

The Everlasting God

Psalms for Uncertain Times

Psalm 102:1-28

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Our world has always been full of troubles and pain, but right now we're more aware of it. We're reminded that we're fragile. Sickness and death are real. And that's not all. People feel isolated. And they're reminded of broken relationships. Isolation has also intensified depression and anxiety. And many feel like God is distant. Maybe some of you are experiencing spiritual dryness or doubt.

As Christians, what should we do in the face of trouble and pain? Our tendency is to look for answers. We want to know: "Why does God allow suffering in the world? Why does he allow suffering in my life?" And we're in good company when we ask these questions. Theologians have sought answers to the problem of evil for centuries. But as my theology professor was fond of saying, the Bible's not very concerned with the arrival of evil; it's more concerned with the survival of evil.¹ I've quoted him many times, but I think it bears repeating.

The Bible doesn't give us a lot of logical explanations for why God allows suffering. Instead, the people of God simply cry out, "How long, O Lord?" The biblical writers know that God won't allow bad things to continue forever. And so, the people of God simply ask God to set the world to its rights. In the face of evil, the Bible's posture isn't propositional; it's prayerful.

And so, if the proper response to pain is prayer, we need to learn *how* to pray in our pain. Thankfully the Psalms invite us to pray in our pain. They even teach us how to pray in our pain. But they don't teach us to pray through instruction. They teach us through modelling. Athanasius says "Most of the Bible speaks *to* us. The Psalms speak *for* us."² They are *God's* words to us that give *us* words to speak back to God.

Last week, Psalm 100 taught us the role of praise in our pain. This week, we're going to look at the role of protest in our pain. Our psalm this morning is Psalm 102. It's a psalm of lament. It teaches us how to pray to God during these difficult days that we're in. But my goal this morning is to go beyond our present crisis. I want to provide a pattern for prayer for you to use for the rest of your life; whenever you face times of pain and trouble.

Psalm 102:1-28

¹Hear my prayer, O LORD;

let my cry come to you!

²Do 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!

³For my days pass away like smoke,

and my bones burn like a furnace.

¹ Graham Cole, from class lectures. See also *God the Peacemaker: How Atonement Brings Shalom*, p. 19 n. 2.

² Quoted in John Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms. For original, see St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, Appendix: The Letter of St. Athanasius to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms.

⁴*My heart is struck down like grass and has withered;
I forget to eat my bread.*
⁵*Because of my loud groaning
my bones cling to my flesh.*
⁶*I am like a desert owl of the wilderness,
like an owl of the waste places;*
⁷*I lie awake;
I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop.*
⁸*All the day 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 taken me up and thrown me down.*
¹¹*My days are like an evening shadow;
I wither away like grass.*
¹²*But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever;
you are remembered throughout all generations.*
¹³*You will arise and have pity on Zion;
it is the time to favor her;
the appointed time has come.*
¹⁴*For your servants hold her stones dear
and have pity on her dust.*
¹⁵*Nations will fear the name of the LORD,
and all the kings of the earth will fear your glory.*
¹⁶*For the LORD builds up Zion;
he appears in his glory;*
¹⁷*he regards the prayer of the destitute
and does not despise their prayer.*
¹⁸*Let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet to be created 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*that they may declare in Zion the name of the LORD,
and in Jerusalem his praise,*
²²*when peoples gather together,
and kingdoms, to worship the LORD.*
²³*He has broken my strength in midcourse;
he has shortened my days.*
²⁴*“O my God,” I say, “take me not away
in the midst of my days—
you whose years endure
throughout all generations!”*

²⁵*Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.*
²⁶*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,
²⁷*but you are the same, and your years have no end.*
²⁸*The children of your servants shall dwell secure;
their offspring shall be established before you.*

Most psalms of lament contain the same four elements. There's always a cry of petition, asking God to act. And there's always a complaint or protest lodged at God for the psalmist's present circumstances. But these psalms don't end in protest. They also contain confidence in God's promises. And a commitment to praise God when their prayers are answered.

Psalm 102 contains all of these elements. But they're mixed in to the overall structure. This psalm is divided into three stanzas. These three stanzas give us three ways to respond to trying times.

PRAY TO GOD IN YOUR PAIN. (1-11)

Let's begin with the first stanza in verses 1-11. It teaches us that we should pray to God when we're in pain.³

This stanza includes a petition and a protest. The petition comes in verses 1-2. Notice, it's not just a prayer request. He's crying out to God. He piles pleas on top of pleas. Hear my prayer; let my cry come to you! Do not hide your face from me! Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily! It's an impassioned plea.

And why is he crying out to God? Verses 3-11 give us the reason. He lodges his complaint or protest against God. Clearly something is threatening his life. We see this in verses 3 and 11. His days pass away, they wither away. Maybe the psalmist is facing a terminal illness. Maybe threats from an enemy. We're not told explicitly what's going on. And that's a good thing. The lack of specificity allows this psalm to have applicability for all people in all kinds of difficult circumstances.

