

VICTIMS OR VICTORS?

SERIES: ASCEND



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Psalm 129
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R.A. Dickey's rough childhood became even rougher when, at the age of eight, he was sexually abused multiple times by a thirteen-year-old female babysitter and once by a seventeen-year-old teenage boy. Like many victims of sexual abuse, he felt somehow responsible for what he had suffered, and he didn't immediately tell anyone about what had happened to him. In fact, he kept his secret for two decades and channeled his rage into sports, becoming a dominant college baseball pitcher, and later into an extramarital affair. Now a Major League Baseball pitcher, Dickey tells his story in *Wherever I Wind Up: My Quest for Truth, Authenticity and the Perfect Knuckleball*.

As humans, we all suffer. It comes with living in a sin-wracked world. Some suffer more than others, of course, but we all suffer. Because things have been done to us that shouldn't be done, we're all victims. Nevertheless, Dickey, though he suffered horrendous abuse and now openly acknowledges it, does not come off sounding like a victim. Where, then, does our suffering leave us? In a world of hurt, perhaps, but, if we are to take a cue from R.A. Dickey's story, not without hope. We might, also, take a cue from Psalm 129.

Oppressed from her youth

Psalm 129:1-4:

A song of ascents

- ¹**“They have greatly oppressed me from my youth,”—let Israel say—**
²**“they have greatly oppressed me from my youth, but they have not gained the victory over me.**
³**Plowmen have plowed my back and made their furrows long.**
⁴**But the LORD is righteous; he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked.”**

The psalmist writes as if the Israelites together were a single person, thus encouraging individuals to see themselves as part of a people. He recalls the oppression that Israel has endured ever since her “youth,” a reference to her formation as God's people in Egypt: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, / and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1). When Israel was formed, Egypt was the oppressor. Two of the three feasts that called for pilgrims to

journey to Jerusalem commemorated Israel's exodus from Egypt. Therefore, the pilgrims who would sing Psalm 129 on the way to Jerusalem would remember Israel's bondage in Egypt.

At first, when the Israelites settled in Egypt, the Egyptians recognized that the aliens were blessing them, especially through Joseph. But as the years passed, and as the Israelites grew in number, the Egyptians increasingly viewed the Israelites as a threat. Therefore, to keep them under his thumb, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, afflicted the Israelites with hard labor.

The psalmist observes not only that Israel has been oppressed but also that she has been “greatly oppressed.” For example, in Egypt, Pharaoh first oppressed Israel with hard labor, then he ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill the newborn sons of Israel, and finally he ordered his subjects to gather the straw for brick making without reducing their quota. Not only was Israel greatly oppressed in Egypt, during her youth, she has been greatly oppressed up to the day of the psalmist. And if that weren't enough, the psalmist repeats himself, twice noting that “they have greatly oppressed me from my youth.”

What starts out as a proclamation by the psalmist becomes a proclamation for the whole of Israel. The psalmist not only observes that Israel has been greatly oppressed from her youth, he also urges Israel to verbalize it. Why would the psalmist urge Israel to speak about her affliction?

Verbalize suffering

It's important for any people, or any person, for that matter, to first honestly face into what they have suffered. The tendency for many people, in the interest of deflecting pain, is to downplay whatever suffering they have endured. There's a word psychologists use for this: it's called “denial.” I have found myself trying to distance myself from the suffering I have experienced by saying that it was slight in comparison to what others have suffered. On the one hand, it's true: my suffering has been comparatively slight. On the other hand, if I distance myself from my suffering, I distance myself from reality, and if I distance myself from reality, I distance myself from God.

Denial can be helpful for a while; in fact it's often necessary for a while. Denial protects us from experiencing the pain, maybe even the horror, of what we've experienced before we're ready. The psalmist literally urges Israel to "now" say that she has been greatly oppressed from her youth. There was a time in Israel's past, perhaps, when she was not ready to speak of her oppression in this way, but, from the psalmist's perspective, that time is past. As children, we don't have the capacity to understand what's happening to us. In this way, God protects us. It's often as adults, as our cognitive facilities mature and as our experience broadens, that we have the capacity to process what we have experienced in healthy ways.

