A Prayer For The Afflicted
Psalm 102
2009 Summer Psalm Series
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If I was to make a list of things over the years I think I’ve become really good at, it’d be a really short list. Well one of the things on the list would be that I think I’ve become really good at saying, “I don’t know.” “I don’t know”—there’s actually a lot of freedom in that. We don’t like that though. We want to know. We want to be able to figure out the stuff of life. I don’t know why things are the way they are. I don’t know why you have that disease. I don’t know why you were in that accident. I don’t know why some things are the way they are. I don’t know. I do know that what we understand and truly believe to be the purpose of life will dramatically affect how we respond to the stuff of life.

When you think about the culture in which we live, how do you think this world—this culture—defines success? What would the people of our culture say is the purpose of life? I don’t think that’s real hard to figure out. For example you can just watch the commercials on TV. You get a strong sense of what we believe is the purpose of life as a culture. For example there’s one commercial on television that’s been on television for a long time. It tells you that if you retire and move down South, the line is, “You can live like a millionaire.” What does that mean? Is that the prize at the end of the day? “You live like a millionaire?” According to the commercial I think it means you play golf a lot. That’s it? At the end of the day you play a lot of golf? That’s the prize?

There’s another commercial on TV that tells you that you can sit out by the pool and sip lemonade, with a laptop and work 3 hours a month and hundreds of thousands of dollars come pouring in. They don’t even tell you what the job is. The only point is: you make thousands of dollars! That’s the prize! You sit by the pool and you drink lemonade and have lots of money. Now there’s nothing wrong with success. There’s nothing wrong with money. But is that the point? Is that the purpose? Is that the prize at the end of the day?

You listen to country-western music and it’s pretty easy to figure out. It could be summed up in girls and beer and takin’ it easy—no shoes, no shirt, no problems—free and easy down the road you go.

However this world defines purpose, if it is defined by somehow accumulating stuff—lots of money, life of leisure, be happy all the time—every single affliction is a roadblock preventing you from that purpose. And if you get enough of those roadblocks, it becomes unbearable. You get one shot at life and, “I had my hopes and dreams and now all this stuff is keeping me from experiencing life.” That way of thinking just simply piles pain on top of pain on top of pain. There is an alternative to that though. If we understand the purpose, as the psalmist understands it, we will be much better equipped to deal with the difficult stuff of life.

If you have a Bible, turn with us to Psalm 102. Nobody knows who wrote Psalm 102. Based on the details in the psalm, we would say it was written during the exile. So after the Hebrew people were captured and hauled back into captivity in Babylon, they were there for 70 years, the time period—
if you want an Old Testament book—would be during the book of Daniel. So somewhere in exile they’ve experienced the destruction of Jerusalem, the destruction of the walls and the temple; they’re in exile and they wonder if they’ll ever get back again.

It’s quite an impressive superscription—that little writing under the number there. Last week the superscription said “A Psalm”. This week it’s on the other end of the scale. It’s “A Prayer of the Afflicted, when he is faint, and pours out his complaint before the LORD.” That’s a mouth-full.

Verse 1:

Hear my prayer, O LORD!  
And let my cry for help come to You.  
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. (*NASB, Psalm 102, vs. 1-2)

These two opening verses are interesting. It’s as if the writer poured through the Psalms and found all the different ways that psalmists phrase this cry to the Lord and decided, “You know maybe if we list every single way to cry out, maybe then God will hear.” Whenever you’re interpreting Hebrew poetry, one of the things you’ll look for is called parallelism—two lines that parallel one another—and there are different types of parallelism. This happens to be what we called synonymous which means the second line simply restates the first line. So the point of verses 1 and 2 would not be how these phrases differ. The point is just the opposite of that. They’re all the same. They’re just different ways of crying out to God. And at the end of verse 2, there’s clearly a sense of urgency. “God, if you don’t do something fast, I’m in trouble.”

Verses 3 through 11 are the complaint. If you look again at the superscription, it says he “pours out his complaint before the LORD.” Okay, 3 through 11 are the complaint.