But although we're not given the specific situation, we're told what it feels like. We know he's in pain.

He's experiencing physical and psychological pain. This comes out in verses 3-5. His bones burn. They cling to his flesh. His body is gaunt. He's nothing but skin and bones.⁴ And that's not all. His heart is struck down and so he's not even eating. Anybody who's ever been in deep depression knows what this is like. You're so consumed with sorrow that you lose your appetite.

He's also experiencing social isolation. We see this in verses 6-8. He's like a desert owl of the wilderness. The most isolated bird living in an isolated place. He's like a lonely sparrow on the housetop. No longer in the trees singing with the other birds. But all alone. Not only is he not

³ My outline is informed by Bing Nieh's sermon "[Psalm 102](#)" in the Wise Living sermon series.

⁴ Bruce K. Waltke, J. M. Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary*

eating, he's not sleeping either. And if that were not enough, his enemies taunt him all the day. He's isolated from other people. And at odds with other people.

But his physical and psychological pain and his social isolation are not the worst of it. He's also experiencing spiritual grief. Verses 9-11 repeat themes he's already introduced. He's eating ashes, drinking his tears, and his days pass away. But in verse 10 we're told why. It's because of God's displeasure with him (cf. v. 2). He's suffering because of God's indignation and wrath. God's responsible for his pain. God lifted him up at some point in his life, only now to throw him down!

In our study of Psalm 90, we learned that all death and pain are ultimately a result of our sin and God's judgment. There's not always a straight line between our sin and our problems. But all pain is a result of the fall. And the psalmist acknowledges this. And it grieves him.

Stop for a minute and think about his pain. Physical and psychological pain. Social isolation and broken relationships. And spiritual grief. That pretty much covers it, doesn't it? Most of you have experienced at least some of this. And you know what it feels like. It's painful. It hurts. And it reminds us that our lives are fragile and temporal.

How should we respond to the pain in our lives? I don't want you to miss the most obvious thing in this stanza. In the midst of deep pain, the psalmist isn't running from God. He doesn't give up. He doesn't abandon his faith. No! Don't miss the fact that he's still praying to God! But while he's praying, he doesn't act like everything's all good. Instead, he says to God, "This is not the way it's supposed to be!"

And we need to do the same. Lament is pervasive in the Psalms. And although it may make us a little queasy to see people protesting against God, even complaining to him, this is the biblical pattern for how we're to respond to trouble in our lives. Lament is not only permissible. It's advisable in the Bible.

But true biblical lament doesn't stop with crying out in protest to God. It must go on. It must have confidence in God and his promises. And it must commit to praise God. And that leads me to the second stanza.

PRAISE GOD FOR KEEPING HIS PROMISES. (12-22)

This is what it teaches us: We must praise God for keeping his promises. Verses 12-22 express a confidence in God's promises. And a commitment to praise God when he answers his prayer.

This is important. The whole reason for his protest is because his experience in life is inconsistent with God's promises.

This psalm was likely written during Israel's exile in Babylon. The people of God are not in Jerusalem. They were carried off as slaves and prisoners to Babylon. But God had made promises to his people. Promises for Zion to endure forever.

Zion is another name for Jerusalem. The place where God is present and ruling in the temple. And the place where David's throne is. God made promises that the temple and David's throne would be permanent. And that God's kingdom would spread to the ends of the earth. That the nations would come under God's rule and would praise him forever.

But those promises were not being realized in exile. The psalmist's life is not enduring; it's passing away. And it's not just him. The whole nation of Israel is experiencing pain. And the psalmist knows that his well-being is bound up in the well-being of the nation.⁵ And so he protests, "This is not the way it's supposed to be!"

But he doesn't give up on God and God's promises. Instead he has confidence in God's promises. This comes out in verses 12-17. He says, "You *will* arise and have pity on Zion. It's the time to favor her." He says, "The nations *will* fear the name of the LORD." The Lord will build up Zion and appear in his glory. The psalmist has confidence that God will hear his petition and respond to his protest-prayer, because God is a God who has made promises and keeps them.

But he's not only confident in God's commitment to Zion. The psalmist also commits to praise God when those promises are fulfilled. This comes out in verses 18-22. When the prisoners are set free, they will praise God. And not only that, all peoples will one day gather in Zion to praise and worship God. And future generations will praise God.

Do you see how biblical lament works? It's not just license to complain to God. Lament is grounded in God's promises. When the world is not the way it's supposed to be, we cry out, "How long, O Lord!" But we also trust God. We have confidence that he'll do what he says he'll do. And that confidence in God must involve a willingness to worship God.

And we not only worship God for keeping his promises. Confidence in God's promises is intimately connected with confidence in *God*. And that leads us to the third stanza.

PRAISE GOD FOR HIS PERMANENCE. (23-28)

The third stanza teaches us to praise God for his permanence. We need to praise God because he's the everlasting God.

