

FAITH AND PERSISTENCE

Series: Tough Faith---The Search for Honest, Durable Christianity

by Doug Goins

Have you figured out that life isn't fair? One responsibility of parenting is to try to help children understand that. Things don't work out the way they ought to, and it is difficult for children to come to grips with what it means to live in this world. It seems a bit more puzzling when I have fifty-year-olds in my office still grappling with the same issues, still not understanding that life isn't fair. The frustration they feel as a result can be very great.

The reality is that we live in a fallen world that is in rebellion against God. The majority of the people on this planet are opposed to God and his character, his purposes on earth, the plans he has for the human race, and his people as well. There are many enemies of God around who don't like those of us who have determined to commit ourselves to him. Think back to when you came to new life, surrendering yourself to Jesus as the Lord and accepting his forgiveness for your sins. You probably didn't find a crowd of all your old friends and co-workers immediately forming around you to applaud your decision. Instead there may have been puzzled disinterest or agnosticism toward what had happened to you. You have probably at some time or other crashed into outright hostility or anger from your family or friends, almost as if you had become some sort of turncoat because of the commitment you made to follow Christ.

That sort of rejection can be overwhelming, even frightening for people of faith. When our son Micah was six years old, I remember his coming home one day after a few weeks in first grade, and with no attempt at humor or theatrics expressing pure amazement that all the kids at school didn't love Jesus. "Why wouldn't they want to love Jesus?" he asked. It was almost too much for him to comprehend.

When our daughter Kathryn was in sixth grade I remember her struggling to understand why every theory of human origins could be discussed in her school except the one that she believed in, the Biblical view of creation. Kat said, "It's not fair, Dad!" At one point, she took on the teacher, a young Jewish woman, and asked her, "Why don't you even believe the story in your Jewish Bible?" (Pretty gutsy for a sixth grader, I thought.) She was outraged that that was the kind of world she was living in.

When Alayna, our youngest, was in first grade, I remember her tears with her mother. She had made a new friend at school and really wanted this little girl to come to our house to play with her. But when the girl's parents found out that we were "born again," evangelical Christians, the daughter was not allowed to come to our house. I remember Lanie's hurt because it wasn't fair, we were nice people, and they were friends.

Our text this morning in Psalm 129 deals with this kind of suffering. This is not suffering because of sin in the life of the victim or because of stupidity or irresponsibility. It's suffering because of relational rejection---physical or emotional persecution and ridicule from people who are violently opposed to the God we love and have chosen to follow.

Psalm 129 is the first of four psalms that we're going to look at together in the next month from the Songs of Ascent, a mini-psalm book of fifteen pilgrim songs, each one very short and focused on one specific theme. These songs were sung by the men and women of Israel when they went up to the city of Jerusalem or Zion, the city of God, three times a year for feast days. In the spring they would go up for Passover, in which they remembered and celebrated their deliverance from Egypt by God. In the early summer they would celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, in which they would renew their commitment to this covenant God. Passover was focused on God's initiation of salvation toward them; Pentecost was focused on their response of faith and obedience. In the early fall they would come to Jerusalem again for the Feast of Tabernacles or Rosh Hashanah, and they would thank God for his provision of material blessings, his care for them, and all the ways he met their needs.

Each one of these fifteen songs confesses the Israelites' deep yearning and hunger for the Lord. The songs speak of their sense of alienation in the world; of being pilgrims, strangers, exiles, or sojourners. Each song also affirms that God steps into whatever their problem is and more than adequately meets all their needs. These psalms focus very practically on the different responsibilities that the people of Israel, and we as Christians, are called to in the home as spouses and parents, in the workplace, and in relationship to our government. Finally, these psalms survey tough-minded, durable faith; a faith that lasts.

SUFFERING FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SAKE

Let's turn to Psalm 129 now. The first five verses focus on the reality of suffering for righteousness' sake, just because you are a follower of God. The faith of Israel, and our faith as well, is not perfect faith. But it is a lifelong history of tough, persistent faith that these verses remember.

