

April 28, 2024

A PRAYER OF LAMENT AND HOPE IN REDEMPTION

Psalm 102

*(3 of 5 in a series of selected Psalms)*

In John Piper's book, *Desiring God*, he writes, "You might turn the world on its head by changing one word in your creed. The old tradition says, *The chief end of man is to glorify God AND enjoy him forever*. . . . This book aims to persuade you that *The chief end of man is to glorify God BY enjoying him forever*."<sup>1</sup> I'm going to admit that my aim is a bit lower than that this morning. I'm not aiming to turn the world on its head. But I would like to change one little word for our benefit.

This morning we're looking at Psalm 102, and we're told in the superscript of the psalm exactly the situation. It reads, "A prayer of one afflicted, when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the Lord." In other words, this psalm is a prayer written by one who was in a bad situation. We'll see that he was most likely sick. The superscript says "faint," which is to say *weak*, and probably weak in every way. His health had gone downhill, and he was probably emotionally and spiritually spent. And so he cried out to God with this prayer that we now see before us as Psalm 102.

But—and here's my change of one word—I want to suggest that Psalm 102 is not simply "a prayer of one afflicted" but "a prayer *for* one afflicted." That is, I think this psalm was written so that we might have help in knowing how to cry out to the Lord in the middle of our own affliction. After all, we are well aware that this can be a world of great sorrow. In a recent Sunday school class Tom noted that though the book of Psalms ends with praise—as the last five psalms begin and end with a call to praise the Lord—the most prevalent kind of psalm we find among the 150 psalms is a psalm of lament, a psalm where the author is crying out to the Lord in the midst of his pain and sorrow. Indeed, if the Psalter is a picture of the Christian life—showing us that we're headed toward an eternal day of ceaseless praise—it shows us right out of the gate to expect much sorrow and pain in our lives until then.

After the first two psalms show us that there is a path of wisdom and foolishness and that the path of wisdom requires us to bow the knee to God's holy, righteous, and reigning king, the Psalter immediately moves to lament. In Psalm 3 David speaks of many foes rising against him, in Psalm 4 he speaks of his distress, in Psalm 5 he speaks of his groaning, in Psalm 6 he tells the Lord he's languishing, and that's just the opening of the Psalter. If we were to continue, we would read the psalmist expressing deep sorrow again and again.

You and I live in a world where we know the pain of being rejected, facing sickness, being disappointed, and hurt. We experience small sufferings daily, perhaps, but sometimes we face

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1996), 15.

larger pains like seeing a parent, spouse, or child die. We watch people we love run away from the Lord toward sin. We observe individuals whom we care about so deeply struggle daily with deep abuse that has come their way, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. And it can lead us to despair. Probably right now you can think of someone who has sunk into despair and turned from the Lord, perhaps voicing their anger at God as the reason they've walked away or their disappointment in what has happened in their lives as simply too much to overcome.

But just as affliction can lead us to despair, it can also provoke us to prayer. It can open our eyes to see once more our desperate need for the Lord. Indeed, this is the purpose of our pain. It is to move us toward the Lord in prayer. But what does that look like? What does it look like to pray in the midst of pain so deep you feel like you might not survive it? That's what lament psalms are for. Our Lord has given us example after example throughout the Psalter of what it looks like to cry out to our Lord in prayer in the midst of our pain and sorrow. He knows we need help, and so he's given it to us these psalms of lament. And Psalm 102 is just such a psalm. That's why I say we should see this psalm as more than simply a prayer *of* the afflicted one but also as a prayer *for* the afflicted one. We should let it guide us in knowing how to pray in the midst of our pain. So, as we look at this psalm together, I want to note a few things about how to cry out to the Lord in our pain. First, we cry out to the Lord, knowing he wants to hear us.

### **Cry out to the Lord, knowing he wants to hear us**

Let me start by stating the obvious: the Holy Spirit inspired Psalm 102 to be written. We don't know the human author of this psalm, but we do know (like every other word of Scripture) that God himself, through the Holy Spirit, moved the psalmist to write down these precise words. Why is this important to note? Well, it's important because we need to recognize that God is the one giving the psalmist these words to pray back to God. Our Heavenly Father is acting here like a parent instructing a young child, saying, "When you want something, here are the words I want you to use in asking for it." Didn't we all say that to our children? We taught them to say, "Please," "Thank you," "May I," and the like. Well, here is God giving the psalmist words to pray—but not just to pray but also to write down—so that we might see them and receive instruction for how to pray in times of pain and sorrow.

And so note what the psalmist does. He first starts by asking the Lord to hear him, when it feels like God is absent. He writes, "Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you! Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress! Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call!" (vv. 1-2).

