



Psalm 102 - Prayer to the Eternal King for Help

A prayer of one afflicted, when faint and pleading before the Lord.

Introduction

The title, 'a prayer of one afflicted,' makes it clear that this is an individual lament. At the same time, it is certainly not individualistic: the 'I' who sings this, whose troubles are so poignantly described here in all their inexplicability, sees himself as a member of a community, Zion; his own well-being is ultimately bound up with the promised well-being of God's people. The psalm also contrasts the shortness of human life with God's enduring life. Probably the repeated 'my days' are intended to put 'your [God's] years'.

As mentioned, the psalm is suited for one whose troubles seem to be unexplained, not unlike Job's: even God's 'indignation and anger' does not appear to be directed toward any specific sin. Nevertheless, singing this prayer equips the eye of faith to see God's ultimate purposes for the whole people of God and to look forward to participation in that blessedness.

The psalm describes Jerusalem in a state of ruin. If this is taken as literal ruin, Psalm 102 may come from those in exile who mourn over both their personal and national affliction. Adam Clarke followed this thinking, suggesting that the author could have been Daniel, Jeremiah, or Nehemiah. However, it may be that the ruin of Zion described is more poetic in nature and the psalm is pre-exilic.

In traditional Christian liturgy, this has been regarded as one of the seven penitential psalms, along with Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 130, and 143.

Psalm 102:1-2 - O Lord, Hear Me When I Call!

The psalm opens by sounding a note of bold urgency: the cry is desperate, and the singer wants God to respond speedily. He fears that God may continue to hide his face from the psalmist; refer to the comments made on Psalm 13:1, 22:24, 27:9, 30:7, 44:24, 69:17, 88:14, and 143:7. The faithful can present their troubles to God with confidence.

- 1 Hear my prayer, O Lord;
let my cry come to you.
- 2 Do not hide your face from me
on the day of my distress.
Incline your ear to me;
answer me speedily on the day when I call.

Psalm 102:1-2

Hear my prayer, O Lord. According to its title, this psalm comes from an anonymous afflicted one. The psalmist begs for God to hear his prayer, knowing that a good and compassionate God could not fail to hear and help. The first two verses of this psalm are filled with phrases that allude to other psalms.

Let my cry come to you. The prayer was passionate for the psalmist cried out on the day of my distress. The psalmist was desperate that God would bend towards him to hear and answer his prayer but he could pray with confidence: *<<And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?>>* (Luke 18:7).

Do not hide your face from me. The affliction itself was bad enough, but made worse beyond measure by the sense that God did not see or care. When he had the sense that God's favour and face were evident, then affliction could be endured.

Incline your ear. The psalmist used expressive language to speak of his need. The idea - figurative, of course - is that God in heaven bows his head to earth to hear the psalmist's plea for help - his cry, "Hear me, help me."

Answer me speedily on the day when I call. The psalmist is not demanding an answer from God but is offering up his prayer in expectation that God will reply: *<<Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer>>* (Psalm 4:1), and: *<<Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death>>* (Psalm 13:3).

Psalm 102:3-11 - I Am in Distress as My Enemies Taunt Me.

These verses go on to describe what the singer feels like amid his distress. The psalm leaves out the specifics of the external troubles in order to focus on the singer's sense of discouragement: his bones burn, his heart is struck down, he forgets to eat his food, he groans loudly, and his bones cling to his flesh – all these are vivid images of what it feels like to be consumed by sorrow and tempted to despair, which has such withering effects on one's body. There is a terrible sense of being alone hence a reference to the solitary birds of vv.6-7, which makes the taunts of the enemies pierce all the more deeply. The situation is one of mourning, expressed by ashes and tears, because it makes one think that these circumstances

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must be due to God's indignation and anger; and yet there is no suggestion in the psalm that there are specific sins to be confessed and forsaken. A person feeling such things inevitably senses his own mortality: his days pass away like smoke, i.e. quickly, and are like an evening shadow, i.e. they are soon gone.

- ³ For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.
- ⁴ My heart is stricken and withered like grass;
I am too wasted to eat my bread.
- ⁵ Because of my loud groaning
my bones cling to my skin.
- ⁶ I am like an owl of the wilderness,
like a little owl of the waste places.
- ⁷ I lie awake;
I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.

Psalm 102:3-7

For my days pass away like smoke. In a Job-like tone, the psalmist described his agony. His days passed like meaningless smoke. Pain from deep inside his body made his bones feel as if they were burning. His heart ached and he had no appetite for food.

