

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

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Psalm 102 — Ashes, Tears, and Owls

1.0 Introducing Psalm 102

- For centuries the Christian church categorized Psalm 102 with the so-called penitential psalms (Pss 6; 32; 38; 51; 130; 143). However, the psalmist does not confess to sin, suffers like Job—not knowing the reason for it.
- The superscription to the psalm is unique with its description. Other psalms identified as “A Prayer” include Psalms 17; 86; 90; 142 (cp. Habakkuk 3:1).
- While it is evident that the psalmist suffers from an illness that leaves him physically weakened and exhausted, he also suffers from anxiety for Jerusalem and he is harassed by enemies.
- In Psalm 102, God’s eternality becomes the psalmist’s response to his growing awareness that he has all too soon reached the end of his own life.

2.0 Reading Psalm 102 (NAU)

102:1 A Prayer of the Afflicted when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the LORD.

Hear my prayer, O LORD!
And let my cry for help come to You.

102:2 Do not hide Your face from me in the day of my distress;
Incline Your ear to me;
In the day when I call answer me quickly.

102:3 For my days have been consumed in smoke,
And my bones have been scorched like a hearth.

102:4 My heart has been smitten like grass and has withered away,
Indeed, I forget to eat my bread.

102:5 Because of the loudness of my groaning
My bones cling to my flesh.

- 102:6** I resemble a pelican of the wilderness;
I have become like an owl of the waste places.
- 102:7** I lie awake,
I have become like a lonely bird on a housetop.
- 102:8** My enemies have reproached me all day long;
Those who deride me have used my *name* as a curse.
- 102:9** For I have eaten ashes like bread
And mingled my drink with weeping
- 102:10** Because of Your indignation and Your wrath,
For You have lifted me up and cast me away.
- 102:11** My days are like a lengthened shadow,
And I wither away like grass.
- 102:12** **But You, O LORD,** abide forever,
And Your name to all generations.
- 102:13** **You** will arise *and* have compassion on Zion;
For it is time to be gracious to her,
For the appointed time has come.
- 102:14** Surely Your servants find pleasure in her stones
And feel pity for her dust.
- 102:15** So the nations will fear the name of the LORD
And all the kings of the earth Your glory.
- 102:16** For the LORD has built up Zion;
He has appeared in His glory.
- 102:17** He has regarded the prayer of the destitute
And has not despised their prayer.
- 102:18** This will be written for the generation to come,
That a people yet to be created may praise the LORD.
- Δ** **102:19** For He looked down
B from His holy height;
B' From heaven
A' the LORD gazed upon the earth,
- 102:20** To hear the groaning of the prisoner,
To set free those who were doomed to death,
- 102:21** That *men* may tell of the name of the LORD in Zion
And His praise in Jerusalem,
- 102:22** When the peoples are gathered together,
And the kingdoms, to serve the LORD.
- 102:23** He has weakened my strength in the way;
He has shortened my days.
- 102:24** I say, "O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days,
Your years are throughout all generations.
- 102:25** "Of old You founded the earth,



- And the heavens are the work of Your hands.
- 102:26** “Even they will perish, **but You** endure;
And all of them will wear out like a garment;
Like clothing You will change them and they will be changed.
- 102:27** “**But You are the same**,
And Your years will not come to an end.
- 102:28** “The children of Your servants will continue,
And their descendants will be established before You.”

3.0 Understanding Psalm 102

3.1 Outline

- I. Sickness in an Ephemeral Life (vv. 1-11)
- II. Security in an Eternal Lord (vv. 12-22)
- III. Servants for an Enduring Lord (vv. 23-28)



