

Psalms of Ascent

Message 6b

V. Many a Time have They Afflicted Me, Yet They have Not Prevailed Against Me – Being Enlarged by the Cross

Psalm 129: ¹ “Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth,” Let Israel now say— ² “Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth; Yet they have not prevailed against me. ³ The plowers plowed on my back; They made their furrows long.” ⁴ The LORD is righteous; He has cut in pieces the cords of the wicked. ⁵ Let all those who hate Zion Be put to shame and turned back. ⁶ Let them be as the grass on the housetops, Which withers before it grows up, ⁷ With which the reaper does not fill his hand, Nor he who binds sheaves, his arms. ⁸ Neither let those who pass by them say, “The blessing of the LORD be upon you; We bless you in the name of the LORD!”

Monday

“Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth,” Let Israel now say— “Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth; Yet they have not prevailed against me.” (Psa. 129:1-2).

A. The experience of Israel – to be the testimony of God, to experience sufferings for life

1. The sufferings for life:
 - a. “‘Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth,’ Let Israel now say—‘Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth; Yet they have not prevailed against me.’” This matches the experience of Jacob. Jacob indeed experienced many sufferings from his youth.
 - b. The psalmist also testified his experience; he testified that afflictions were with him from his youth. His life was a life of sufferings, a life of dealing, and a life of being broken. However, he did not go through the sufferings by himself

since he had the church life. He experienced the sufferings for the testimony of God. This is why he said, “Let Israel now say.”

- c. In verse 2: “Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth; Yet they have not prevailed against me.” This verse repeats the experience in verse 1. He was saying “I have many years of experiences of afflictions. When I consider these sufferings, I can testify that God always provides a way out. Outwardly it looks like I am beaten; actually, I overcome the sufferings. I can testify that the enemy has not prevailed against me; I am still here in the church standing for the testimony of God.”

Psalm 129 is the testimony of one who followed the Lord his entire life. This is his testimony of how the Lord used situations to work on him and break him causing him to go through various kinds of sufferings. God was transforming him from being someone like Jacob who was grasping what belonged to others to Israel. Israel represents someone mature in life who can also reign in life. So here it says, “‘Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth,’ Let Israel now say—‘Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth; Yet they have not prevailed against me’” (vv. 1-2). Because of all these afflictions and sufferings, he was transformed and mature in the end. Genesis shows us that Jacob eventually became Israel, the prince of God who was mature in life. Joseph represents the reigning aspect of Israel. Today we Christians also need to go through the same thing. If you want to reach maturity to become a blessing to the church, filled with life to supply others, to have wine and ointment to supply others, the process must be like this. Psalm 129 testifies of the experience of the entire life of one like this. That someone can reach this level of maturity is not because of him; it is God’s mercy. It is God’s work in us by causing all kinds of things to come upon us so that we experience many afflictions and difficulties.

Tuesday

“The plowers plowed on my back; They made their furrows long.”
(Psa. 129:3).

Now Isaac pleaded with the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived. But the children struggled together within her; and she said, “If all is well, why am I like this?” So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her: “Two nations are in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger.” (Gen. 25:21-23).

2. Jacob became Israel through dealing.
 - a. God allows all circumstances to come upon you because God wants to make you an Israel. Your failures become your victories. We all should learn this lesson before God. A true Israel can be made in Him.
 - b. Our God has saved us. He has put a heart inside of us to desire spiritual things; it gives us a purpose to gain the grace of God. All of these desires are precious before God, and they can really please our God. However, it is pitiful that we are indeed corrupted. Even though we seek spiritual grace and blessings, we seek them for ourselves; this self is our Jacob.
 - c. So God comes to train us, to deal with us, to remove Jacob inside of us, in order for us to become an Israel. Everything that comes from the self and flesh must be dealt with; everything that comes from Christ and God must be strengthened within us, in order for us to be transformed from Jacob to Israel.

Psalm 129:3 explains in detail how the psalmist was afflicted: “The plowers plowed on my back; They made their furrows long.” Can you imagine what it would be like for someone to be plowing on your back. This means that your back is completely cut open by someone going back and forth. This means that to reach the stage of maturity is not a simple thing. The psalmist had paid the price and

experienced many sufferings. God had been working on him a lot. When you are plowing a field, it is not a random process. To be plowed is to be made ready for the seed to be sown into you. God must plow us so that the seed of life can be sown into us. The process of being plowed is not easy to go through; you will suffer in pain.

