



November 24, 2013  
Pastor Larry Hackman  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *The Climb of Your Life: The Valley* Psalm 129

Beside every mountain there is a valley. And in the mountains of Norway there is a town called Rjukan nestled in a valley (ree-you-khan) where the sun does not shine directly on them for six months out of the year. Surrounded by mountains on both sides, the sun simply doesn't rise high enough between September and March to provide the town direct light. And it's been that way since the town was founded in early 20<sup>th</sup> century... over a hundred years of living in relative darkness. The sun is out, the rest of the country gets to see it, but Rjukan only sees shadow. They actually built a cable car 100 years ago to ferry people to the top of the mountain so that they could get their vitamin D. If you think the winters here are dark, you don't have anything on Rjukan. Living in the valley can be tough.

For the past couple of months we've been talking about *The Climb of Your Life*.

- We made the decision to climb,
- We got a Sherpa and short-roped ourselves to him,
- We made it to base camp,
- Dealt with altitude sickness,
- Maneuvered the perils,
- Were belayed by Jesus,
- Experienced the triumph of the climb,
- Then we asked, "Why are we climbing, anyway?"
- And finally last week we looked back at the mountain, our legacy.

And if that just made no sense at all to you then you need to head to the website and listen to all of this fall's sermons all over again. But if you've been with us, you've experienced the climb, and now we are at the end of our sermon series, we're at the end of the climb, and where do you end up at the end of the climb? You end up in the valley.

It's sort of anticlimactic really. If you've ever climbed a mountain you know what I mean. You reach the top, it's exhilarating, it's wonderful, it's triumphant, you slog back down to the bottom, maybe you look back on the mountain... and then you just want to sleep. You hurt all over. You've got a few memories. But life goes on. You experience the valley.

Our Psalm today is about the valley. What do you do when you end up in the valley?

*[Read Psalm 129]*

Let Israel now say. Does that sound familiar? Does anybody remember where we heard that before? If you're looking in your Bible you don't have to flip too far back to go to Psalm 124. Do you remember this Psalm? It was all about being trapped. Pastor Mark had that giant trap and we had that incredible story from Tim Bailey about being trapped in a canyon. But that Psalm says, "Let Israel now say, if God had not been on our side, we would have never escaped the trap." That Psalm is about the faithfulness of God. Let Israel now say! God was on our side! God is faithful! He delivers us! Psalm 124 is a corporate declaration of faith!

But when we hear this same phrase again, "Let Israel now say," it sure doesn't sound like a declaration of faith, it sounds like complaining. [In whiny voice] "Let Israel now say, they have greatly oppressed me from my youth." It's corporate complaining! Actually, the whole Psalm is a combination of a lament and a curse. Lamenting and cursing. So at first blush, Psalm 124 and 129 don't seem to have a lot in common. Psalm 124 says God is faithful! Psalm 129 seems to say, "I've get beat up a lot and my enemies suck!" But... we're going to dig a little deeper, and when we do I think we'll find that these two Psalms are really about the same thing in the end. They're both about faith.

But first... lamenting. Remember that this is Israel, the whole of Israel, that is singing this Psalm. "Let Israel now say!" So the one who has been greatly afflicted from their youth is Israel.

If you were to think about what has been the single most impactful event on the American psyche in the last 20 years what would you guess? I would say 9-11 was that event. Ever since 9-11 happened, our nation has been shaped and formed by it. Our politics, our art, our entertainment, all of it has reflected that horrible event in some way. For the Israelites, their equivalent to 9-11, the event that shaped their psyche, was the Exodus. The Exodus shaped them as a nation. Their time in Egypt, living under slavery, the loss of life, the pain of it, made them who they were, and are even today in many ways. Israel's youth was their time in Egypt, and indeed from their youth they have known pain. During the times of the Judges, before kings reigned in Israel, the Philistines, Syrians, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, and others would raid and oppress the small nation. They were literally surrounded by enemies on all sides. Towards the end of the time of the kings, they were constantly assailed, first by the Egyptians, then by the Assyrians, then finally by the Babylonians until they were exiled from the land they had once been delivered into. They have greatly oppressed them indeed!

One of the few people groups who might understand this oppression might be the ancestors of many modern African Americans. Pastor Mark mentioned a few Sundays ago that this is the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, so it's easy to remember of the plight of black slaves. It's no surprise to realize

that those forced transplants from Africa understood oppression, and it's no wonder that many of the Negro Spirituals found their inspiration from the Exodus story. They were literally slaves waiting for their deliverance, just like Israel. They got what it meant to be oppressed.



This is a picture of an escaped slave, simply known as Gordon. He made it to the Union lines by rubbing himself with onions to throw off the scent of dogs that were hunting him, three months after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed. Within weeks of arriving on the front lines he enlisted as a soldier in the U.S. Army, and before he did he had to go through a physical. The doctor found this, and it was photographed and eventually widely distributed as a symbol of the horrors of slavery. I think Gordon knew what it meant to have furrows plowed into his back.

The truth is I don't know how to relate to Gordon. I can't imagine the pain and oppression that his back illustrates. And really, I can't imagine the years of oppression that the people of Israel have experienced. There is so much weight behind this lament. So when you and I relate to this Psalm, we have to translate it into our own experience.

- Where does your life look like Gordon's back?
- Where have you experienced oppression?
- Where have you been torn up, ripped to pieces, furrowed like a plow?
- What do you need to lament?

Of course, that's not where the Psalm lands. In the end, the Israelites were delivered from the Egyptians in the story of the Exodus. In the end, Gordon found his freedom. The cords were cut, their enemies did not gain victory over them. But I do not want to move too quickly there because we are uncomfortable with the lament, aren't we?