"Sorely have they afflicted me from my youth,"
let Israel now say---
"Sorely have they afflicted me from my youth,
yet they have not prevailed against me.
"The plowers plowed upon my back;
they made long their furrows."
The LORD is righteous;
he has cut the cords of the wicked.
May all who hate Zion
be put to shame and turned backward!

These verses are reviewing the entire history of the nation of Israel. For long centuries the nations and tribes that surrounded them had waged war against the way of faith to which they had committed themselves and the God they were following. But the good news in the heart of these first five verses is that their enemies hadn't triumphed: "...They have not prevailed against me."

If we look carefully at the first five verses, we will discover some things about their experience. First we will discover who perpetrated their persecution. Secondly we will discover what the nature of their suffering was, or what it felt like for the people of Israel.

Those who were the source of Israel's suffering are referred to in verses 1 and 2 by the pronoun "they." And basically they were all the individuals, all the movements, and all the kingdoms that had consistently attacked and tried to destroy God's people and what God was doing on earth.

The first two verses say this opposition had been there since Israel was a baby, since its youth. This refers clear back to when they lived in Egypt as an oppressed people. The prophet Hosea, speaking for the covenant God, says (in 11:1):

"When Israel was a child I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son."

God miraculously delivered them from that bondage under the leadership of Moses. Then came forty years of wandering in the wilderness; their own sinfulness kept them going around in circles. But then there was the exciting conquest of Canaan under Joshua's leadership when God taught them how to fight spiritual warfare, to fight on his terms. In the period of the Judges when everyone did what was right in his own eyes, the nation got lost and kind of thrashed around.

But then came the united monarchies under Saul and David and Solomon. Throughout all those years there was always focused opposition from external enemies who were dead set against the existence of this nation. Egyptians, Amorites, Amalekites, Canaanites, Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians...on and on goes the list of those who hated Israel's God and wanted to destroy the people in that little land.

These opponents are described in verse 4 as wicked, a harsh word that means morally depraved, guilty of premeditated evil. Both the quality of their life and the activity that they focused on Israel was morally depraved. These were people who were consciously doing wrong and were intent on continuing. This describes violent destructive activity, inflicting physical pain on people with malice aforethought. This kind of persecution and pressure on the nation had awful effects on the people; it was as if their very souls were under siege. At times they wanted to give up.

Verse 5 tells us these wicked people hated Zion. Now, Psalm 48:1 calls Zion "the city of our God." Psalm 68 says Zion is the mount of God's abode; he chooses Mount Zion, the mountain at the heart of Jerusalem, as the special place where he lives. Psalm 87 is a wonderful hymn of the Gentiles' thanking God for Mount Zion. They see it as the center of history. It says their salvation flows out from that city. And it ends with their dancing for joy, celebrating their salvation because now they have come into a love relationship with the God of Israel. They are saying that Zion is the mother city of the world, and all the spiritual blessings and resources flow out of that place by God's design. So when verse 5 of our psalm says these wicked opponents hate Zion, it's saying they hate God and his chosen place in which to focus the salvation of the world. When we read the rest of Psalm 129 we're going to see that their hatred is suicidal, because those who declare themselves in opposition to who God is and what he is doing have written out their own death warrant.

The nature of Israel's suffering in verses 1-4 is described very graphically. The Revised Standard Version (RSV) calls it "affliction;" your Bible may use another word to describe what they were experiencing. The Hebrew term means harassment, oppression, and both physical and emotional suffering. The psalm is talking about intense persecution, opposition, and struggle that have been lifelong, consistent throughout Israel's national history. These opponents have tried everything they could think of to destroy the faith of God's people: persecution, torture, ridicule, even exile into foreign countries.

Verses 3 and 4 paint a picture of the suffering from an agrarian culture. Verse 3 says the suffering involves being plowed up. It's as if Israel, who represents the man or woman of faith, is stretched out on the ground, back bared, and then oxen and plows are hooked up, and they literally plow up the bone and sinew of their back, like a farmer systematically working his field, to inflict as much damage as possible. The picture conveys agonizing physical torture.

