

Messianic Psalms Psalm 102

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The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Afflicted and overwhelmed

What do you do when everything becomes too much and you feel you just can't bear another moment? Some of us rant and rage at life's unfairness; some of us want to crawl under the duvet and hide! Maybe we sometimes echo the sentiments of another psalmist who wanted to take wings and fly away like a bird (Psalm 55:6). The title above Psalm 102 says,

"A prayer of the afflicted, when he is overwhelmed and pours out his complaint before the LORD."

The first thing that we learn then from this Psalm, is that the right response to overwhelming difficulties is to turn to God in prayer. Since this is a Messianic Psalm, we can think of Christ Himself turning to God in His distress, and if Christ needed that resource in His life, then we certainly do!

Why Messianic?

But how do we know that Psalm 102 is Messianic? The simplest answer is because verses 25 to 27 of this Psalm are quoted in Hebrews chapter one verses 10 to 12, where they are applied explicitly to Christ. Without that quotation in Hebrews, I would naturally read that section rather differently, and I suspect that is how the Psalm would have been understood before Hebrews was written, certainly in Old Testament times. A straightforward reading of the Psalm would be that: the writer speaks of his trials and sense of aloneness in the first seven verses; in verses eight and nine he talks about what his enemies are doing; and in verse ten he highlights how he feels God has turned away from him.

In the rest of the Psalm, he contrasts the brevity of his own life, and his fears that it will be cut short, with the eternal nature of God. A natural reading of verses 25 to 27 would be that the psalmist is addressing Jehovah and speaking about God's work in creation and a future new creation. I imagine generations of godly Jews taking comfort from this psalm when they were experiencing hardship and a sense of isolation; perhaps when they reached the same stage of life as me, they too would have felt that the number of years left to them were become significantly less than the years they had lived so far! The contrast with a God who, "shall endure forever" (v. 12) and whose, "years will have no end" (v. 27) is both troubling and comforting at the same time. As a believer in Jesus I have a strong assurance of eternal life and I understand that Christ's death and resurrection give that life an unshakable foundation. These are things that an Old Testament believer could never enjoy. Nevertheless, I still feel the pangs of that contrast between my time frame and God's.

But much of this is turned upside down by the insights that the quotation in Hebrews give us. The writer of Hebrews, directed by the Holy Spirit, shows us that in verses 25 to 27 we should not be thinking of a human being addressing the infinite God, but God Himself addressing Christ! Hebrews uses these verses to underline the eternal nature of Christ, and His position and honour as the Creator, in contrast with the relatively lowly position of the angels. This new understanding of who is speaking to whom in these verses, transforms our understanding of the whole Psalm. We can now see that the whole Psalm speaks about Christ, His experience of being rejected and cast off, but also His person as the eternal God, the Maker of everything.

It has been said that the Messianic Psalms divide into two categories: those that show us something about what Christ does, and those that indicate what Christ is. This is one of the latter type – it presents us with Christ as God the Creator.

I said a moment ago that this Psalm shows us Christ as rejected, but His rejection by mankind is not its principal topic. Nor is this Psalm particularly like Psalm 22, which speaks very vividly about Christ's suffering for sins, which is the basis for our salvation. The crux of this Psalm, given the invaluable insights that Hebrew 1 provides, appears to be verse 10, where we hear Christ addressing Jehovah saying,

“Because of Your indignation and Your wrath; for You have lifted me up
and cast me away.”

This refers to the time when Jesus is approaching the cross and feeling in advance what will happen there. It may also include earlier times in the Lord's ministry where he anticipates the coming cross, for example John 12:27. We can picture the Lord Jesus, knowing, of course, who He is and the work He will shortly accomplish on the cross; knowing also the future blessings for God's nation of Israel; nevertheless, as a man, feeling the fact that God will forsake Him. Christ feels the pain caused by the way that He has so often had to stand alone in this world, and knows that His life will soon be cut short, and the blessings of His reign as Messiah not immediately implemented. Knowing this, God Himself speaks from heaven, assuring His Messiah (who is of course His own Son) that He, that is His Son, is also the creator, and will outlive His creation. Indeed, the Son will establish a whole new creation and have no end to His life. That is the overview of this rather remarkable Psalm.

