

In keeping with the themes of the three psalm sequence (distress, danger, and deliverance), Psalm 129 focuses on the dangers and trials of the people of God and the Lord's faithfulness in the midst of intense oppression. The journey to Jerusalem was long enough for the people of God to remember a long history of oppression. The repeated reference to "my youth" at the beginning of the psalm sends most commentators back to Egyptian bondage and the Exodus when the nation in its infancy was formed under the leadership of Moses. But when the author of the Book of Hebrews reviewed Israel's history of struggle he went all the way back to Abel, who was murdered by his brother Cain, and to Enoch who pleased God in a world that had rejected God, and to Noah who was delivered out of a world that had been condemned, and to Abraham, the father of the nation, who made his home in the promised land although he was a stranger in a foreign country.

Salvation history reveals a pattern that persists to this day. The people of God are chosen outsiders, resident aliens in a world that more often than not hates and oppresses them. But that's not all, they are resilient saints who say with the psalmist, "They have not gained the victory over me. . . [because] the Lord is righteous; he has cut me free from the chords of the wicked." The people of God should be inspired to cultivate the mind-set of Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers, but by the grace of God, Joseph was able to say to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen 50:20).

Unconquered

*"They have greatly oppressed me from my youth,"
let Israel say;
"they have greatly oppressed me from my youth,
but they have not gained the victory over me.
Plowmen have plowed my back
and made their furrows long.
But the Lord is righteous;
he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked."*

Psalm 129:1-4

The multiplicity and magnitude of the persecution is great and it has gone on for a long time. Nevertheless the oppressor has "not gained the victory over me." Although the people of God as a whole have been persecuted "ruthlessly and cruelly, physically and emotionally,"¹ the psalmist draws attention to the personal nature of suffering. The oppression has been experienced "from my youth," but the oppressor has "not gained the victory over me." The plowmen have plowed "my back" and the Lord has "cut me free" from the harness of oppression. The first personal singular experience of cruelty and redemption is emphasized. The psalmist captured the intensity of the suffering by comparing it to a farmer's heavy wooden plow cutting long furrows in his back. We may assume that only a person's whose daily grind had become nearly unbearable

¹ Ross, Psalms, 703.

would be drawn to use the farmer's plow as an instrument of torture. In spite of all the pain and suffering that lies behind the image, the psalmist boldly announces, "They have not gained the victory over me." His hope and courage lies in the fact that the Lord is righteous and will not allow the oppressor to go on unchecked. Judgment is inevitable because the Lord will eventually set things right. The psalmist stays with the image of the farmer's plow and describes God's saving action as an intervention. God renders the plow useless by cutting the harness straps. The instrument of torture is taken out of the hands of the oppressor.

Undaunted

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

Psalm 129:5-8

Hate is an uncomfortable topic for many and signals for some the difference between Old Testament judgment and New Testament gospel. How can Christ's followers call down shame on those who hate Zion and still obey Jesus's command to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). "We can't excuse the psalmist for getting angry on the grounds that he was not yet a Christian," argues Peterson, "for he had Leviticus to read: 'You shall not hate your brother in your heart. . . . You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Lev 19:17-18; see Exod 23:4-5; Prov 24:17)."² What we can say is that the psalmist identifies passionately with the holy and righteous Lord God. His plea to God to put down the wicked is in line with the truth expounded in the Old and New Testaments of the just judgment of God. There is no place for vigilante justice, but there is justification for siding with God and sharing God's perspective on evil and injustice. The psalmist and the apostle agree that God has given people over to shameful lusts and a depraved mind (Rom 1:26, 28). Paul had no qualms about describing the horror of the human condition and the certainty of God's wrath, even though he knew that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." But because of God's great love "all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:23-24).

