

Psalm 129.¹⁻⁸

Persecution

Background

The 15 'songs of ascent' in the psalter (Psalms 120-134) are most helpfully seen as a brief and easily accessed 'manual' on discipleship. The nature of that discipleship: the experience of that discipleship: and ultimately, as we'll see in coming weeks, the culmination of that discipleship.

This psalm flags up the reality of persecution as an inevitable part of the believer's experience. Jesus made that clear to His disciples in the famous 'sermon on the mount' (eg [Matt.5.10-12](#)), consistently through His ministry (eg [Luke 9.22-24](#)), and on the night before His crucifixion (eg [John 15.18](#), [John 16.1-4](#) and [16.33](#)): far from being an occasional note that He sounded, it was central to the message He always preached.

The apostle Paul was, therefore, doing nothing more than reiterating a truth which Jesus Himself had emphasised when he highlighted this same truth in the guidance and encouragement he gave to Timothy – "*In fact,*" he wrote, "*everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted ..*" (2 Tim.3.12).

The story of the early church, recorded by Luke in Acts, amply illustrates, from beginning to end, this same reality in the lives of the first believers: the church has, indeed, been 'greatly oppressed' from her 'youth'. Just as the Old Testament narrative shows how Israel herself had similarly been 'greatly oppressed' from her earliest days, or from her 'youth'.

Believers are not encouraged to go looking for trouble and oppression (they won't need to!), nor is there any suggestion that they take any 'masochistic' delight in such trouble (they don't – it's painful and sore, sometimes dreadfully so): but it happens, it will be there as a fact of life for those who intent on following Jesus and living their lives towards Him.

This manual on discipleship, therefore, flags up this reality and dispels from the start any notion that entrusting your life to the Lord Jesus Christ will solve all your problems and give you a trouble-free life. Anything but!

The psalm, however, doesn't simply underline the reality of persecution; it sets out the perspective in which it's to be seen, by highlighting two basic truths – (1) Jesus has gained the victory and gives that victory to His people (see [John 16.33](#) and [1 Cor.15.57](#)); and (2) the Lord is righteous and judges justly for His people – and, then, on the basis of those truths, by pointing to the privileged recourse to prayer.

It is to prayer that believers are directed when exposed to persecution, whatever form that takes (see [1 Pet.2.23](#) for instance). Our instinct is to take revenge, but vengeance is the Lord's prerogative (see [Rom.12.19-21](#)) – and He makes a far better job of it than we ever do!

Along with '**days**' (1) and (2) which focus on Psalm 129 itself, I suggest for a third set of questions you look at '**day**' (4). For each of these 'days' there are additional questions which will hopefully occasion fruitful discussion in your Community Group.

1) Monday 7th March – oppressed

Read [Psalm 129.1-4](#)

“But the LORD is righteous ..” (Ps.129.4)

‘Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,’ declared the apostle ([2 Tim.3.12](#)). Your embracing the lordship of Jesus thrusts you into a battle (see [Ps.124](#)), but though you may be knocked down, you won’t be knocked out!

In what ways can you identify with the psalmist when he speaks about being ‘greatly oppressed’?

Why will those who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus inevitably be persecuted?

Read [1 Pet.2.20-23](#): why is the righteousness of the Lord a ‘comforting’ truth?

How has the Lord ‘cutting you free from the cords of the wicked’ found expression in your life?

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, that the victory You have already achieved and given to Your people cannot be taken from us! Whatever I face today, help me rest in that victory!*

2) Tuesday 8th March – prayer

Read [Psalm 129.5-8](#)

“.. May all who hate Zion be turned back in shame ..” (Ps.129.5)

The Lord is not only righteous (v.4), He is also the one ‘who answers prayer’ ([Ps.65.2](#)). When experience ‘oppression’ and suffer unjustly, you may bring the matter to the Lord in prayer: He will exercise wisely and rightly His judgment on all oppressors.

How do these verses ‘square’ with Jesus’ instruction to ‘pray for those who persecute you’ ([Matt.5.44](#))?

How do prayers such as this serve under God to ‘turn a sinner from the error of their ways’ ([James 5.20](#))?