The first question we should ask with any Messianic Psalm is, which bits are Messianic? Some of the Messianic Psalms have sections that obviously cannot be referring to Christ, for example when they confess the psalmist sins. Psalm 69:5 is an example of this: we could never apply the words “O God, You know my foolishness; and my sins are not hidden from You” to Christ! Other Psalms may have only a verse or two in the whole Psalm that are truly Messianic. Psalm 16 may be an example of this, where verse 10, which reads, “For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption”, is the only verse that is clearly Messianic. This Psalm, as we have already noted, is one of only a few that appear to be Messianic in their entirety.

So, now that we have established the Psalm's purpose and content, let's break the Psalm down into sections and work our way through them. I will use the following outline:

1. vv.1-7: Trouble and isolation.
2. vv.8,9: Enemies and mourning.
3. vv.10,11: God's casting off and its consequences.
4. vv.12-22: Future blessings for Zion.

5. vv.23,24: The problem and an appeal to God.

6. vv.25-28: God's answer.

I will read the block of verses each time before I comment on them.

1. Trouble and isolation (vv.1-7)

“Hear my prayer, O LORD and let my cry come to You. Do not hide Your face from me in the day of my trouble; incline Your ear to me; in the day that I call, answer me speedily. For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned like a hearth. My heart is stricken and withered like grass, so that I forget to eat my bread. Because of the sound of my groaning my bones cling to my skin. I am like a pelican of the wilderness; I am like an owl of the desert. I lie awake, and am like a sparrow alone on the housetop.”

The Psalm commences with a request that Jehovah would hear the anguished cry of His Servant and respond speedily. We can all understand that kind of agonised prayer, and the feeling that God seems to be looking the other way from our problems. We can find many similar passages in the Psalms, but the remarkable thing here is that these are the feelings of the Lord Jesus Himself. Already in this Psalm, with the phrase, “days consumed like smoke”, we are starting to get indications that the writer is anticipating a shortened life. The graphic phrases of these verses suggest inner sorrows that are consuming the writer, maybe starting to affect his physical health, and occupying him so much that he even begins to forget the essential things of life, such as eating. We are given three bird analogies: pelican, owl, and sparrow. The first two are solitary, perhaps even mournful birds, and the locations we are given for them are “the wilderness” and “the desert.” They obviously depict solitude. The third bird is slightly different. Sparrows are not normally solitary birds, and a housetop is rather less isolated than a wilderness! Some commentators think that the word translated sparrow refers more generally to a bird, and that another solitary bird is intended. But if the translation sparrow is correct, maybe the picture of a usually sociable bird, left by itself, and specifically said to be alone, even in the place of human habitation, paints an even starker picture of loneliness.

2. Enemies and mourning (vv.8,9)

“My enemies reproach me all day long; those who deride me swear an oath against me. For I have eaten ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping.”

This section has the only reference to enemies, or human opposition in the whole psalm. The allusions to ashes and weeping refer to the mourning customs of the time when the psalmist is writing. Sitting in ashes was a sign of abject mourning, and the writer implies that the ashes have been mingled with the food that he eats. Even as he drinks, the contents of his cup get mixed with the tears pouring down his face. Thus, even eating and drinking provide no relief from his sorrow; the sadness and mourning are constant and all-consuming.

3. God's casting off and its consequences (vv.10,11)

“Because of Your indignation and Your wrath; for You have lifted me up and cast me away. My days are like a shadow that lengthens, and I wither away like grass.”

I have already said that verse 10 is the focal point of this Psalm and central to understanding it in the way that the writer of Hebrews implies. At the heart of the psalmist's grief are not the activities of his enemies, but the actions of God. God has lifted him up and is now casting him down. If we refer this to Jesus the Messiah, then we see the one that God has exalted in this world - His own chosen King, brought low by God Himself. No wonder there is such grief! The writer compares his life to a shadow that will only last a few more hours at most, and grass that, in a hot, dry country, will soon wither away to nothing. Once again, these are poignant things for any human being to feel, but most striking when we think of them as the experiences of the Christ.