3.2 Notes

- **vv. 1-2** “Hear my prayer”
 - Five separate requests repeat the psalmist’s impassioned plea.
 - These two verses are like the preface or introduction to the psalm.
- **v. 3** “my days have been consumed in smoke”
 - The psalmist believes that his brief life is vanishing like smoke.
 - A corresponding statement occurs in verse 11: “My days are like a lengthened shadow.” This forms a frame for verses 3-11.
 - ✓ Lengthened shadows indicate the approach of night and the closeness of death for the psalmist.
- **v. 4** “My heart . . . like grass . . . has withered”
 - This phraseology is echoed in verse 11: “I wither away like grass.” Thus, the psalmist forms a dual frame around verses 3-11.
 - The metaphor reinforces the emphasis on the brevity of life.
- **v. 5** “My bones cling to my flesh”
 - Gaunt, without appetite, the psalmist suffers with his illness. His muscles are atrophied and empty skin adorns his deteriorating body.
- **v. 6** “I resemble a pelican”
 - “Pelican” is a guess. According to Isaiah 34:11 and Zephaniah 2:14, this bird’s habitat is in desolate and waste places.
 - By comparing himself to these birds, the psalmist indicates that he feels isolated and lonely.
 - Both birds are listed among unclean animals in Leviticus 11:17-18.
- **v. 9** “I have eaten ashes like bread”
 - Instead of eating his food, the suffering psalmist grieves and fasts.

- ✓ Ashes were placed on the head in mourning (2 Sam 13:19; cp. Isa 61:3; Jer 6:26; Esth 4:1) and are also associated with fasting (Isa 58:5; Dan 9:3; Esth 4:3). Job sat on ashes as he grieved and suffered (Job 2:8) and later he repented “in dust and ashes” (42:6; cp. Matt 11:21).
- ✓ In Isaiah 44:20 ashes represent the unsatisfying and futile beliefs and deeds of one who worships idols.
- In place of taking liquid nourishment, the psalmist weeps.
 - ✓ See Psalms 42:3; 80:5.
- **v. 10** “Because of Your indignation”
 - The psalmist acknowledges that his condition results from sin and God’s wrath to punish sin.
 - However, he nowhere offers confession. He implies that his suffering is justified—he is unworthy of deliverance and thankful for the security he possesses in the eternal God for the future.
- **v. 12** “But You, O LORD”
 - This verse is the turning point of the psalm. Focus turns to the eternal God, rather than on a vanishing man.
 - “Claiming a right to health or anything else may seem spiritual. It may be described as a proof of strong faith by faith healers. But it is not spiritual at all. It is actually a proof of worldliness or secular thinking in the church. . . . We are preoccupied with health issues because we are preoccupied with ourselves. . . . perfect health is not a right, and ill health is often as much a gift from God as wholeness.”—James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 2:828.
 - *In what ways are illness and suffering a gift from God?*
- **v. 13** “have compassion on Zion”
 - In the period of the Babylonian exile and shortly thereafter, the city of Jerusalem is in a pitiable state. Only God’s compassion and grace can reverse her condition.
 - The city’s Temple and walls are piles of rubble (verse 14).
 - ✓ Stones and dust depict destruction (cf. Mic 1:6). See descriptions of Jerusalem in Nehemiah 4:2.
 - ✓ Even the jumbled stones and dust are dear to the servants of the Lord (cp. Ps 137:5-6).
 - Her inhabitants are “destitute” (v. 17), stripped of everything they had cherished. An uncertain future lies before them.
 - The psalmist in his affliction identifies with the condition of Jerusalem and its people.
- **v. 15** “the name”
 - There is a play on the sounds of words that contain the sound of the Hebrew for “name.” The sounds are *sh* and *m*, occurring in “name,” “heavens,” and “hear.”



