

Valparaiso University

ValpoScholar

Walter E. Keller's Devotional Studies of Psalms

University Archives & Special Collections

5-27-2000

Psalm 102: A prayer of one afflicted, when faint and pleading before the LORD.

Walter E. Keller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/kellerpsalms>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives & Special Collections at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walter E. Keller's Devotional Studies of Psalms by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

Psalm 102

A prayer of one afflicted, when faint and pleading before the LORD.

(NRSV)

Introduction to Psalm 102

This is a complex Psalm. You will notice, first of all, that it is a Psalm of lament. Verses 1-11 read like the lament of an individual for his own personal afflictions, a lament that then continues from verse 23 to the end of the Psalm. But the intervening verses read like a lament for the unhappy fate of Jerusalem, which lies in ruins (verse 14), even as the Psalmist anticipates the day of her rebuilding (verse 16). This has led some scholars to think of two originally different Psalms, which have subsequently been blended together into a single Psalm. I personally do not think so. I think that Psalm 102 is originally a single composition, and that it displays a deep unity of thought. Secondly, in the history of the Church this has traditionally been listed as the fifth of the Penitential Psalms. This is striking because there is no mention of either sin or forgiveness in the Psalm. Nevertheless it is a useful clue as to what is going on in this Psalm and what makes that an insightful avenue into the fuller context of our penitence.

I take it as a given that we are dealing in this Psalm with the prayer of someone who has witnessed – or at least must deal with the reality of – the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. (verse 14). That reality implies that Yahweh seems to have been dethroned not only as the Sovereign of Zion, but also as the Sovereign among the nations (verses 21-22). At the same time the Psalmist ardently believes that Yahweh will once more rebuild Zion, both out of His own pity and promised favor for His own glory (verses 13,16), and in response to the fervent prayers of the faithful (verse 17).

The destruction and ruin of Jerusalem coincide with another growing terror. The Psalmist is one for whom time is running out, one who is confronted directly with his mortality and transience. His days are passing away like smoke (verse 3); his days are passing away (verse 11) and he appeals to Yahweh as the one who liberates those who are doomed to die (verse 20). And what is more, he faces death not at a ripe old age, but as a young man, one who is in mid-course and whose normal life expectancy has been shortened (verse 23). He suffers the acute aloneness of death (verse 7) and the taunts of those who wish him ill (verse 8). But worst of all, all this is happening to him because of the anger and indignation of Yahweh, who simply throws him away (verse 10).

Thus what we have here is a young person who is acutely and painfully aware that he is near death, and who understands that death is the dread sign of the anger and indignation of God. He also finds his brief span of life all the shorter when measured against the eternity of Yahweh (verse 12). Moreover, the God to whom he appeals is the God whose own throne has been ravaged in the ruin of Zion. It is thus also a long lifeline that he hopes for. He hopes in Yahweh who will, according to prophetic promise, be restored to his rightful rule in Zion, and restored in such a way that all the nations will acknowledge Him and Him alone as worthy of worship (verses 21-22). In the anticipation of the eternal God's restoration to acknowledged sovereignty he will rejoice in the unchanging regard that Yahweh has for his People. Even future generations will find their security, also and especially in the hour of death, in Him (verse 28).

A lament in personal affliction.

Vv. 1-2

- ¹ Hear my prayer, O LORD;
let my cry come to you.**
**² 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. 3-11

- ³ For my days pass away (vanish) like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace (I am suffering from a fever).**
**⁴ My heart is stricken and withered like grass (as under the hot sun);
I am too wasted to eat my bread (In my sickness I have lost my appetite).**
**⁵ Because of my loud groaning
my bones cling to my skin.**
(REB: I groan aloud [in my suffering];
I am nothing but skin and bones.)
**⁶ I am like an owl of the wilderness,
like a little owl of the waste places.**
**⁷ I lie awake;
I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.**

All of the images in verses 6-7 are poetic ways of saying the same thing, namely, that the sufferer feels so terribly alone, utterly bereft of human companionship.

- ⁸ All day long my enemies taunt me;
those who deride me use my name for a curse.**

It is a familiar theme in the Psalms; enemies taunt and deride. Here they even spice up their maledictions upon others by using the Psalmist's name: may you suffer the same fate as that accursed Psalmist!