For my days have been consumed in smoke, (Vs. 3a)

Whenever you’re interpreting the Psalms, it’s very important to notice the images—the metaphors. You need to notice those; you need to unpack those and then you need to ask the question, “What is the writer’s intent in using that metaphor?” In other words, “What does the writer want to have happen in the life and the heart and the emotions of the reader as a result of that metaphor?” He’s trying to move us in some way and clearly these pictures—these metaphors—are meant to help us understand this is a very serious, painful circumstance. The idea of smoke was a common imagery in the Old Testament for the brevity of life. He’s imagining himself as a piece of wood that’s thrown on the fire and, as the wood is consumed, it goes up in smoke and as the smoke dissipates, that’s it! That’s life—here today, gone tomorrow—very brief.

....And my bones have been scorched like a hearth. (Vs. 3b)

Thinking back to the ancient world and of course everything was done around a fire. Those fires would scorch the hearth or the stones around them. And he’s imagining his bones are like that. They’re black with soot because they’ve been scorched from the pain. He’s probably talking about some level of either fever or pain in his joints and it’s as if they’re burned; they’re so hot.
Verse 4:

*My heart has been smitten like grass and has withered away,* (Vs. 4a)

Again this is a great ancient imagery. It’s harder for us today to enter into this because we have such easy access to water. We have automatic sprinklers; everything tends to be green. But in an ancient world where it was very dry and barren, everything wasn’t green. It was brown and it was dry and it was withered up. That’s a common imagery of that’s how his heart feels: like it’s dry and shriveled up.

*Indeed, I forget to eat my bread.*

[He’s so sick he doesn’t even eat anymore.]

*Because of the loudness of my groaning*  
*My bones cling to my flesh* (Vs. 4b-5)

It’s a great description of someone who’s emaciated. It’s like his skin is just kind of hanging on the bones. Clearly he’s talking about some sort of physical illness here.

*I resemble a pelican of the wilderness;*  
*I have become like an owl of the waste places.*  
*I lie awake,*  
*I have become like a lonely bird on a housetop.* (Vs. 6-7)

Now the Hebrew is not actually the word “pelican”; that’s just kind of an educated guess. Actually all these birds here are hard to figure out what bird is being referred to, but I think the point is clear. He’s painting a picture of a bird that’s isolated and alone. The idea of a pelican in the wilderness would be kind of a *fish out of water.* A pelican is a coastal bird so he’s completely out of place in the wilderness. The point is that because of his disease, because of his affliction, because of his suffering, he feels completely isolated and is just kind of withering away. We understand that’s a very common problem when you endure trials, especially if it’s an illness. At a time in your life when you probably need more people, we tend to isolate ourselves from people. And the more we isolate ourselves the more afflicted we feel and it just creates pain upon pain and that’s what he’s feeling here.

Verse 8:

*My enemies have reproached me all day long;*  
*Those who deride me have used my name as a curse.* (Vs. 8)

He’s talking about his enemies that laugh at his pain. Maybe they say things like, “Where is your God now?” Now we may have people in our lives that take great delight in our suffering. But I’m going to take a little bit of liberty with the text here and suggest to you there may be other voices that come to us in our suffering that create more pain. And I would say those are the voices of bad theology. If you have bad theology it just simply makes your pain more painful. If you’ve bought into the *Let’s Make A Deal* theology, it’s unbearable to struggle with afflictions, because you thought this was a deal. I have my quiet time; I say my prayers; I give my money; I’m a good boy or girl. The deal is: if I do that, then God will deliver. If I’m naughty I’m going to suffer, but if I’m a good boy God’s going to be good to me. *Let’s Make A Deal!*
But that isn’t good theology. There’s nowhere that God says, “That’s the deal”. The deal is we just trust Him and admit that sometimes life makes no sense. But if you’ve bought into the Let’s Make A Deal theology, then your suffering torments you. You’re trying to figure out, “What did I do? What did I do wrong? How come God’s not keeping up His end of the deal?”