- The focus of verses 12-22 is on God and his name. Seven times his title as “Yahweh (6x)/Yah (1x) appears.
- **v. 18** “written for the generation to come”
 - Hymnlike praise from afflicted saints needs to be recorded and passed on to future generations. They, too, may face great troubles and must know to cast their cares upon the Eternal God Who truly cares.
 - No other text in the Psalms speaks of preserving praise in writing.
 - *When you are ill or severely afflicted, write a journal of praise to pass on to children and grandchildren.*
- **v. 18** “may praise the LORD”
 - By using “Yah” for LORD, the statement alludes to “Hallelujah.”
- **v. 20** “those who were doomed to death” — Literally, “sons of death.”
- **vv. 25-27** Messianic Reference
 - Hebrews 1:10-12 quotes Psalm 102:25-27 from the pre-Christian Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) alongside other messianic psalms (Pss 2; 45; 110) to demonstrate that Jesus is superior to all other persons and powers.
 - ✓ The translators of the Septuagint already may have interpreted the text messianically a century or more before the birth of Jesus.
 - Perhaps, just as Hebrews 1:6 appeals to part of Deuteronomy 32:43 in the Septuagint (a portion not in the Hebrew text), the appeal to Psalm 102 may be due to a popular Jewish interpretation at the time.
 - ✓ Therefore, the citation might not prove that the text was originally messianic or even interpreted messianically.
 - Another option: The writer of Hebrews accepts the fact that the Son was the Creator (Heb 1:2; cf. Col 1:16) and applies that knowledge to Psalm 102’s reference to the Creator.
 - ✓ A similar refinement of the identity of the person of the Godhead occurs in John 12:41 (cf. Isa 6:1-5).
- **v. 26** “they will perish, but You endure”
 - “Grand and old as they are, they are like nothing in comparison with the Lord himself (v.26). He will be forever (vv.24b, 27), whereas they will ‘perish’ (‘-b-d, v.26; cf. 1:6; 90:4 [cf. 2 Peter 3:8]) and be of no use like a rag (cf. Isa 51:6).”—Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 5:649.
- **v. 27** “You are the same” — Literally, “You are He.”
 - See “I am He” in Isaiah 43:10, 13; and 48:12. Uncertain as life might be for God’s people, there is one unchangeable certainty: God Himself.

- In this concept, the diseased, the despairing, the derided, and the destitute find hope. As long as God retains control, there is hope. Since God can care for Zion, He can also care for the psalmist.

4.0 Singing Psalm 102

Lord, Hear My Prayer

(Tune: “The Solid Rock”—Omit shaded lines when singing to this tune.)



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| <p>1 Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry
Have ready access unto Thee;
When in distress to Thee I fly,
O hide not Thou Thy face from me.
Attend, O Lord, to my desire,
O haste! to answer when I pray;
For grief consumes my strength like fire,
My days as smoke pass swift away.</p> <hr/> <p>3 But Thou, Jehovah, shalt endure,
Thy throne forever is the same;
And to all generations sure
Shall be Thy great memorial Name.
The time for Zion’s help is near,
The time appointed in Thy love;
O let Thy gracious aid appear,
Look Thou in mercy from above.</p> <hr/> <p>5 The Lord, exalted on His throne,
Looked down from Heav’n with pitying
eye
<i>Shall</i> still the lowly captive’s moan
And save His people doomed to die.
All men in Zion shall declare
His gracious Name with one accord,
When kings and nations gather there
To serve and worship God the Lord.</p> | <p>2 My heart is withered like the grass,
And I forget my daily bread;
In lonely grief my days I pass
And sad my thoughts upon my bed.
My foes reproach me all the day,
My drink is tears, my bread is grief,
For in Thy wrath I pine away,
My days are like a fading leaf.</p> <hr/> <p>4 O Lord, regard the prayer of those
Who love the walls of Zion well,
Whose hearts are heavy for her woes,
Who sad amid her ruins dwell.
Thy power and glory shall appear,
And Zion’s walls shall be restored;
Then all the kings of earth shall fear
And heathen nations serve the Lord.</p> |
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— Author unknown



5.0 Praying Psalm 102

- Father, when I am sick, please hear my prayer. [vv. 1-5]
- Help me to focus on You, rather than my problems, as I lie awake at night. [v. 7]
- Lord, bring the nations and their leaders to You. [v. 15]
- I praise You, O God, because You never change. [vv. 26, 27]
- A modern Jewish prayer: “Eternal God, help me to feel your presence when dark shadows fall upon me. When my own weakness and the storms of life hide You from my sight, help me to know that You have not deserted me. Uphold me with the comfort of Your love.” [*Siddur Lev Chadash*]

6.0 Applying Psalm 102

- In all of our life’s changes, God never changes.
- Heaven’s God cares about what happens here on earth.
- When God favors Zion, the nations will fear God.
- Preserve your praise to God for posterity — be a beacon, not a barrier.