

OpenTheo

February 23rd: Psalms 129, 130, 131 & Romans 8:1-17

February 22, 2021



Alastair Roberts

The quieted soul. The Law of the Spirit of life has set me free from the Law of Sin and Death.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Psalms 129, A Song of Ascents Psalm 129 personifies Israel. Within it, a likely post-exilic Israel reflects upon its experience from its youngest days. It begins with what some have called an instance of staircase parallelism.

Two successive lines begin with the words, Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth. The effect of this is a rhetorical heightening of suspense as you move into the body of the psalm. Here Israel speaks as an individual looking back upon his life of hardship.

He's faced a great many enemies. The Amalekites, the Midianites, the Moabites, the Philistines, the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Babylonians. All of these enemies have afflicted Israel, but they have not prevailed.

Israel is described as if it were a field that is ploughed by its enemies. In Micah chapter 3 verse 12 we find similar imagery. Therefore because of you Zion shall be ploughed as a field.

Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins and the mountain of the house a wooded height. Here we also have the introduction of an agricultural metaphor. The enemies of Israel are ploughing like farmers preparing to sow.

The ploughers never prevailed however because the Lord being righteous and faithful to his people cut the cords of the wicked. On numerous occasions he delivered his people from the hand of their oppressors and adversaries. As this personified Israel looks back upon his experience, he can take comfort and assurance in the present.

Much as the Lord had frustrated the schemes of his enemies in the past, so he calls for the Lord to frustrate those who oppose Zion in the present. Here he merges botanical and agricultural imagery. The roofs of houses in Israel would often be made of soil.

Grasses might start to grow there but they would not be able to put down any deep roots and as a result they would be withered and stunted. The psalmist imagines a situation in which reapers might come to the roofs of houses looking for grains to reap. However nothing growing on the roof of such a house would be worthy of harvesting.

Similar imagery is employed in Isaiah chapter 37 verses 26 to 27. Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what I now bring to pass, that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins, while their inhabitants, shorn of strength, are dismayed and confounded and have become like plants of the field, like tender grass, like grass on the housetops, blighted before it has grown. The psalm ends with a curse which is essentially a negated blessing.

Nor do those who pass by say, The blessing of the Lord be upon you, we bless you in the name of the Lord. It is possible that this is a blessing and an answering response. We see something like this in Ruth chapter 2 verse 4, which suggests that it would be a blessing given around the time of harvest.

And behold Boaz came from Bethlehem, and he said to the reapers, The Lord be with you. And they answered, The Lord bless you. Read in its immediate context, Psalm 129 comes after a psalm that speaks about fruitfulness and blessing.

In verses 1 to 4 of Psalm 128, Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways. You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands. You shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house. Your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.

In contrast to the fruitfulness of the righteous, the wicked, though they have tried to plough the back of Israel in persecution and have tried to grow on the rooftops, are frustrated in their growth. The contrast might remind us of the very beginning of the book of Psalms. In verses 3 to 4 of Psalm 1, He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. A question to consider.

In Psalm 129, the psalmist finds reassurance in reflecting upon the continuity that he and the people of his day have with Israel throughout its history. Israel has suffered many forms of persecution and oppression, but the Lord has delivered and preserved them through all. How might we learn from and follow the psalmist's example in our own prayers and thinking? As John Goldengay notes, Psalm 130 is one of the seven traditional penitential psalms.

It presents the individual as an example to the community of Israel. It begins with a cry from the depths. There is, as Conrad Schaefer notes, an emphasis upon a vertical axis.

The psalmist is not merely depressed, he is engulfed in troubles and difficulties and trials, and he is calling for the Lord to lift him out of the abyss. The psalm has the form of a petition, followed by statements concerning the way that sinful human beings can relate to the Lord, addressed to the Lord himself by the psalmist, followed by a description of the psalmist's own posture towards the Lord, followed by an exhortation to Israel to adopt that same posture, a posture determined by confidence in the character of the Lord, as the forgiving and redeeming God. The psalm focuses upon the Lord's forgiveness.

