

Psalm 129

A Song of Ascents.

- ¹ 'Often have they attacked me from my youth'
—let Israel now say—
- ² 'often have they attacked me from my youth,
yet they have not prevailed against me.
- ³ Those who plough ploughed on my back;
they made their furrows long.'
- ⁴ The LORD is righteous;
he has cut the cords of the wicked.
- ⁵ May all who hate Zion
be put to shame and turned back.
- ⁶ Let them be like the grass on the housetops
that withers before it grows up,
⁷ with which reapers do not fill their hands
or binders of sheaves their arms,
⁸ while those who pass by do not say,
'The blessing of the LORD be upon you!
We bless you in the name of the LORD!'

This is a psalm of collective resilience. The worship leader begins, and then calls on the whole people to respond “Let Israel say...” But why is resilience needed? “Often have they attacked me from my youth”. Who has done this? Any number of colonial attackers and occupiers of the people have done this and over a long time. Was this psalm composed in a foreign land or under occupation? Certainly, it being a psalm pilgrims would sing on their way to Jerusalem for a festival of harvest ascending to the temple, it would recollect occupation and oppression, motivating people to resist capitulation to a state of defeat or despair. We will make it and we will keep ascending!

The imagery used is also harvest imagery. It may be referring to foreign invaders having stolen the land and farming it for their own purposes. “Those who plough ploughed on my back; they made their furrows long.” It’s as if the people have been buried under the land being farmed by invaders... Pretty stark imagery, no?... And then this reference to grass growing on housetops, clearly intended for reaping (did people grow the land and use even their roofs for growing food?).

In better days, of course, it would be the people who would work the land and enjoy the harvest, and they would greet each other when collecting it saying: “The blessing of the Lord be upon you!” But now that invaders are seeking to harvest the land the psalm prays that the harvest fails. “Let them be like the grass on the housetops that **withers** before it grows up, with which reapers **do not** fill their hands or binders of sheaves their arms, while those who

pass by **do not say**, ‘the blessing of the Lord be upon you!’” The final line is a blessing upon the people “We bless you in the name of the Lord!” But is it also blessing on all the vengeful feelings that have just been expressed in the rest of the psalm?

We have already encountered in many psalms the desire for payback or revenge expressed in prayers and song. This is a core desire that grows in many of us when we are hurt or wounded. On the positive side it is an indication that we are alive and we have not given up or given in to defeat and despair. But we cannot remain here. Somehow, we must keep “ascending” to the temple where we will find peace and even an abundance through forgiveness not so much as a letting go and forgetting, but forgiveness as the double movement of declaring: 1) you need to be forgiven for what you did to me, and 2) I need to get there for my own peace even if I may not be there yet. Forgiveness is a letting go of the need for revenge, but not a letting go of the injustice that was committed. Forgiveness frees me up to engage the injustice in a more constructive way than revenge. And whether that constructive way includes reconciliation or not (and often that’s not possible), it must always include some measure of peace.

Psalm 129, voices resilience, it voices deep feelings of the desire for vengeance, but it also provides a path toward ascending to worship in the temple, where other things may happen as people encounter their God. What about you? Where are you at in your journey ascending to the temple in your own heart before God, in relation to others in your life, and as you gather with others for worship?

PRAYER: We thank you, O God, for you are always with us whether we are aware of your presence or not. You are always seeking to find entry points into our heart to heal angry, resentful and vengeful feelings, to turn our frustrations into creative expressions and constructive actions, to shift our thinking toward seeking resolution rather than retaliation. Sometimes we just need to let it out, O God. We can have hate in us, we can shut down, we can turn our backs on some people and we can give up on them. But then, something may also happen to open us up. Something may change and we cannot, ultimately, give up. Help us discern our path forward, O God. We must always find our way to love, yes, but loving ourselves as your precious creations and seeking our peace is just as important as building bridges of understanding and patience with those around us. Help us find our way. Restore, renew and refresh us. And give us peace in where we are today, even if it is not where we need to be tomorrow. In Jesus’ name; Amen.