- We are afraid to offend God with our pain.
- Or maybe we are afraid that God is the one causing the pain.
- We are afraid that if we ask God for justice, for an end to the pain, maybe he won't give it to us.
- We are afraid that God just isn't big enough for our lament.

And then there's the cursing. The second half of the psalm is actually what's called an "imprecatory" psalm. What's that mean? It means a spoken curse. You may be saying, "Well why didn't you just call it a spoken curse psalm Pastor Larry?" Because big words are fun to say! And "Spoken curse psalm" doesn't quite roll off the tongue quite the same way.

Imprecatory psalms actually occur fairly often in the book of Psalms. There are at least 14 of them, some of them much more uncomfortable to read than this one.

Admit it, this is uncomfortable to read, isn't it? Don't you kind of twitch a little when you read him talking about his enemies withering like dead grass? Maybe you've got little alarm bells ringing when he tells us to withhold the blessing? What's up with that? I thought Jesus said, "Bless those who curse you?" Doesn't that sound exactly opposite of what this Psalm is praying for? Didn't he know about the imprecatory psalms?

I'm not going to tell you to curse your enemies, not necessarily. There's a clear command from Jesus to bless and not curse, and we should do that. So then, what are these kinds of Psalms really about?

I think the clue to understanding this is earlier in the Psalm. It's the simple statement "the Lord is righteous." We might take righteousness, in this context, to mean the Lord is pure, or perfect, or does good always. But the word for "righteous" here has a much wider range of meaning than that. I hear some of you like to learn the original language so I want to teach you this word, because it shows up throughout the Old Testament and even in other ancient civilizations and conceptually it's important. The word is צַדִּיק (tza-deek). Can you say that with me? And what it means more widely is justice, or fairness. It's a word that used commonly when referring to the oppressed or the poor, that tsadique would be done for them, that balance would be restored, that the right thing would be done. It was tsadique to give to the poor. The year of Jubilee was a great example of what tsadique meant. Restoration, justice, fairness... righteousness. So to say that the Lord is tsadique is to say, the Lord is fair. God is just. He will do what is right by us. There's a whole lot of meaning packed into that one little word.

And the word helps us to understand why the Psalms are so comfortable with lamenting and cursing when we might not be. Lamenting and cursing are an appeal to God's fairness, God's justice. Because the writers of the Psalms are so sure that God is fair, God is just, they are free to voice their complaints and their curses, because they're saying, "God we know who you are. We know you are just and fair. How can these things be?"

When the psalmist hurls these curses, which by the way are not about revenge, but about calling to God for justice. It's another way of saying, "God don't let the wicked get away with what their doing! Let him turn back in shame. Let him wither like dead grass on a sod roof. And especially don't let the wicked prosper, don't bless them God. God, you can't let this happen. You are good! You are just. You can't let this happen!"

But once again, maybe we are afraid to think this way. Maybe we are afraid to enter the pain of the curses, to put ourselves in those shoes because we just aren't sure that God is fair after all. Maybe you haven't seen God's justice, and you simply have a hard time believing that he will come through for you. Maybe we simply can't believe that the wicked won't prosper after all.

Lamenting and cursing. God is big enough for both. God is fair. God is just. He invites you to trust him enough to call out to him for justice.

How do I know this? How can I be so sure? For the Israelites, they looked back to the Exodus. There they saw God's deliverance, his tsadique, his justice in full display. There, the cords of the wicked were cut for the Israelites. They could look back on that and say, confidently, God is righteous. But we... we look to the cross.

There was a man, 2,000 years ago, whose back looked far worse than Gordon's. That Roman cat-of-nine-tails would have ripped into his flesh, exposing his ribs, turning his back into ground beef. Plowmen plowed his back and made their furrows long. And from this man, we heard perhaps the most profound lament in the history of humankind, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In the cross we see God's lament. And in the cross we see God's justice. The cross is the ultimate expression of tsadique, of righteousness. In the cross we can know, for sure, without a doubt, that God will make things right, that he is fair. You know, for three days, it looked like evil had won. When that stone rolled over the grave, the disciples doubted that God was fair after all. But that stone couldn't hold back Jesus, and justice prevailed. You may be unsure that God is fair, you may have a hard time believing that he is just, but I want you to know without a doubt that you can trust in him.

That little town in Norway that lives in darkness for half the year. After a hundred years of that they finally got tired of it. So they installed bunch of mirrors that would follow the sun and bounce a beam of light straight down into their town square. So the light did shine in their valley. And isn't this so much like what Jesus has done for us? It may seem impossible. You may look at the facts, and say there's no way that justice can be done, that the sun will rise any higher than it can, that light will get in my valley. But he can shine light into your valley. We know, because that's exactly what he did when he broke free of that grave. His light broke into our darkness. And it's his promise to make all things right, whether in this life or the next, to be the just, fair, righteous God that he is.

This morning, maybe there are some of you who need to lament, to cry out with the imprecatory psalms that this just - isn't - right. Maybe you live in an abusive situation that you can't leave. Maybe you have an oppressive work environment. Maybe someone is slandering you, and getting away with it. And you just aren't sure if God cares. The Psalms invite us to believe that God is big enough for our laments and curses. They invite us to cry out to him. To trust God that he is good, fair, and just. Look upon the cross and know no lament too loud, no curse too strong, to drown out God's righteousness.

## Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
  1. What is a valley you've had to walk through, or are walking through now?
  2. Have you been able to express lament to God in tough times? If it seemed hard to express this, why?
  3. How do you feel about the "fairness" of God? Why does God seem either fair or unfair to you?