

BETWEEN THE DREAMING AND THE COMING TRUE

Keeping on, Keeping on.

He was born on 24th August 1759 and became a politician. He was born into wealth and privilege. He himself admitted that in his early days in parliament he did nothing of any purpose. But at Easter in 1788 something changed – he had a spiritual rebirth. It led to him to, at one time, being actively in support of 69 philanthropic causes. He chose to give away one quarter of his annual income to the poor. He fought on behalf of chimney sweeps, single mothers, Sunday schools, orphans and what were then called juvenile delinquents. He helped to found the Church Missionary Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society. He wrote a book that became a best seller – it was a scathing criticism of comfortable Christianity!

But none of these things are what he is best known and remembered for. In the late 1700's, English slave traders captured between 35,000 and 50,000 Africans a year and shipped them to America to be sold as slaves. One writer at the time wrote this about the slave trade: "The impossibility of doing without slaves in the West Indies will always prevent this traffic being dropped. The necessity, the absolute necessity, then, of carrying it on, must, since there is no other, be its excuse..."

William Wilberforce came to a different view: "So enormous, so dreadful, so irredeemable did the trade's wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for abolition. Let the consequences be what they would: I, from this time, determined that I would never rest until I had effected its abolition."

Wilberforce thought it would be a quick success! In 1789 he introduced 12 resolutions – which were all blocked. He was defeated in 1791, 1792, 1793, 1798, 1799, 1804 and 1806! But Wilberforce was determined and he persevered. He was vilified by politicians and traders alike. His opponents spoke of "the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies."

The opposition was so strong that one of his friends feared he might one day read that 'Wilberforce had been carbonated (broiled) by Indian planters, barbequed by African merchants, and eaten by Guinea captains.' But Wilberforce never quit – and that, despite his own ill health. He suffered poor

health his whole life, sometimes being bedridden for weeks at a time. He survived by using a then new drug – opium, to which he became addicted. Its hallucinatory powers terrified him and the depression it caused nearly crippled him at times.

But Wilberforce persevered. Finally, in 1807 parliament abolished the slave trade in the British Empire. But it was not until 1833 that he heard that the final passage of the emancipation bill was ensured in committee and finally to be passed in parliament. William Wilberforce died three days later.

Psalm 129 is a Psalm of perseverance.

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 a reaper cannot fill his hands with it,
nor one who gathers fill his arms.

⁸ May those who pass by not say to them,
“The blessing of the LORD be on you;
we bless you in the name of the LORD.

There is a myth that some people and some followers of Jesus seem to believe. It is, that when we choose to follow him, our life will be free of trouble and always filled with good things. Perhaps, sometimes, we do the same because we misunderstand what it means to live in God’s blessing. Psalm 129 reminds us that life can be full of trouble and opposition, and Psalm 129 perhaps teaches us something important that we have already witnessed in the story of William Wilberforce. It’s a truth that’s not just found in the encouraging yet

challenging story of one wealthy, English politician who was a follower of Jesus.

There was a man who was known as Saul but became known as Paul. He, Saul, persecuted followers of Christ, intent on wiping out the fledgling Christian church. But Saul had an encounter with the living Jesus himself on the road to Damascus, and Paul became a follower of Christ. The first decade after his conversion was lived in Tarsus in obscurity – no-one trusted this new convert! Barnabas, finally, went to Tarsus to find him and bring him into the church. Not an easy start, not to be believed or trusted by the church of which you are a part! Paul became one of the most powerful and dynamic preachers of the faith, and arguably the greatest theologian in church history.

He travelled some 10,000 miles on missionary journeys. He travelled across Israel, Syria, Turkey, Greece and Italy. He was finally beheaded outside the walls of Rome when he was about 57 years old. Here's what he wrote about this time as a follower of Jesus:

²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷ I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. ³³ But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands. (2Corinthians 11 v 23-33)

None of the things that Paul experienced, the physical violence, the persecution or the emotional and psychological trauma he felt, convinced him that to follow Jesus wasn't worth it. And the truth is that he was following his Master, Jesus, in his sufferings.

Every Easter we read these words from the prophet Isaiah:

Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

² He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

³ He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

⁴ Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.

⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,

though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰ Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand (Isaiah 53 v 1-10)

When we read these words, we understand them as a prophetic description of the life of Jesus. It does not describe an easy, pain free life does it? Here's how a contemporary writer writes about Jesus life and what he experienced.

The frailty of becoming a human baby. The shame of illegitimacy. The terror of being a refugee. The experience of an oppressive occupying power. The learning of a trade. The grief at the loss of an earthly father. The direct confrontation with Satan. The hunger from fasting. The disappointment of unbelief in his home town. The humility of washing dusty feet. The weariness of constant ministry. The frustration with his disciples. The misappropriation of money by a follower. The scorn and criticism as he: befriended prostitutes, chose terrorists as disciples, had meals with corrupt businessmen, cared for lepers, did good on the Sabbath, ministered to non-Jews.

