

Sacred practice of stick-ability

Psalm 129

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Psalm 129

A song of ascents.

¹ They have greatly oppressed me from my youth—let Israel say—

² they have greatly oppressed me from my youth, but they have not gained the victory over me.

³ Plowmen have plowed my back and made their furrows long.

⁴ But the LORD is righteous; he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked.

⁵ May all who hate Zion be turned back in shame.

⁶ May they be like grass on the roof, which withers before it can grow; ⁷ with it the reaper cannot fill his hands, nor the one who gathers fill his arms.

⁸ May those who pass by not say, "The blessing of the LORD be upon you; we bless you in the name of the LORD."

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I had a go at updating this psalm into words that are as near as I can make them to their equivalent in our Kiwi context.

So if we were to sing this Kiwi version of Psalm 129 as a Sunday morning worship song, it might go something like this:

The worship leader sings the first line:

"They've been sticking it to me since I was a kid - let all us Kiwis say-"

[Then everyone joins in with the next part]

"They've had me under their thumb ever since I started as a nation, yet they haven't gotten the better of me yet."

*They whipped my back till it was bleeding,
like a farmer plowing a paddock ready for planting.*

But the LORD is good, he disconnected the plow from the tractor and set me free, now I don't have to suffer like that anymore!

*May all the Christian bashers hang their heads in shame!
May they be like a foolhardy orchardist trying to grow
kiwifruit beside the Desert Road, where it'll wither for sure,
and the picking gang'll never be able to fill their baskets with
any fruit!*

*May those who drive by not slow down to say,
"Gidday mate how's it going, or God bless you!"*

Imagine Amy introducing *that* as our worship song for us to sing this morning!

We wouldn't tolerate it would we?

How could we possibly worship God with words like that!

Yet I reckon that's a *pretty close equivalent* to what the words would've meant to an *Israelite farmer* singing *Psalm 129* in worship as he trekked from his farm in rural Israel to the temple in Jerusalem!

You see *many of the Psalms* they worshipped God with *back then* differ from ours *not only in the music* they were sung to, but *also* in the *content* of what they sang about.

The words of which quite often express *exactly how they were feeling to God*, how *ticked off* they were about their present circumstances, telling God in no uncertain terms *what they thought He should do about it!*

Psalm 129 is a very good example of one of these *raw, earthy, brutally honest* worship songs they sang back then.

The songs we worship God with *these days*, in comparison, describe *our relationship with God* and how he *puts everything just right for us*, in *much sweeter, nicer terms*, than what they used *back then!*

Which is why it's *good for us* to read Psalms *like this one* every so often, so that its *uncomfortable, shocking words* may *startle us out of our comfortable ways* in which we *worship God*.

Psalm 129 is *anything but a nice sweet worship psalm!* When it's sung it's meant to *shock the worshipper into remembering the sacred practice of spiritual stick-ability*, because *spiritual stick-ability* is what *wins out in the end*, *freeing us from tyrants*, and *turning our angry cursing around*.

So let's let the *disturbing words and shocking imagery* of Psalm 129 *startle us* worshippers into realising that *spiritual stick-ability* is just as essential *for us today* as it ever was for the Hebrew pilgrims *back then!*

Spiritual stick-ability wins out in the end

2



¹ They have greatly oppressed me from my youth—let Israel say—

² they have greatly oppressed me from my youth,
but they have not gained the victory over me.

³ Plowmen have plowed my back and made their furrows long.

One of the things we're *not* used to doing in our worship, which *this psalm does*, is *singing about our nation* in *first person*.

Psalm 129 begins with the *priest singing the first line* and then inviting the worshipers to *repeat after me* when he says "*let Israel say—*" which was their queue to repeat what the priest had just sung,

"they have greatly oppressed me from my youth,"

Then they continue singing the song,

"but they have not gained the victory over me."

" Plowmen have plowed my back and made their furrows long."

The *farming imagery* they were singing about is a *graphic description* of the *terrible suffering* that Israel had been through ever since their beginning as a nation:

slavery in Egypt, invasion of foreign armies, a long forced march into exile, years of misery in Babylon.

The *Hebrew farmers* likened these horrific events to the *back of their nation being plowed with long deep furrows*, like the way *the whips* of their former *slave masters* had *cut open* their backs.

Yet *here they were now*, on their way to the *temple in Jerusalem* to worship the Lord!

Their enemies had *not gained the victory over them after all!*

Because the Israelites *spiritual stick-ability* had *won out in the end!*

As the *Hebrew pilgrims* sang these *first three lines* of the psalm together, they *weren't just remembering the hardships* they'd had to endure in *their life-time*, they were *remembering right back over everything they'd had to endure* at the hands of their oppressors ever since Israel first began.