To process pain in healthy ways, we not only need to face into it, we also need to "say" it, as the psalmist observes: "let Israel say . . ." In fact, saying it can help you feel it, for words often unlock feelings. You might not know what you feel, but when you search for a word to describe what you feel, and you find that word, you find and release the feeling that it represents. Journaling can be a helpful exercise in this regard. So can writing poetry, which makes use of imagery. Notice how the psalmist uses poetic imagery to describe Israel's suffering: "Plowmen have plowed my back / and made their furrows long." To "say" it, you first may want to say it to yourself, then to a small circle of trusted friends, and finally, perhaps, in a more public setting, so that others may benefit from your experience. However, it is also possible that your feelings may surface for the first time in the context of a conversation with a trusted friend or counselor. Whatever it is, call it what it is. Say it. Name it. If it's abuse, call it abuse.

Opening up

R.A. Dickey kept his secret for twenty years before opening up to a counselor about the abuse he suffered as a child:

I felt him [God] saying to me, "You've been running and hiding long enough now. I've got something else for you." So I took a step of faith to say that I was sexually abused and this is what happened. I felt like Atlas and somebody had just taken the world off my shoulders.¹

When we face into and speak of our suffering, we not only connect with our own experience, we also connect with the experience of others. You cannot feel what another person feels; you can only feel what you feel. However, if you feel suffering, you can more closely relate to the suffering of other people, and you can more effectively care for, be with, and pray for them. After all, the psalmist in this work expresses concern for a people as a whole. We relate to such a concern first by connecting with our own

experience.

Therefore, don't downplay, minimize, or deny your suffering. Instead, feel it and verbalize it. You'll help yourself, and you'll help others. There is a danger to be aware of, however: the danger of playing the perpetual victim.

The Lord is righteous

The psalmist urges Israel to face into her suffering, but he does not urge her to see herself as a victim. What keeps Israel from seeing herself as a victim is a particular attribute of the Lord. The psalmist, while observing that other nations have oppressed Israel, notes that "they have not gained the victory over me." Oppression, therefore, does not necessarily equal defeat. Why? The psalmist again: "But the Lord is righteous." The God of Israel is faithful to Israel, especially to deliver her from her enemies. Because of the righteousness of the Lord—that is, his faithfulness to deliver his people—the wicked enemies of Israel have not defeated her.

In fact, the Lord has literally "cut the cords of the wicked." Cords were attached to oxen, which pulled plows (Job 39:10). In this imagery, the cords, which had allowed the oppressors to plow the back of Israel and make their furrows long, so to speak, have been severed. (Israel has not been cut free from the cords of the wicked; the oxen, which enabled the oppressor/plowman to plow Israel's back, have been cut, which, of course, has enabled the freedom of Israel.)

Israel can remember her youth in Egypt, where her oppressors plowed her back and made their furrows long. For every move of Pharaoh, however, the Lord had a countermove. In fact, every effort of Pharaoh to oppress Israel actually backfired: "But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites." Finally, Pharaoh, thwarted at every turn, couldn't help but let Israel go (Exodus 1:12). Of course, Pharaoh, with his superior army, couldn't let Israel go, so he pursued her. However, as the Egyptians approached the Israelites, who were hemmed in by the Red Sea, the waters parted—for the Israelites at least. As the Egyptians took up the pursuit, the water collapsed on them. Indeed, Egypt did not gain victory over Israel, and the Lord cut the cords of the wicked. The Lord is righteous.

Or is he? For someone who has been greatly oppressed in his youth or from his youth, for example, the contention that the Lord is righteous can sound like torture. For many, the distance between the so-called righteousness of God and their experience of God is cavernous. They

don't experience God as righteous. If they experience him at all, they experience him as uncaring at best and sadistic at worst.

Bridging the gap

Yes, R.A. Dickey felt as if the weight of the world had been taken off his shoulders when he finally opened up to his counselor about the abuse he had suffered, but he also told his counselor,

I am furious at God. . . . How could a loving God let this happen to me? How? Can you tell me that? I was only eight! Why didn't He do something? Why?

Dickey's counselor told him,

You know, R.A., your God might just be big enough, loving enough, to take your hate. That's your risk. That's faith: stepping past what you know, the shame and hurt, and into the mystery that love might be there for you. You are giving yourself and your children the greatest gift you could ever give them, because letting yourself face your story and feel all the pain you've run from is the only way you are going to be the free man you want to be, with the life you want to live.²

To even attempt to build a bridge in the mind that spans the gap between the righteousness of God and one's experience of God seems all but impossible. Nevertheless, if one is to be healed, if one is to be free, it is work that must be undertaken. Indeed, it is holy work.