Jacob was fighting with his brother even in the womb. Jacob somehow knew that he needed to fight for the birthright but in God's sovereign arrangement, he was born second. Then he used every strategy he could to try to gain the birthright. This is why he was always in the tent planning how to gain the birthright; finally he found a way. Whenever his brother went out to hunt, he was famished when he came back. So Jacob prepared a bowl of red bean soup that his brother liked. Yesterday, it didn't work, so today he would try again. Then one day the opportunity came. Esau came back extremely tired, hungry and thirsty, so Jacob brought out his red bean soup. Esau said, "Can I have some of the soup?" Jacob said, "No problem, but first you must give me your birthright." Even that process was an affliction to Jacob; he must have waited a long time for the right opportunity. It was not an accident that he had something ready when the opportunity came. When Jacob left his father's house to go to Laban's house, he was already 70 years old. That means he waited for a long time; in the end he gained the birthright.

Wednesday

He sent a man before them—Joseph—who was sold as a slave. They hurt his feet with fetters, He was laid in irons. Until the time that his word came to pass, The word of the Lord tested him. (Psa. 105:17-19).

B. The plowers plowed

1. Next, the psalmist used a metaphor, saying, "The plowers plowed on my back; They made their furrows long." When an ox moves forward, the plow plows through the soil, the soil turns over, and the things underneath the soil are exposed. Israel was saying, "They afflicted me from my youth. The plowers plowed on my back; they broke my skin; the blood came out and my flesh was

exposed; the taste was bitter.”

2. Sometimes, when people are against you, you feel the bitter taste. Esau said, “I will kill you”; Laban said, “I will not let you go.” At that time, inside Jacob’s spirit, it was very painful as the plowers plowed upon him. Joseph also suffered as the Bible says, “They hurt his feet with fetters, He was laid in irons” (Psa. 105:18). When Joseph’s brothers wanted to sell him, he begged for mercy (Gen. 42:21) and his sufferings were like plowers plowing upon his back. What a painful thing it is!
3. When a farmer uses plows for plowing, his purpose is to sow. A wise farmer cannot spare the soil; he must plow it. The deeper and longer he plows, the more and deeper he can sow his seeds and he will have a golden harvest. What a glorious thing it is!

Even when it was time to give the blessing according to the birthright, Jacob’s father did not acknowledge that he should get the birthright. His mother did but his father did not. So when the time came for the blessing, his father told Esau to go out to hunt to prepare game according to his taste so that he could give the blessing of the birthright to Esau. Jacob had run out of options. If his father did not want to give him the birthright, what could he do? Then his mother came to help him because God had promised his mother that her older son would serve the younger son. Perhaps she had not fellowshiped this with her husband, so the father still determined to bless Esau. Or else, it could have been that Isaac didn’t care what his wife said. He still wanted to bless Esau because he always prepared the game that Isaac liked. So Rebecca helped her son to deceive Isaac to gain the birthright.

Then God immediately sent Jacob out to become a wanderer. He had to leave the tent where he had lived his whole life and the mother who loved him. Then he suffered many afflictions. After he came to his uncle, Laban, his uncle dealt with him deceitfully. His uncle knew how to take advantage of him. He observed that Jacob was always watching Rachel; he had fallen in love with Rachel and was always watching her. One day he said to Jacob, “Because you are my relative, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what should your wages be?” (Gen. 29:15). Immediately Jacob said, “I will serve you

seven years for Rachel your younger daughter” (v. 18). This is a high price. How many wages can you earn in seven years? He was willing to work seven years to gain Rachel as his wife. His uncle immediately agreed.

Then Jacob worked seven years to gain Rachel; he was so much in love that the years seemed like only a few days to him. Then Jacob said, “Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in to her” (v. 21). So Laban made a wedding feast. At that time, the bride’s face was covered. After the wedding, the bride was brought into the inner chamber and Jacob went in with his wife. In the morning, when he looked, it was not Rachel; it was Leah. This was how God was dealing with Jacob. How great was that suffering! Then Laban told him that this was their tradition. If the older daughter is not married, the younger one cannot get married first. Serve me another seven years and I will give you the younger daughter as well. Jacob had to serve Laban for fourteen years for his two daughters. After that he asked Laban to let him go back to his own country with his family. But Laban realized that God’s blessing was with Jacob so he asked Jacob to stay to take care of his flocks. Jacob served Laban for another six years.

Thursday

These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried their young, and I have not eaten the rams of your flock. That which was torn by beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it. You required it from my hand, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. There I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes. Thus I have been in your house twenty years; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. (Gen. 31:38-41).