Tough experiences through which they'd learned the difficult lesson that *spiritual stick-ability always wins out in the end!*

It's actually quite hard for *Pakeha Christians* like *me* and for most of *you*, to comprehend the *depth of feeling* these words convey because we're *so far removed* from the circumstances through which the *nation of Israel was forged*.

We've hardly had to *suffer anything much* over our nation's *youthful history*, compared to what the Israelites have suffered over the past 4,000 years!

Maori would have a *much better appreciation* of Psalm 129 because of what *they've been through* over the past 177 years since our *youthful nation began*.

On the outskirts of *Te Puke* beside the *Raparapahoe* stream lies the village of *Manueka*, the home of the *Waitaha* people, who've lived in this region ever since their ancestor *Hei* migrated from *Hawaiki* on *Te Arawa waka*, claiming the *mana* of the land for his son *Waitaha*.

Rangatira Hakaraia once lived here. Till he was captured by raiding *Nga Puhi* who took him north where he became a Christian after coming into contact with the missionaries there.

When *Nga Puhi* released their slaves, *Hakaraia* returned to his people now living on the northern side of *Lake Rotorua* and began working with the church missionaries stationed there.

In 1844, *Hakaraia* and some of his people, moved back to *Te Puke* where they transformed the old pa site which they called *Kenana* (Canaan).

However, when *Treaty and land tensions* escalated into the *Tauranga and Waikato* land battles, *Hakaraia* sided with the *Kingitanga movement* and fought to defend their land.

Resulting in *Waitahi iwi* being labeled as 'rebels' and consequently losing all their lands.

All except for *1000 acres* on the outskirts of *Te Puke* beside the *Raparapahoe* stream.

Which is *how it came to be named- Manueka* which means *1000 acres*, because *that's all* that was set aside for *Waitaha* to live on after the Crown *dispossessed them of their land* after the land war.

The name *Manueka* is actually a *protest* against the *thousands of acres* taken from them by the crown!

Although the *recent Treaty settlement and apology* by the crown has gone a *long way to appeasing and reconciling* their suffering, the *memory of how the back of their land was taken and plowed by farmers, lives on*.

Hence *Waitaha* Maori can *identify very well* with the kind of suffering described in Psalm 129.

Yet for *anyone* who has suffered at the hands of *any kind of oppressor*, whether in history past or in *our life time*, Psalm 129 sings that *spiritual stick-ability wins out in the end!*

Spiritual stick-ability frees us from tyrants

3

Spiritual stick-ability wins out in the end

Psalm 129



"But the LORD is righteous; he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked."

Psalm 129 also explains *why* spiritual stick-ability *wins out* in the end by *freeing us from our tyrants*.

"But the LORD is righteous; he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked."

Eugene Peterson unpacks the imagery of this verse like this:

Picture *Israel*, the person of faith, *lying stretched out prone*. The enemies *hitch up their oxen and plows* and begin *cutting long furrows* in the back of Israel. Long gashes cut into the skin and flesh, back and forth, systematically, *like a farmer plowing a field*.

But then *suddenly* the realisation that there was *no more hurting!* The oxen were still tramping back and forth, the plowmen were still shouting their commands, *but the plows were not working* because God had *cut them loose from the oxen!*

The wicked plowmen are *comic figures*, as they *carry on plowing away oblivious* to the fact that they've *left their plows behind!* Because *the Lord has cut Israel free* from the cords of their *wicked enemy!*

They'd been *set free* from their *wicked tyrants*, because *God* in his goodness & righteousness *sticks by his people!*

The *imagery* of how *God sticks by us* through the hardship described in Psalm 129, *reminds me* of the *reassuring words* the *Apostle Paul wrote* after *enduring* much hardship before writing Romans 8:35-37.

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ...³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loves us.

You see it's not so much **our spiritual stickability to God** that *frees us from tyrants*, but **God's stickability to us**, that releases us from the cords of the wicked.

Take for instance the *traumatic situation* experienced by *Syrian Christian refugees* such as:

Elie, who recalls how, "My two children, my wife and I fled Syria on a bloody day, in November 2014, heading to Lebanon to find a shelter protecting my family. It was very hard to get out of the city as the armed [rebels] were all over, preventing anyone from leaving especially by car. Finally, we got to Lebanon and spent the night at my friend's rented unit, tried to sleep and forget the terrible situation we were in."