Again, when we Christians pray this Psalm, of whom shall we be thinking when we say the word "enemies"? Remember that for us Christians these Psalms always filter through Jesus Christ, who also prayed them, and we pray them "in him." Jesus, the Son of God suffered wrong at the hands of those whom He came to rescue. In him we too are sons and daughters of God, who in our mission of doing God's good for others, can attract the resistance and hostility of those others. Recall that in other places in the world, Christians are actively being oppressed, often for no other reason than that they are Christians who confess the Name of Jesus.

- ⁹ For I eat ashes like bread,
and mingle tears with my drink,**

It was the custom during times of mourning to throw ashes over one's head. This may therefore refer to the Psalmist's period of fasting and penitence. All he has to eat are the ashes of mourning, and during his fasting he drinks nothing save his own tears.

So far throughout this section (verses 3-11), we have been interpreting the Psalmist's description of his state in terms of physical symptoms. The following verse makes it possible to interpret them as descriptions of the state of his soul.

- 10 because of your indignation and anger;
for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside** (as garbage).
11 My days are like an evening shadow (which soon disappears when
day comes to its end);
I wither away like grass.

If you look at Psalm 69:24 you can see that Yahweh's indignation is virtually Yahweh's curse. In the Old Testament, and also in the New Testament, God's wrath is expressed in our death. Death is a sign of God's anger against sin, for, as Paul teaches us, the wage God pays for sin is death. Admitting that we cause God to be angry belongs in any confession of sins.

A lament for Jerusalem

Vv. 12-17

- 12 But you, O LORD, are enthroned** (as King) **forever;**
your name (remembrance) **endures to all generations.**
(TEV: All generations will remember you.)

The counterfoil to my finitude is Yahweh's everlastingness. But even more, juxtaposed to God's anger at me for my sinfulness as it is expressed in death, is the name of Yahweh. For the name of Yahweh is the name of the compassionate one (Exodus 34:6ff). The Psalmist does what the Bible consistently teaches us to do, namely, to oppose the undeniable wrath of God with the covenantal mercy of God. We cannot get rid of the wrath of God by finding theological systems which would deny the wrath of God. The only answer to the wrath of God is to confess that we have justly deserved God's temporal and eternal punishment, and plead the name of Yahweh, which further unfolds in the New Testament as the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. For the Triune Name is the name of the Father who sends his Son for us and for our salvation and continues to be active among us by His Spirit.

Actually the Hebrew word here translated "name" means "remembrance." "Your remembrance" is better translated into idiomatic English as for example the TEV does: "remember you." The Psalmist is confessing his faith that God will be remembered by future generations as Yahweh.

- 13 You will rise up and have compassion on Zion,**
for it is (high) **time to favor it** (restore Zion);
the appointed time has come.
14 For your servants (Israel) **hold its stones dear,**
and have pity on its dust.
(TEV: Your servants love her, even though she is destroyed;
they have pity upon her, even though she is in ruins.)

- 15 The nations will fear the name of the LORD,
and all the kings of the earth your glory.**
**16 For the LORD will build up Zion;
he will appear in his glory.**
17 He will regard the prayer of the destitute (Israel in Babylonian exile),
and will not despise their prayer.

The Psalmist's confidence that Yahweh will restore Jerusalem to her former glory as His throne is based on prophecies that came out of the Exile, like Isaiah 40:1-11 and Ezekiel 37.

Vv. 18-22

- 18 Let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet unborn may praise the LORD:**

"This" can appropriately refer either to the preceding verses 15-17, or alternatively to the following verses 19-20, as the RSV takes it. The material content remains the same in either case. The Psalmist wants future generations to be able read the record of what he confidently expect will happen, and so be inspired to sing their own praises to the God who acts in faithfulness to His promises. Among others he was thinking of – us!

- 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** (Israel in Exile),
to set free those who were doomed to die;

This characterization of Yahweh parallels very closely that given in Exodus 6:2-8. This is what all subsequent generations are to learn: God in heaven above looks down in pity upon His children in distress upon the earth. That is the lesson of the Exodus from Egypt and the return from Babylonian Exile.

- 21 so that the name of the LORD may be declared in Zion,
and his praise in Jerusalem,
22 when peoples gather together,
and kingdoms, to worship the LORD.**

The restored Jerusalem is the place where in the End all shall worship Yahweh, whether they are Israelites or whether they are the Gentile nations.

A lament in personal affliction resumed

The return to a personal lament almost comes as a surprise. It would appear as if the Psalmist does not himself expect to be a part of – or a witness to – the restoration of Jerusalem. But his hope is for his children, who will be recipients of that good gift (verse 28). He himself may well die, despite his prayer in verse 24.