Verse 4 talks about cords, which carries the idea of being tied up so they couldn't move at all. There was no freedom because of the oppressive evil presence and influence. It's a picture of frustrating limitation.

But good news, a bright flash of deliverance, comes in these verses as well. Verse 2 and 4 define the source of deliverance that these Israelites hang onto and the quality of deliverance that they have experienced and know they will experience again. Verse 4 says clearly, "The Lord is righteous." This phrase is the linchpin for the whole psalm. The Lord is the one who delivers. But this isn't just any lord or god; it's the righteous Lord with whom these people have a relationship.

Your Bible may say, "The Lord is just." That is a valid translation, but the word means much more than abstract, impersonal justice. I like the word righteous better. Righteous is a word of covenant, of relationship and intimacy. Remember, God set his heart on this little nation, just as he set his heart on you and me as individuals, and said, "I'm going to love you no matter what." It's a word of unbreakable relationship. As God watches his nation suffer and as he watches us suffer, he cares very deeply because of the intimacy of his relationship with us. He aches with us, and he is committed to our deliverance.

Gerhard von Raad in his *Old Testament Theology* says, "Righteous is out and out a term denoting relationship. It is in this sense referring to a real relationship between two people. It is not the relationship between an object under consideration to an idea. This is not impersonal justice." That's why we can wholeheartedly sing songs like *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. He is not a distant Savior but a friend who can enter into every single struggle we have and understand us and the circumstances completely.

The psalm makes two statements about the nature of Israel's deliverance. Verse 2 says, amazingly, "They have not prevailed against me." No matter what, they hadn't been totally destroyed or overwhelmed. The psalm is

looking back over a long life that has been crisscrossed with cruelty, with out-of-control tragedy that just came flooding in, unexpected setbacks, and disappointments. But looking back over it all, they could see it as a road to blessing because God sticks to his relationships. That is the central reality that the phrase, "The Lord is righteous" suggests.

Survival was absolutely certain, but not because of Israel's worthiness, for they had a very imperfect history. We can also count on spiritual survival--yet look at the inconsistency of our own salvation history. But we count on survival because of God's character, his commitment to this covenant relationship. Because of that certainty, when we look back through Biblical history and the history of the church of Jesus Christ, God's people have always been tough. There has always been a wonderful resilience, persistence, continuity, vitality, and robustness in true faith.

Verse 4 counts on (and promises) instantaneous, dramatic deliverance to come. "...He has [and will in the future] cut the cords...." He has not just tidily untangled but cut right through them. He cuts through all the things the oppressors use to tie us up, limit us, and frustrate us. The promise of the prophet Zechariah is that anybody who belongs to God is the apple of his eye. (Do you see yourself that way, as the apple of God's eye? You are precious to him!) And Zechariah warns that anybody who touches one who belongs to God will be punished (Zechariah 2:8); there will be hell to pay in the life of anyone in any movement on the face of the earth who violates one of God's own.

Do you think of your relationship to God in Christ as something very fragile and delicate, teetering on the edge of being wiped out? I think of our lawn that way. We had a new lawn put in with seed, and it has taken a couple of months to grow. I mowed it really well for the first time the other day, and it looked good to me. I was pretty proud of it until the young man who put it in came over on Saturday and told me how fragile my new lawn is, mentioning weeds, blight, fungus, heat, bugs, foot traffic, and all sorts of things that could happen to it. I was alarmed at the delicacy and fragility of my little lawn that may not make it. Do you view your faith as being that delicate? Or do you picture your relationship with God more as some tough perennial that is going to survive no matter what--drought, hail, kids tromping across it--knowing you're going to grow and thrive?

As long as we're talking about the hardiness of plants, look at the Biblical view in Isaiah 53:2-7, which is anticipating the coming Messiah, the suffering servant, our Lord Jesus:

"...He grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground...
He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief...
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted...."

That's a pretty bad start--a little spindly plant coming up out of ground as hard as rock, with no water at all. One wouldn't give it a lot of chance for survival. But look at the results that Isaiah 53:10-11 describe, still speaking of the Lord Jesus:

"...He shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand;
he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous;
and he shall bear their iniquities."

