

# Against God's Enemies

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**Bible Verse:** Psalm 129  
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Well, I'm certainly delighted to be able to return to our study of the Psalms this evening and I invite you to turn to Psalm 129. Psalm 129. For those of you that maybe have just recently joined us, we've been studying through the Psalms since 2014, I believe, and in the providence of God we come to Psalm 129 tonight and I'm going to read it as we begin to set it before your mind. Psalm 129, one of the Songs of Ascents.

1 "Many times they have persecuted me from my youth up," Let Israel now say, 2 "Many times they have persecuted me from my youth up; Yet they have not prevailed against me. 3 The plowers plowed upon my back; They lengthened their furrows." 4 The LORD is righteous; He has cut in two the cords of the wicked. 5 May all who hate Zion Be put to shame and turned backward; 6 Let them be like grass upon the housetops, Which withers before it grows up; 7 With which the reaper does not fill his hand, Or the binder of sheaves his bosom; 8 Nor do those who pass by say, "The blessing of the LORD be upon you; We bless you in the name of the LORD."

One of the outstanding features of this Psalm is its use of agricultural imagery and we'll see that as we go along. But since it's been several weeks since we were in the Psalms, let me just remind you about the nature of the Songs of Ascent. The Songs of Ascent comprise Psalms 120-134. There are 15 Songs of Ascent that are so titled in the inscription, and in those Psalms most people believe that these were Psalms that were sung by pilgrims as they went up to Jerusalem for the three national feasts, and so there was a repeated emphasis of these Psalms that show a geographical progression from distant lands into Jerusalem, into the temple, into the temple gates for worship, and so it's very intriguing to study them from that perspective. And also even apart from that dynamic, the Psalms appear to be given in five triads and there's a progression in each triad. You know, so Psalm 120-122 is one triad, and so forth, and each triad follows a pattern of themes. The first Psalm in each triad speaks in one or another about the problems in the life of God's people. The second Psalm in the triad will speak about God's protection for them. And then the third Psalm of the triad generally ends on a theme of peace. And this is a repeated pattern and we said at one time early on in the study that the pattern in a way shows almost a cycle of life in the believer, you know, as we cycle through problems that trouble us, and then we're brought back to the promises

and protection of God, and we rejoice in that, and then something new happens and we start the pattern all over again, you see the pattern even teaching us kind of an ebb and flow in spiritual life that can be expected. I think it's important for us all to realize individually and even in the life of a church that it's not always going to be at a high plateau or great emotional energy and everything is always positive for all times without end until we go up to heaven in a chariot of fire, it's just not like that. Scripture says that man is born for trouble as the sparks fly upward, Job 5:7. The book of Acts says that it's through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God.

So the Songs of Ascent help us to have a right sense of expectation about the nature of spiritual life, and it's obvious, then, isn't it, that if what's true of individual Christians would also prove to be true in the life of a local body. You know, in the early years, we had some tough times at Truth Community Church, we had some difficulties; not all of them were known publicly by everyone but certainly there were difficulties. Right now we're in a time of blessing without question, we're in a time where it's just evident that God is blessing us in many different ways as our church grows, as there's joy and peace that's come along, but we shouldn't expect or we shouldn't have any kind of expectation that it will necessarily always be that way. There will be times where tragedy comes, where we have to deal with sin in the church or things like that, and those things are difficult and weigh us down, but this is all part of the way that God sanctifies us, it's all part of the way that he conforms us to the image of Christ. So we accept that and we embrace that and we reject the false promises that are held out by health and wealth or prosperity teachers that talk about, you know, you can have your best life now and God wants you to be healthy and happy. That's just demonstrably false. If that was true, Christians would never die. If that's true, they wouldn't age and, you know, I can speak from personal experience here, you know, you get further along in life and gravity starts to have its effect on you, right? This is not avoidable and that's all right. That's all right. We realize and what the cycle teaches us to do is it teaches us not to be so attached to this world and to have our affections so tied up in this world that as the problems come, it loosens our grip on this world in a way that causes us to rest our real hope in heaven, to realize that our hope is in heaven, not here on earth. Scripture says here we have no lasting city but we are seeking the city to come. And it's very important for believers to develop affections for heaven and to diminish our expectations about what this life will bring, and if the Lord brings blessing, if the Lord brings prosperity and brings good health for a long period of time, we give him thanks for that but it's not out of a sense of entitlement but it's just that God has added earthly blessings in addition to the fact that he has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.