The psalmist is desperate. He's pleading with God to hear him, while asking him not to hide his face from him. And when he uses that image of God hiding his face, he's asking God no longer to appear as if he's silent or removed from the psalmist's situation, unwilling to intervene and do something about it. Our Father shows us through this that he wants us to cry to him in our desperation, ask him to intervene in our circumstances, and hear our requests and respond to them. Ironically, by the Spirit moving the psalmist to pray and write these words, the Lord is

showing us that he indeed *wants* to hear us and will hear us as we cry out to him. But the psalmist doesn't stop there. He shares with the Lord all of his pain.

It's clear from verses 3-11 that the psalmist is suffering physically. It seems that he is sick and thinks he could die. He speaks of his bones being like a furnace, which could be a reference to a high fever (v. 3). His heart feels discouraged and weak so that he can't even muster the strength to eat (v. 4). He groans in his pain and is getting so thin that you can see his bones through his flesh (v. 5). He feels isolated and lonely, comparing himself to birds in isolated settings (vv. 6-7). He can't sleep (v. 7). He's taunted by enemies (v. 8). He's weeping so much it feels like he's drinking his tears (v. 9). He feels like his days are fading away as quickly as smoke vanishes (v. 3), evening shadows disappear (v. 11), or grass withers (v. 11). He also notes that this is because of God's indignation and anger (v. 10), which could indicate that he's aware of specific sin that has led to this. But it doesn't have to be that way. It could be that he's suffering in exile (there's evidence of this later in the psalm), and he knows they're there because of their sin. Or it could be that he's acknowledging that God is sovereign and suffering is in the world because of man's sin. Whatever the case, he is clearly holding nothing back. He's pouring out his heart in as descriptive of a fashion as one can. If he feels it, he expresses it.

Again, this is what the Lord wants us to do. It's why the Spirit moved the psalmist to write this psalm. He's showing us how to respond in faith when we're in the depths of our pain. Luther once said, "God both loves and hates our afflictions. He loves them when they provoke us to prayer. He hates them when we are driven to despair by them."<sup>2</sup> I think he is right. And Psalm 102 is pleading with us through this example to cry out to the Lord, rather than turning away and being led toward anger, resentment, bitterness, and despair. Instead, let us follow the guide our Father gives us and cry out to him, cast all your cares on him in detail, knowing he wants to hear us. Second, as we cry out to the Lord, remember God's unchanging nature.

### **Remember God's unchanging, eternal nature**

Starting in verse 12, the psalm abruptly shifts. The psalmist has been talking about how he is fading away like withering grass in verse 11, and then he begins a contrast, saying, "But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever; you are remembered throughout all generations. And what this marks is the psalmist reflecting on the Lord's eternal reign and unchanging nature.

Now, let me note why this is crucial. Lament isn't merely a therapeutic exercise. That is, it's not just you letting out all your frustrations and pain to the Lord. That's part of it, but that's not all. It also involves you reminding yourself of what is true and speaking that to yourself. For example, you might say as you lament, "Lord, why are you quiet and absent from me?" reflecting your heart that you feel alone and abandoned in your struggle. But then you may proclaim, "But I know that you never leave us nor forsake us." Do you see? You cry out in your pain, and you

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. XVIII, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 87.

remind yourself of what is true. Both are necessary elements in lament because when we lament we're not just letting all that is inside come out; we're fighting for faith in the midst of our pain and suffering. We're fighting to hold on to what is true, even through our tears.

That's why the psalmist reminds himself of God's unchanging nature in this psalm of lament. Note how often he reminds himself that God is eternal and does not change. He's already mentioned it in verse 12, but again in verse 24. After returning to his complaint in verse 23, he says, "'O my God,' I say, 'take me not away in the midst of my days—you whose years endure throughout all generations!'" Then he ends the psalm, saying, "Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end" (vv. 25-27). He affirms that God is eternal and unchanging.

Now, why is it important for the psalmist to remind himself that God is eternal and unchanging? The answer is because he knows what God's character is and that he can be counted on. For example, He says in verse 17, "He regards the prayer of the destitute and does not despise their prayer." And in verse 28 he adds, "The children of your servants shall dwell secure; their offspring shall be established before you."

If it's true that God does not forsake his people so that his children dwell secure, then that is always true—no matter what our circumstances are. If it's true that God hears our cries when we're in pain, then that's always true—no matter what our circumstances are. We know who our God is when we aren't discouraged, disoriented, and overcome in our pain. He is the God who abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness toward his children. So, it is important in the midst of our pain to remember that he never changes, ever. We can always trust him to be who he is—forever. He is the eternal unchanging God. If he lacked either of these attributes, we would be hopeless. If he weren't eternal, then how could we count on him to forever hear us or be able to deliver on his eternal promises? If he changed, then who knows what he might be like today? But because he is unchanging and eternal, we can count on him to always be who he has always been. Also, because as the eternal, unchanging God, he is able to keep his promises, we should note a third element in our lament: we must remember God's promises.