4. God allows many difficulties to come on our bodies or to come within the feelings of our souls. As the plowers plow upon us, these difficulties expose our real situations before God. God uses His word to plow within us like a double edged sword, to separate

our spirits and our souls, to expose the thoughts and intentions within us, and to expose our nakedness before God.

5. God does not delight in afflicting us; yet He wants to perfect us. If not, the seed of His life cannot be germinated and grow within us.
6. In his old age, when Israel looked back on his life experience, he leaned on his rod to worship God! And when he held the rod to worship God, he had many feelings towards God, “God is worthy of the praises. His way is perfect. He dealt with me in order for me to become Israel.”

After all the time serving Laban, Jacob testified of how much he suffered (Gen. 31:38-41). During the day he was suffering the heat of the sun; at night he suffered from frost. He could not even close his eyes properly to sleep. His uncle made him pay back when anything from the flock was killed by a beast telling him that he had not taken care of the flock properly. Can you imagine such an affliction for twenty years. Not just that, his two wives were fighting for him. He was squeezed in the middle. They were fighting for his love so each wanted to bear more sons for him. God also was involved. He saw that Leah was not loved as much as Rachel so He caused Leah to have more sons. Leah had four sons but Rachel had none. Then Rachel complained to Jacob: “Why don’t you give me children?” Jacob was angry and told her that God was the One who had withheld children from her.

Can you see the picture? Jacob was continually being afflicted. God was working on him through all these situations. He was afflicted just like plowers plowing on his back and making their furrows long. He followed the Lord to the extent that he became mature; he became a blessing to others. But when he thought back on his life, he felt that he was always being afflicted by the enemy. The result of such a plowing was that the land was ready for sowing to produce a rich harvest.

It very interesting that the psalmist used the illustration of plowing to make a person ready for sowing and reaping. The seed can be sown into the land that was plowed and much more grain can be produce. So today, God allows many situations to come upon us. The

process is suffering but one who fears God is still willing to follow the Lord, endure, and go forward on the way of the cross.

This is like Paul who suffered many afflictions (2 Cor. 11). He boasted in all the afflictions that he went through. He knew how God was working on him. He became a great blessing because of all the afflictions. He has generations of children even up to today. We are still getting help from Paul. If the New Testament did not have the writings of Paul, what a loss! May the Lord give us the desire that we would be willing to follow Him in such a way, that we would be willing to allow God to give us many afflictions, that we could be perfected, that the seed of life could be sown into us and bear fruit.

Friday

The Lord is righteous; He has cut in pieces the cords of the wicked. Let all those who hate Zion Be put to shame and turned back. (Gen. 129:4-5).

For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. (2 Cor. 4:11).

C. He has cut the cords of the wicked

1. God allows the work of plowing upon us by the cross for the purpose of growth and harvest. The Lord is righteous; at that day, he will cut the cords of the wicked. When God cuts the cords, the oxen and plowers are gone. In other words, once we have gone through the temporary sufferings and have learned the lessons, He will come to strengthen us and perfect us. Our God is righteous; He will not let us be tempted beyond our ability. He will provide the way of escape that we may be able to endure it.
2. Who is the wicked? It is your flesh. Knowing that, your biggest enemy is yourself. But at that day, God will cut the cords. In Christ, we are a new creation, the old has passed away, and the new has come. When the time comes, He will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor darkness, because everything which comes from God is glorious.

D. Let all those who hate Zion be put to shame and turned back

1. “Let all those who hate Zion Be put to shame and turned back.” *Zion* signifies *the authority of God*. Whoever hates the authority of God is flesh! The book of Romans tells us, “Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7). At that moment, the wicked man, the flesh, has been put to shame and has turned backward. God has accomplished a work on you, and He has enabled you to become Israel, a spiritual man.

God’s purpose is not to cause us to suffer but God desires that we would be perfected through the afflictions. There are no exceptions to this process among all those gained by the Lord. Watchman Nee wrote a song saying that our chances to suffer for the Lord are so few; all the opportunities to be afflicted for the Lord are about to pass. No wonder Watchman Nee can affect so many others; his ministry affects the entire earth and has been translated into many languages. I went to Greece and Romania to visit the churches there in 1994. Even in those places, some of Watchman Nee’s books had already been translated into their languages. Because his afflictions were more than others, the Lord could perfect him more, and he could be more of a blessing to others.