So I trust that that's where your heart is as we turn to Psalm 129 to study here this evening, is that your affections are set on heaven, that your trust and you have repented of sin and that your trust is rested in Christ, and that you're looking forward to heaven as the ultimate fulfillment, the physical presence of Christ is what your pursuit of Christianity is designed around and not simply the blessings that you can get from God during this earthly life. The gift is not earthly blessings, the gift is Christ himself and he's whom we treasure, and to be with him in heaven will be the ultimate fulfillment of every reason for our existence.

So with that perspective as we just consider the cycle of themes here, we come to the first Psalm of the fourth triad, Psalms 129-131, and we expect to see something based on adversity and that's exactly what we find. Here in this Psalm it takes the form of prayers against God's enemies. As we start to come into the text, it's important for us to remember that the nation of Israel and the church of God, and even Jesus Christ himself, experienced opposition and difficulty during their years on earth, and we'll look at some examples of that throughout the time. Jesus said, "In this world you have tribulation but take heart, I have overcome the world." And that could certainly be said about the nation of Israel as well.

So in the Old Testament we read about Israel suffering affliction, we read about Christ suffering affliction in the gospels, we read about it in the lives of the apostles and in the subsequent history of the Christian church. If the Lord Jesus Christ was oppressed during his time on earth, we understand something very important, that being in the family of God, being under the Lordship of Christ means that we can expect times of affliction and difficulty. It just comes with the territory and we don't mind that, beloved, we don't resent that and we don't resist it. We embrace the fact that life comes with its sufferings at times because we follow a man of sorrows, we follow our Christ who was bruised and afflicted on our behalf. How is it that we would think and how is it that we would want and expect and even demand a life without affliction if Christ lived a life of affliction on our behalf in order to redeem us from our sins? As we loosen our grip of our affections on earth and embrace the person of Christ and love him for who he is, and love him for what he has done for us, then it is more important that we be conformed to his image, that we trust him as he leads us through life rather than to have these expectations of earthly ease that false teachers promise their followers and lead them ultimately into spiritual ruin. The fact of the matter is, is that life is often painful, sometimes it is completely unjust, sometimes we deal with life-long consequences of foolish things that we did in our youth and sins that we committed, and it's just to be expected that there's going to be affliction in this life.

Now I realize that preaching things like this isn't the way to pack out a house but it is the way to build up the people of God, and so I'm very glad that you're here with us today as we consider these things. Psalm 129 gives us perspective on how to respond to a life of affliction and how to think about the presence of enemies among the people of God. So let's look at the first section of the Psalm, and if you're taking notes you could title your first point this way: a look at past deliverance. A look at past deliverance.

As is so often the case, what the psalmist does in these opening verses is he looks to the past, he looks to history in order to draw strength for the present and into the future. He looks at what God has done in times gone by in order to have confidence and build up his faith for the times to come. And you see this in the opening two verses when he says this,

1 "Many times they have persecuted me from my youth up," Let Israel now say, 2 "Many times they have persecuted me from my youth up; Yet they have not prevailed against me.

One of the things that we notice right from the start about this Psalm is that this psalmist is speaking on behalf of the entire nation. He's speaking on behalf of Israel and he's leading corporately in worship when he says, "Let Israel now say." And he brings to mind their past affliction, their national history of affliction, and in order to bring emphasis to the theme, he repeats himself with the identical phrase in verse 1 and in verse 2. "Many times they have persecuted me from my youth up. Many times they have persecuted me from my youth up," there in verses 1 and 2.

So as you read the Old Testament, you find that the nation of Israel has a history of persecution and difficulty that repeats itself and goes into cycles and I want to take you back to a few passages just to remind you of that and to realize how heavy and dark and burdensome their affliction was. Think back to their youngest days as a nation in Egypt and even before they were really formally a nation and were just a people in the land of Egypt. Turn back to Exodus 1 with me and I just want to read a couple of narrative portions of text for you. Exodus 1, beginning in verse 8. Exodus 1:8 says,

8 Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. 9 He said to his people, "Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. 10 Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land." 11 So they appointed taskmasters over them to afflict them with hard labor. And they built for Pharaoh storage cities, Pithom and Raamses. 12 But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out, so that they were in dread of the sons of Israel. 13 The Egyptians compelled the sons of Israel to labor rigorously; 14 and they made their lives bitter with hard labor in mortar and bricks and at all kinds of labor in the field, all their labors which they rigorously imposed on them.

So you see that from the time after Joseph's death, you see that the nation came under affliction from their rulers in Egypt and life was bitter and it was difficult for them. As you continue on reading in the book of Exodus in chapter 5, you'll see this as well and in Exodus 5, we'll just pick up in verse 8, you'll remember the context as I read it. I said verse 8, I meant verse 4. I'm sorry.

