

"Hear My Prayer"

Psalm 102

Lent 4

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One of the splendid illusions of youth is
that they think they are immortal.
No matter how recklessly they drive,
no matter how much drugs and alcohol they consume,
or the physical harm they expose themselves to,
they do not believe that anything can happen to them.
But that changes as we grow older.
There come times in our lives
when it dawns on us that our existence is
filled with dangers and life is not unending.
Physical ailments and limitations begin to trouble us,
and we become anxious about the type of
fatal disease that might become our demise
Also family members die.
We realize that the time is surely coming
when we, too, will occupy a deathbed
and be the subject of an obituary.
As we move into retirement and later years,
the realization of our mortality grows stronger-
that life is precious and time is fleeting
Of course, at any point in life,
whether young, middle aged or elderly,
we can be made painfully aware of these realities
by serious and life-threatening disease.

This what the writer of Psalm 102
seems to be experiencing.
Sickness has forced him into an acute
awareness of his human frailty and mortality.
But in his weakened state he turns to God
in prayer, who he regards as strong,
and seeks to find spiritual refuge.
In our Lenten series on "Praying the Penitential

Psalms.” this psalm is significantly different than the previous psalms we have covered.

The psalmist does not pray to God as one who is guilty and seeking forgiveness.

Rather, the psalmist is complaining to God about his life situation and the same time praying confidently that God change the fortunes and future of both himself and his entire nation

The reason why this psalm is counted among the Penitential Psalms is because of its presentation of the swiftness of human life and how little time is allotted to us to live a godly life and grow in our relationship with God.

So we pray this psalm because it puts the petitioner in the mind for examining one’s life.

Psalm 102 in the fifth of the church’s seven penitential prayers.

As I have mentioned before, it is helpful to look up a psalm in the Bible to check out the superscription or title that is given to each psalm and a further subtitle or instruction that may appear below it.

In the case of Psalm 102 the superscription tells us the kind and condition of the person for whom it is written.

It is a prayer to the Eternal King for Help.

Underneath the subtitle informs us that it is a prayer of one affected, when faint and pleading before the Lord.

Psalm 102 is the longest of the seven penitential psalms, and is composed of two strands.

Before taking a closer look at each strand let’s begin with the psalm’s prologue, it’s first two verses which are familiar to most of us.

“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."

These two verses serve as a prologue or
an introduction to the next seven verses
that form a lament in which the writer
describes his weakened condition.

In these opening verses, with much
repetition and great passion, the
sufferer appeals to God to hear him.

Since most of the Psalms can be
considered poetry that can be sung,
much like the hymns in our
worship book and hymnal,
the singlemost noticeable feature is
repetition or what is called parallelism

This means that an idea stated in
the first is followed by a second line
in which the idea or petition is repeated,
through in slightly different words.

Sometimes the repetition is synonymous,
or similar in meaning.

At other times it is antithetical,
or opposite in meaning.

And still at other times the second
sentence or verse will add a thought
to the first to amplify its meaning

In these two verses repetition is carried to
the extreme, for there are five requests
in these six lines and they are
virtually identical;

"Hear my prayer,"

"Let my cry come to you,"

"Do not hide your face,"

"Incline (turn) your ear to me,"

and "Answer me quickly (or speedily)."

The impression intended is that this is
no passive or halfhearted petition,
no mere formal "saying of prayer"

Quite the contrary.

It is an impassioned prayer because the
situation of the petitioner is desperate.
Desperate conditions made for strong petitions.

In the first stand of this psalm,
the psalmist is sick.

But this is not all that is bothering him.
He is concerned for Jerusalem for,
and he is being taunted by his enemies.

These conditions enter into him lament.

Nevertheless, it is chiefly his sickness
frailty, and the brevity of life that trouble him and give impetus to his complaint.

He describes his condition in these ways.

First, his life is like smoke (v.3)

He feels that he has been thrown upon
the fire and that his life is vanishing
like smoke.

On to change the image, his is withering
away like summer grass (v.4).

Second, the psalmist says he is sick or stricken

Even though he suffers, the psalmist
does not identify the specific cause of his suffering.

Whatever it was, it affected his appearance

It had taken away his appetite, and as a
result, he was reduced to 'skin and bones'

Third he is lonely and isolated.

This complaint is represented by the "little
owl of the waste places" and the lonely bird
on the hometop."

Owls are nocturnal creatures, making them
a fitting analogy to one who is unable to sleep at night.

Both birds express the psalmist's emptiness
and alienation

Fourth, in verse 8, he points to those who
intensify his problems, namely those who taunt him

Suffering is a difficult enough burden to bear
by itself, but when others mock you for it,
it is virtually intolerable.

Fifthly and finally, the psalmist suggests that
the ultimate cause of his affliction is
none other than God.

God is angry with him, there he is passing out of

existence like a shadow at evening or
grass that withers under the sun.
Nowhere in this psalm does the writer mention
his sin specifically or confess it.
He is not at all sure of what he has done
to deserve this affliction.

Then comes the important turning point of this psalm,
so much so that Martin Luther commented:
“Everything that has gone before looks to this verse.”
“but you, O LORD, are enthroned forever;
your name endures to all generations” (v.12).

Everything that follows builds on this verse also
In the previous verses the psalmist has described
his frail and wasting condition.

He is like smoke that vanishes in thin air
But he has a God who is not at all like that!
He has an eternal, sovereign God.

These words could be expressed bitterly.
They could mean “Look at you, you do not
have my worries. You are enthroned in
eternal, unshakable splendor, while
I am wasting away and will soon die.”
They could also mean, “You are powerful and
able to heal me.

This thought gives the psalmist hope.

A great preacher said this about this verse:
“There is nothing more calculated to strengthen
the heart in suffering, or inspire the spirit
with courage in days of danger and difficulty,
then the sense of the eternity of God.”

With this transformed outlook, the psalmist
can turn his reflections from himself to God.
and them to others.

There are four things he prays for

First, the rebuilding of Jerusalem

The psalmist sees a parallel between
his condition and that of Jerusalem.

this concern for the city embraces his concern
for the people in it.

Maybe we also need this today.

When the people of God cease thinking about themselves
so much and begin thinking about the state

of things around them, then God may indeed
hear our prayers and revive our spirit.

Not only does the psalmist pray for his own people,
his concern reaches beyond Jerusalem to all
the world's nations, whom he envisions coming
to worship God at some future time.

One of the most fascinating things about the
transformed, global outlook of the psalmist is
that it extends not only outward geographically
but also forward in time.

Do we not think about the future?

Do we think that what we do now and
what God will do for us and through us
will be a blessing to future generations?

The final condition the writer anticipates is
deliverance for those who will perish and
"wear out like a garment" (v.26).

When I read these words as we pass the
midpoint of lent and look forward to
Holy Week and Easter, I cannot help but
to think of our future with God though
the resurrection of Jesus and the hope it brings us.

Beloved people of God,

Jesus is the one through whom Jerusalem
and Israel is restored; the Gentile nations converted
future generations of the Church raised up and
preserved, and those enslaved by sin and death
freed and delivered from their spiritual bondage

Awakened in God and Jesus Christ mean
we are anchored in eternity.

As our sending hymn will remind us:

"Change and decay in all around I see,
O thou who changest not, abide with me."

-AMEN