Another voice of bad theology is what we call the Prosperity Gospel—that what God wants for you, the reason Jesus died on the cross, is that you will be healthy, wealthy, and prosperous in this life. That’s it? That’s why he went to the cross? The voice says, “If you’re struggling from an affliction, it’s your fault. If you struggle with a disease today, it’s your fault. God doesn’t want that. If you had more faith—if you really believed—you wouldn’t be sick today.” Boy that really helps, doesn’t it? It’s very comforting in your hour of need to know it’s your fault. That’s bad theology; it’s just not true.

Verse 9:

For I have eaten ashes like bread,  
And mingled my drink with weeping,  

In the ancient world they put ashes on their head as a sign of mourning. It sounds like he’s done it so much he feels like that’s his food and his tears are his drink.

Because of Your indignation and Your wrath;  
For You have lifted me up and cast me away. (Vs. 10)

Clearly that’s a reference to sin and understanding it’s because of sin in the world and it’s because of sin among the Hebrew people that they are in exile. It doesn’t mean, necessarily, that the psalmist is saying because of his specific sin, because there’s no sense of that. There’s no confession; there are no specifics in the psalm. I think he’s more likely saying, “Because we as a people disobeyed God, we understand we’re under God’s hand of discipline and we’re suffering the consequences of that.” He knows that and he acknowledges that.

My days are like a lengthened shadow;  
And I wither away like grass. (Vs. 11)

I love that imagery of a “lengthened shadow”. There are two ways we can think about it from the ancient world. The Hebrew people did use a sundial, so telling time was an issue of a lengthened shadow. So that might be one way that they would have visualized this. But probably more so was the idea that in an ancient world, you had to be a sun watcher. We have no real concept of that today because, if it starts to get dark, we turn on the lights. But in a world where there was no electricity, there were no lights, you had to be very careful that what needed to be done was done before it got dark. Because when it was dark, it was dark! So they were sun watchers and they had to be very careful to make sure that life was timed around the setting sun. And one of the ways to do that was to watch the lengthening shadows; the longer they got, the closer it was to sundown. And so the psalmist may be sitting there in his affliction and he’s watching that shadow lengthen. As the sun’s going down he says, “That’s me. The sun’s going down; my shadow’s getting longer and I’m just about dead.” It’s a very graphic imagery.
Verse 12 is a turning point in the Psalm:

**But You, O LORD, abide forever; And Your name to all generations.**

The “But You...” is in the emphatic in the Hebrew, and the point of that is that the contrast between the psalmist and God is dramatic. The psalmist is like smoke: here today, gone tomorrow. He’s like a lengthening shadow; he’s almost done. But he contrasts that with the reality that God’s forever. God’s eternal—a dramatic difference between God and people that are here today, gone tomorrow.

Let me see if I can illustrate it this way: Let’s imagine this morning that there is a timeline that goes from wall to wall. If I was to try to measure the lifespan of the average person—let’s just say 70 years today—on that timeline, I would get the smallest razorblade possible and I would make the most narrow slash possible on that timeline. So, even though 70 years seems like a long time to us, in relevance to this timeline—it’s the tiniest little slash. That’s it. Whether it’s 30 years or 40 years or 70 years or 90 years, you can’t even tell the difference in the size of that little tiny slash. It’s all we get. If what we’re living for is the slash, what difference does it make? What have we ultimately accomplished? An hour on the stage? A moment of pleasure? That’s it? Big deal!

If you were to imagine in your mind the top 10 most successful people you know by the world’s definition… No, let’s broaden that out… the top 10 most successful people in the world today according to the world’s definition… No, wait a minute, let’s broaden that out… The top 10 most successful people who have ever lived in the history of mankind according to the world’s definition. If all they accomplished can be contained in that slash, what I would say is, “Big deal! It’s nothing—total waste!” But imagine over top of that timeline there is this arc that represents the eternity of God—He’s forever. And with the eternity of God is God’s plan and purpose that absolutely will be accomplished and will last forever. Now imagine that God has given you an invitation that, in the span of that little tiny slash, He’s invited you to connect with the eternal plan and purpose that He absolutely will accomplish. So rather than what your purpose in life is, rather than limiting it to the little slash, you have a chance to connect from that slash to that which will last forever. Once you understand that, everything is different. Everything’s different: how I understand my talents, how I understand my life, how I understand my afflictions, how I understand my money. Everything’s different because I have a remarkable opportunity from this little slash to be a part of something that will still matter 100,000 years from now. That’s what the Psalmist is talking about. He understands—even though he’s faded away, God’s not.