4 ... the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why do you draw the people away from their work? Get back to your labors!" 5 Again Pharaoh said, "Look, the people of the land are now many, and you would have them cease from their labors!" 6 So the same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters over the people and their foremen, saying, 7 "You are no longer to give the people straw to make brick as previously... you shall impose on them; you are not to reduce any of it. Because they are lazy, therefore they cry out, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.' 9 Let the labor be heavier on the men, and let them work at it so that they will pay no attention to false words." 10 So the taskmasters of the people and

their foremen went out and spoke to the people, saying, "Thus says Pharaoh, 'I am not going to give you any straw. 11 You go and get straw for yourselves wherever you can find it, but none of your labor will be reduced.'" 12 So the people scattered through all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. 13 The taskmasters pressed them, saying, "Complete your work quota, your daily amount, just as when you had straw." 14 Moreover, the foremen of the sons of Israel, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten and were asked, "Why have you not completed your required amount either yesterday or today in making brick as previously?" 15 Then the foremen of the sons of Israel came and cried out to Pharaoh, saying, "Why do you deal this way with your servants? 16 There is no straw given to your servants, yet they keep saying to us, 'Make bricks!' And behold, your servants are being beaten; but it is the fault of your own people." 17 But [Pharaoh] said, "You are lazy, very lazy; therefore you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD.' 18 So go now and work; for you will be given no straw, yet you must deliver the quota of bricks."

So you see the affliction was physical as they were beaten and there was also this kind of mental torture as they were given tasks that were impossible to complete and yet demanded to do them all the same.

Now the people of God, the people of Israel spent 400 years under those kinds of harsh conditions and as you read on in the Old Testament, later as a nation they faced opposition from the surrounding people. Longer term and we're jumping through centuries here in just a sentence or two, eventually the nation of Assyria took the northern kingdom into captivity and a little while after that Babylon took the southern kingdom into captivity. So there's just this long history of debilitating adversity, of discouragement, of things going badly in an earthly sense, and when the psalmist – now we can go back to Psalm 129 just having kind of stimulated your biblical memory with those brief examples, going back to Psalm 129 now – you find the psalmist saying this as he talks about their persecution, he says there at the end of verse 1, "Let Israel now say," and what he is doing here is he's calling on the people of God to actually verbalize their experience of this persecution. It's almost like calling for a responsive reading, if you will, in that you have people verbalize things so as to reinforce it not only through their ears but by their tongue to reinforce the lesson that he is impressing upon them and there is something compelling, there is something compelling about the purpose of this confession. This confession is not designed to be a morbid reflection on the past that would weigh someone down, rather the remembrance of the persecution is designed to lead to this conclusion found at the end of verse 2, "Many times they have persecuted me from my youth up; Yet they have not prevailed against me." Israel was thriving and Israel was going up for worship in the midst of their remembrance of the affliction that they had been under.

So what the psalmist is doing here is very compelling and is going to have a very penetrating pastoral application for you and me in just a moment. He is not complaining

about the persecution, rather he is boasting about it. He says, "Look at our history. Look at how they tried to exterminate us again and again. Look at how different nations have tried to hold us down from Egypt and our opposition when we took possession of the Promised Land, to Assyria, to Babylon. You know, we've just had far greater earthly powers trying to crush us and exterminate us and yet look at where we're at. We're at another national festival, we are here in the presence of God to worship. God has enabled us to prevail despite all of the affliction that has marked our national history." That is compelling and it gives us something to think about and I just want to say this as softly and tenderly as I possibly can because, you know, at times many of you, if not most of you, are like me and we're prone to complain at the slightest of adversity, right? We grumble against our circumstances. We grumble when our health is troubled. We grumble when our finances aren't what they would have to be. We grumble about a grumpy boss. We grumble about a grump spouse. We complain about so many many different things and rather than, you know, rather than just dwelling on that, look at the contrast here where he looks at the national history and the difficulty of it and he says, "Yet I stand. By the grace of God we stand and we have not been prevailed against."

So in the midst of the affliction and the memory of the affliction, he's rising out of the ashes, as it were, to proclaim victory, to proclaim confidence in his God, and the bottom line is this, what he is saying here, talking about all of this affliction and he says, "Yet they have not prevailed against me," he's making a glorious statement to the people of God that says the enemies never had the final word. They never wrote the last chapter. We went through times of affliction but God brought us out of them continually. God repeatedly saved us in the midst of our affliction. Now those of you that have been Christians for any length of time have gone through different periods of adversity and sorrow and sometimes very deeply so and maybe you're in the midst of them now as we gather here together tonight. Let me encourage you to go back and look at the cycles of life as a Christian and remember past times and past afflictions that God has brought you through, times of deep grieving, times of struggling with temptation and sin, times of affliction and all of those things that mark our earthly life, and to look back on it with a sense of gratitude that you verbalize to Christ and you give thanks to him. "I remember this, this and this from the past. It seemed like it would be impossible and I staggered under the weight of the load, but I look back at it, dear Lord, and I see that those afflictions did not prevail against me. Here I am today in 2022 and I stand." And we give praise to God for his faithfulness in enabling us to persevere.