My heart is stricken and withered like grass. The psalmist describes the pain he is feeling at his situation. David had similar feelings when he realised the enormity of his sin in calling an unauthorised census that resulted in the Lord's judgement on the people of Israel: <<*But afterwards, David was stricken to the heart because he had numbered the people. David said to the Lord, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O Lord, I pray you, take away the guilt of your servant; for I have done very foolishly'*>> (2 Samuel 24:10).

I am too wasted to eat my bread. Ahab, smitten with one kind of grief, David with another, and Daniel with a third, all 'forgot' or 'refused to eat their bread.' Refer to 1 Kings 21:4, 2 Samuel 12:16 and Daniel 10:3 respectively. Such natural companions are mourning and fasting.

An owl; a little owl. Exact identification of these birds is not possible. Fortunately, the point is still clear: the stress is on their solitary life in desolate places, i.e. the wilderness, and the waste places. Some translations have the first owl as a pelican, which is the same word that appears in Isaiah 34:11 and Zephaniah 2:14. Whatever its true identity it is taken to be a solitary and mournful bird. Charles Spurgeon commented, "The psalmist likens himself to two birds

which were commonly used as emblems of gloom and wretchedness.” This fits with his concluding remark, “I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.”

- ⁸ All day long my enemies taunt me;
those who deride me use my name for a curse.
- ⁹ For I eat ashes like bread,
and mingle tears with my drink,
- ¹⁰ because of your indignation and anger;
for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside.
- ¹¹ My days are like an evening shadow;
I wither away like grass.

Psalm 102:8-11

All day long my enemies taunt me. The psalmist’s affliction came from more than poor health; he had enemies set against him. They opposed him with constant disapproval and rejection. They added a tone of mocking and cursing, i.e. those who deride me use my name for a curse.

For I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink. The life of the psalmist seemed to be constant mourning: <<*In every province, wherever the king’s command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes*>> (Esther 4:3). The marks of mourning - ashes and weeping were as familiar to him as food and drink.

Because of your indignation and anger. The sense of mourning was all the more bitter because of sense that this affliction came as some kind of punishment from God.

For you have lifted me up and thrown me aside. Spurgeon observed, “He felt that God was treating him as wrestlers treat one another, when a man deliberately lifts up his opponent in order that he may give him the worse fall.”

I wither away like grass. Overwhelmed with a sense of divine rejection, he felt that his life was short and had little meaning.

Psalm 102:12-17 - O Lord, You Will Have Pity on Zion.

The previous section begins and ends with a sense of how short the life of a sufferer seems; this section looks from that to the enduring life and reign of God who is enthroned forever and remembered throughout all generations, which secures the ultimate success of his saving purposes in the world (v.15). The connection between the afflicted individual and God having pity on Zion (v.13) is not immediately obvious. God regards the prayer of the destitute, which indicates

that God's ultimate good for Zion, its role in bringing to pass that the nations will fear the name of the Lord, includes ultimate good for each of the faithful members of God's people. Because God does not despise their prayer, they can be assured that their momentary grieving is part of a larger scheme, and their endurance in faith contributes to it.

¹² But you, O Lord, are enthroned for ever;
your name endures to all generations.

Psalm 102:12

But you, O Lord, are enthroned for ever. The previous lines spoke of the psalmist's own sense of frailty and the fleeting nature of life. The present line gives a sharp and wonderful contrast. Man may have days like shadows or wither away like grass, but Yahweh shall endure forever. The psalmist can therefore reject all sense of self-reliance and hold on to a true God reliance. Note the contrast between the first 11 verses, which was filled with the personal references I, me, and my. With the words, but you, the focus changes and is set on God.

Your name endures to all generations. The phrase is borrowed from Exodus 3:15, describing God's 'name' Yahweh. Not only would the Lord himself endure, but his influence and greatness would be declared to all generations, never passing away.

¹³ You will rise up and have compassion on Zion,
for it is time to favour it;
the appointed time has come.

¹⁴ For your servants hold its stones dear,
and have pity on its dust.

Psalm 102:13-14

You will rise up and have compassion on Zion. Although in deep affliction, the psalmist had steadfast confidence that God would act and show mercy to Jerusalem once again.

The appointed time has come. At God's appointed time Jerusalem would be the object of God's favour. He had a set time for their restoration and would not forever leave them in ruin. If this psalm is set in the exile, the appointed time points to the seventy years set by God for Israel's captivity: *<<This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon for seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste. I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations>>* (Jeremiah 25:11-13), and: *<<For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place>>* (Jeremiah 29:10). Spurgeon commented, "There was an appointed time for the Jews in Babylon, and when the weeks were fulfilled, no bolts nor bars could longer imprison the ransomed of the Lord."

