

PSALM 129

INTRODUCTION TO PSALM 129

A Song of degrees.

This psalm was written in later times, after many of the distresses of Israel; very probably upon the Jews return from the Babylonish captivity, by Ezra, or some other godly person. Aben Ezra says the psalmist speaks in the language of Israel in captivity; and the same is the sense of Kimchi and Arama. The Syriac inscription is,

“a psalm without a name, concerning the distress of the people; but as to us, it intimates to us the victory and triumph of the worshippers.”

Ver. 1. *Many a time have they afflicted me from my youth*, etc.] That is, the enemies of Israel, afterwards called “ploughers”. This may be understood of literal Israel, the posterity of Jacob; whose youth was the beginning of their constitution as a nation and church, or the first times of it; when they were greatly distressed by their enemies, and from thenceforward; as in Egypt, where, and in places near it, they were afflicted four hundred years, according to a prophecy given to Abraham their ancestor, and where their lives were made bitter with hard bondage; and in the times of the Judges, by several neighbouring nations, which was the time of their youth, or their settlement in Canaan; and afterwards in the times of their kings, particularly in the times of Ahaz king of Judah, by the Edomites and Philistines, and by Tiglathpileser, king of Assyria; and in the times of Hoshea, king of Israel, by Salmaneser, who carried away captive, ten tribes; and in the times of Jeconiah and Zedekiah, kings of Judah, by Nebuchadnezzar, who carried captive to Babylon the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. And the psalmist, by a spirit of prophecy, might have a further respect to the distresses of Israel in the times of Antiochus and the Maccabees, when the temple was profaned, the altar demolished, and the daily sacrifice made to cease, and many good men lost their lives; to which times the apostle may be thought to have regard, (³¹¹⁵ Hebrews 11:35-38);

and also to their last affliction by the Romans, the greatest of all; and their present captivity, and deliverance from it;

may Israel now say; this now refers to the time of redemption, as Arama observes, whether at their return from Babylon, or at their future conversion; then reviewing their former troubles ever since they were a people, may say as before. This may be applied to mystical Israel, or to the church of God in Gospel times, which, in its infancy, and from its youth upwards, has been afflicted, many a time, and by many enemies; first, by the unbelieving Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus, and persecuted his apostles and members; then by Rome Pagan, under the ten persecutions of so many emperors; and afterwards by Rome Papal, the whore of Babylon, who many a time been drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus. Yea, this may be applied to the Messiah, one of whose names is Israel, (^{<348>}Isaiah 49:3); who was a man of sorrows, and acquainted with griefs all his days, even from his youth, (^{<257>}Isaiah 53:3); he was the “Aijeleth Shahaḥ”, the hind of the morning, (^{<421>}Psalms 22:1), title; hunted by Herod in his infancy, (^{<402>}Matthew 2:13); and obliged to be carried into Egypt for safety when a child, from whence he was called, (^{<2810>}Hosea 11:1); and ever after was more or less afflicted by his enemies, men or devils, in mind or body; and at last endured great sufferings, and death itself. It may moreover be applied to every Israelite indeed, to every true believer and member of Christ; conversion is their time of youth; they are first newborn babes, and then young men; as soon as regenerated, they are afflicted with the temptations of Satan, the reproaches and persecutions of men; which are many, though no more than necessary, and it is the will of God should be, and all for their good.

Ver. 2. *Many a time have they afflicted me from my youth*, etc.] This is repeated for the confirmation of it, to excite attention to it, and to express the vehement affection of the speaker;

yet they have not prevailed against me; the Egyptians could not prevail against literal Israel; the more they were afflicted, the more they grew and multiplied; in the times of the Judges, one after another were raised up as deliverers of them; neither the Assyrians, Chaldeans, nor Romans, nor any other, have been able to cut them off from being a nation; they continue to this day: the enemies of the church of Christ, even the gates of hell, have not been able to prevail against it, being built upon a rock, so as to extirpate and destroy it, neither by open and cruel persecutors, nor by

secret and fraudulent heretics; nor could the enemies of the Messiah prevail against him, for though they brought him to the dust of death, they could not hold him in it; and they themselves, through his death, were conquered by him, as sin, Satan, the world, and death itself; nor can the enemies of the saints prevail against them, God being on their side, Christ making them more than conquerors, the Spirit in them being greater than he that is in the world.

Ver. 3. *The ploughers ploughed upon my back*, etc.] “Sinners”, as the Septuagint, Vulgate Latin, and Arabic versions, render it; such that plough iniquity, and sow wickedness, (^{<18048>}Job 4:8 ^{<28003>}Hosea 10:13); which may be understood of their carrying Israel captive, when they put yokes and bonds upon their necks, as upon oxen when they plough, as Arama interprets it; or it may design the destruction of their high places, signified by the back, such as the temple, the royal palace, and houses of their nobles, burnt with fire; yea, it was predicted that Zion should be ploughed as a field, (^{<38182>}Micah 3:12); and the Jews say that Turnus Rufus, the Roman general, as they call him, did plough up Jerusalem. The Syriac version is, “they whipped” their whips or scourges; with which many of the Israelites were scourged in the times of the Maccabees, (^{<38136>}Hebrews 11:36). And the Messiah himself, who gave his back to the smiters, and was buffeted and scourged by them, (^{<28106>}Isaiah 50:6 ^{<42726>}Matthew 27:26); and many of his apostles and followers, (^{<4007>}Matthew 10:17 ^{<47123>}2 Corinthians 11:23-25). The Targum renders it

“upon my body;”

and Aben Ezra says the phrase is expressive of contempt and humiliation, and compares with it (^{<28123>}Isaiah 51:23);

they made long their furrows; which signify afflictions, and the pain their enemies put them to, and the distress they gave them; as no affliction is joyous, but grievous, but like the rending and tearing up the earth with the plough; and also the length and duration of afflictions; such were the afflictions of Israel in Egypt and in Babylon, and of the church of God under Rome Pagan and Papal; but, as the longest furrows have an end, so have the most lasting afflictions. The Syriac version is, “they prolonged their humiliation”, or “affliction”; Kimchi says the meaning is,

“they would give us no rest from servitude and bondage.”