And let me just remind you that this is the promise of God for his people. What is it that the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 1:6? You don't need to turn there but Paul says, "I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." So that we look back at our affliction in the past and say, "It didn't prevail over me." You know, you can say to yourself, "I remember some of these darkest possible days where everything was black, it was like I was a blind man in a black room with black walls with no lights that had no door out, and yet what did the Lord do? He led me out anyway. He miraculously, so to speak, opened the wall and I walked out unscathed. I was stronger for the experience in the end of it." This is the Christian perspective, the biblical perspective that we want to develop.

So what the psalmist is saying is this in these opening two verses, he says, "God has kept us all this time and here we are gathered at the temple for worship," and it just adds to the spirit of gratitude and worship that rises up in the midst of it, and he's opening this Psalm by reminding his readers of God's faithfulness to them in their prior trials. And as you sit here this evening and as I stand here this evening, I call upon you to look back at your trials and to remember God's faithfulness to you in the past and let that shape your perspective on your present trials going forward. If God is unchanging, if God is immutable and he is, then the God who delivered you in the past is certainly going to deliver you again. He does not abandon his people and we need to stop acting like he somehow might because he won't. That is not what God does for his people. He causes us to persevere. He keeps us. He protects us and he leads us to victory in the end.

So he's calling on Israel to remember this. Now having stated that note of hope, he goes back and rehearses in more detail some of the earlier suffering and he does so with a couple of metaphors beginning in verse 3 where he says,

3 "The plowers plowed upon my back; They lengthened their furrows."

As I said, he draws upon an agricultural image here in order to illustrate his point, and in the days and in farming today, I'm not a farmer so, you know, I need to quickly tap into this and then tap out before I start talking about things I don't know anything about; you've got to be careful about that even as a preacher, you know, even your illustrations need to be accurate when you're preaching the word of God because everything you say needs to be truthful to the best of your ability and not use illustrations that, you know, that are not within your personal knowledge. Here the psalmist is drawing upon the realm of agricultural to illustrate his point and what he's saying is this, is that when farmers plow fields, the rows they leave behind show the work that they had done to the ground. So they plow the field and the rows that are behind the plow show that the work has been done; it's the mark of what had been done, the rows that were left in the field by the plowing. Here he's making a different kind of point. He's pointing to that imagery that shows the effect of something that was done in a field, but here in verse 3 the plows are not working in dirt and the rows were not made on earthly ground, rather the rows were made on human backs. He's describing the scars that were left behind by the masters' whips when they were beaten. And you know, if you've looked at any pictures from Civil War days or something like that and seen some of the horrific pictures of slaves that were beaten by wicked masters back in the day and there's just those horrific graphic images of raised scars on their back from the affliction that they suffered, that's kind of a picture of what he's doing here, reminding the nation in the present that their ancestors in the past, that that was their experience, that their own flesh and blood going generations back had experienced that kind of affliction. That's how severe it was.

So the raised welts on their back were like the raised rows in a planted field and he says there in verse 3, look at it again with me, he says, "The plowers plowed upon my back; They lengthened their furrows." And that word "lengthened," the verb "lengthened" there is indicating that it was a sustained and brutal suffering that had occurred and there's

almost a sense of, you know, it almost brings up a sense of indignation against the injustice of what their ancestors had gone through, you know, and just remembering with that vivid imagery this is what our forebears went through. And yet again even as he's prompting that difficult memory, the memory is ultimately not about a bitter recitation in order to make people angry and in order to stir up division in the present as past affliction from our history is used today. The psalmist is not writing here with divisive purposes in mind, rather he is writing to express a sense of victory once again. Remember we said that in this section he is looking at past deliverances so the memory here is not bitter but, again, it is triumphant as you look at verse 4 and you see this quite clearly there in verse 4 where he says,

4 The LORD is righteous; He has cut in two the cords of the wicked.

And what he's saying here when he says the Lord is righteous, what he means by that is that the Lord has kept his covenant with us. He has kept us as a people and he delivered us from our affliction and he pictures it as a cutting of the bonds or a breaking of the chains by which representative and emblematic of their past affliction and past servitude to other masters. God had cut the cords of their bondage and set his people free so that the past deliverance is framing his hope against current persecutors. He says, "Look at what happened in the past. Remember the affliction, remember the scars of our ancestors but remember at the same time what the outcome was. The outcome of that affliction was ultimately deliverance in the Lord's time, in the Lord's way, in the Lord's power, in the Lord's strength." You could read the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11 and see similar kinds of testimonies as the writer of Hebrews walks through the Old Testament and remembers those various triumphs by individuals of faith.

