

November 15, 2020

“The Radical Response of Prayer”

Psalm 129

FCF: The oppression of the church

PROPOSITION: (anchor) The LORD calls us to a radical response when oppressed.
(magnet) And that begins with prayer.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

This world does not greet the gospel. Open Door’s *2020 World Watch List* of Christian persecution paints a sobering picture. Every day, 8 Christians worldwide are killed because of their faith. Every week, 182 churches or Christian buildings are attacked. And every month, 309 Christians are imprisoned unjustly. Remember that with every one of those numbers is a name.

Maybe you know what it’s like to be passed by because you refused to go with the crowd. Perhaps at school or work, you took a stand. Relationships were strained, a door was closed, an opportunity was lost, a reward justly due was unjustly denied, perhaps your rights taken away.

How should we respond? You shouldn’t be surprised to hear me say, “The Bible says we should pray.” But you might be surprised at how. Let’s look once again to the Songs of Ascent.

SCRIPTURE READING: Psalm 129

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Radical actions tend to get our attention. Let me tell you of one on 06/29/96 ([READ](#)):

Keshia Thomas was 18 years old when the KKK held a rally in her home town of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Hundreds of protesters turned out to tell the white supremacist organization that they were not welcome in the progressive college town. At one point during the event, a man with a SS tattoo and wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with a Confederate flag ended up on the protesters' side of the fence and a small group began to chase him. He was quickly knocked to the ground and kicked and hit with placard sticks. As people began to shout, "Kill the Nazi," the high school student, fearing that mob mentality had taken over, decided to act. Thomas threw herself on top of one of the men she had come to protest, protecting him from the blows, and told the crowd that you "can't beat goodness into a person." In discussing her motivation for this courageous act after the event, she stated, "Someone had to step out of the pack and say, 'this isn't right'...I knew what it was like to be hurt. The many times that that happened, I wish someone would have stood up for me...violence is violence - nobody deserves to be hurt, especially not for an idea." ...Mark Brunner, the student photographer who took (a) now famous photograph (of Keshia's brave stance), added that what was so remarkable was who Thomas saved: "She put herself at physical risk to protect someone who, in my opinion, would not have done the same for her. Who does that in this world?"

Keshia’s response got the world’s attention that day. It resonated as something deep and true for it’s what the world needs. Beyond even that, it’s what we were made for. It’s an echo of Jesus’ call to love our enemies, a radical response to oppression. The Lord calls us to a radical response when oppressed. But where does this begin? It begins with prayer. It begins with prayer.

So what would such prayer look like? The psalm points us towards three things. First, a corporate understanding. Second, an honest reflection. And, third, a kingdom orientation.

I. A CORPORATE UNDERSTANDING

First, a corporate understanding, how we see ourselves in relation to our fellow disciples.

A) *Beyond Just Ourselves*

The psalm is clear that this has to go beyond just ourselves. It has to go much wider.

1. Individual significance

Yes, the Bible makes clear the significance of the individual. We hear that in the differences of our testimonies. We see it in Jesus’ tailored conversations. It’s reflected in no few of the Psalms.

2. For the community

But our self understanding has to go beyond that, knowing we are part of a community (**READ Psalm 129:1-2a**). Do you see? This is a shared lament spoken by and of the people as a whole.

B) But the Whole Body

From the start, it's clear we have to look beyond ourselves to see the whole body.

1. The experience of them all

The psalm is reflecting the experience of them all. In the past, "This is what happened to us, to our forefathers." This expression of the individual is a personification of the nation as a whole.

2. Seen throughout the Bible

This corporate understanding is seen throughout the Bible. Paul reminds the church of Corinth (**READ 1 Corinthians 12:26-27**). It's the basis for this instruction (**READ Romans 12:15-16a**).

Psalm 129 points us towards the response of prayer with a corporate understanding.

Illustration:

Jameson Wetmore is an engineer and social researcher at Arizona State University. He has **studied the Amish intensively**, especially their view on technology. He notes (**READ**):

The reason the Amish rejected television is because it is a one-way conduit to bring another society into their living rooms. And they want to maintain the society as they have created it. And the automobile as well. As soon as you have a car, your ability to leave your local community becomes significantly easier. You no longer have to rely on your neighbor for eggs when you run out. You can literally take half an hour and run to the store. In a horse and buggy, when you don't have your own chickens, that's a half-day process. I asked one Amish person why they didn't use automobiles. He simply smiled and turned to me and said, "Look what they did to your society." And I asked what do you mean? "Well, do you know your neighbor? Do you know the names of your neighbors?" And, at the time, I had to admit to the fact that I didn't.

Application:

This should prompt some questions. How do you see yourself? As a solitary individual or a member of a larger body? Have you considered the number of "one another" passages in the New Testament? Have you realized the need we have for each other, our interdependency?

Pushing this further, when you hear stories of Christians suffering religious persecution in other parts of the world, how does that land on you? As just another troubling bit of noise or news of your siblings being ill-treated? Can you say "They have done this to us. To us."?

