

## **PSALM 129 TIMES ARE PERILOUS**

This tenth psalm of the Song of Ascents is a tough poem. Some people see it as a lament, others a community thanksgiving or even a song of trust and assurance. Some see it as an imprecatory psalm. Such psalms express disgust for enemies and wish ill upon them.

It has all those themes.

### ***Oppression of the people of God (1-3)***

The Psalm begins with a cantor or leader starting the pilgrims off and the rest of the pilgrims responding with the rest of the psalm. It shows that the psalm is liturgical in origin. Israel is here thought of as a person cf. the church's use of the Body of Christ.

The psalm starts with an adverb that means both often (NRSV) and intense or severe (NIV). The poet articulates the reality of persistent and severe opposition to the people of God either by their neighbours, or their captors.

Even when Israel was young, a teenager, the people were subject to violent attack. Yet they learned that the attacker could not prevail even though the pain to Israel was intense. The metaphor of verse 3 paints the pain as like being laid on the ground and ploughed over. We need to note the intensity of the pain.

Note here that God's people do not escape from pain and oppression. Indeed, they may attract it because of who they are. Note again we are not told what happened; it is very general, but it is the pain that is emphasised. This is not about history but experience, an experience we all can have and this is why the psalms speak to us in all our conditions. Poetry touches us where history cannot. We can say that we do not share an historical experience but intense pain of

rejection, violence and hatred any might experience and the powerlessness it creates in us.

### ***God saves (4)***

The reason that the enemies of Israel have not overcome them is not because they are brilliantly resilient or powerful or good. They are none of these things.

They survive and flourish because God is righteous.

God puts things to rights and he does that by cutting the cords of the wicked. Now this is not some anatomical figure of speech. Think of rope. It is about the power of rulers and oppressors to coerce intimidate, restrain in order to control and hurt their prisoners. God's rule is real and we trust it when we are completely powerless. God cuts the ropes. God sets them free; think of the Exodus.

These people live in the real world of pain and powerlessness and yet they trust God to exercise his sovereignty; the firm belief that God would put things to rights.

### ***Opposition to God's people is opposition to God (5-8)***

To hate the people (Israel) is to hate Zion (where God's presence is and God's promise is remembered). The future for God's opponents is not bright.

The agricultural images are images of life cut off, an unfruitful life, a life without blessing, and a life full of dying. The last verse is the final nail in their coffin: no-one can proffer them a blessing because their lives have been full of death not life. God cannot bless that kind of life.

This is God's opposition to the oppressor, the abuser whose whole life is given over to death, to capture, to restraining and giving pain to others.

### ***Further reflections***

From its earliest times, from patriarchs and matriarchs to the embattled generations of the post exilic era, the history of the people of God is one of opposition and inflicted pain.

Another way of looking at this, as this psalm does is to recognize that God's reign is always opposed. The people of God experience the opposition directed at God. The people live by memory and hope.

Jesus asked his disciples to live the same way. They entered God's reign and took up the cross. The history of the people of God in the psalms or the disciples of Jesus is one long passion narrative.

We live by memory, God's righteousness in the past, and hope, trusting that the future is in the hand of the same God. That is why the church has the sacraments and the Word to help live in memory and hope.

In our affluent and relatively peaceful world unrelenting oppression is not something that we have experienced. We therefore find it hard to reconcile harsh words about enemies with Jesus' ideas about loving your enemy and turning the other cheek.

We need to remember that the psalmist is praying because the poet has no capacity to do anything about the violence, injustice and suffering all around him. The psalmist prays for God to act because no one else can. The psalmist is turning the other cheek and handing it over to God's justice.

The psalmist does that in the knowledge that God opposes and confronts injustice, evil and oppression. The psalmist's prayer is for a society where such things do not exist. The anger expressed is expressed in prayer and thus submitted to the action of God.

***Question***

Do we love justice so much we hate injustice as God hates it?

Read Romans 12.19-21. What bearing might this have on the discussion?

Consider the following in relation to injustices (such as child abuse):

“We have suppressed in our Christian consciousness the idea that judgment is for the sake of justice, especially for those who are the victims of injustice, and that the purpose of this judgment is to restore everything “as it should be” - and even to confront the wicked with their injustice in such a way that they honour justice through their repentance.” (Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance: Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* p.64)