So this is just imprinted all over scripture that this is what God does for his people and so he's calling on us to remember that, and although the word "Selah" which is used much more frequently in the earlier Psalms, meaning "stop and pause and ponder this," that word is not here, it's good for us to stop and pause and ponder it. Consider the history of Israel. Consider the person of Christ and his sufferings. Consider Christ in the grave after his crucifixion and what happened? The Father delivered him. Christ raised himself out of the grave. Remember the affliction of the apostles and the persecution of the early church and the church triumphed and the church survived, and though the Roman emperors in the first three centuries tried to stamp out Christianity, to kill the Christians, to intimidate them into silence, to take their Scriptures and burn them so that their holy word was not available to instruct them, those emperors are dead and by most completely forgotten. The church today that they tried to extinguish thrives and continues on in an unbroken chain for the past 2,000 years and you and I are a part of the glorious triumph of God in the perseverance and the keeping of his church.

So and we just need to step back and remember that and it reminds me of what I said a number of weeks ago, is for you and I to remember as we gather together and we enjoy the fellowship of a local church, it's very important for us to remember that we're part of a bigger outworking of the eternal plan of God. It's not simply about us and we're not isolated and alone, God is working and advancing the gospel continually throughout



different parts of the world and in different places at different times promoting revival and we are a part of that. We are a part of that greater plan. The purposes of God far transcend us. The purposes of God are far greater than just what is happening at Truth Community Church and so we need to remember that and keep that in mind. And one of the things that I'm excited about, about our event on May 17<sup>th</sup> in our evening with John MacArthur, is that we are going to see that manifested personally and together with literally thousands of other people coming together, rallying around the word of God, and we are going to have a visible representation to our mind that what we are doing here is a part of a greater work of God, something bigger than ourselves. And as we remember that, as we keep that in mind, it gives us a sense the Lord is righteous, the Lord accomplishes his purposes and it helps us to persevere and not be overly focused on our individual problems which we're all tempted to do.

So the psalmist here has looked at past deliverance and what he has done is he's brought up that past deliverance in order to frame hope against current persecutors, and so our second section tonight we could call it a longing for future judgment. A longing for future judgment. There's a look at past deliverance and now in the second section there is this longing for future judgment, and what he does here is this, he turns to prayer and he turns to prayer against their current tormentors. Look at verse 5 now where he says,

5 May all who hate Zion Be put to shame and turned backward;

Zion, as we've said many times, is a poetic name for the city of Jerusalem. More than the physical city is in view. Zion, as it's described in the Old Testament, is the city of God. Zion, Jerusalem was the place where God uniquely made his presence known. And so understand this, beloved, as we're studying Scripture tonight, this is a very critical point: to hate Zion, to hate Jerusalem was to hate God himself. It wasn't simply a horizontal matter of hating Zion, and it wasn't simply a horizontal concern that the psalmist here was describing, to hate Zion was to hate God himself because Zion was representative of God because this is where God manifested his presence. It was the center of national worship. And so when the psalmist here is talking about the persecutors, understand that he is not expressing personal vindictiveness because of a personal wrong that he suffered at the hands of someone else. His picture is far greater and this is usually true of all of the imprecatory Psalms, the concern is far greater than what we usually have when we are upset because someone has offended us. As you read the imprecatory Psalms in Scripture, you're finding expressions about concern for the purpose and person of God himself.

So that is critical for understanding the rest of this Psalm. He is not praying against personal enemies. He invokes Zion to show that as he speaks he is upholding the glory of God against God's enemies and that is crucial for keeping the right perspective on that, on what he says. And so what he's doing in what follows here when he says this in verse 5, he says, "May all who hate Zion," have this outcome, "May they be put to shame and turned backward." What he's saying is this, his prayer is that God would frustrate his enemies' plans so that those plans would not succeed. He is burdened with the purpose of God. He is burdened with the kingdom of God. And if we were more godly and more

biblical in our heart and perspective on life, we would instantly understand that, we would know immediately why he was saying this without injecting our own sinful desires for revenge or vengeance into a reading of the Psalm. And it's easy to demonstrate that, that this should be our perspective as well.