The hatred and opposition of the religious leaders. The fickle nature of the masses. The ingratitude of so many he ministered to. The treachery of the betrayal by Judas. The agony in the garden. The temptation to avoid the cross. The loneliness as his followers desert him. The heartbreak of denial by his key leader. The injustice of an illegal trial. The lies and slander in front of Pilate. The mockery of Herod. The manipulation of the mob at his trial. The physical pain as hair was pulled from his face. The anguish and shame of crucifixion. The curses of the soldiers. The insults of the onlookers. The gloating of his enemies. The revulsion of being made sin. The horror of death. The forsaking by his Father – the shattering of the Trinity. The permanent alteration to the Trinity now – Christ has a resurrected body in heaven.

Jesus's adult life began with being tempted to choose another path than his calling, and ended with the trauma of the cross. Jesus's final words on the cross as recorded by Luke: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (Luke 23:46) Jesus persevered.

The nation of Israel, Wilberforce, Paul and Jesus himself would recognise the truth of Psalm 129 v 1 & 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.

And we do too.... Don't we? But what Wilberforce, Paul, Jesus, the people of Israel and all those who call themselves followers of Jesus hold onto, is another deep truth we find in this Psalm:

- 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 a reaper cannot fill his hands with it,
nor one who gathers fill his arms.
⁸ May those who pass by not say to them,
“The blessing of the LORD be on you;
we bless you in the name of the LORD.

These words perhaps seem strange to us, but they illustrate a deep truth we would do well to engage with and hold close to our hearts. The picture here is of Israel being stretched out and unable to move. Their enemies have hitched up their oxen and begin to cut and plough furrows in the back of Israel. They make long, painful cuts and trenches in the skin and they do so systematically. Perhaps it could be described as back and forth cruelty. It creates an image that is somewhat horrific.

I'm wondering if we still see that kind of image happening in the lives of some of our brothers and sisters today in some places in the world. Perhaps, in truth, you can in some way identify with that kind of image in your own life. Perhaps its not so far from how life can, at times, feel.

Verse 4 brings a sudden and dramatic change which we must not miss. The oxen are still trudging along, back and forth, their masters still shouting their commands, but the chords of the plough have been severed and are no longer working. Their masters might shout commands but they are wasting their time.

Verses 5-8 make the same point. The point is this: Opposition to the people of faith is like grass in shallow ground. Palestine had lots of rocky soil. Grass might grow quickly but it had no roots and by midday it would wither and fade. You wouldn't find anyone there reaping grass because they would simply be wasting their time. Actually, there's a bit of a joke here, the people of faith would recognise: no-one walking along the road would ever look at the grass and say: "Great harvest you have there. God's blessing upon you!"

It's a way of reminding the people of faith that things of the world ultimately don't last! It's a way of reminding the people of faith that, although it may bring its challenges, some of them really tough, it is the way of faith that truly lasts. It is a way of reminding the people of faith that there is a bigger and better story at work in the world. It is a way of reminding the people of faith that there is a bigger and better story at work in their own lives.

Psalms 129 is an invitation for all those of faith to lift our eyes to the things that are maybe as yet unseen. It is an invitation for all those of faith to lift our eyes to the things that remain. It is an invitation for all those of faith to lift our eyes to the deep and profound truth that eternity has begun, but it is not fully here yet. It is an invitation for all those of faith to recognise that though trouble is hard, it is, in the bigger and far better story of God, only momentary.

It is an invitation for all those of faith to hold the deep and profound truth that one fine day, one bright hour, God himself will come to us. It is an invitation for all those of faith to know that one fine day, one bright hour our story will be complete. It is an invitation for all those of faith to live in the story, the bigger and far better story of God's eternity. It is an invitation for all those of faith to persevere.

So, how are you doing?

Friends, others have gone before, you are not alone. In fact, in struggle and hardship and persecution, you stand with them and they stand with you.

What I love about the Psalms is their honesty. Verse 5 calls God to bring shame on those who make life difficult! Don't you want to do the same? I do! I certainly do! It's not an encouragement to ask that of God – it's simply proof you don't have to be perfect to persevere! And this is very, very good news for me, and I suspect, for you!

Perseverance is not though, resignation – perseverance is vibrant and alive. It is what helped Wilberforce fight slavery, Paul to be a missionary and Jesus to go to the cross.

Perhaps the most important part of Psalm 129 is the truth about God it speaks. Verse 4: ‘But the Lord is righteous’. In his version Eugene Peterson translates those words this way: “But God wouldn’t put up with it, he sticks with us.” Ultimately, the deep truth of Psalm 129 is simply that God perseveres: He doesn’t quit.

Way back with Abraham, it is God himself who takes the covenant walk – his way of saying: ‘Whatever you do, I will never quit on you. Never. Never ever.’ (Genesis 15) We can persevere because of God’s faithfulness to us.

Hebrews chapter 11 tells of those heroes of faith who followed God as best they knew how. There are names we recognise here: Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses. There are names that maybe surprise us here: Rahab the prostitute. There are names maybe we don’t know so well here: Barak, Jephthah. And there are unnamed people here: others who were tortured, some who faced jeers and floggings, some who were put to death by stoning or cut in two or killed by the sword.

Hebrews chapters 12, recognising that none of them received what they were promised, says, in the light of what you know about them, do this:

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12 v 1-3)

Psalm 129 invites us to do the very same thing. It reminds us that God is at the centre of a far bigger and far better story, that God himself is the one who sticks with us, and that this is the life we were truly created for. Psalm 129 reminds us of the truth that God has always been with us, that God is with us, and that God will be with us always. Amen!

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by Rev. Ian Phillips.