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II. AN HONEST REFLECTION

Such prayer means something else - an honest reflection, how we absorb the oppression.

A) Not Denying the Pain

1. Unwilling to pretend

There is no denial of the pain here. There is no willingness to pretend or ignore what happened.

2. Determined to live in reality

The psalm would have us live in reality, to give this evil a long hard stare. Note the repetition (**READ Psalm 129:1-2a**). The repetition is striking and clearly meant for a sobering emphasis.

B) But Naming It

We are not to deny the pain. We are to name it, to call it what it is and make it clear.

1. What is sung

Of what are they singing? Affliction - hostile treatment, wrong done by an enemy. This was a thing Israel knew well through her history - slavery in Egypt on into the captivity in Babylon.

2. How it is sung

How was this song sung? With metaphors of horror ([READ Psalm 129:3](#)). These are images of harsh captivity - a scourged back, tortuous wounds, scars left behind like the furrows in a field.

Now think with me. To pray with such honest reflection can be a radical response.

Illustration:

Naming can be a powerful experience. There's almost a sense of ownership when you can put a label to the emotions stirring inside, the experience you've had, the trauma you've felt. Until it's named, we often feel lost and confused, unsure of where we are and where we're going.

Application:

Friends, this psalm is part of God's written word. We are invited, encouraged, and guided into praying this way. He would have us to pray with the open transparency of this and so many of the other psalms. We have a book called Lamentations. And Jesus weeping in Gethsemane.

Think of it this way. What message is sent, what purpose is served, by our dishonesty here? Do we not believe that all of life matters to God? Do we not say we can entrust all things to Him? The pain of oppression has to be dealt with. If we do not give it over to Him, then it will be taken over by us. And if taken over by us, it is only a matter of time before we are taken over by resentment, bitterness, anguish, and despair. We must speak of these things to Him.

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III.A KINGDOM ORIENTATION

Such prayer demands a corporate understanding, honest reflection, and then a kingdom orientation. That is, our aim, what we long for, how we move forward ([READ Psalm 129:5-8](#)).

A) Never for Revenge

1. Our natural response

Now this is never about revenge, our natural response - to do to others as has been done to us.

Illustration:

Sean Connery died recently. Though he was best known for his role as James Bond, he won an Oscar for his role as Jimmy Malone in *The Untouchables*. Jimmy Malone is a seasoned Chicago police officer working with the FBI and Eliot Ness to bring down Al Capone ([READ](#)):

Malone: What are you prepared to do? If you open the can on these worms you must be prepared to go all the way. Because they're not gonna give up the fight, until one of you is dead.

Ness: I want to get Capone! I don't know how to do it.

Malone: You wanna know how to get Capone? They pull a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue. *That's the Chicago way!* And that's how you get Capone. Now do you want to do that? Are you ready to do that? I'm offering you a deal. Do you want this deal?

It's a great scene. That's our natural response. But it's not what is being spoken of in this psalm.

2. A mistaken reading

And it would be a mistake to read these words that way. This is not about vindictiveness.

B) Always for Deliverance

Even in affliction, our desire is not to be for revenge. The psalm is a cry for deliverance.

1. What is at stake

Consider what was at stake. Zion was not just any city. This was Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel, the home of the Temple. Israel was not just another people but God's covenant people, to whom He had pledged Himself. To assault this city was ultimately to assault the LORD Himself.

2. What is sought after

So what is being sought after? The frustration of the enemy's plans and the futility of their efforts. That it would be as fruitless as shoots growing in the shallow soil of a rooftop. That the binding cords of the wicked would be cut and the lives of the people spared. This is a kingdom orientation - not the kingdom of self but the kingdom of God, that His purposes would flourish.

And to pray with such a kingdom orientation is another part of this radical response.

Application:

What would fuel such a posture in prayer? Imagine traveling with Jesus and the disciples to the festival, singing this song. Whose voice to you hear? The King with the furrowed back. He knows the affliction of the oppressed. He bore it for us. He stood in our place, taking the blows, the deepest scourging, bound with the cords of the wicked that we might then be set free.

He is the King with the furrowed back. He bears those scars for eternity as proof of His love. We have but to look on them as a reminder we can trust Him in anything with everything.

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CONCLUSION:

(**READ Revelation 8:1-5**). When you think about it, prayer itself is a radical response to oppression. After all, how does it make you feel? Resentful and angry. Powerless and afraid. What do you want to do? To respond and rally. To press your case and make a stand. And there may be a time for that. The God of justice is never served by allowing injustice to flourish.

But even if that's the case, we're not ready to take the first step until we've slowed down to acknowledge the most vital thing. Yes, what happened was wrong. But we are not God. We need His intervention. Prayer is putting feet to our faith. We're not ready to do anything until we've prayed. Not just because of the effect of prayer upon us but because we're actually engaging in conversation with the God who is there, the God who is at work and on the move for the sake of His glory and our good, the God who hears our prayers as they rise up like incense in the temple - unleashing peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and earthquakes.

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