Look over at Matthew 6 with me. Matthew 6, and we turn here often, I don't mind that, you know, some of my earliest teaching in my ministry, my most sustained exposition started in the Sermon on the Mount and it's been formative and it's always rattling around in my mind and day-by-day I come back to the Sermon on the Mount. So we go here, you know, in part for that reason but I want to show you that the psalmist was preoccupied with kingdom concerns as he spoke about Zion and Zion being hated. What I'm saying now and what I'm trying to transition you to is that for a growing, maturing Christian who is being sanctified, the purposes of God are at the center of our concerns in prayer and Jesus instructed us to pray in exactly that manner when he said in verse 9, "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. 'Your kingdom come.'" Before he makes any prayers, he teaches us that before we express our concerns about our physical needs or even about our own spiritual needs, Jesus teaches us to have a preeminent priority about the purposes of God when we pray. "Your kingdom come. May Your kingdom be advanced through the advance of the gospel. May it be advanced evangelistically," in other words, "and also may Your kingdom be advanced eschatologically," and there's a sense of praying, "Lord, may Your kingdom come. May Christ come back. Maranatha. Let the Lord come back." So that there is this preoccupation in the growing believing heart with the purposes of God and prayer is directed to his glory to advance his purposes rather than simply being a matter of what my daily struggle is and asking for grace to get me through today.

It's fine to pray that way and we express our dependence by asking God for grace day-by-day, I get that. I'm not denying that and telling you not to pray that way, what I'm saying is that if we are going to grow in Christ, that our purposes in prayer grow beyond just what affects us on a day-to-day basis. We are concerned with the kingdom of God. We are concerned with the word of God. We are concerned with the advance of his kingdom. We are concerned with the proclamation of his word rather than simply having a social gathering where we talk with each other about how our past week went. There is a higher purpose to the existence of the people of God. God has called us out of the world in order to be set apart for him and his purposes, and if God has delivered you from sin, if God has caused you to be born again, if you have new life in your heart, then your concerns have changed from the earth to the kingdom and it should be reflected increasingly in what it is that you desire and what you seek from God. We seek his glory; whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, may it all be done to the glory of God.

That's kind of convicting, isn't it? But there's something so fundamental at stake here and I think to flip this switch in your heart, to flip this switch in your mind, it opens up a door to unlimited spiritual growth in your mind and in your heart and in the remainder of the years that the Lord gives to you. God, we should not view God as an instrument by which our purposes are obtained, but rather we view ourselves as instruments by which the purposes of God are obtained. God does not exist to fulfill my will. I exist to fulfill his

will. "Your will be done," Jesus said, you know, and I remember in times past, I don't run into this so much, you know, here at Truth Community Church which I'm grateful for but, you know, I can remember so many times in my early Christian life where people would say something that I think is utterly ridiculous. They say, "You know, I just don't know what the solution to this problem is, and so I'm trying to figure out what the solution should be so that I can ask God to do it." That's an entirely wrong way to think. That is turning everything about being a Christian on its head, you know, as if God needed our advice on what the solution should be and we figure it out apart from him and then say, "O God, help this come to pass." That's ridiculous. Why is it that we don't just adopt the simplicity of the way the Lord taught us to pray? And if we are perplexed, if we don't know what the way forward is, if we have a problem that we can't solve, why is it that we just don't simply go to the Lord and simply say, "Lord, I have no idea what the solution is but I know exactly what to pray, Your will be done. Do what You want in this situation. I submit to Your will. I desire only the accomplishment of Your purposes whether that's outcome A or outcome B or disaster C. Lord, I just ask You to do Your will. I submit to You. I'm only an instrument." I'm only an instrument, as the songwriter Philip Bliss said. "Only an instrument, ready His praises to sound at his will. Willing if He should not require me, in silence to wait on Him still." "God, I'm just an instrument here. I just want Your will to be done. So whatever the solution is to this problem, I submit to You and I trust You for what You're going to do. You're the Deliverer of Your people. I trust You. I don't need the outcome. It's enough for me to know who You are, to know that Christ loves me, set His love upon me, saved me from my sins at the cross, that the Spirit indwells me and the ultimate outcome is glory for me. That's enough, Lord. That's enough for me to be content. I yield this to You and I trust You for the outcome."

Do you know what? That makes living the Christian life a whole lot easier and just living in the purity and the simplicity of that devotion to Christ, as a little child holds his mother's hand as she leads him through a crowd, perfectly safe, content, not a worry in the hands because his mom has his hand. Well, multiply that by infinity and that's a picture of you walking through this world with your heavenly Father. It can't go wrong in the end. It can't. It can't because our God is gracious, he's gracious to his people, he keeps us and he's a deliverer of his people. Because we love him and magnify his name for the greatness of his grace, we're more concerned about the advance of his purpose than what happens in our own lives, at least that's the way it should be.