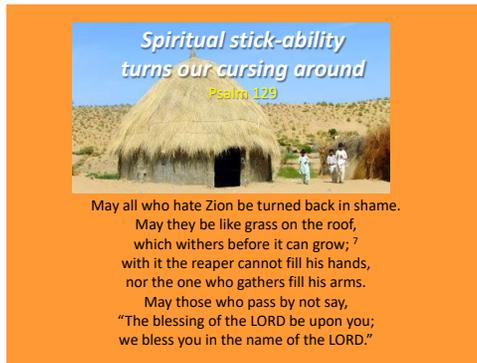
Elie continues, "I started doing labour work to earn our living and suffered the costly living in Lebanon. We got the Australian visa in April 2016 after a long waiting and suffering. The problem was how to afford our flight tickets. We had been praying to God day and night until the big miracle happened and *Barnabas Fund* offered the crucial help, they booked the tickets and gave us the opportunity to get to Australia and have a good start and a safe life far from rockets, bombs and fears."

Elie concludes, "We are currently living a normal life in Australia, managing all our affairs, and planning for a bright, lovely future for our kids. May the Lord bless *Barnabas Fund* and all their supporters for helping us like this."

God's stick-ability frees his people from *evil tyrants* such as this, and *those of us* in more comfortable circumstances can participate with *God's releasing, resettling work* for the Christian refugees caught in the *cross-fire of the Syrian civil war*. We can do so by *praying for them* (like we did this morning) and by *donating* to organisations such as the *Barnabas Fund*.

Spiritual stick-ability turns our cursing around

4



Remember how I said the psalms they worshipped God with back then were often *down to earth*, expressing exactly *how they felt*, and how *ticked off they were about their circumstances*, even telling God *what they thought He should do about it?*

Well this is *especially so* in the *closing lines of Psalm 129* in which the worshippers *angrily curse their enemies*, that they may be *turned back in shame*, *wither like roof-top grass*, and *miss out on the customary harvest time blessings because their crops had failed!*

We *can't excuse* their choice of words on the grounds that they *weren't yet Christians* who *hadn't yet heard* Jesus's teaching about *loving your enemies*, because actually *they had!*

In *Leviticus 19:17-18* they would've heard it read that

"You shall *not* hate your brother in your heart...You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself"

And from *Exodus 23:4-5*

"If you meet your enemy's ox or his ass going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the ass of one who hates you lying under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it, you shall help him lift it up."

And *Proverbs 25:21*

"If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing so, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you."

When Jesus taught,

"Love your enemies" he added *nothing new* to what the Israelite worshipers *had heard before!*

So what was going on with these angry curses the Hebrew worshipers were singing to the Lord?

They were doing what Paul would teach to the Roman Christians centuries later about their attitude and actions toward their enemies.

Quoting from *Deuteronomy 32:35*, Paul wrote:

"Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord. ...[So] do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good!"

This is *what's going on* when the Hebrew pilgrims sang these *angry cursing* lines of *Psalm 129*:

⁵ May all who hate Zion be turned back in shame.

⁶ May they be like grass on the roof, which withers before it can grow; ⁷ with it the reaper cannot fill his hands, nor the one who gathers fill his arms.

⁸ May those who pass by *not* say, "The blessing of the LORD be upon you; we bless you in the name of the LORD."

They were venting their anger *to God*, and thereby making room for *God to act* as he sees fit, and in doing so they are *making room for God to work upon their angry attitude* toward their enemies so that they *might not be overcome by evil*, but instead *overcome evil with good!*

I was reminded *how hard this is to do* when the evil that's been committed is *truly evil*.

The book *Unbroken*, tells the *incredible true story* of *Louis Zamperini*, a *US B24 bombardier* who was taken captive as a Japanese prisoner of war where he suffered terrible physical and psychological abuse at the hands of a Japanese prison officer they called "*The Bird*."
(Some of you may have read the book or seen the movie).

But the most *incredible thing* about this true story, is *not how Louis Zamperini* managed to *survive several weeks at sea* on a life raft, or the *terrible conditions and brutal treatment* as a prisoner of war, but how he *eventually was able to forgive his enemy* whom he'd hated for years after his return to America!

But after *committing his life to Jesus* at a *Billy Graham crusade*, Louis Zamperini was able to finally *forgive his enemy* for what he'd done to him.

Laura Hillenbrand, the author of *Unbroken* wrote in a magazine article,

"Anger is a justifiable and understandable reaction to being wronged, and as the soul's first effort to reassert its worth and power, it may initially be healing. But in time, anger becomes corrosive. To live in bitterness is to be chained to the person who wounded you, your emotions and actions arising not independently, but in reaction to your abuser. Louie became so obsessed with vengeance that his life was consumed by the quest for it. In bitterness he was as much a captive as he'd been when barbed wire had surrounded him."

Louis Zamperini discovered the *incredible miracle* that through spiritual stick-ability *God takes our angry curses for our enemy and turns it around into the blessing of forgiveness for them!*

Because as psalm 129 teaches us worshippers with its shocking words,
spiritual stick-ability wins out in the end,

freeing us from tyrants, and turning our curses into blessings!