Ver. 4. *The Lord [is] righteous*, etc.] Or gracious and merciful; hence acts of mercy are called righteousness in the Hebrew language; the Lord has compassion on his people under their afflictions, and delivers them; or is faithful to his promises of salvation to them, and just and righteous to render tribulation to them that trouble them, and take vengeance upon them;

he hath cut asunder the cords of the wicked: alluding to the cords with which the plough is fastened to the oxen, which being cut, they cannot go on ploughing; or to the cords of whips, which when, cut cannot be used to any purpose: it designs the breaking of the confederacies of wicked men against the people of God; the confounding their counsels and schemes, and disappointing their devices; so that they cannot perform their enterprises, or carry their designs into execution, or go on with and finish their intentions. The Targum renders it,

“the chains of the wicked;”

(see ²³⁶⁸Isaiah 5:18).

Ver. 5. *Let them all be confounded*, etc.] Or “ashamed”: as all the enemies of God’s people will be sooner or later, either in this world, or however when Christ shall come in the clouds of heaven; or let them be disappointed of their views, aims, and ends, when they will be confounded, as disappointed persons are;

and turned back; from pursuing their designs and accomplishing them; as the Assyrian monarch was, who had a hook put into his nose, and a bridle in his lips, and was turned back by the way he came, (²³⁷²Isaiah 37:29);

that hate Zion; the inhabitants of Zion, who are called out of the world, and separated from the men of it, and therefore hated by them; the King of Zion, the Messiah, whom they will not have to reign over them; the doctrines of the Gospel, the word that comes out of Zion, to which they are utter enemies; and the laws and ordinances of Zion, the discipline of God’s house, which they cannot bear to be under and submit unto.

Ver. 6. *Let them be as the grass [upon] the housetops*, etc.] The tops of the houses in Judea were flat, and so grass grew upon them, being covered with plaster of terrace; though it was but small and weak, and being on high was exposed to the scorching sun, and soon withered^{f1774}; and Menochius says^{f1775} he saw such roofs in the island of Corsica, flat, and

having earth upon them, smoothed and pressed, on which grass grew of its own accord; but being burnt up in summertime by the sun, soon withered, as here said. But what Olaus Magnus^{f1776} relates is somewhat extraordinary; that, in the northern Gothic countries, they feed their cattle on the tops of houses, especially in a time of siege; he describes their houses as built of stone, high and large, and covered with rafters of fir and bark of birch; upon which is laid grass earth, cut out of the fields foursquare, and sowed with barley or oats, so that their roofs look like green meadows; and that what is sown, and the grass that grows thereon, might not wither before plucked up, they very constantly and diligently water it; but in the eastern countries, which are hot, and have but little rain, grass could not retain its verdure long, as follows;

which withereth afore it groweth up; to any height, the usual height of grass: or, “before it is plucked up”, as the Septuagint, Vulgate Latin, and Arabic versions; and so Jarchi. And this was their usual way of gathering in their corn; and which continues to this day, as Mr. Maundrell^{f1777} affirms, who was an eyewitness to it in many places; where they plucked it up by handfuls from the roots, leaving the most fruitful fields as naked as if nothing had grown on them; and this they did for the sake of the straw, which was generally very short, and necessary for the sustenance of cattle; to which he thinks there is here a manifest allusion; but not corn, but grass, is here spoken of. The Targum is,

“before it flourisheth, an east wind cometh, blows upon it, and it is withered;”

and to the same purpose the Syriac version,

“which when the wind comes upon it, it fades and withers.”

This expresses the high and elevated state and condition of wicked men, the pride and haughtiness of their hearts; yet their weakness and frailty, and the danger they are exposed unto, through the wrath and vengeance of God upon them; when they consume and wither away like grass on the housetops, and never come to the happiness they are hoping and wishing for; (see ²³⁷⁷Isaiah 37:27).

Ver. 7. *Wherewith the mower filleth not his hand*, etc.] Such grass never rises high enough to be mowed, nor is of that account to have such pains taken with it; nor the quantity so large as to fill a mower’s hand, and carry it away in his arms;

nor he that bindeth sheaves his bosom; when corn is mowed or reaped, the binders come and gather it up in their arms, and bind it in sheaves, and then bring it into the barn; but nothing of this kind is done with grass on the housetops. This represents the insignificancy and worthlessness of wicked men; who, when the harvest comes, the end of the world, will not be gathered in by the reapers, the angels, into Christ's garner into heaven as the wheat, the righteous will; but like the tares and chaff will be cast into unquenchable fire, (~~41B2~~ Matthew 3:12 ~~41B7~~ Luke 3:17).

Ver. 8. *Neither do they which go by say, the blessing of the Lord [be] upon you*, etc.] As was usual with passengers, when they went by where mowers, and reapers, and binders, were at work in the field in harvest time; who used to wish the presence and blessing of God with them, and upon their labours; and who returned the salutation, as may be seen in Boaz and his reapers, (~~41D4~~ Ruth 2:4);

we bless you in the name of the Lord; which is either a continuation of the blessing of the passengers, or the answer of the reapers to them; so the Targum,

“nor do they answer them, “we bless you”,” etc.

The sense is, that those wicked men would have no blessing on them, from God nor men; that no God speed would be wished them; but that they were like the earth, that is covered with briers and thorns; which is nigh unto cursing, and its end to be burned.