When we look at the life of Jesus we have to say, "Yes, faith lasts." The person of faith is going to outlast any oppression, and Jesus is our number 1 example. His promise is that his victorious life can be lived out through us as we rely on the same resources that carried him through his humiliation; beating; and slow, agonizing death on the cross. We can be as confident in the Father as he was to deliver and save us.

The apostle Paul is another example. A summary of his life includes an incredible list of violence, opposition, adversity, and persecution that he faced over and over (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-33). It went on and on. But never do we ever hear of the apostle Paul's saying, "I think I'm going to give up and bail out." None of that pushed him off the path that he was pursuing. He wrote at the end of his life in the letter to the Philippians (3:13-14), "...Straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." That's persistence, stick-to-it-iveness, pressing on with confidence in the God who was with him. And it is itself a pilgrim's song of ascents in response to the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Righteous Indignation

The rest of Psalm 129 introduces the reality of being righteously indignant over unfair suffering. This psalm doesn't tell us to say, "Thank you, praise the Lord, this is wonderful," when things are terrible. No, it expresses a lot of anger in these verses. Yet what is expressed is faith---not perfect, but honest and passionate. Verses 5-8:

May all who hate Zion,
be put to shame and turned backward!
Let them be like the grass on the housetops,
which withers before it grows up,
with which the reaper does not fill his hand,
or the binder of sheaves his bosom [or lap],
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!"

This prayer is asking for bad things to happen to these people. Now, does that sort of anger make you nervous? Should we talk to God that way? Well, it's strong and honest. And you have to admire the conviction and energy with which evil is deplored. This indignation is on God's behalf. It is crying out, "Lord, don't let the bad guys win again." Proverb 28:4 expresses this same kind of sentiment:

"They that forsake the law praise the wicked:
but such as keep the law contend with them."
And we can see that this prayer contends against destructive evil.

Eugene Petersen warns:

It is apathetic, sluggish neutrality that is death to faith. It acts like a virus to the bloodstream and enervates the muscles of discipleship. The person who makes excuses for the hypocrites and rationalizes the excesses of the wicked, who loses a sense of opposition to sin, who obscures the difference between faith and denial, grace and selfishness, that's the person to be wary of.

This prayer is an example of offering up our anger to God. It says we care about God, the ways of his kingdom, righteousness, and making our lives count for something. The heart of this prayer is, "We know that the wicked aren't going to prevail and that you are righteous and will deliver; nevertheless, Lord, what are you going to do here and now in our lives?" And we have every right to confidently pray that way.

This prayer desires three things. In verse 5 there is an angry desire for the humiliating retreat of those who are opposed to God, for the ultimate failure of all the schemes and plans of evil that are focused on believers, a desire that they be outed, if you will, and shown for what they are. Note carefully that it doesn't say, "all who hate me;" but "all who hate Zion." This is not personal revenge. This is concern for God's reputation and zeal for God's people. Out of that concern this prayer asks for the confusion and oppression of the ungodly.

In verses 6 and 7 there is an angry desire that there be futility and barrenness in the lives of those who are proud and opposed to God, like dead grass and like empty-handed harvesters. The first picture is of Palestinian flat-roofed homes with dirt on top for insulation, so there is a skimpy growth of grass for a few days in the early spring, but the heat of the sun and the lack of moisture kill it very quickly. This is a desire for the same thing in the lives of those who oppose what God is doing, that their influence be cut short, that the evil work they are doing be drastically limited. The other picture is of harvesters whose hands and laps are empty; they have no grain to show for the effort they have expended in planting seeds and trying to harvest. It is a desire that though they may give it their best shot, in the end there be no result whatsoever in terms of anything of value or eternal significance.

Finally in verse 8 there is a desire that the wicked who are working against the God of heaven will feel a sense of isolation. This prayer is asking, "Don't let them ever hear people say, 'God bless you, have a great day.'" Ultimately the fact is that those who are totally focused on opposing what God is doing never will know God's blessing. They never will hear words of love from the heavenly Father. Tragically, they will end up isolated, lonely, and cut off from any blessing.