In calling for the Lord to be attentive to his trial and distress, the psalmist meditates upon how terrible it would be if God kept watch over our iniquities, constantly bringing them to his mind and acting in terms of them. Yet the Lord's character is quite otherwise. He is a God of forgiveness, and in a noteworthy theological move, the psalmist claims that it is on account of the Lord's forgiveness that he is to be feared.

Far from leading to presumption, God's forgiveness should lead us to honour him all the more. Confident in the Lord's forgiveness in this manner, the psalmist waits patiently and with assurance for the Lord to deliver him from out of his distress and his trials. He describes the posture of his soul or his life towards the Lord.

His soul is waiting for the Lord like watchmen waiting for the dawn of the day. The watchmen may be waiting for the opportunity to rest as their shift is over, or perhaps they are waiting for the terrors and the fears of the night to be passed. Either way, the visitation of the Lord is compared to the break of dawn, to the first advent of light into a dark situation.

The psalm concludes with an exhortation to Israel to adopt that same posture. The individual calling to the Lord from the depths of his own struggles on account of his sins, calls to the Lord for mercy, and he gives his petition and the confidence that underlies it as an example to the whole of the community that is also suffering on account of its sins. The Lord is one as the forgiving God that can be hoped in.

He is steadfast in his love, faithful to his promises. He is mighty to redeem. He can deliver Israel from all of his iniquities.

A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which meditating upon the fact that the Lord is the forgiving God can inspire us to his worship? Psalm 131, A Song of Ascents of David O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high. I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother.

Like a weaned child is my soul within me. O Israel, hope in the Lord, from this time forth and for evermore. Psalm 131, one of the shortest psalms, has at its heart a most arresting image, one of a child nursed by its mother.

The psalm begins with a fourfold disavowal of the pride, the hubris, and the ambition that can drive us. His heart is not lifted up, his eyes not raised too high. He does not occupy himself with things that are too great for him, nor does he occupy himself with things that are too marvellous or beyond him.

His life and horizons are in the right perspective. He has a sense of dependence upon the Lord, and a keen awareness of his own finitude and limitations, starving both the pride and the ambition within him. We might think here of the instruction in Deuteronomy chapter 29, verse 29, The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

Conrad Schaefer writes, The language encompasses both the vertical axis, too high, and the horizontal plane, occupied is literally warped. The poet neither entertains too lofty allusions, nor spreads himself or herself too thin, meaning one has moderated the relation with God and others. The meaning of heart, eyes, occupied and soul, scopes out both interior attitudes and external actions.

The method is clear. The poet first mentions the heart, the seat of thought, intention and decision. He or she next mentions the eyes, which open to the world around and mirror the interior, as they look after desires and seek things small or great.

Next is how to proceed or walk, rising from the heart, led by the eyes, the person's conduct takes shape. The psalmist then is someone who has taken concern to master his own spirit. He expresses this in the most arresting imagery in verse 2. He has calmed

and quieted his soul, like a weaned child with its mother.

Commentators debate the meaning of the child here. A weaned child would likely be around three years of age. However, John Goldengay remarks that the Jewish commentator Rashi and others have taken this expression not as a reference to a weaned child, but to a child that has just been nursed.

Such a child is satisfied and at rest. The psalmist compares his soul to the child, but perhaps the surprise of the image is found in the identity of the mother. The psalmist is both child, his soul, and mother, the one who is calming and quieting his soul within him.

On several occasions within the Psalms, the psalmist personifies or gives an image for his soul. His soul is like a deer panting for streams of water. His soul is like a bird looking for rest.

And here, his soul is like a child, satisfied with the milk of its mother. In such imagery, the psalmist can express the vulnerability, the dependence, and the pre-rationality of the soul. The soul needs to be protected and tended.

The soul needs to be calmed and quieted, much as you might deal with an infant or with a frightened animal. The imagery also encourages us to think in terms of a self-relationship, neither to identify ourselves completely with the soul, with its immediate feelings and instincts, nor for that matter to identify ourselves completely with that voice of calming truth that is given to the soul. It is important that we recognize our vulnerability, our dependence, our susceptibility to fears and various weaknesses.

