ran over their stretched-out bodies with a plow
- This is a vivid picture of suffering and subjugation
- The comparison here is taken from the plowing of land, and the idea is that the sufferings which they had endured were such as would be well represented by a plow passing over a field, tearing up the grass; piercing deep; and producing long rows
- *on my back*, The direct reference would seem to be to stripes inflicted on the back, as if a plow had been made to pass over it

Enduring Through the Pain

129:1-4



- They had been subjected to sufferings as slaves or criminals were when the lash cut deep into the flesh
- Probably the immediate thing in the mind of the Psalmist was the hard bondage of the children of Israel in Egypt, when they were subjected to all the evils of bondage
- A similar figure in Isaiah 51:23, *“But I will put it into the hand of those who afflict you, Who have said to you, ‘Lie down, that we may walk over you.’ And you have laid your body like the ground, And as the street, for those who walk over.”*
- And similarly, the Messiah Himself, gave His back, *“to those who struck Me.”* (Isaiah 50:6)

Enduring Through the Pain

129:1-4



- And many of His apostles and followers, *“But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues.”* (Matthew 10:17)
- *They made their furrows long*, which signify afflictions, and the pain their enemies put them to, affliction is grievous, like the rending and tearing up the earth with the plough
- St. Augustine says, “The wicked persecutes the righteous because the later does not conform his ways to his evil way.”
- *The Lord is righteous*, God promised to preserve people of Israel, and His faithfulness in delivering them is a demonstration of His righteousness

Enduring Through the Pain

129:1-4



- The same attribute of righteousness which compels Him to punish, *“You are just in all that has befallen us; For You have dealt faithfully, But we have done wickedly.”* (Nehemiah 9:33) binds Him to deliver, for it involves faithfulness to His covenant
- The fact that the *Lord is righteous* means He has and will keep His promises to Israel
- Israel’s enemies were strong and clever, but not greater than God, who could deliver
- The ways the *wicked* restrained and enslaved God’s people would be *cut in pieces*

Enduring Through the Pain

129:1-4



- *the cords*, He may be referring to the cords that bind the oxen to the plow; without which the plower may exert a great effort to move the plow, with no avail
- Or, he may be referring to the cords or the stripes of the whip, without which the wicked cannot strike someone
- Or, he may be referring to the chains by which the captives were shackled to herd them out of their country to foreign land
- In the Septuagint version it came as: *“The righteous Lord cuts the neck of the wicked”*
- According to St. Augustine, the psalmist did not say the hands or the feet of the wicked, but “their neck” the symbol of pride

Enduring Through the Pain

129:1-4



- Once again Psalm 129 builds upon some of the earlier Psalms of Ascent
- In Psalm 124 we read: *"The snare is broken, and we have escaped."* (Psalm 124:7)
- In Psalm 125, we read: *"the scepter of wickedness shall not rest"* (Psalm 125:3)
- And so there is the pictures of the broken snare in Psalm 124, the removal of the scepter in Psalm 125 and cutting the cords of the plow here in Psalm 129
- God has set a limit for suffering, pain is temporary, and the wicked will not always rule over the righteous

Praying Through the Pain

129:5-8



- The first part of the Psalm is all about enduring through the pain
- The second part is all about praying through the pain
- Praying through the pain is one of the most important ways one can steadfast
- The first part of the Psalm was about the survival of the righteous
- The second part is about the brevity of the wicked
- The righteous will endure, but the wicked will not last
- So, the psalmist prayed that not only would the Israelites be delivered from their enemies, but that God would also apply His righteousness to their enemies

Praying Through the Pain

129:5-8



- They should be shamed and *turned back*
- Some take offence at the prayer the Psalmist made against the enemies of Israel
- They think these verses seem to support praying against people rather than for people
- Yet there is really no basis for such offence
- The psalmist is not asking that those who have harmed Israel experience the same sufferings they have inflicted on others
- He asks only that they and their plans might not prosper
- He is praying against God's enemies and against their success

Praying Through the Pain

129:5-8



- *those who hate Zion*, Zion is the place where God meets with His people
- To reject Zion is to reject God's people
- To reject God's people is to reject God Himself
- So, this is a prayer motivated by concern for God's Kingdom rather than personal revenge
- *as the grass on the housetops*, During the rainy season, grass springs up quickly on the flat roofs of middle eastern houses, but having no depth of soil, it withers prematurely away, and yields no harvest

Praying Through the Pain

129:5-8



- He prayed that the present green season of Israel's enemies would be short-lived
- The metaphor suggests a more complete and sudden destruction of the enemies, who perish before the plans of evil can be carried out
- St. John Chrysostom says, "he wants to show the worthlessness of the adversaries, and so compares them to what grows on the roof so as bring out their lowly condition on both scores, from the nature of grass and from the nature of the place. Such, he is saying, are the assaults of the adversaries, lacking root or support; they seem for a while to flourish, but later are put to shame, and collapse of themselves."

