

The psalmist gives us a prayer for desperate times. He is distressed and destitute, unable to cope, and filled with despair. His life is upended and he is barely hanging on.¹ This is not an everyday prayer. It is reserved for those times of grief, loneliness, and utter weakness that bring us to the edge of the abyss. This is not Job's original prayer, but he prayed this way sitting on the ash heap after everything was taken away. The prophet Jeremiah may have prayed this very psalm, because it gave him words to articulate his pain and dismay, his agonizing desperation. Jesus' Prayer Book has several psalms that might have been prayed by our Lord in Gethsemane and this is one of them.

What stands out about this personal lament is the worshiper's in-depth understanding and confidence in the sovereign Lord coupled with his genuine grasp of the big picture of salvation. Rarely are these two extremes, personal despair and solid theology juxtaposed in such a dynamic way. The psalmist portrays his dark desperation in tension with his unwavering belief in the Lord's sovereignty and in the future of salvation. He chooses to locate his personal trauma in the larger picture of God's eternal security. Raw emotion is freely expressed and mature theology is beautifully articulated. We are given a psalm that melds the dark night of despair with the living hope "that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet 1:5).

The author of Hebrews eloquently quotes seven passages at the beginning of his epistle including Psalm 102:25-27 to prove the deity and exaltation of the Son. The Greek translation (LXX) adds, "O Lord," to Psalm 102:24, so the text read, "He [God] also says, 'In the beginning, *O Lord*, you laid the foundation of the earth.'" The meaning is similar to Psalm 110:1, "The Lord says to my Lord." The author of Hebrews interprets the psalm as the Father addressing the Son and crediting the Son with the creation of the cosmos. This raises the reasonable possibility that the author of Hebrews understood the whole psalm as messianic and descriptive of the life of Jesus (metalepsis). If we read Psalm 102 from the perspective of Jesus's earthly suffering and heavenly exaltation we get the full Messianic perspective. The psalmist's experience of fear and isolation correlates objectively with the Messiah's Gethsemane experience (Ps 102:1-11). And if the psalmist felt he was cut down in his prime (Ps 102:23 MSG) this was even more true for the Lord Jesus whose days were cut short at the cross.

My Prayer, My Days

*Hear my prayer, Lord;
let my cry for help come to you.
Do not hide your face from me
when I am in distress.
Turn your ear to me;
when I call, answer me quickly.*

¹ The early church classified Psalm 102 as one of the seven penitential psalms (Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 130, 143), but the cause of the person's suffering is not tied to a confession of sin. It is "the cry of one whose sufferings are unexplained, like Job's" (Kidner, Psalms, 360).

*For my days vanish like smoke;
my bones burn like glowing embers.
My heart is blighted and withered like grass;
I forgot to eat my food.
In my distress I groan aloud
and am reduced to skin and bones.
I am like a desert owl,
like an owl among the ruins.
I lie awake; I have become
like a bird alone on a roof.
All day long my enemies taunt me;
those who rail against me use my name as a curse.
For I eat ashes as my food
and mingle my drink with tears
because of your great wrath,
for you have taken me up and thrown me aside.
My days are like the evening shadow;
I wither away like grass.*

Psalm 102:1-11

The psalmist's opening appeal is intense, personal, and on-going. It is apparent that he has languished in fear and isolation for some time. His urgent plea is for the Lord to pay attention. He needs answers and quickly! Those who pray the psalms are familiar with this cry for help (Ps 39:12; 54:2; 61:1; 64:1). It is common enough that we should expect to find ourselves in similar circumstances and learn from his example. Few may experience the intensity of Job's sufferings, who found himself on the ash heap, feverish and friendless, homeless and hounded, scraping his sores and mourning his losses. But all believers at some time or another find themselves in the psalmist's situation. Psalm 102 is for such times.

The psalmist flashes a series of images across the screen of our imagination to capture his suffering. He describes the horror of his unexplained suffering twelve different ways! He opens and closes his carefully crafted chiasmic description with a reference to "my days" going up in smoke and "my days" fleeting like the evening shadows (Ps 102:3,11). He withers away like the grass (Ps 102:4,11). "I forget to eat my food," parallels, "I eat ashes for my food" (Ps 102:4,9). He is feverish, emaciated, unable to sleep, groaning because of the pain, and weeping from despair. He feels like a lonely desert owl or a pelican far from the sea or a buzzard in the desert or a lost sparrow. Scholars cannot agree as to what kind of bird, but the meaning is clear. Added to the physical and emotional trauma is the constant barrage of taunts and slander coming from his enemies, who "use my name as a curse" (Ps 101:8).

The source of the psalmist's unexplained suffering is found in God who is sovereign over all of life and ultimately responsible for everything that happens. We have seen this reasoning before in the psalms where the sufferer pushes past immediate and secondary causes and brings his plight directly to the Lord. This is not an implicit admission of sin and wrong doing, but rather a

recognition of the psalmist's humble submission before God and a reflection of his dismay.²

The psalmist reminds us of Job who refused to face his suffering with the quiet resignation of a Stoic or with the disciplined passivity like a mystic or with the blind fatalism of a determinist. Job saw himself on trial but refused to put God on trial. He lashed out at God, like a son against his father or a daughter against her mother, but no matter how fierce the argument there is always an abiding relationship. Job fought against his suffering. He recognized evil as evil and felt it breathing down his neck (Job 10:1-2). The psalmist's twelve-fold description of suffering anticipates the anguish of Gethsemane, when he who was without sin contemplated being pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (Isa 53:5). Psalm 102 is not far removed from Jesus' Gethsemane prayer and anticipates the cry from the cross, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34).