However, we must also play the role of the mother that brings calming truth and reassurance to that frightened soul. The psalmist encourages a gentle and understanding calming and addressing of the fears and anxieties within us, something achieved in large measure, as verse 1 would suggest, through the practice of humility. The calmed soul is a soul that recognizes its limitations, but faced with those limitations, has learned to depend upon the Lord.

As in the preceding psalm, the experience of the individual is used as a basis for exhorting the people as a whole. Here, the soul that has been given rest and quieted, as it has learned to accept and acknowledge its own limitations and to depend upon the Lord in its situation, exhorts the nation to take the same posture. This should not just be a temporary posture, looking towards some horizon in the near future.

Rather, this posture of humbling of pride, curbing of ambition and moderating of plans is one that should characterize Israel's life from this time forth and forevermore. Faced with its own fears and anxieties, the motherly truth that will comfort the troubled soul of Israel is the fact that the Lord is greater than all of their struggles. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which, following the example of the psalmist, we

can calm our own souls? Romans chapter 8 verses 1 to 17 Not according to the flesh, but according to the spirit.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh. But those who live according to the spirit set their minds on the things of the spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the spirit is life and peace.

For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You therefore are not in the flesh, but in the spirit, if in fact the spirit of God dwells in you.

Anyone who does not have the spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is life because of righteousness. If the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his spirit who dwells in you.

So then brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh to live according to the flesh, for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, Abba, Father.

The spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him, in order that we may also be glorified with him. Romans chapter 8 is arguably the greatest summit in the mountain range of the epistle. It follows closely the case that Paul has been developing since chapter 5. Romans chapter 8 verses 1 to 11 completes the more immediate argument of Romans chapter 7, unpacking the contrast that was drawn in verses 5 and 6. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit for death, but now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

Romans chapter 7 ended with an expression of the wretchedness of the self in the flesh and with a bifurcated self and a bifurcated law. When the spiritual law of God comes on the scene, sin simply tightens its grip upon Adamic humanity, leaving it in an even bitterer bondage than it was before. While the law was given to Israel in particular rather than to the nations more generally, under the law Israel responded as any other Adamic people would have done had they been in the same position.

There was however a light at the end of the tunnel in the preceding chapter, a means of deliverance from the body of death. The second half of Romans chapter 7 unpacked verse 5 of the chapter and now Romans chapter 8 verses 1 to 11 unpacks verse 6, but

now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the spirit and not in the old way of the written code. The chapter begins by stating the truth that Paul is about to explain and then proceeds to unfold it.

The opening four verses of this chapter are arguably the most central claim of the entire book. Those in the Messiah Jesus have been released from the condition experienced by the eye of chapter 7. They no longer face the condemnation of the law. How can this be the case? Paul starts to develop an answer in the dense and cryptic statement of verse 2. Once again, there are two laws, the law of sin and death and the law of the spirit of life, just as there were at the end of the last chapter.

There is the law that tightened the grip of sin and death and which locked the Jews up and locked the Gentiles out. There is, however, another law, the law of the spirit of life, a law operative in Jesus Christ. Paul has already defended the law against accusations that it is sinful in the previous chapter.

The problem was never with the law itself, it was with the human material that the law was working with. As Paul points out in verse 3, the problem was that the law was weakened by the flesh. Now, however, the law finally achieves its design.

The law failed when weakened by the flesh and hijacked by sin, but now it succeeds when empowered by the spirit for those in the Messiah Jesus. The law sought to give life. It declared, do this and live, but the flesh rendered the performance of this impossible.

God, however, has addressed the problem in sending his son. God's son, Jesus the Messiah, entered into the fleshly Adamic condition. He took upon himself the full reality of human nature.

As he entered into our condition, as the Christ, the representative ruler of the people, he could take the condition upon himself and deal with it within himself. He died as a sin offering, what the words for sin means, so that the power of sin could be condemned in the flesh, the place where it had its greatest hold. This then made possible the fulfillment of the righteous requirement of the law in us, as we now walk according to the principle of the spirit rather than that of the flesh.

There have been questions hanging over Romans since chapter 2, where Paul spoke as though some people would be justified on the last day when judged according to their works. We get something of an answer here. Those in Christ have been delivered from condemnation, as that condemnation has been borne by Christ himself.