Verses 23-28 basically rehash all we've already covered. There's a protest for God cutting his days short. There is a petition for his days to be prolonged. And there's confidence that God will keep his promise—that future generations will dwell in Zion secure. But there's something more. The psalmist not only trusts in God's promises. He grounds his trust in God's nature.

God's years endure throughout all generations. While the psalmist's days pass away, God's years endure. He also appeals to creation. Before the psalmist ever lived, God laid the foundation of the earth and created the heavens. Not only will the psalmist pass away; even the heavens and earth will pass away. But not God. He will remain. He is the same. His years have no end.

The psalmist's confidence in survival is not just in God's promises; it's in God. His desire for permanence can only happen because of God's permanence. God is the everlasting God!

Unanswered Prayer

At this point in the sermon, I want to pause for a moment and ask a question many of you have probably asked a number of times. Does God answer prayer? Did God answer the prayer in Psalm 102? And will he answer your prayers in times of pain?

⁵ Waltke

Alec Motyer says there's no such thing as an unanswered prayer.⁶ Sorry Garth Brooks! But at the same time, the answer to our prayers isn't always a simple "yes." There are three other ways God answers our prayers. Sometimes the answer is "no" because our prayers are no more than nonsense. Or they're not in line with the will of God. Sometimes the answer is "not yet," because our timetable and God's timetable are out of step. And sometimes the answer is "don't be silly! I'm going to do way more than you're asking, way more than you can even imagine." Think of Elijah who prayed for death. What was God's answer? "Don't be silly! You're actually not even going to die."

Motyer says that all three of these answers are present in Psalm 102. In response to the psalmist's request for extended life, God's answer is "no." In response to his confidence that *now* is the time for Zion's restoration, God's answer is "not yet." And to his specific request for God to bring the exiles back to Jerusalem, for the temple to be rebuilt, and for David's throne to be re-established, his answer is "Don't be silly! My plans for Zion are more than you could ever imagine. Just wait and see what I'll do!"

Sure, the exiles eventually came back to Jerusalem. And they rebuilt the temple. But even that was a disappointment to those who had known Solomon's temple. And David's throne wasn't reestablished at that time. So, did God answer the psalmist's prayer? There was so much that remained unfulfilled. To that question, God says, "Don't be silly!" Of course, he *did* answer that prayer. And there's even more that will be answered in the future. But he answered it in ways the psalmist didn't imagine.

In Jesus all of the promises for Zion are fulfilled. Jesus filled the vacant throne of David and is now seated at God's right hand. Jesus is the new temple, the place where the nations now meet with God.

And not only that. Hebrews 1:10-12 quotes Psalm 102:26-27 and applies it to Jesus. Hebrews 1 shows us that the everlasting God spoken of in Psalm 102 is Jesus. Jesus is the one who created the world and laid the foundation of the earth. The heavens are the work of his hands. When they pass away he will remain. He's the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. His years have no end.

His body is the temple that was torn down and left in rubble, but rebuilt in his resurrection. He died for our sins that lead to death. But he's now risen from the dead. He's defeated death victoriously. And one day, he will usher in the new heavens and the new earth. The everlasting Son of God gives us everlasting life.

The answer to the psalmist's prayer has been answered in ways he could never have imagined. Now all the earth has hope of escaping death and pain. Not just Israel.

And this hope is grounded in Jesus Christ. If we want to escape death, we need to trust in Jesus for forgiveness of sins and eternal life. If we want hope for a life without pain and trouble, we need to trust in the promise that he'll create a new heavens and a new earth. One day he'll usher in the new heavenly Zion. A place where the nations will gather in worship around the throne of the Lamb for all eternity.

⁶ Alec Motyer, "The Psalms" in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, pp. 485-583.

So now, in our pain and trouble, we cry out to him, “How long, O Lord? This is not the way that it’s supposed to be. May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”⁷

We don’t pray this way because we’re crybabies. We pray this way because we long for our present reality and experience to be aligned with God’s eternal promises and purposes for his people. And we trust that God will fulfill his purposes. And so, we also commit to praise God for all he’s done in ages past and for our hope for years to come.

This psalm is so instructive for us. It teaches us how to pray in times of pain. It teaches us how to pray during our present crisis. So, to get really practical, let me just say it’s perfectly fine and even appropriate for us to protest in our present crisis. To pray for God to bring healing to our land from the coronavirus. And it’s appropriate to pray that we will be reunited as a church and get to see our friends again.

But let us not miss the fact that God has so much more for us. When you pray, remember we have a God who says to us, “You just wait and see what I’ll do!”

Our God is the everlasting God. And nobody who trusts in Christ will pass away. Their days will endure for everlasting days. Let us pray with this bigger horizon in view. And let us pray with great expectation.

⁷ William S. Plumer, *Psalms*, Geneva Commentary Series. Plumer says the whole sum and substance of this psalm is “Thy kingdom come.”