4. Future blessings for Zion (vv.12-22)

“But You, O LORD, shall endure forever, and the remembrance of Your name to all generations. You will arise and have mercy on Zion; for the time to favour her, yes, the set time, has come. For Your servants take pleasure in her stones, and show favour to her dust. So the nations shall fear the name of the LORD, and all the kings of the earth Your glory. ...He shall regard the prayer of the destitute, and shall not despise their prayer. This will be written for the generation to come, that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD. For He looked down from the height of His sanctuary, from heaven the LORD viewed the earth, to hear the groaning of the prisoner, to release those appointed to death, to declare the name of the LORD in Zion, and His praise in Jerusalem, when the peoples are gathered together, and the kingdoms, to serve the LORD.”

In contrast to the writer of the psalm, Jehovah will live forever and be known to all succeeding generations. Not only that, but the time when God will bless his national people of Israel is approaching. God is about to show mercy and favour to His nation, and those people, who have been disobedient for a long time, will delight in the very stones and dust of the Promised Land. The blessing will extend beyond Israel to the Gentile nations, and the kings of those nations will fear God and His glory. In doing this, God will answer the prayers of the destitute. In phrases which recall the expressions that God used before He acted to bring Israel up out of slavery in Egypt (see Exodus 3:7,8), the psalmist says that, in heaven, God has heard the groanings of His people and will accomplish their release. Consequently, in Zion, in the city of Jerusalem, all shall come together to serve the LORD.

Often in the Old Testament we get a vision of the future which brings together events that will be separated by many years when they are actually fulfilled. Perhaps the best known is Isaiah 61:1,2 which say,

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God.”

When the Lord Jesus reads this passage in the synagogue in Luke 4:18,19, He ends the reading before the phrase, “the day of vengeance of our God.” Jesus proclaimed that He was fulfilling the sections He had read. It is clear that the “day of vengeance” is still in the future today. So the two parts of one sentence are to be fulfilled more than 2,000 years apart from each other! Similarly, in Psalm 102, we see the sufferings of Christ, which were fulfilled over 2,000 years ago now, and the blessings of a coming earthly kingdom, still in the future, brought together in a single view. However, in this Psalm, they are very much logically connected, as we shall see.

5. The problem and an appeal to God (vv.23,24)

“He weakened my strength in the way; He shortened my days. I said, ‘O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days; Your years are throughout all generations.’”

These verses take us back to the subject matter of our first three sections, that is the “casting off” of Christ and the cutting short of His life. The logical challenge is: how can the future Messianic kingdom, anticipated in verses 12 to 22, be brought into being if the Messiah Himself dies in comparative youth? If the Messiah is merely a human being, a man like any other, then the conundrum cannot be solved. The story would be one that is tragically familiar in history: a life that is full of promise, brought to a premature end and, no matter how great the individual’s legacy may be, their direct impact on the world is forever ended. The interpretation of the next three verses that the book of Hebrews gives us, shatters that gloomy version of events, and presents God’s own response to the one who is not just the Messiah, but also God’s own Son and equal with Him!

6. God’s answer (vv.25-28)

“Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will endure; yes, they will all grow old like a garment; like a garment You will change them, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will have no end. The children of Your servants will continue, and their descendants will be established before You.”

The reason that the Messiah can have his life cut short, and yet still bring in the future Kingdom, is that the One who is Messiah is also Jehovah!