Vv. 23-28

- ²³ He has broken my strength in midcourse;
he has shortened my days.**
- ²⁴ “O my God,” I say, “do not take me away
at the mid-point of my life,
you whose years endure
throughout all generations.”**
- ²⁵ Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.**

God is the creator of heaven and earth, of all that exists.

- ²⁶ They (heaven and earth) will perish, but you endure;
they will all wear out like a garment.**
- ²⁷ You change (TEV: discard) them like clothing, and they pass away;
but you are (always) the same, and your years have no end.**

Not only will the Psalmist die, so will all the rest of the creation. The very heavens and the earth will wear out like a piece of clothing. Only God remains. By itself, God's everlastingness is not much of a consolation. But it is not by itself. His everlastingness is able to console us, because the everlasting God is Yahweh. His grace and pity are everlasting, and in these we may hope everlastingly.

Verses 25-27 are quoted by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Hebrews 1:10-12). You will notice that where Psalm 102:27a says, “You discard them like clothing, and they pass away,” Hebrews 1:12a says, “like a mantle thou wilt roll them up and they will be changed.” The reason for the difference is something that we have seen before, namely, that the New Testament authors often use the Septuagint in citing the Old Testament. That is what has happened here. The differing translations make little substantive difference.

The more startling interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews lies elsewhere. In verses 25-27 the Psalmist is clearly speaking to and about Yahweh: He is the creator of heaven and earth (verse 25), and, while what He has made will wear out and vanish, He the Creator endures forever. But the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says that those verses speak to and about the Son of God. Hebrews asserts that Jesus is the Son of God, and that as the Son of God he ranks higher than the other leading candidates for our worship, namely, the angels. The angels of God must worship the Son (Hebrews 1:6), because in the divide between the Creator God and all that the Creator God has made, the Son of God belongs on the side of God. The Son of God shares in the work that only God can do, namely, that of creating the universe. So while all the rest of the universe will eventually come to an end, Psalm 102:25-27 says that the Son of God is eternally the same. In this way Epistle to the Hebrews affirms that the eternal mercy and pity of God for His People is concentrated, as it were, in the Son of God, who came to earth to suffer and be glorified for us.

- ²⁸ The children of your servants (the Israelites) shall live secure;
their offspring shall be established (continue) in your presence.**

Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 102:

Lord, while our days vanish like shadows and our lives wear out like a garment, you remain undisturbed by change. Although our earthly lives come to an end, help us to live in Christ's endless life and at length attain our home, the heavenly Jerusalem, where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

The prayer is a good reminder that, as Christians are to pray this Psalm, some translations and expansions must take place. The Psalmist addresses his prayer to Yahweh; the fuller name of God now in the New Testament is Triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When the Psalmist laments the broken condition of Jerusalem and its Temple, we need to think of the fractured condition of the Church, where people of all nations and races are one day to sing the praises of the Triune God. The prayer from the LBW contrasts us whose days vanish, with God who is undisturbed by change. But God is disturbed by our sins, which, though not mentioned directly in this Penitential Psalm, are nonetheless alluded to in the Psalmist's reference to God's indignation and wrath as expressed in death. Our lives wear out; that is one half of the description. The other half is the grimmer truth: they wear out under the wrath of God. The unchanging character of God is our consolation because He is unchangingly Yahweh who pities His children. That mercy made incarnate in Jesus who died and then was raised to a death-proof life.

Nugget

As Neil Postman has written, "I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether." ... The trouble is, our public at large...after 50 years of visual conditioning has become habitually and notoriously impatient with any kind of speech that requires sustained attention. It is not accidental that "Attention Deficit Disorder" is the childhood problem of the age. Most of the children's parents also suffer from this "disorder." Middle-class restlessness is rampant, and nowhere is it more in evidence than in the average mainline Protestant congregation assembled for (yes!) *worship*. An immediate consequence of this: Sermons have had to become desperately short. Nobody can attain profundity in a ten-minute sermon, and the preacher who settles for seven minutes (which I am told is now the accepted norm in some seminaries) has discounted "seriousness" a priori. As Paul Scherer, perhaps the greatest preacher of 20th century America used to tell his classes at Union Theological Seminary in New York: "Sermonettes make Christianettes."

Douglas John Hall, *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2000, as quoted in *Context*, May 15, 2000

Nugget

Most of the people I know who have what I want – which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy – are people with a deep sense of spirituality. ... They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful. I saw something once that said, “A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless. Or it can be part of a great meaning.”

(I forgot to copy the source of this nugget.)

Walter E. Keller

5/27/2000