Verse 13:

**You will arise and have compassion on Zion;**  
**For it is time to be gracious to her,**  
**For the appointed time has come.**  
**Surely Your servants find pleasure in her stones,**  
**And feel pity for her dust.**  
*(Vs. 13-14)*

The psalmist is a good theologian. He understands God made a promise. God entered into a covenant and even though it looks really bleak now in exile, God’s not done. He’s going to restore His people to their land. He’s going to fulfill His promise. So he is imagining God showing up and doing something, because God promised He would. Verse 14 is identifying that as much as the
Hebrew people love their land, God loves it more—because it represents a promise that’s ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

Verse 15:

So the nations will fear the name of the LORD,
And all the kings of the earth Your glory.
For the LORD has built up Zion;
He has appeared in His glory.
He has regarded the prayer of the destitute,
And has not despised their prayer. (Vs. 15-17)

This is a common technique, especially in the Old Testament, and that is speaking of the future as if it’s past. In other words the psalmist is speaking as if it’s already done. It’s already accomplished, even though it is yet to come. It’s a technique that represents the psalmist’s understanding that God made a promise and there is no way that promise will not be fulfilled. Therefore we speak of the future as if it’s the past. It’s as good as done and he knows that and speaks accordingly—so great that the nations and the kings will bow down and will respond to the greatness of God’s action.

Verse 18:

This will be written for the generation to come;
That a people yet to be created may praise the LORD.

He says what’s going to happen will be so great that the generations to come will read about it and give God praise because of what He’s done. I love the language here when it says “...That a people yet to be created...” He’s talking about people yet to be born—a generation that hasn’t even been born yet—but the psalmist reminds us that nobody is an act of chance. We are “fearfully and wonderfully made”. The wording here is very careful. From the moment of conception you are God’s handiwork—created by God. And those that aren’t even created yet will one day celebrate the great thing that God’s about to do. The psalmist knows that’s true.

For He looked down from His holy height;
From heaven the LORD gazed upon the earth,
To hear the groaning of the prisoner;
To set free those who were doomed to death;
That men may tell of 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. (Vs. 19-22)

You have to understand how hopeless things must have seemed in Babylon in exile and yet, because the psalmist is a good theologian, he knows we’re not going to stay here. God promised and it’s as good as done. Because of that, he’s talking as if it’s already done and, for generations to come, people will praise God because He was faithful to His promise. Now he brings it back to his circumstance:

He has weakened my strength in the way;
He has shortened my days.
I say, "O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days, 
Your years are throughout all generations." (Vs. 23-24)

The psalmist knows he’s dying. He’s not dying of old age. He’s dying a premature death because of this disease and he asks God, “God, I’m asking you to give me an extension. I’m asking you to keep me alive ‘til I see the fulfillment of the promise.”

Verse 25:

"Of old You founded the earth; 
And the heavens are the work of Your hands. 
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.” (Vs. 25-26)

This is great imagery. We’re talking about even the heaven and the earth will not remain as it is. It will ultimately be changed; it will be transformed—redeemed is the New Testament language—back to what God intended. But even the universe itself is not eternal. Only God is eternal.

Now this is interesting to think about because a lot of people in our world today really want to tap into the energy of the universe. They want to become one with the earth. It’s kind of this New Age—or there are lots of different names for it—but it’s very popular. But what they don’t understand is that’s temporary. That’s still life in the slash: here today, gone tomorrow. Even if it was possible, which it is not, but even if it was possible, it’s short-lived at best! Why settle for that when you can connect with the One that is eternal over all? The imagery is one day God will change the universe as someone would change a dirty shirt—a New Heaven and a New Earth. If you have the option, why not connect with that which will last forever? That’s what the psalmist is saying.

