

Psalm 129

You know my persecutions...yet from them all the Lord rescued me (2 Tim. 3:11)

1. Background

Psalm 129 gives us perspective by (a) reviewing (in a very brief compass) thousands of years of salvation history, and (b) looking forward to the ultimate end of those who oppose the work and the people of God.

“Churches often see themselves as an essentially contemporary phenomenon. It is as if we were the first-ever Christian generation. The psalm invites a congregation to see itself as one in life with the people of God over the centuries... Its particular reason for doing so is that it sets our generation’s experience of decline and weakness, marginality and harassment, in the context of a story running through millennia, which has moved through cycles of defeat and deliverance. The fact that God has not let this people disappear, even though it has often experienced reversal and defeat, is reason for encouragement when we ourselves experience decline and defeat” (Goldingay).

“Psalm 129 is no trite statement of an easy faith or a shallow optimism. This song of confidence is an outgrowth of the prayer of lament in which distress was tearfully brought before Yahweh. God’s people, as they sang this song, were doubtless painfully aware not only of past ordeals but of present threats. They had learned both from ancient history and from recent experience that the light of salvation lies at the end of a dark tunnel of suffering. They sang this song in the night, as it were. By faith rather than sight they clung to God’s past self-revelation as champion of a particular city and people. With the courage that sprang from a real faith, they dared to assert that their divine help in ages past was their hope for years to come” (Allen).

Theodore Beza said to Henry IV of France, “Sire, it is the lot of the Church of God to endure blows and not to inflict them. But may it please you to remember that the Church is an anvil that has worn out many hammers.”

2. Structure

Like Psalms 126-128, Psalm 129 comprised two nicely balanced panels.

Panel 1 – Ancient Hostility (vv. 1-4)	Panel 2 – Failed Harvest (vv. 5-8)
They harassed us but they didn’t prevail	→They will retreat in shame, and wither
They ploughed our backs	→They will not produce a crop
The LORD delivered us from them	→They will be no occasion for blessing in the name of the LORD

The first panel is a review of the past (the verbs are in the “perfect” tense). The second panel looks at the future (the leading verbs are in the “imperfect” tense).

The first panel tells us that Israel’s enemies harassed Israel from the very start, but they did not prevail because the LORD delivered his people. The second panel tells us that Zion’s haters will utterly fail and will not participate in any blessing (as either the cause of happy harvest blessings, or the recipients of harvest blessings).

3. Notes

(a) *The Ancient Hostility* (vv. 1-4)

“Whereas most nations tend to look back at what they have achieved, Israel reflects here on what she has survived” (Kidner).

Israel’s experience of harassment goes back to Rebekah’s conception of Esau and Jacob (Israel), Genesis 25:22-23. As a man, Jacob/Israel was afraid of his brother, his uncle (Laban), the inhabitants of Canaan, and of what the Egyptians might do to his youngest son. Jacob/Israel’s experience was that of a man besieged. “Israel’s story is one long tale of assault by unnamed foes, among whom the Israel that uses the psalm can thus locate its own attackers” (Goldingay).

The central, triumphant affirmation of vv. 1-3 is “They greatly harassed me...but they have not prevailed against me!” (v. 2). But the reason for this triumph remains unstated until v. 4 – “The LORD is righteous...”

“Suddenly the first word in [v. 4] introduces a whole new factor. Where has the LORD been before? The LORD has been rhetorically and practically missing, but now bursts onto the scene. There is not even a ‘but’ to announce that another factor is about to intervene... Further, the psalm leaps beyond the LORD’s actual action, or perhaps stands back and looks behind it, in declaring that the LORD is faithful... The LORD burst in and cut the rope. Israel bound free, from Egypt, from Amalek, from Moab, from Philistia, from Assyria, from Babylon...” (Goldingay).

(b) *The Failed Harvest* (vv. 5-8)

Although the picture in v. 5 is of the retreat of a besieging army in shame and confusion, the overall picture in vv. 5-8 is of agricultural failure. The word “ashamed” with which v. 5 opens is almost identical to the word “wither” with which v. 6 closes.

The Israel who makes the confident confession of vv. 1-4 now stands back and sees the attack as aimed at the citadel of Zion, the very heart of the nation. “If *Zion* were no more than a capital city, this imprecation on its enemies would be mere petulance and bluster. But in the Psalter Zion is ‘the city of our God’ (48:1), ‘the mount...for his abode’ (68:16) and the destined mother-city of the world (87)... It is only appropriate, speaking in those terms, that those who reject her should wither (6f.); leaving metaphors aside, they are not only choosing the way of hate, which is soul-destroying, but setting themselves against God, which is suicide” (Kidner).

Roofs in Israel were made of soil. Grass seeds would blow there and begin to take root, but they would not be able to put down the roots that would make proper growth possible. Grass could thus start to grow, but it would not flourish.

Harvest involved three actions described in vv. 7-8. (a) Reapers took standing grain by the handful, cutting the stalks and laying them down. (b) Binders came and lifted the stalks into their arms, bound them in sheaves and stood them up. (c) Passers-by, moved by the generally positive atmosphere of a good harvest shouted greetings to the workers, “The LORD bless you!”, to which the workers replied, “We bless you in the name of the LORD!” (cf. Ruth 2:4). All three elements will be absent among those who hate Zion – theirs is an utterly failed harvest. The absence of blessing in Psalm 129 contrasts with the abundant blessing of Psalm 128.