

Israel & Jesus- Psalm 129

Many people separate their raw, negative emotions from their relationship with God through prayer and worship. This Psalm, like others, shows us that we should not suppress such feelings when we pray and sing to God. Expressing lament over past afflictions and anger toward those who hate and have hurt us, particularly because of our faith, is a part of biblical spirituality.

This Psalm of Ascents, sung with the other ones in this group by God's people as they traveled to and worshiped together in Jerusalem three times each year, is about the nation of Israel. In verses 1-4, we see the nation of Israel lamenting their afflictions. They sang together about how as a nation they had been afflicted since their youth. This would refer to the suffering they endured as slaves in Egypt. Their afflictions were so severe they could be compared to having their backs ripped apart like a plowed field when beaten by their masters or possibly indicate this actually happened in Egypt. (v3) In these verses we also see the nation remembering their deliverance. Israel could say, "yet they have not prevailed against me" (v.2) and "The LORD is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked." (v. 4) Their perseverance despite their afflictions in Egypt, as well in times of affliction after this, was due to God's deliverance.

The last half of the Psalm expresses to God Israel's desire for their enemies to experience God's curse. This Psalm expresses longing for those who hate Zion to endure the shame of being turned backward when they attack Israel, and for them to wither and perish like grass on a rooftop. The song ends with no one blessing these haters of God and his people.

This Psalm is also about the person of Jesus. We can see the connection between Israel and Jesus in Hosea 11:1, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." This verse about the nation of Israel is quoted in the New Testament about Jesus, who was taken to Egypt as a child for safety and later was brought back. Think of the nation of Israel, they came out of Egypt, passed through the waters of the Red Sea and then they were tested in the wilderness for 40 years. Jesus came out of Egypt, passed through the waters of baptism in the Jordan River and then was tested in the wilderness for 40 days. The difference was that Jesus succeeded where Israel failed. He was the true Israel who fulfilled the mission that God intended for Israel. In this Psalm we see other parallels.

Like Israel, Jesus experienced afflictions and deliverance. Jesus' back was beaten when he was scourged before his crucifixion. His back was torn apart by the whip of the Roman soldier, like a field plowed with long furrows (v.3). Isaiah refers to this, "I gave my back to those who strike..." (50:6) and "...by his stripes we are healed." (53:5) After his suffering and death, Jesus was released from the chords of death, which came at the hands of those who hated him (v4). He was raised from the dead.

The end of this Psalm anticipates the curse that will come on those who hate Zion or Jesus (Heb. 12:22f). Jesus bore the shame and curse our sin deserves, but those who don't accept his death as the only atoning sacrifice for their sin, will suffer this shame and curse themselves, forever. The invitation is to all to come to Jesus and enter into the new covenant he established with the sprinkling of his blood.

Finally, though this Psalm is about Israel corporately and Jesus ultimately, it also is for all of God's people at all times who have suffered abuse and affliction. If you can say, "Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth" this Psalm insures there will be justice for those who afflict you, and never repent and turn to Christ. They "will one day wither and be carried away to eternal insignificance in the way that dead grass flies away on a soft breeze (vv. 4-7). But, if you are in Christ—if you are one of those upon whom the blessing of the LORD rests (v. 8)—then, like your Savior before you, your pains will one day be transformed into glory, turned inside out into marks of beauty. "