Praying Through the Pain

129:5-8



- He continues, “This, in fact, the nature of the prosperity of those living in unrighteousness, the attraction of things of this life: they appear and disappear at one and the same time, lacking support and substance. Hence one should pay them no heed, considering instead their impermanence, and should long after the immortal and imperishable things that undergo no change.”
- *With which the reaper does not fill his hand*, The grass of the previous verse was useless
- On the flat roof there was not even enough to fill the hands
- This is in contrast with the rich harvest in the fields where the reaper would fill his arms with sheaves of grain

Praying Through the Pain

129:5-8



- The psalmist wanted the uselessness of the wicked enemies of Israel to be exposed and evident to all
- When grass is mowed or reaped, the binders come and gather it up in their arms, and bind it in sheaves, and then bring it into the barn; but nothing of this kind is done with grass on the housetops
- This represents the insignificance and worthlessness of wicked men; who, when the harvest comes, the end of the world, will not be gathered in by the reapers, the angels, but they are like the tares and chaff will be cast into unquenchable fire, Matthew 3:12

Praying Through the Pain

129:5-8



- St. Augustine says, “The reapers will come, but they fill not their sheaves from these. For the reapers will come, and will gather the wheat into the barn, and will bind the tares together, and cast them into the fire. Thus also is the grass of the house tops cleared off, and whatever is plucked from it, is thrown into the fire; because it had withered even before it was plucked up... And, ‘the reapers are the angels,’ the Lord says.”
- The psalmist prayed that these enemies of Israel would *not* enjoy *the blessing of the Lord* upon them
- This was the standard blessing during harvest time in Israel where people greet each other with blessings from the Lord, (Ruth 2:4)

Praying Through the Pain

129:5-8



- *The blessing of the Lord be upon you*, was expressive of good wishes; of respectful congratulation; of a hope of success and prosperity; as when we say, "God be with you;" or, "God bless you"
- The blessing of God is the greatest thing any human life can enjoy, giving goodness to every aspect of life
- The psalmist prayed that *none* of this goodness would be given to those who hated Jerusalem and Israel
- The prayer here is that we would not bless that which God has called wrong or sinful
- It is a prayer for discernment and recognition of evil

Praying Through the Pain

129:5-8



- St. Augustine says, “Who are the passers by? They who have already passed hence to their country through this road, that is, through this life: the Apostles were passers by in this life, the Prophets were passers by. Whom did the Prophets and Apostles bless? Those in whom they saw the root of charity? But those whom they found lifted on high on their house tops, and proud in the bosses of their bucklers, they declared against these what they were doomed to become, but they gave them no blessing.”
- In Psalm 129, the psalmist prays that the influence of evil people would be brief

Praying Through the Pain

129:5-8



- The psalmist desires the Lord's relief in mercy and it is only natural to desire relief from opposition, as it was for St. Paul, when he prayed for the removal of his thorn in the flesh, (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)
- This Psalm looks forward to the return of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, when Israel, meaning both God's people, the Church, is delivered from her bondage in this world, her oppressors being both human and, primarily, demonic
- The cords of Satan and sin will be broken, God's people will at last be set free, and Satan and his followers will be brought to shame



Discussion

- How this Psalm is similar in structure to Psalm 124? What is it about their content that might explain why both of these Psalms were written in this style?
- Whose back has been scarred by the afflictions of the wicked?
- What happens to grass that sprouts on the rooftops of houses?
- How can you benefit from suffering?



Discussion

- In verses 5-7 the psalmist prays for revenge on his enemies. What do you think of seeking revenge on an enemy? Do you think that this sentiment lines up with Christian love and forgiveness? Why or why not?
- How hard is it to bless those who persecute you? How should believers respond to unbelievers' offenses?