Dickey's counselor told him,

If you aren't willing to face your demons—if you can't find the courage to take on your fear and hurt and anger—you might as well wrap them up with a bow and give them to your children. Because they will be carrying the same thing. . . unless you are willing to do the work.³

How do you do the work? How do you build a bridge between the righteousness of God and your experience of God?

The triumph of the oppressed

There was only one human who deserved not to suffer, yet he suffered more than any human: "his appearance was so disfigured / beyond that of any man"—that is, beyond human semblance (Isaiah 52:14). The sinless Servant of the Lord, Jesus of Nazareth, was greatly oppressed: the

plowmen plowed his back with their lashes and made their furrows—their strokes—long (Matthew 26:64). In fact, Jesus gave his back to those who struck him (Isaiah 50:6). Finally, they gained victory over Jesus by nailing him to a cross—or so they thought. Oh, they killed him all right, but they didn't defeat him.

First, though they tortured him and mocked him, he did not return evil for evil. Your enemies, whoever they are, only prevail over you if you become like them, if you hate them the way they hate you, if you sink to their level. Second, though they killed Jesus, he didn't stay dead. The worst of human and demonic wickedness tortured and executed the sinless Son of God, but God raised him from the dead. Indeed, God cut the cords of the wicked.

What keeps us from seeing ourselves as victims? The righteousness of the Lord—that is, his faithfulness to deliver us from whomever, or whatever, oppresses us. The apostle Paul says that the gospel literally reveals "the righteousness of God" (Romans 1:17). First, in the death and resurrection of his Son, God, in his righteousness, has already delivered us from our greatest oppressors: Satan, sin, and death. Second, he is delivering us and giving us glimpses of his righteousness. Third, he will deliver us, raising us from the dead and giving us the new creation. They can abuse you, torture you, and kill you, but they cannot take Jesus from you, and they they cannot take eternal life from you. Therefore, you are not a victim. On the contrary, you are a son of God, a daughter of God. "The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. / What can man do to me?" (Psalm 118:6).

Therefore, follow in the footsteps of the Son of God: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). Jesus told Pilate, the one who had the authority to execute him, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above" (John 19:11). He knew that God not only gives authority to humans, he also knew that God uses evil for good. Was there a greater evil than the crucifixion of the Son of God? Was there a greater good than the crucifixion of the Son of God? Amazing.

First, put your suffering into words. Second, build a bridge between the righteousness of God and your experience of God by scrutinizing the crucifixion of Christ.

The Scriptures encourage even those who have been victimized to see themselves not as victims but as victors because the Lord, in his righteousness, uses evil for good. Therefore, as Paul puts it in Romans 8:37, we are "more than conquerors": we don't simply defeat that which would destroy us, we also benefit from it. God, in his love for us, seen particularly in Christ and experienced through the

Holy Spirit, guarantees that we will emerge victorious, if not in this life then in the resurrection of the dead. Remember: the worst thing isn't the last thing.

Catching fire

Consider how God has used what happened to R.A. Dickey, a career minor leaguer until he finally made the major leagues for good in 2011 at the ancient age (by baseball standards) of thirty-six. Then he felt that God was calling him to tell his story in a book. His book, *Wherever I Wind Up*, was published in 2012. Then, all of a sudden, Dickey, playing for the New York Mets, caught fire and became the best pitcher in baseball. His manager, Terry Collins, remarked during the 2012 season,

*I've never seen anything like this. Never. I've seen some dominant pitching, but nothing like what he's going through right now.*⁴

Dickey went on to win the National League's Cy Young Award, given each year to the league's best pitcher.

Just as everyone wanted to know who R.A. Dickey was, a book came out that told his story. It became a national bestseller and, oh, by the way, includes multiple references to the gospel. Last year, I heard a local radio personality lauding the book while at the same time complaining that he had to "read about the good news every five pages." This year, R.A. Dickey has returned to earth. He's a serviceable pitcher for the Toronto Blue Jays, but he's no longer pitching the way he was in 2012, the year his book was published. I wonder: might the righteousness of God have anything to do with all this?

Because the Lord is righteous, his righteous sufferers will triumph. What, then, of the wicked?