When I was a young Christian, older Bible teachers would often say, “The Jehovah of the Old Testament is the Jesus of the New.” What they meant, was that the covenant keeping God of the Old Testament, who said to Moses in Exodus 3:14, “I AM WHO I AM”, the eternal, unchanging, self-existing God, is Jesus the Messiah, who appears in the New Testament. John’s Gospel carefully sets out the eternal existence of Jesus, how He is the Son of God and co-equal with God the Father. Various chapters of the epistles, such as Ephesians 1, Colossians 1, and Hebrews 1, set out, in some detail, how this is the case. Who Jesus is, “The image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation” according to Colossians 1:15, is a vital element at the heart of Biblical Christianity. There is no basis to the Gospel message of salvation and liberty if Jesus is not God – the Jehovah of the Old Testament. These verses in Psalm 102 set out the wonderful truth of who the Messiah, the One we now know to be Jesus, is. The One who is about to have His life cut short, is the One to whom the earth and the heavens owe their existence! Those vast fundamentals of creation, which we think of as unshakeable, and almost the very definition of longevity and permanence, will one day perish, but the Messiah will continue forever. When the universe has grown old, Jesus Himself will fold it up like a used cloak and replace it with a new one! These verses say they will be changed. They will have no power to resist. Also, the created earth and heavens stand in contrast to the Son who is “the Same”, in other words, He is unchangeable, because He is the eternal, self-existent God. The One who is about to die is told, “Your years will have no end!”

So, what have we learned?

What does all this mean? How might we summarise the implications of this remarkable Psalm? The Messiah, who we now know to be Jesus, is, at one and the same time, both the eternal God, and a man, who feels loneliness, the casting off of God, and the anguish of a life cut short. Of course, this is exactly the Saviour and Lord that we need! We need a Saviour who is sinless and

perfect, One whose life is of infinite value when offered as a sacrifice for our sins. We need a Saviour who is God. But we also need a Saviour who can offer up His life and go into death for us. One who can die and then rise again. We need a Saviour who is a Man. We have just one Saviour who is both God and Man!

Now that we know Jesus Christ as our Saviour and have new life in Him, we need a Lord who can lead and protect us through our whole life and provide us with a guaranteed entrance into Heaven when our life here ends. We need a Lord, therefore, who has sufficient power to keep us safe from powerful enemies and strong temptations. We need Someone to pick us up and set us back on our feet when we have fallen and failed. We need a Lord who can fulfil His promise to complete the good work He began in us at our conversion (Philippians 1:6). We need Somebody who can give us the Divine power that will be needed to accomplish anything useful for God in this world. We need a Lord with the authority to send a Divine person (the Holy Spirit) to come and live in our hearts (Matthew 3:11 & John 14:16). All of this means we need a Lord who is Himself God.

But we also need a Lord who understands our human limitations 'from the inside.' One who has Himself experienced hunger and thirst, tiredness and rejection by friends and family. One who has stood at a graveside and wept at the loss of a loved one. We need a Lord who has personally experienced temptation and stood firm against it. We need Somebody who, when He pick us up after our failures, speaks with human compassion as well as divine authority. We need One who not only sends the Holy Spirit, but promises to remain with us Himself, until the very end (Matthew 28:20). We need a Lord who has all the attributes of perfect manhood.

Thank God, we do not have to choose between a Lord who is a man and a Lord who is God, or even have two Lords: we have one Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, God's Son! This is the person that Psalm 102 introduces to us. No wonder it is a most extraordinary Psalm, because it is all about a most extraordinary Person!

In Summary

While we should be very careful not to misapply the Old Testament, the Spirit of God was free to give new understandings and applications of Old Testament scriptures when He inspired the New Testament. Of course, the teachings and doctrines of Christianity are all clearly set out in the New Testament scriptures. Passages like the Messianic Psalms do not add to New Testament revelation, but they can give us very valuable perspectives and illuminations of those truths. I trust that our consideration of Psalm 102 has done that today.

Our God and Father, we thank You for the indescribable gift of Your Son! We are saddened to be reminded of how His life was cut short because of our sins and disobedience, but we rejoice to hear Your words stating His eternal, unchanging existence. We look forward to seeing Him bring in a whole new creation and are glad that, through Him, we too "will continue...and..." "be established before You", Amen.

Thank you for listening to this truth for today talk on Messianic Psalms – Psalm 102 , talk number T1299.

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