The modern reader should also remember the words of Jesus: *<<So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority'>>* (Acts 1:6-7).

For your servants hold its stones dear. It is in human nature to reject that which is broken or torn down, but God's servants have a love that goes beyond human nature. They see the ruined city, take pleasure in its stones and have pity on its dust.

The psalmist was overwhelmed by a sense of his own ruin and need (vv.1-11). Yet he did not allow that to turn him completely inward; he also cared for his community. If every stone of God's city was precious to his servants, then by analogy every stone representing the people of God in his great building: *<<Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ>>* (1 Peter 2:4-5). Spurgeon again commented, "The poorest church member, the most grievous backslider, the most ignorant convert, should be precious in our sight, because forming a part, although possibly a very feeble part, of the new Jerusalem."

- 15 The nations will fear the name of the Lord,
and all the kings of the earth your glory.
- 16 For the Lord will build up Zion;
he will appear in his glory.
- 17 He will regard the prayer of the destitute,
and will not despise their prayer.

Psalm 102:15-17

The nations will fear the name of the Lord. The restoration of mercy to Jerusalem is only the first part of a much larger work among the nations. God would reveal himself so that all the kings of the earth would honour his name and glory. For the OT expectation that one day Gentile nations and kings will come to know the true God by way of Israel or its Messiah, see also Psalm 72:11, and Isaiah 52:1, 60:3, and 62:2.

For the Lord will build up Zion. The psalmist speaks with confidence that God will never abandon his people Israel. Likewise, Jesus will take care of his own people: *<<And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it>>* (Matthew 16:18).

He will appear in his glory. The kings and kingdoms of the world honour Yahweh because he revealed himself in his work towards Zion. His blessing and mercy to Jerusalem is a foretaste of his goodness to all the earth, when he will regard the prayer of the destitute, the same Hebrew word used for prayer in the title. Spurgeon observed, "Only the poorest of the people were left to sigh and cry among the ruins of the beloved city; as for the rest, they were strangers in a strange land, and far away from the holy place, yet the prayers of the captives and the forlorn offscourings of the land would be heard of the Lord."

Of course, a greater demonstration of God's love for both his people Israel and the rest of the world was still to come as his plan unfolded: <<For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life>> (John 3:16).

Psalm 102:18-22 - Let Them Always Remember This in Zion.

This section further develops the previous section's reflections on Zion's future. The days of Zion's glory lie in the future, in the time of a generation to come (v.18), who will need this record of God's promises and faithfulness to his people of all eras. In particular, the psalm allows the singers to see their present troubles, along with God's help, as a contribution to the praises to be offered in the future. The time will come when God's people will reflect on how God looked down to hear, a past event to them, although still future to the singers! They are to lift

their voices to declare in Zion the name of the Lord; apparently the Gentiles will also celebrate (v.15).

18 Let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet unborn may praise the Lord:
19 that he looked down from his holy height,
from heaven the Lord looked at the earth,
20 to hear the groans of the prisoners,
to set free those who were doomed to die;
21 so that the name of the Lord may be declared in Zion,
and his praise in Jerusalem,
22 when peoples gather together,
and kingdoms, to worship the Lord.

Psalm 102:18-22

Let this be recorded for a generation to come. God's goodness to Zion and the entire earth will be a written testimony for the future, so that a people yet unborn may praise the Lord: <<Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead>> (Romans 4:23-24). This is an interesting suggestion: that God considers and plans for those yet to be born: <<We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified>> (Romans 8:28-30). People do not enter into the consciousness of God when they are conceived in their mother's womb, but when they are conceived in the heart and mind of God.

He looked down from his holy height. The psalmist pictured God bending down low from heaven:

- To see, he looked at the earth.
- To hear the groans of the prisoners.
- To act, i.e. to set free those who were doomed to die.
- To proclaim the name of the Lord in Zion.
- To gather, i.e. when peoples gather together.
- To receive, to serve and worship the Lord.

Psalm 102:23-24 - O Lord, Do Not Shorten My Life!

As already mentioned, the person who feels what vv.3-11 describe is keenly aware of his own mortality; it seems like the troubles will shorten his life even further. Probably, in view of the long-range expectations for Zion's future (vv.12-22), the prayer is that the God whose years endure throughout all generations would preserve the life of his faithful ones so that they may see something of this wonderful future.

23 He has broken my strength in mid-course;
he has shortened my days.

Psalm 102:23

He has broken my strength in mid-course. The psalmist began this song by recognising his own weakness (vv.1-11). Then he praised God for his deliverance and ultimate victory (vv.12-22). Now in the last section of this psalm, he confesses once again his weakness and frailty, i.e. he has shortened my days.