The failure of the oppressors

Psalm 129:5-8:

**⁵May all who hate Zion
be turned back in shame.
⁶May they be like grass on the roof,
which withers before it can grow;
⁷with it the reaper cannot fill his hands,
nor the one who gathers fill his arms.
⁸May those who pass by not say,
"The blessing of the LORD be upon you;
we bless you in the name of the LORD."**

In verses 1-4, the psalmist spoke of the suffering Israel has endured at the hands of oppressors but also observed

that they had not triumphed over Israel. He is under no illusion that Israel's oppressors will go away, however. After all, though they have not gained victory over Israel, Israel has nevertheless been greatly oppressed since her youth.

Zion is Mount Zion, on which Jerusalem was built, the mountain toward which pilgrims who would be reciting this psalm were journeying. God chose to make his dwelling with his people on Mount Zion, in the temple. Those who hate Zion, therefore, would be those who hate Israel and who, whether they acknowledge it or not, hate the God of Israel. The nations who have hated Zion, who have oppressed Israel, have failed in the past, and the psalmist envisions that they will fail in the future also. He wishes that they would be "turned back in shame"—that they would fail and be disappointed when they fail.

The psalmist compares those who hate Zion to "grass on the roof," which withers without any soil in which to take root. Having withered, such grass is good for nothing, neither for the reaper or the gatherer. Poetically speaking, those who hate Zion bear no fruit. On the one hand, their wicked schemes fail. On the other hand, the more tragic hand, they fail to fulfill their purpose as humans: to live spiritually fruitful lives.

The psalmist in Psalm 128:5 says, "May the LORD bless you from Zion." If the Lord dwells in Zion, and if someone hates Zion, how can he receive the Lord's blessing from Zion? The psalmist therefore cannot imagine passersby engaging in a customary exchange with such Zion-haters by wishing for the Lord to bless them, for if the Lord were to bless them, he would be enhancing their evil works (Ruth 2:4).

The failure of the wicked, of course, is demanded by the righteousness of God. If God finally allows the wicked to succeed, he would stand accused of either being powerless or aligning himself with the wicked.

As the high priest was gathering evidence against Jesus in order to hand him over to the Romans for crucifixion, Jesus told him that he would "see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven"—that he would, in other words, "be turned back in shame" (Matthew 26:64). Many of Jesus' first century accusers lived to see him come, so to speak, in judgment against Israel, in 70 A.D. This was when the temple was destroyed, and all who have opposed him will be turned back in shame when he returns, as the risen Lord, to consummate the kingdom of God. Indeed, the wicked will be turned back in shame.

If, however, the Lord blesses from Mount Zion, and it was on Mount Zion that the Son of God was crucified for the sins of the world, there is hope not only for the

oppressed but also for the oppressors, if they turn to the one who suffered for their wickedness. We can hope, for example, that those who abused R.A. Dickey, who were only teenagers at the time, have found, or will find, forgiveness for their sins.

Hope

First, if you've suffered, put your experience into words: verbalize suffering. Second, if there is a gap in your thinking between the righteousness of God and your experience of God, get to work on spanning the gap: build a bridge in your mind by scrutinizing the crucifixion. Look inward, to feel your pain, but also look outward, to the cross, to be healed.

Dickey writes:

Once I kept secrets and hid and ran from the truth and ran from intimacy. Now I am about as close as you can get to being an open book, feeling called by God to tell the truth and be authentic and love my wife and children with everything this imperfect man can summon.

Once I lived in almost terminal shame, knowing why but never wanting to unpack it. Now I live in God's mercy and I want to unpack everything, no matter how messy and hurtful it can be.⁵

Dickey finishes his book by recalling a prayer he uttered in a hotel room at the conclusion of the 2011 baseball season:

Thank you, merciful God, for all these blessings and more, for giving me the courage to stop hiding, and the courage to find a new way.

His last words in the book are these:

I turn out the light. I close my eyes. I have hope.⁶

No matter what we have suffered, if there is a God who is righteous, and the Scriptures are adamant that there is, then we have hope. This world can oppress us, abuse us, and even kill us, but it cannot kill the righteousness of God, which means that you are not a victim but a victor.

NOTES

¹Christian Broadcasting Network: www.cbn.com/tv/1729655868001.

²R.A. Dickey, *Wherever I Wind Up: My Quest for Truth, Authenticity and the Perfect Knuckleball* (New York: Blue Rider Press, 2012), 234-35.

³Dickey, 269.

⁴Anthony DiComo, "One-hit Wonder: Dickey Brilliant in Tenth Win" (MLB.com, June 14, 2012.)

⁵Dickey, 290.

⁶Dickey, 328.