### **Remember God's promises**

In the midst of his lament, the psalmist turns his attention to God's promises—focusing specifically on his promise to restore Zion (or Jerusalem). Now, it may be because he's in exile, thinking of the prophets' declaration that God would one day bring his people back to Jerusalem and restore it. We just finished a study through the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which told of the time that the exiles were released from Babylon as Persian kings granted them permission to return to Jerusalem so that they might rebuild the temple, the city, and the wall. Well, the Lord had promised these days in the prophets. They'd even promised a day when the nations would stream to Jerusalem and worship the Lord. And so the psalmist locks on in his prayer of lament to this precious promise and reminds himself that God will indeed fulfill this.

He proclaims, “But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever; you are remembered throughout all generations. You will arise and have pity on Zion; it is the time to favor her; the appointed time has come. For your servants hold her stones dear and have pity on her dust. Nations will fear the name of the LORD, and all the kinds of the earth will fear your glory. For the LORD builds up Zion; he appears in his glory; he regards the prayer of the destitute and does not despise their prayer” (vv. 12-17).

By mentioning the “appointed time,” it may be that he sees the years drawing close to when Jeremiah prophesied Jerusalem would be restored. Regardless, he’s holding on to promises of a better day to come. However, I also want us to note that he’s not simply envisioning the rebuilding of Jerusalem. After all, as I’ve noted, the prophets spoke of a great day to come when the nations would swarm there and worship the Lord. And the psalmist speaks of that day as well. In the midst of speaking of God restoring Zion, he notes that future generations will one day see what the Lord has done, namely, “that he looked down from his holy height; from heaven the LORD looked at the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die, that they may declare in Zion the name of the LORD, and in Jerusalem his praise, when peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to worship the Lord” (vv. 19-22).

He’s envisioning that great day when the “peoples” and “kingdoms” come to worship the Lord. He’s envisioning the blessing of the last days. He’s not only holding on to the promise of Jerusalem being rebuilt. He’s holding on to the promise that one day God will make everything right. And this too is something we must do in our lament.

As we cry out to the Lord in our pain and suffering, remembering that he is the eternal, unchanging, faithful God, we can also hold on to his promise that one day all will be made new. And we need to hold onto that because it’s our ultimate hope. We may well recover from sickness in this age, but not always. Our hope isn’t in this age only. It’s in the age to come. And so, as we lament, we remember that great day is coming. One day there’ll be no more crying or pain. That day is sure, and so we must force ourselves to open our eyes and look to this sure hope, even in the midst of our pain and lament. And, finally, we must keep our focus on the glory and praise of God.

### **Keep your focus on the praise and glory of God**

If there’s ever a time to be self-absorbed, it’s when we’re in pain. In the midst of our pain, we can be tempted not to think of others. Our world gets quite small. We just want *our* issue resolved. And yet we must make sure as we lament that we keep our focus on wanting God to receive praise and be glorified. That’s what the psalmist does here. Interestingly, in the only time in the Psalter, the author calls for something to be written down and recorded.

As he prays about God restoring Zion, he says, “Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet to be created may praise the Lord” (v. 18), and then he speaks of God bringing the nations to Jerusalem, as we’ve noted, but look to what end. He says in verses 21-22, “That

they may declare in Zion the name of the LORD, and in Jerusalem his praise, when peoples gather together and kingdoms, to worship the LORD.”

The psalmist is longing for God to be praised by a generation to come and for the Lord to be worshiped by a people all over the globe. In the midst of his pain he is still longing for God to be praised and glorified. This must characterize all believers at all times—a focus on the glory and praise of God. We can never let our focus be diverted from this pursuit.

Remember when Paul wrote to the Philippians from prison, and it was quite possible he could die. So, he writes to them weighing—as if the decision were in his hands—the pros of living and dying? He wrote to them, “With full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil 1:20-21). Paul knew Christ would be honored regardless of what happened because if he died and went to be with the Lord, he’d be going to the one he treasured above all else. And if he remained alive, his life was about Jesus and seeing him honored above all else. That wasn’t Paul exhibiting *super* Christianity. That must simply be the heart of all believers. And so keep your focus on God being praised and glorified, and pray to that end in your lament.

Last week in Sunday school Tim Ellsworth shared with the class that when Noah was diagnosed with leukemia his heart’s desire was that he’d respond to all of this in such a way that Christ was honored and his children would see that no one is more worthy of their devotion than Jesus. That must be our focus, even in lament.

So, in the midst of your pain, cry out to the one who loves us and sent his Son to live, die, and be raised for us. And as you do so, fix your focus on God’s unchanging nature, his certain promises, and the fact that he is worthy of the praise of all. Let’s fix our eyes on these things now as we come to the table. Amen.