So what's happening here as you go back to verse 5 with me, "May they all be put to shame and turned backward," he's asking God to frustrate their plans so that they would not succeed, and you can identify three themes in this section of the prayer. As he's longing for future judgment, you can identify three distinct themes that mark his prayer going forward in the rest of this Psalm. First of all, he prays that God would bring dishonor upon his enemies, that he would bring shame upon them. You see it there in verse 5, "May all who hate Zion Be put to shame and turned backward." "God, look upon Your enemies and bring disgrace upon them. Bring disgrace upon them. Let them turn back in retreat and defeat in the light of the way that you have ordered victory."

So probably in an earthly sense what he's picturing right now in the immediate context is he's asking God to prevent a military victory by Israel's enemies, and the imagery certainly fits with that kind of matter. So he's saying, "Lord, instead of letting them prevail over us, let them know the embarrassment of defeat instead. Let them turn back and be ashamed for rising up against You and Your people." Secondly, in similar manner, he prays that God would hinder all of their success. He prays that God would hinder all of their success. Look at verses 6 and 7 with me where he says,

6 Let them be like grass upon the housetops, Which withers before it  
grows up; 7 With which the reaper does not fill his hand, Or the binder of  
sheaves his bosom;

Now this is kind of, sounds like a strange analogy to us when we're used to metal roofs or shingles or things like that. Why would you be talking about grass on the housetop? Well, you know, in those days houses had dirt roofs where temporary grass would grow. The soil was shallow. There wasn't any irrigation up there and so any grass that would appear would quickly shrivel and die, and when that happened, there wasn't enough residue left to fill anything in your hand. And this would have been a common picture in the nation, "Yeah, I know exactly what he's talking about. You know, the grass rises up, it withers, it dies, it blows away just like chaff in the wind. He says he's talking about leave them with nothing."

So in other words, what he is doing is he's using that picture to ask God for this to the glory of God's own name, he's saying, "God, turn Your enemies back so completely that there is no remnant of their presence to be found. God, they're rising up against You. Here we are, we're a nation, we're a people that love Your glory and for the sake of Your own glory, turn them back. Rout them so that there is no trace of them left." And you know, that's a little bit of a foreshadowing of what's going to happen at the end of the age when God casts his enemies into hell, when Satan himself is ultimately cast into the pit for eternal destruction. God will ultimately do exactly this in a cosmic eternal sense to his enemies, there will be no trace of them left. And those of you that are not Christians here today, this is what's ahead for you in your hardness of heart, your unrepentant spirit, your dismissal of the things of God, your coldhearted rejection of Christ. This is what's ahead for you. You are, as it stands right now, an enemy of God and what God does with his enemies is he extinguishes them, he evaporates them, in a sense, so that there is no memory of them among the people of God, but the ultimate destination is one of complete destruction but it's an eternal destruction in hell, not an annihilation but an ongoing, eternal, conscious punishment for being an enemy of God. God doesn't mess around. Scripture is not bluffing when it speaks this way and so I warn you again, I plead with you to contemplate the ultimate outcome of the hardness of your heart because there will be a crushing defeat at the hands of an omnipotent holy God who will vindicate his name against all of his enemies.

With that said, the fact that, you know, you're here and breathing in that condition means that there is still an offer of grace that is being made to you. The wonder of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the wonder of the mercy of God is that even to his enemies, number 1, he

sends the rain the sun upon them, on the righteous and unrighteous alike. He shows grace even to his enemies, but in the gospel of Jesus Christ there is a promise of mercy to his enemies so that in Romans 5:8, the Apostle Paul could say this,

8 ... God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

So there's this magnificent fork in the road laid before the enemies of God. You can persist in your hardness of heart and end up in utter destruction, or you can turn to Christ and find mercy that's offered to sinners just like you.

So we see this. Here in this Psalm, though, he is praying for the destruction of God's enemies and when he ends the Psalm, he is praying that God would refuse all blessing to them. Look at verse 8. He says,

8 Nor do those who pass by say, "The blessing of the LORD be upon you;  
We bless you in the name of the LORD."

And this we won't take the time to turn there because I've gone long already, this is an echo of the second chapter of the book of Ruth where Boaz's servant's in the field spoke blessing to him as he greeted them during the workday. What the psalmist is saying here is, "God, let no such blessing be extended to Your enemies." And to us, you know, we who are so accustomed to grace, for us that may sound harsh to modern ears but in the words of James Montgomery Boice, whom I quote all the time and that's okay because all of his books are good, it may sound harsh to our modern ears but it shouldn't sound harsh to us as believers. Boice insightfully asks this question, "Can it be wrong for us to pray that the efforts of evil persons might be so unsuccessful that in the end there is nothing left of their schemes? To bless evil would be a betrayal of righteousness and an offense to God." When I taught on the imprecatory Psalms a few years ago, I said this: the problem, the problem is not that the Bible has imprecatory Psalms in it, the real problem is that we don't have more of the imprecatory Psalms in us because the imprecatory Psalms are marked by a zeal for the glory of God and a hatred of everything that is opposed to him. And it's just our flabby spiritual condition that doesn't make us rise up at the continual offenses that we see all around us against the holiness of God.