A few years ago Pat O'Neil, Lambert Dolphin, and I went down to Puebla, Mexico for a week to minister on two university campuses, working with a church there. We spent several hours in prayer each morning for four days, and we prayed prayers that had this same tone to them, because shortly after we arrived we crashed into intense, focused opposition to who we were and what we were doing. We went to the University of the Americas, a private university, and ministered one day. But when we came back the second day we were physically barred from the campus. It was painfully humiliating to be told, "You can't come back here. Your message is inappropriate." There were many accusations made against us and our motives, and we were actually physically removed from the campus. So we prayed, "Lord, what are you doing? We don't want to waste four days here." We prayed fervently that the plans of evil would be thwarted and that we would have opportunity to preach the gospel.

The original plan had been for us to be at the National University in downtown Puebla on Friday afternoon. But in the very beginning on our arrival our host had warned us, "You may decide not to go there because it's too dangerous. There have been murders on that campus, and it is controlled by the Marxist influence." So we prayed all week out of fear. I confess I was scared to death. "Lord, I don't want to die, but please, you're greater than any purposes and plans of the wicked. Be faithful to who you are." We prayed fervently against the evil plans of the enemies of God. And God resolved it wonderfully. He restored to us great opportunity to minister to students at the University of the Americas, and gave us an incredible time of ministry that Friday afternoon at the National University. We walked into a room jammed with people, our knees knocking. Lambert Dolphin preached powerfully to several hundred, and God honored the effort. "They have not prevailed against me...the Lord is righteous," was the theme of our prayers as well.

Persistent Faith

Let me summarize the central focus that we need to take away with us from this psalm. The reality of all of this for Christians is the personal, unalterable, persevering commitment that God makes to us. Our persistence in the Christian life is not the result of our own determination, but of God's faithfulness; not because we have developed extraordinary stamina, but because God is righteous. Christian growth, I am learning, is a process of paying more and more attention to God's righteous activity on our behalf and less and less attention to our own activity, finding meaning in our lives not by probing our own actions and motives, but by believing in God's will and his purposes as revealed in a psalm like this. It is reviewing his history of faithfulness to us, not charting our own history of faithfulness or fearlessness (it would be embarrassing if we did that).

That's what the writer of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews does in chapter 11, the great Who's Who of faith. He sings an historical hymn surveying the lives of men and women of faith who trusted God, people who centered their lives on this righteous God who stuck with them through every imaginable difficulty. That's why they were able to persevere and why they are now heroes of faith for us. They lived with steadiness of purpose and amazing integrity. None of them were perfect people; their lives were not without rebellion and sinful failure, and they made mistakes. But God stuck with them so consistently that they learned

to stick with him, to follow him with greater consistency. After that hymn in chapter 11 (12:1b-2) comes this exhortation to the Hebrew Christians in the first century and to us today: "...Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

Some of those early Christians to whom this pastor wrote had been complaining. Apparently they thought the opposition was too tough and that they couldn't hold out any longer. You may have had conversations like that with folks around you. I just talked with a brother who told me about a computer bulletin board network on which a whole group of ex-Christians share all the reasons why they have given up on their faith. He talked about how discouraging it was. He actually raised the question at the heart of our psalm: "What chance do I have to hang in there? All these other people are giving all the reasons why they bailed out from following the Lord."

In Hebrews 12:3-4 there is a very gentle pastoral response to that question, within it a touch of irony. The writer continues, "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted." We are to consider him, not look at ourselves. "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood." Have you been beat up for your faith yet? Jesus has, and he is the one to focus on as the pioneer, the perfecter at work in us.

A subtext of this psalm is, "Quit complaining and look at your Savior God." Review your own salvation history. See where he has brought you from, remind yourself again where he has promised to take you, and then join with others to sing over and over again the refrain of the great song of persistent faith that we have examined this morning:

"Sorely have they afflicted me from my youth,
let Israel now say---
'Sorely have they afflicted me from my youth;
yet they have not prevailed against me.
The plowers plowed upon my back;
they made long their furrows.'
The LORD is righteous;
he has cut the cords of the wicked."

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