What answers have you seen to prayer along the lines of these verses?

Prayer: *How glad I am that as the Judge of all the earth You will always do, and secure, that which is right: I look to You, and trust You, to secure justice for Your people.*

3) Wednesday 9th March – folly

Read [2 Corinthians 11.16-21](#)

“.. You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise ..” (2 Cor.11.19)

From his earliest days as a believer Paul had been 'greatly oppressed' ([Ps.129.1f](#)) by others – not least, in Corinth, because he scorned the 'folly' of those merely human techniques and shows of strength to which the Corinthian church gave such weight.

What does 'boasting in the way the world does' look like, and why do we so readily engage in that?

What is it about those who throw their weight around that results in people being impressed by them? Are you too easily impressed by that?

Prayer: *Preserve me, Lord, from the foolish concern to try and make much of myself through what I say and do: help me, rather, to boast only of Yourself.*

4) Thursday 10th March – servants

Read [2 Corinthians 11.22-29](#)

".. Are they servants of Christ? .." (2 Cor.11.23)

The freedom Jesus gives you is found and experienced in His service: you are now His servant. Paul here illustrates what that service looks like: hard work, painful opposition, regular adversity, sleepless nights, and a constant concern for others.

What has been your experience in the service of Christ?

R M McCheyne was a notable Scottish preacher who died aged 29, his constitution weakened by his exertions: he was reported to have said as he died – "The Lord gave me a horse to ride and a message to deliver. Alas, I have killed the horse and cannot deliver the message." How do you 'work hard' without 'killing the horse'?

Or, expressed differently, how do you balance the need to 'take care of yourself' with the readiness to risk danger in the service of Christ?

What lessons do you learn from Paul's teaching here as to how you cope with the trials which your service of the Lord Jesus may bring?

How does this 'concern for all the churches' find expression as a 'pressure' which, as a fellowship of believers, we also face daily? Or is that 'concern for all the churches' largely absent?

Prayer: *I instinctively shy away from trouble, Lord! Grant me by Your Spirit, the boldness I need to serve You well, and the grace I need to bear with all trials.*

5) Friday 11th March – weakness

Read [2 Corinthians 11.30-33](#)

".. If I must boast, I will boast of things that show my weakness .." (2 Cor.11.30)

This man who before his conversion had always sought to be 'top dog', had eyes now only for Jesus: his concern was to make much of His Lord and Saviour, and he was no longer afraid to show himself weak, if that weakness magnified Jesus.

How did Paul's escape from Damascus as he records it here show his own 'weakness' and the Lord's 'praise-worthiness'?

What 'escapes' have you had which similarly illustrate the Lord's preserving power in the face of your own weakness?

Prayer: *You are my strong Deliverer, Lord: ever be my strength and shield. Guide me through every difficult time and guard me in the midst of every hazardous trial.*

6) Saturday 12th March – experience

Read [2 Corinthians 12.1-6](#)

".. I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted .." (2 Cor.12.6)

Paul couldn't keep quiet about his experience of God, but wouldn't speak about it in a way that drew attention to himself. The Lord will make Himself known to you, to encourage and fortify your spirit – not for you to go bragging to others about it.

How can you share your experience of God with others in a way which doesn't make much of yourself?

God means His people to know Him with a real immediacy in Christ: have you settled for something less than His best or do you hunger for more of the Lord?

Prayer: *Thanks be to You, my Lord Jesus, for all the benefits You have given me. May I know You more clearly, love You more dearly, and follow You more nearly, day by day.*

7) Sunday 13th March – grace

Read [2 Corinthians 12.7-10](#)

"My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.."' (2 Cor.12.9)

Paul learned an important lesson through what the Lord withheld. His continued weakness afforded the Lord the platform to display both the perfection of His power and the sufficiency of His grace. Resurrection life flows from crucified living!

Does Paul's experience recounted here help you better understand what may lie behind some 'unanswered' prayers?

In what ways and in what areas of your life will Christ's power be seen to rest on you today?

Prayer: *It goes against the grain of my proud heart, Lord, to acknowledge and embrace any weakness: but I **am** weak in all sorts of ways – come, and demonstrate Your power.*