

*“Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth”—  
let Israel now say—*

*2 “Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth,  
yet they have not prevailed against me.*

*3 The plowers plowed upon my back;  
they made long their furrows.”*

*4 The Lord is righteous;  
he has cut the cords of the wicked.*

*5 May all who hate Zion  
be put to shame and turned backward!*

*6 Let them be like the grass on the housetops,  
which withers before it grows up,*

*7 with which the reaper does not fill his hand  
nor the binder of sheaves his arms,*

*8 nor do those who pass by say,  
“The blessing of the Lord be upon you!*

*We bless you in the name of the Lord!”*

ESV

*1-4 “They’ve kicked me around ever since I was young”—this is how  
Israel tells it—*

*“They’ve kicked me around ever since I was young,  
but they never could keep me down.*

*Their plowmen plowed long furrows up and down my back;  
Then God ripped the harnesses of the evil plowmen to shreds.”*

*5-8 Oh, let all those who hate Zion  
grovel in humiliation;*

*Let them be like grass in shallow ground  
that withers before the harvest,*

*Before the farmhands can gather it in,  
the harvesters get in the crop,*

*Before the neighbors have a chance to call out,  
“Congratulations on your wonderful crop!*

*We bless you in God’s name!”*

*The Message*

If you want to make a successful movie in America, let me tell you something that must be in it. You have to have a situation where the main character works hard, overcomes adversity and in the end, triumphs. You can have a ton of other things happen, but it’s going to be hard if this aspect isn’t present.

You can have:

An Italian kid from Philadelphia run around the city to train and beat the boxing champ Apollo Creed.

You can be a fish who has lost his dad and has to swim to Australia to find him.

You can be two “little people” who have to travel to the other side of the world to get rid of jewelry.

You can be a kid who waits his turn to play football at Notre Dame.

Or a NASCAR driver who has a psychosomatic illness, delivers pizzas on his bike, and has his father help him get back on the track again.

Or a prisoner in jail for life who uses a spoon to dig out of his cell.

You can be a Scottish fellow who stands up against the English in war so he can get his freedom.

You can be a prince who goes through everything (including being “mostly dead”) in order to save Buttercup.

You can be a Roman gladiator whose family has been slaughtered waiting to get his chance to take down the emperor.<sup>2</sup>

Movies love the hard-working story. Carson Palmer of the Cincinnati Bengals has worked all off-season to come back from a possibly career-ending blow to the knee. Dusty Dvorcek was kicked off the OU football team because of a drunken brawl he had with his friend, but was allowed back on the team after a year of hard work and repentance. (What about Rhett Bomar?) We love this story.

But many of us don’t have this story. I was into competitive cycling in high school. And Boy Scouts. And the tuba. Hanging out with friends and looking at girls pushed those interests aside.

Being able to stick with important things is a great quality to have. Being able to let unimportant things go is the other side of the same coin. But being able to know the difference between what to dig into and stick with and what to let go by the wayside is not easy.

This psalm is about this sort of stick-with-it-ness, what the Bible calls perseverance. On this journey to worship, this journey of faith and worship, you will be tempted to give up. You may think this worship thing, this Christianity, this Jesus WAS cool, but now, like Barbies or model airplanes, isn’t where it’s at anymore. You may think, “This is too hard. This is too long. This is too boring. This is too unsatisfying.” But perseverance is in order. The end is worth it, but we have to keep going.

### ***Suffering And Survival***

The psalm opens with a great sadness of recorded history. *“Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth”— let Israel now say—*

*2 “Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me. 3 The plowers plowed upon my back; they made long their furrows.”*

---

<sup>1</sup> © Doug Serven, 2006 You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 500 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by Doug Serven.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2006, website: [www.ouruf.org](http://www.ouruf.org).

<sup>2</sup> Rocky, Finding Nemo, Lord of the Rings, Rudy, Talledega Nights, Shawshank Redemption, Braveheart, The Princess Bride, Gladiator.

You can hear the corporate nature of this psalm, can't you? "Let Israel say." Then they repeat what was just said, "Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth." And then we read, "The plowers plowed upon my back; they made their long furrows." Israel is recounting her history as an oppressed people, as surely as it has been. And just imagine what lies ahead for them, from the aspect of this psalm. And yet, they sing.

"The Jews are the longest enduring distinct ethnic group on the planet. They have been slandered, hated, persecuted, expelled, pursued, and murdered throughout their long existence, but they have survived intact. In fact, many are now back in their own traditional homeland of Israel. They are a brilliant, talented people but survival has been their chief achievement."<sup>3</sup>

"Whereas most nations tend to look back on what they have achieved, Israel reflects here on what she has survived. It could be a disheartening exercise, for Zion still has its ill-wishers. But the singers take courage from the past, facing God with gratitude and their enemies with defiance."<sup>4</sup>

How else can you explain Israel's survival except through the sovereign will of God?