Jesus dealt with the subject of hate in the upper room less than twenty-four hours before he was crucified. Hate is a strong word suggesting a vehement and vindictive spirit. It is vividly portrayed in the contorted face of rage and in the guttural voice of anger, but it also can be expressed in subtle and covert ways. Hate is a four letter word encompassing malice, contempt, resentment, bitterness, spite, and blame. It can be blatant or hidden, but hate is painfully real. To hate is to detest, loath, abhor, ridicule and condemn. Hate in the abstract is bad enough, but to be

² Peterson, Long Obedience, 126.

hated in person triggers an adrenaline rush that causes our heart rate to quicken. We tend to avoid the word hate. It sounds too extreme. We don't like using the word, but Jesus used it to describe the world's reaction to his followers.³

Jesus sought to prepare his disciples by explaining the roots of hate: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:18-19). Jesus gave the disciples' a heads-up so they would not be blind-sided by persecution. "All this I have told you so that you will not fall away" (John 16:1).

Jesus gave three reasons why the world hates his disciples and each reason relates to believers everywhere (John 15:18-16:4). First, the world hates believers because they don't belong to the world. Jesus has chosen them out of the world. Second, believers are hated because of the exclusive truth claim of Christ. The world is not willing to accept that Jesus was sent by the Father and is one with God. Third, the world hates believers because of the convicting power of the gospel of grace. The gospel provokes rejection and rebellion. On the basis of these three reasons the grounds for hate are fundamentally theological even though the surface reason for the world's reaction may have to do with sexual practices or lifestyle convictions.

Prayerful recognition of evil is the first step in dealing with the enemy. Jesus does not conceal the fact that the gospel draws enemy fire. By naming the enemy, Jesus lays bare the harsh realities confronting the people of God. All this enemy talk triggers our adrenaline. We are in a spiritual combat zone. Our deep concern and prayer should be that it is truly the Word of God that draws enemy fire and not our obnoxious and offensive ways.

The psalmist's description of "all those who hate Zion" takes on a specifically Christian meaning for the people of God today.⁴ William Temple wrote, "The world hates anything which it cannot understand which yet seems to contain a judgment of itself."⁵ John Chrysostom chalked it up to "the natural course of things," because Christian virtue "engenders hatred." "Let us not grieve," Chrysostom wrote, "for this is a mark of virtue." This is why Christ said, "If you were of the world, the world would love its own."⁶ Dale Bruner's reflection on the world's hate is especially helpful. The world's hate for the Word and the Church is "a great mystery" stemming from the fact that believers are rooted "in Jesus, his Father, the Paraclete Spirit, the Church, Holy Scripture, the major creeds, and world mission." The world finds these roots provocative and translates each one into something to be despised: "an otherworldly Teacher, an unreal God, a specious Spirit, a hypocritical Church, a misleading Scripture, dogmatic creeds, and an arrogant mission."⁷

The psalmist prays for a shameful defeat for "all who hate Zion." He compares the wicked to rooftop grass that dries out in the sun as fast as it springs up. There is nothing for the reaper to

³ Webster, *The God Who Comforts*, 114.

⁴ Webster, *The God Who Prays*, 97.

⁵ Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, 322.

⁶ Chrysostom, *Homilies on John*, 302.

⁷ Bruner, *John*, 991.

harvest. It is only so much waste. Psalm 129 is not an easy psalm and it is susceptible to misuse by our vindictive selves, but Alec Motyer has the right idea when he says, “Don’t be afraid of such vigorous, realistic prayers! This is the way to commit life-threatening situations to God. . . . To balk at praying for a similar fate to befall an oppressor is to reveal either that one has never been in danger of one’s life, or that one lacks the imagination to feel what it would be like.”⁸ With that said, the psalmist leaves us with one more image drawn from farming. We have had plowing, withered grass, and now a harvest blessing. It was customary for harvesters to be greeted with a blessing (Ruth 2:4), but the psalmist warns against it. “May those who pass by not say to them, ‘The blessing of the Lord be on you; we bless you in the name of the Lord’” (Ps 129:8). The world does not need nor should it have our blessing to do what the world does. It is not our place to bless those who hate Zion so that we can ingratiate ourselves to the enemies of the gospel. We must love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us without becoming hypocrites.

⁸ Motyer, *Journey*, 103.