And the new life of the spirit, which is producing righteous behavior in them, is conforming them to the judgment that has been declared concerning them in their justification, a judgment that will be reiterated when they are judged according to works on the last day. Although God justifies the ungodly, delivering them into good standing

with himself, those who are justified are not left in sin. It is not the case that after justifying the ungodly out of sheer grace, God throws them back upon themselves to live in a way that merits their salvation.

We never cease to stand in and live by grace. Rather, it is a matter of God's own work within us, transforming us into the image of his son. It's also the fact that this is the shape that salvation and fellowship with God takes.

Paul further draws out the contrast between those who live according to the flesh and those who live according to the spirit. They set their minds on different things, being defined with ways of thinking, desiring, imagining, and loving. The way of the flesh produces death, while the way of the spirit produces life and peace.

Processes of thought lie at the very heart of the problem and are the primary site of the transformation. Paul isn't thinking so much about ideas as he is thinking about dispositions and orientations of the heart and mind with two very different sets of consequences. The central problem of the mind set on the things of the flesh is that it is fundamentally hostile to God.

When the law comes along, it will instinctively rebel against it. It cannot submit to the law and consequently it cannot please God. It is as though the flesh has a severe allergy to the spiritual law and as soon as it is exposed to the law, it starts to manifest itself in all sorts of unpleasant ways.

It spews out sin, it swells up in rebellion. The law then, in a situation of the flesh, makes matters worse. It does not actually produce that life that is pleasing to God.

Rather, it exacerbates the rebellion and the sin. Those in Christ, however, are not in the flesh but in the spirit. This strengthens the argument that the end of Romans 7 wasn't referring to redeemed humanity but fleshly Adamic humanity exposed to the allergen of the spiritual law, primarily in Israel but in a manner illustrative of the common human problem of the flesh.

Flesh was the old realm and sin was its animating power. The new realm is Christ and the spirit and the animating power is also the spirit. It is the presence of the spirit of Christ within us that marks us out as Christ's own.

The spirit's empowering presence within us is also Christ's presence within us. Christ is present within us by his spirit. Although we are still subject to the power of death in our mortal bodies, if Christ is within us, his spirit is life because of God's saving justice which is setting a broken world to rights.

This spirit is the very spirit that raised Jesus himself from the dead and on the last day, our bodies will also be raised by that spirit. Until then however, we already experience the new life of the age to come at work within us. The direct upshot of all of this is that

as people graciously marked out by the spirit of Christ, there is an onus upon us to live according to that spirit in the newness of life that God has granted us.

A life that isn't being lived isn't life so we must live out the life of Christ if we want to possess that life. The alternative of course is living according to the flesh which has death as its natural outcome. We are indebted to live according to the spirit because the spirit of God is the spirit of our adoption.

To receive the spirit and to continue to live according to our old way of life would be to nullify the meaning of our adoption. It would be like an orphan adopted out of the sheer benevolence of his adoptive parents continuing to sleep out on the streets. The fact of his adoption needs to be lived out in communion with his new family.

Living lives of holiness is part of the shape of salvation because living in such a way is living out of the life of the spirit and living in the reality of sonship of God and fellowship with him. As those led by the spirit we are also like the Israelites in the wilderness led by the pillar of cloud and fire being brought toward the promised land of the new creation. The danger for us as it was for the Israelites in the wilderness is that of returning to the old slavery that we left behind rather than trusting our loving father and following him into the freedom of sonship.

The spirit gives us a filial intimacy with God that leads us to cry out to him, Abba Father. The spirit within us assures us that we are God's dearly loved children not least in the fact that he spurs us to address God as father in prayer. If we are God's children though we are also the heirs of God and fellow heirs with his son the Messiah as we share in his standing.

Sharing in the Messiah's sonship however requires commitment to the way of the son which is the way of suffering. Union with Christ which entails life in Christ the place where we enjoy all of these blessings is a place of trial and testing. However just as it was the path that led to glory for Christ so will it prove to be for us.

A question to consider. Looking through Paul's argument here what do you notice about the Trinitarian shape of our salvation?