Where are the Philistines, Syrians, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites? Where now are the peoples of Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab? The threats of the Babylonians, Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians were real, were brutal and savage. People had been carted away, slaughtered, raped and pillaged before their eyes. Sennacherib stood on the doorstep of Jerusalem in 701 BC, but Israel was spared by the hand of God (read about this in Isaiah). However, Jerusalem did fall in 586 BC, only to be rebuilt and repopulated.

How do you explain all of this? Why has Israel survived, not been defeated?

Not because Israel is so strong. Because of God, who is righteous, and faithful to his covenant. Afflicted, but they have not prevailed against me.

In my Christian Education class, we'll talk about this very thing. How can you explain how Israel came to exist and survive from one small family living in Ur? It makes no sense. How can you explain the growth and survival of the church coming from a ragtag band of followers we find at the end of the gospels?

Do you understand how amazing this is?

What about in your life? Have you undergone suffering? Do you ever feel like God has left you? Do you wonder if you'll ever get through, if the furrows on your back will ever stop? Are you suffering in your family, in your marriage, in your job? Do you wonder if you'll ever get out of school or graduate? If you'll ever get out of debt? If you'll ever be truly happy?

Can you sing this song? Do you have this kind of honest confidence?

Let's look and see what we should pray next.

### ***Judgment on those who hate Zion***

*The Lord is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked. 5 May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward! 6 Let them be like the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows up, 7 with which the reaper does not fill his hand nor the binder of sheaves his arms, 8 nor do those who pass by say, "The blessing of the Lord be upon you! We bless you in the name of the Lord!"*

These are not nice verses. They speak of judgment on the wicked, shame and even derision toward them.

What do we do with these? Isn't it true that Jesus says we should pray for our enemies? Isn't it also true that God says he is going to judge them? How do we bring those together?

First let's realize that the psalmist isn't praying that they should or will go to hell, but they won't prosper. He doesn't want them to succeed in their path against God and God's people.

In his commentary on the psalms, James Boice summarizes these maladictory prayers this way:

1. No honor (verse 5). Instead pray that they are defeated and suffer the shame of defeat.
2. No success (verses 6-7). Like dried up grass, shriveled up and dead.
3. No blessing (verse 8). The opposite of Ruth 2:4 and its harvest image. We cannot bless evil.

There is a balance here. In Psalm 128, we mentioned how we are to be involved in the city, how we are to see its welfare and pray for and help it to do well. But we also must care about righteousness, faith, hope and love, to be "in the world and not of it" as they say. To remember that we really are at war against the flesh, world and the devil, and that those are formidable enemies.

We need to remember that the church is being persecuted, and that Satan hates the church will all his might.

And we need to remember that Christians are not perfect by any means (as if you've forgotten), and our people and causes are mixed up, so we need to be cautious in our assertions of this or that thing being Christian. People we stand up for. The church we defend. But the war in Iraq? Maybe. Maybe not. It's an open question. At least I think so. And there are a ton of other topics that Christians and non-Christians agree on and disagree on.

But when we step back, we need to pray that God will stand for his people, to pray for the persecuted church, to ask for blessing to his flock, and for him to stay the hand of his enemies.

### ***The Suffering Servant***

When we step back from this psalm for a second, I hope you can see someone in it. Read again: *3 The plowers plowed upon my back; they made long their furrows.*" Who does that make you think of? I hope Jesus comes to mind, and you may think of Is. 53:5-6: *5 But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that*

---

<sup>3</sup> Boice, 1130-1131

<sup>4</sup> Kidner, 444

brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

And when you hear “yet they have not prevailed against me....4 The Lord is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked” it would be tremendous if you thought of Jesus and how he triumphs in Rev. 11:5: *Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.”* And how Christ is our Victor in John 16:33: *I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”*

It’s about Jesus and his substitutionary work for us. He is our Redeemer and Preserver – Isaiah 50:6: *6 I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.* Isaiah 53:5 puts this together for us: *5 But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.*

Yes, you will want to give up sometimes. Yes, you will think the path is too long, hard, dusty, boring, dangerous, untrue and you’ll want to quit. The fact is that you are far too weak and fragile to put much trust in.

Paul puts it this way in 2 Cor. 4:7-11: *7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11 For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.*

But one of our mottos should be the Latin phrase: *nec tamen consumebatur!* Which means “Yet not consumed!” Which is shorthand for 1 Cor. 15:57: *But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

What will keep you going?

What kept Paul going to go through what he describes in 2 Cor. 11:23-29? *Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. 24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?*

Why did Paul do all of that, why did he persevere in the face of such hardship and suffering?

Hebrews 12 tells us: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. 4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*

We should probably be wary of instantaneous things. A friend of mine has told me that the only way to holiness and godliness is through suffering. Good things take a long time. Things done well are done slowly. Patience. Practice. Perseverance.

These are good things.