Verse 27:

“But You are the same, 
And Your years will not come to an end. 
The children of Your servants will continue, 
And their descendants will be established before You.” (Vs. 27-28)

What the psalmist is saying is: Because they are connected to the God who lasts forever—that in this little slash of time—they have the opportunity to connect with the plan and purpose of God that will go on forever. And even though he’s suffering, even though he’s dying prematurely from a disease, it does not in any way hinder the plan and purpose of God. And because he’s a part of that, it in no way hinders his plan and purpose and ultimately God’s purpose will be completed and he will be part of the celebration. That’s what he’s saying.

The writer of Hebrews, in Hebrews Chapter 1, connects verses 27 and 28 with Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of Verses 27 and 28. You might say Jesus is the connecting point between time and eternity. So if we go back to our illustration and imagine the timeline and imagine the slash, the question would be, “What is the way by which we, in the slash, connect with that which is eternal, that we might be a part of something that will last forever instead of the momentary pleasures of this world?” The answer, according to the writer of Hebrews, is it’s Jesus. The One who is eternal
entered into the slash, entered into time and space and ultimately was nailed to a cross to pay for your sins and mine. Those who believe that Jesus died on the cross for them have their sins forgiven. But more than that: That is, then, the way to restore a relationship with God. That is the basis by which we, in the slash, connect with that which is eternal. That is the basis by which we go on beyond the temporary stuff of this world to that which will matter forever.

If your understanding of the purpose in life is to be happy, is to accumulate stuff, is to have lots of money, is to play golf all day, if that’s the prize, then every single affliction, every single trial, every single difficulty—the stuff of life—is a roadblock that is going to prevent you from getting to that purpose. And if you get enough stuff in life, you’re eventually going to say, “It’s never going to happen. We had one shot at life and I drew a losing ticket and I’m never going to experience my dream.” What that does is it compounds pain on top of pain on top of pain to the point where it becomes unbearable.

But there is an alternative: to understand I’m really not living for the stuff of this world. I’m really not defining my purpose according to what this world has to offer. That through Jesus Christ and His death on the cross, I can connect with that which is eternal. I may have 30 years; I may have 50 years; I may have 70 years. I may have a life filled with affliction but, if I am connecting and in alignment with the eternal purpose of God, it is not possible for anything in this world to be a roadblock. It’s not possible for anything in this world to keep me from that purpose. It’s as good as done—a slam-dunk—and God’s invited me to the victory party. And in that party I will know that, in spite of all the stuff of this life, I didn’t miss anything. It’s only when we understand that what I have is today. I don’t know if I have tomorrow and I don’t know what tomorrow’s going to look like. What I do have is today, such as it is. Today may be filled with affliction or today may be pretty good, but this is what I have. So today I connect with that which is eternal and I know that ultimately, that purpose will be accomplished. Nobody, nothing can get in the way of that. It’s as good as done. I’m in. No matter what I face today, it’s not keeping me from anything. And one day I will know that I didn’t miss anything because God, in His grace, allowed me in the slash to be a part of something that will last forever. When you understand that, it gives you what you need to deal with whatever life throws your way.

Our Father, we’re thankful this morning that You are eternal. You’re the only thing that is. Lord, we understand that one day You will even change this universe like we change our clothes. It’s only when we connect with You that we are part of something that will last. Lord, we all understand that if we are living for the stuff of this world, there are hundreds of things out of our control that can stop us from experiencing that purpose. But, Lord, when we connect with You it’s as good as done. It’s in the bank. No matter what I experience today, that purpose will be fulfilled and You’ve invited us to be part of the victory celebration. Lord, help us to understand this. Help us to live for that which matters, to live for that which lasts and to view every affliction through the eyes of that which is eternal. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

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