So the psalmist is filled with this concern for the glory of God and he's praying that God would deal with his enemies in a way that would utterly vindicate his glory and bring his enemies so that they are of no effect, and he's confident that God will do that. How can he be so confident? Well, here's where we put the first and second sections of the Psalm together. In the first part he said, "Israel, remember your affliction and remember how God delivered us. We're faced with a new fresh challenge today. In light of how God has delivered us in the past, let us pray with certainty and confidence of how He is going to

deliver us again." So his memory of past deliverance reminds him of the faithfulness of God and that motivates him to pray that that same faithfulness would motivate God to act on behalf of his people once again to vindicate the glory of his great name.

Now just a few thoughts here as we close. Human opposition, the human opposition to the church of God and the people of God is a visible sign of an invisible opposition. We should never let it be too far from our minds that our battle, our struggle is not with flesh and blood but against the powers and against the principalities in Ephesians 6:2. There is an entire realm, an entire dimension of this battle that we cannot see with our eyes, we know by faith because it's revealed to us in the word of God, and so we have to look beyond the human instruments to see the demonic opposition that is at work against the people of God. And as we do, as I said earlier so I won't dwell on it too much here, though I should, to see the fullness of the hostility, beloved, we should look at the course of the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Isaiah 53:5, let's turn there for just a moment, turning after the Psalms. Isaiah 53:5 we read this,

5 ... He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.

Christ, the Lord Jesus Christ, the lovely, sinless, gracious Lord of all was literally scourged by his enemies, you can read about it in John 19, and their blood-lust at the time was not satisfied until they had crucified him so that we see that the enemies of God are not just opposed to the people of God, they are opposed to God himself. When they had God in their hands, they murdered him. That is how deep the hostility and wickedness of the heart of man is, and yet as we remember our Lord Jesus Christ, as we remember that at that very lowest hour when in a human sense he was most degraded, in a divine sense there was, you know, it was a matter where his glory was revealed, but even at that lowest hour his enemies had not prevailed over him. They took him down, they took his lifeless body down and put him in the grave, as it were, but God raised Christ from the dead, gave victory over sin, death and hell and the worst enemies of God on earth, so that death has no hold over Christ, no hold over those that are in him, and Christ through the ultimate opposition proved his greatest victory. God took what his enemies meant for evil and turned it for good and, beloved, in the midst of your trials even today, understand that the purpose of God is to take that trial and turn it into a spiritual victory that has sanctified you and more conformed you to the image of Christ and that gives you the grace and the hope that you need to persevere through it. The victory of Christ over death means that your victory is assured as well. Jesus said in John 16:33, "In the world you have tribulation but take courage: I've overcome the world."

Let's pray together.

*Father, we pray that You would vindicate Your glory against those that seek to deny it, and as we pray that, Father, we pray also that You would have mercy on Your enemies. At one time we were all enemies of God, Lord, that's the truth of the matter. We were born into this world with sinful, wicked, rebellious hearts, without God and without hope*

*in the world but, God, being rich in mercy, caused us to be born again. You made us alive together in Christ and showed mercy on us and by Your power, Your love, Your mercy, You turned us by Your monergistic power, You turned us from an enemy into a friend of God. You took us out of the realm of Your judgment and into the realm of Your grace, out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of Your beloved Son. You did that, Father, You were merciful to us when we were Your enemies. Well, Father, look upon Your enemies in this room and with all of our hearts, Father, we pray that You would have mercy on them just like You did on us. And for those of us who are burdened by loved ones who are still obviously living in rebellion against You and marking by their lives that they are enemies of God, Father, we ask You to have mercy on them. Yes, vindicate Your glory but, Father, it would be so much more to the glory of Your grace if You would vindicate Your glory by grace upon our loved ones who are currently living as Your enemies. So we ask for that. We ask only, Father, for the same grace that You've given to us to be shown upon them. So Father, with our hearts full of the promises of Your provision, our hearts full with the selfless love of our Lord Jesus Christ, we commit all of these things to You in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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