If you are still willing to follow the Lord through many afflictions, the Lord will be able to work on you. This is very high; it is not about outward blessings. This is for the Lord to gain us to participate in the building of His church. We cannot rely on the flesh, on ourselves, to serve the Lord. We must allow the Lord to work on us, to let many situations come upon us. Paul said that he was surrounded by the enemies to the point that he did not know what to do. He was persecuted and cast down, but still he went forward. He considered this as the work of the cross on him. He said, “For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:11). He was surrounded by suffering, persecuted, and beaten down. The result was that the life of Jesus could be manifested in him. How high is this kind of life! This the Lord’s way, the way of Jesus the Nazarene. May the Lord give us such a desire to follow Him like this.

Saturday

Let them be as the grass on the housetops, Which withers before it grows up, With which the reaper does not fill his hand, Nor he who binds sheaves, his arms. (Psa. 129:6-7).

All flesh is as grass, And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, And its flower falls away, But the word of the Lord endures forever. (1 Peter 1:24-25).

E. Let them be as the grass on the housetops

1. Then the psalmist used another metaphor, saying, “Let them be as the grass on the housetops, Which withers before it grows up, With which the reaper does not fill his hand, Nor he who binds sheaves, his arms.” At that time in the Middle East, the housetops were flat; there was a ladder outside the house which leads to the housetop. Even now, houses in the Jewish state have the same style. The grass on the housetops has a characteristic: it can appear very fast, however it withers before it grows up since the soil beneath is shallow and hard.
2. The grass on the housetops does not need to be reaped; if you go to reap it, it cannot fill your hand nor be used to make sheaves to fill your arms. This is a pitiful circumstance.
3. The psalmist is depicting the wicked, one who hates Zion! He is a man who rejected the cross, indulged the flesh, and lived in the flesh. What is such a man like? Like the grass on the housetops!
4. The flesh must be subjected under the ruling of the Spirit. If our soul life can be governed by the spirit, it can become useful, but if it is on top, it is not. When one boasts in his flesh, he thinks that he is above, that he is on the housetop and everyone is beneath his feet; but while he is boasting, he will wither. The natural man is like grass. Men’s glories are like the flower of grass: “The grass withers, And its flower falls away, But the word of the Lord endures forever” (1 Peter 1:24-25).
5. The position of the flesh is to only be placed under the cross. Our emotion, mind, and will have their uses; but if they are

put on the housetops, they will surely wither before they grow up. When you try to reap it, it cannot fill your hand; this is vanity! When you bind it, it cannot be a sheaf in your arms; this is to be unsatisfied. A person who lives in the flesh can never be satisfied and his life is in the vanity of vanities.

If we live in our flesh, we will hate Zion which represents the ruling of the Lord. The flesh opposes the Lord's ruling. Those who live according to the flesh cannot obey the law. People like this are like grass on a housetop; they think that they are in a high place, on a housetop. But even a flat housetop only has very shallow soil; before the grass can grow there it already becomes withered. There is no possibility of it producing a harvest.

Sunday

Neither let those who pass by them say, "The blessing of the Lord be upon you; We bless you in the name of the Lord!" (Psa. 129:8).

F. The blessing of the LORD be upon you

1. "Neither let those who pass by them say, 'The blessing of the LORD be upon you; We bless you in the name of the LORD!'" During the time of the Old Testament, when people went through your land in the harvest season and saw you reaping, they often blessed you saying, "The blessing of the LORD be upon you, and may you gain peace."
2. A man who belongs to the flesh cannot receive the blessing of God; only a man who lives in the Spirit and lives before God. Since he plows deep, when he sows the seeds, the seeds will grow, and will yield fruit, thirtyfold, sixtyfold and a hundredfold. The people who go through his lands will say, "The blessing of the Lord be upon you, and may peace be upon you."

This is a very great contrast. The psalmist was very blessed because the Lord caused all kinds of affliction to come upon him. Still he maintained the attitude of fearing the Lord and walking in His ways. In the end he was blessed and became a blessing to the church.

He had riches of life to supply others. If you are not willing to follow the Lord through afflictions, in the end you will be like grass that withered; there is nothing to bless others and no one will say, “The blessing of the Lord be upon you” or “We bless you in the name of the Lord!” There will be no growth of life, reaping, or blessing from God. If you put these two results side by side, which one do you want? Do you want to fear the Lord and walk in His ways, or do hate Zion and reject the Lord’s ruling? This is a huge contrast. We need to choose. “Lord, I want to fear You and follow You, to walk in Your ways, so that You can work in me according to Your good pleasure. Lord, fulfill Your purpose in me and all of us!”

When you read Psalms, you need to read them from this angle. You will find them too rich, with an unlimited supply that can be applied in the New Testament age. “Lord bless the churches. Cause us to go on in the way of life so that the churches can be blessed and built because of us.” What a blessing this is! The Lord gets the glory and the church is blessed.