But You, Lord

*But you, Lord, sit enthroned forever;
your renown endures through all generations.
You will arise and have compassion on Zion,
for it is time to show favor to her;
the appointed time has come.
For her stones are dear to your servants;
her very dust moves them to pity.
The nations will fear the name of the Lord,
all the kings of the earth will revere your glory.
For the Lord will rebuild Zion
and appear in his glory.
He will respond to the prayer of the destitute;
he will not despise their plea.
Let this be written for a future generation,
that a people not yet created may praise the Lord:
"The Lord looked down from his sanctuary on high,
from heaven he viewed the earth,
to hear the groans of the prisoners
and release those condemned to death."
So the name of the Lord will be declared in Zion
and his praise in Jerusalem
when the peoples and the kingdoms
assemble to worship the Lord.*

Psalm 102:12-22

There is a decisive break and an abrupt change of tone as the psalmist moves from dark lamentation to bright hope and praise. The sharp contrast between the frailty and fleeting nature

² Ross, Psalms, 217. Ross writes, "When he attributes his suffering to God's wrath, he is indicating that sin is the cause of his pain (even though he does not actually say that) and that God is in collusion with the enemies."

of human life and the eternal nature of the Lord's enduring throne is accentuated. The psalmist's confidence in the compassion, timing, and certainty of the Lord's deliverance catches the worshiper by surprise. We have gone from the depths of despair to the heights of praise "in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor 15:52). The psalmist's "my days" are contrasted with the Lord's eternal renown and rule. Although the psalmist's time may be slipping away, but the Lord's "appointed time has come" (Ps 102:13). One hears in Paul's statement an echo of this verse, "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship" (Gal 4:4).

The psalmist's weakness and powerlessness are set in sharp relief to the Lord's power to intervene, to rebuild Zion, to gather the nations, and to respond to the prayer of the destitute. The psalmist envisions a great reversal in the future so "that a people not yet created may praise the Lord" (Ps 102:18). This hope lines up with Jesus' statement, "I am the good shepherd. . . .and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:14-16). The apostle Peter said it this way: "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet 2:9).

By referring to the "prayer of the destitute" and "the groans of the prisoners" the psalmist integrates the opening lament with the promise of salvation. Zechariah's prophecy captures a similar integration of promise when he describes the coming of Zion's king "righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey" proclaiming peace to the nations, adding, "As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit. Return to your fortress, you prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much" (Zech 9:9-12). All of this adds up to a tremendous worship scene. The "peoples and the kingdoms" will gather to praise the name of the Lord in Zion. John the apostle described it this way: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Rev 11:15).

My God, My Days

*In the course of my life he broke my strength;
he cut short my days.
So I said:
"Do not take me away, my God, in the midst of my days;
your years go through all generations.
In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
They will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
Like clothing you will change them
and they will be discarded.
But you remain the same,
and your years will never end.*

*The children of your servants will live in your presence;
their descendants will be established before you.”*
Psalm 102:23-28

The psalmist contrasts his few short years with the Lord’s longevity, “your years go on through all generations” (Ps 102:24). Once again the sharp contrast between personal lament and divine hope are laid bare. The author of Hebrews sees much more going on here than the dying wish of a believer who faithfully clings to the everlasting promises of God. His eyes are fixed on Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of the faith, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). As far as he is concerned “the whole psalm is Messianic, showing first the Messiah’s sufferings and dereliction (Ps 102:1-11), then his eager anticipation of the kingdom in its world-wide glory (Ps 102:12-22).”³

The tension running through the Psalm is a Messianic tension. The one who learned obedience by the things that he suffered (Heb 5:8) is the heir of all things, maker of the universe, and “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:2-3). The author of Hebrews places polar opposite truths, absolute transcendence and deep empathy, in radical juxtaposition. In Christ, we have a high priest who is both the Son of God and the Son of Man. The Incarnate One transcends his transcendence and takes on our weakness in every respect except without sin. He became “fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service of God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:17). As the ascended Lord, Jesus “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Heb 1:3); as the Incarnate One, Jesus knows our needs, understands our temptations and empathizes with our weaknesses. “Sympathy with the sinner in his trial does not depend on the experience of sin which only the sinless can know in its full intensity. He who fails yields before the last strain.”⁴

For the psalmist, what keeps lament and hope bound together are the promises of God. For the believer what keeps them bound together is Jesus Christ. The psalmist concludes confidently. The world is passing away, “But you remain the same,” and the author of Hebrews concludes, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8).

³ Kidner, *Psalms*, 363.

⁴ B. F. Westcott, quoted in Bruce, *Hebrews*, 116.