He has broken, he has shortened. In addition, the psalmist recognised that it was God who either caused or allowed his weakness and frailty. Here the psalmist wrote with some of the same sense as the much later apostle Paul, who saw God's plan and even glory in his present weakness: <<*but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'* So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong>> (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

24 'O my God,' I say, 'do not take me away
at the mid-point of my life,
you whose years endure
throughout all generations.'

Psalm 102:24

'O my God,' I say, 'do not take me away at the mid-point of my life'. Overwhelmed by both his sense of great weakness in affliction, and by the sense of God's greatness and ultimate victory, the psalmist did the right thing. He cried out in prayer, pleading for God's merciful help.

You whose years endure throughout all generations. God not only lives outside of the constraints of time, he existed before time even began and will go on forever: <<*Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God*>> (Genesis 21:33), <<*Surely God is great, and we do not know him; the number of his years is unsearchable*>>

(Job 36:26), and: <<Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith – to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever! Amen>> (Romans 16:25-27).

Psalm 102:25-28 - The Lord Is Eternal, and His Faithfulness Outlasts the World.

The psalm finishes with words addressed to God, meditating on God's everlasting being and purpose. The average person experiences the physical world as a long-established operation, the English saying, 'as old as the hills' comes to mind; and yet God is older still. Of old, God laid the foundation of the earth; he was there before the world was created: <<Lord, you have been our dwelling-place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God>> (Psalm 90:1-2). And although the earth and heavens will perish and will all wear out like a garment, God will remain. In fact, the years will not change him; his is always the same. This means that his purposes will not change either, and, even if it takes, what seems to humans, a long time to bring those purposes about, he will never grow weary or give up: <<But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day>> (2 Peter 3:8). Thus the psalm closes with confidence that goes well beyond the individual worshippers' lifetime, expecting God to keep his promises to many faithful generations descended from today's faithful (v.28).

- 25 Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
- 26 They will perish, but you endure;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You change them like clothing, and they pass away;
- 27 but you are the same, and your years have no end.

Psalm 102:25-27

Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth. Hebrews 1:10-12 cites these verses from the Greek Septuagint, which is very close to the Hebrew. Because the Book of Hebrews applies the words to Jesus, some interpreters think of this passage as 'messianic.' However, it is better to observe that the text is not explicitly messianic; rather, NT authors call Jesus Lord, Greek *Kyrios*, the LXX rendering of Yahweh, and apply to him several OT texts about Yahweh, e.g. Philippians 2:10-11, using Isaiah 45:23; 1 Peter 2:3, using Psalm 34:8; 1 Peter 3:15, using Isaiah 8:13. Further, Christ's involvement in creation supports this pattern <<*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word*
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was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people>> (John 1:1-4), <<He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him>> (Colossians 1:15-16), and: <<Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds>> (Hebrews 1:1-2). Refer also to the comment made on Psalm 97:7. The author of Hebrews uses the expression the same again for Jesus: <<Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever>> (Hebrews 13:8).

They will perish, but you endure. The contrast was clear to the psalmist. The mighty God is eternal, the meaning of <<*throughout all generations*>> (v.24), and can do all things, i.e. you laid the foundation of the earth. The things God creates may perish: <<*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away*>> (Matthew 24:35), but he himself will endure: <<*To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed*>> (Daniel 7:14).

You change them like clothing, and they pass away. God has complete power over creation, including the power to change them as he pleases. Yet he himself is unchanging, You are the same, and eternal, Your years will have no end.

²⁸ The children of your servants shall live secure;
their offspring shall be established in your presence.

Psalm 102:28

The children of your servants shall live secure. The psalmist ended his prayer and this psalm with a note of confidence, even triumph. His affliction seems to have remained and he does not proclaim hope for his present trouble. At the same time, he is utterly confident of God's goodness and ultimate victory for his people, here called your servants. If the psalmist did not see it in his own day, his children surely would and their offspring shall be established by God's goodness and strength.

The children; their offspring. The Lord, who is everlasting, can ensure that the descendants of his servants will dwell secure, i.e. will enjoy God's love and Zion's future. Refer also to the comments made on Psalm 100:5 and 103:17-18.

This is a remarkable declaration of trust in God's promise to make all things right and good, if not in the present day, then in days to come. It shows a wonderful progression in Psalm 102:

- He began with honest declaration of his own misery.
- Then he looked outside of himself to his community.
- Then he looked outside of his community to the world.
- Then he looked outside of his time to future generations.