

A Prayer of One Afflicted **Psalm 102**

Main Idea: The Psalmist teaches us how to cry out to God desperately, honestly, and confidently during dark seasons of life.

- **In Affliction, Pray Desperately (102:1-2)**
- **In Affliction, Pray Honestly (102:3-11)**
- **In Affliction, Pray Confidently (10:12-28)**
 - God's Eternal Kingship (102:12)
 - God's Compassion (102:13-14)
 - God's Sovereignty (102:15)
 - God's Power (102:16)
 - God's Condescension (102:17)
 - God's Faithfulness (102:18-22)
 - God's Immutability (102:23-28)
 - God's Son (Heb 1:10-12)

Nearly one third of the Psalms are laments. Not everything in the Psalter is “happy clappy” because not everything in life is “happy clappy!” Life is hard. There are times of grief, mourning, sorrow, frustration, despair, anxiety, confusion, and many other forms of suffering. For this reason, we need to know what to do in these dark times. How will we bear up under trials?

One way we learn to endure is by learning from the Psalms of *lament*. We learn how to pray desperately, honestly, and with God-centered, Christ-filled confidence and hope. In Psalm 102, we are looking at a lament. Allen summarizes it saying, “A desperately sick man turns to Yahweh as his only hope” (14). We have much to learn from this desperate man.

Though traditionally this Psalm has been classified as a penitential Psalm (a song confessing sin and seeking forgiveness, along with Psalms 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143), this is really a misclassification. Psalm 102 receives this designation because of its traditional usage in the Christian community. VanGemenen rightly states, “The psalm exemplifies the literary genre of an individual lament” (644). This individual lament also has the whole community of faith in view.

The context seems to be an exilic situation. The Psalmist is crying out to God as one exiled from the land.

We must also add that this lament is unique. It includes a “prophetic-hymnic section” (Ibid., 645), which provides future hope to God's people. In fact, this Psalm has a powerful Christological focus. The writer of Hebrews cites Psalm 102:25-26 explicitly in Hebrews 1:10-12, using this Psalm to praise the Jesus as the pre-existent Lord. The writer of Hebrews uses these verses as the Father speaking about the Son, through whom the universe was made (Heb 1:2), and who is “sustaining all things by His powerful word” (Heb 1:3). Kidner adds that one may read the entire Psalm messianically, saying that the reference to Psalm 102 “implies that the sufferer throughout the [whole] Psalm is also *the Son incarnate*” (Kidner, 362, my emphasis; see also Wilcock, 114).

What types of affliction are you encountering? Ligon Duncan helps us relate present situations with this Psalm. Like a careful surgeon, Duncan attempts to care for the souls of his people saying:

Have you known affliction? Deep and intense? Unrelenting affliction? A darkness where there is no light at the end of the tunnel? Have you brought it here with you today?

Perhaps it's in your job and your vocation ... your profession. You have with integrity sought to earn a living, do what is right, and yet there is someone — a client, a partner — who had betrayed you and is raking your good name through the mud, calling into question all of your integrity, threatening your livelihood and the well-being of your family as well as ruining your reputation. And when you go home, late at night you want to lay your head on the pillow and close your eyes and forget about it, but you cannot. There's no escaping it. Everywhere you go that reality is there, and there is no relenting in its pursuit of you.

Or maybe it's in a family estrangement; one to whom you would give great joy, and from whom you would receive great joy, has plunged a knife into your own soul and there is no relief. It may be your husband or your wife or a child, or your own mother and father, or some close relative. And in the very place where we're meant to have security and joy there is in fact the deepest of affliction, because there is no one who can hurt us like those who are closest to us.

Or maybe it's just that you are living in a yawning loneliness ... surrounded by frenetic activity in work, surrounded by numerous acquaintances, but no one who really knows you and loves you or would care about you if you were gone; no one to stick with you to the end.

Or maybe it is that you carry within your own body a disease that is killing you.

Or maybe there is an unbelieving child who has broken your heart.

And I could go on and on and on, and not end the list of the afflictions that are here today. My friends, it is one of the supreme truths of God's word that it is true and that it is His that He speaks to us precisely in these places and that He dares to say to us, "Write down your afflictions and pray them to Me. In fact, I am going to give you words in My word so that you can pray back to Me your broken heart in the midst of your affliction, and so that you can bring to Me your complaint." (Duncan, "A Prayer in Affliction")

Betrayal. Grief. Sorrow. Loneliness. Physical disease. A loved one's unbelief. Confusion. These are real experiences. How does one endure them? Praise God He has given us His word to help us to not only understand this broken world, but also to pray His Word back to Him. I want to point out three ways the Psalmist helps us pray in our afflictions.

In Affliction, Pray Desperately (102:1-2)

The superscription gives us the feel of desperation: "A prayer of an afflicted person who is weak and pours out his lament before the Lord." Obviously, this person needs divine help, and so he cries out to God. The opening verses include a rich vocabulary of prayer. The Psalmist uses various words to convey the passion and depth of his supplication:

Lord, hear my prayer;
let my cry for help come before You.
Do not hide Your face from me in my day of trouble.
Listen closely to me;
answer me quickly when I call. (102:1-2)

The Psalmist's language reflects much of the language of the Psalter, as the supplicant seeks God's presence and help through prayer. In verse 1, the afflicted one seeks Yahweh's attention, "hear my prayer" (1a; Ps 39:12; 65:2). He continues by humbly asking for God to graciously allow his "cry for help come before [Him]" (1b; cf., Ps 18:6). Verse 2a includes a negative plea, "Do not hide Your face from me in the day of trouble" (2a; cf., Ps 13:1; 27:9). Then he asks God again to hear his prayer, "Listen closely to me; answer me quickly when I

call” (2b; Ps 31:2; 71:2; 88:2; 56:9; 69:17).

The Psalmist feels alienated in some sense. The popular singer, Adele’s hit song “Hello” comes to mind. She sings to someone special, “So hello from the other side. I must have called a thousand times. To tell you I’m sorry for everything that I’ve done. But when I call you never seem to be home. Hello from the outside” (Adele, “Hello”). Do you feel like that with regard to prayer? Do you feel like an outsider? Learn from the Psalmist. Persist in prayer. Be desperate in prayer.

Despite this dark season of his soul, the suffering saint is also demonstrating a sense of confidence. He knows God hears the prayer of the afflicted otherwise it would make no sense to call to Him persistently and desperately. Later in the Psalm he says, “He will pay attention to the prayer of the destitute and will not despise their prayer” (102:17). Be encouraged if you find yourself in similar season of affliction. God hears the prayers of the destitute! Call on Him desperately in times of affliction.

What’s most striking to me about this opening plea is *the passion* of the afflicted one. This is not a soft, casual, perfunctory prayer. In the ESV, there are three exclamation points in these first two verses! This guy is calling on the Lord passionately, and he will not give up until he has God’s ear. The puritans used to say, “Pray until you’ve prayed.” If you’re a Christian, you know what they meant. Don’t get off your knees until you have communed with the Father. Press in to know Him and meet with Him.

As I was reading commentaries on this Psalm last Sunday night, my family was watching the movie “War Room,” which is a movie about prayer. An older saint is teaching a younger Christian woman about how to seek the Lord earnestly. While you can always critique particular things in movies, I greatly appreciated the passion with which this older saint prays. She has her little prayer room, her prayer lists, her verses, and she has a living faith. Do you have a prayer closet? Do you have some place where you can cry out to God? Piper says, “You will not know what prayer is for, until you know that life is war” (*Let the Nations Be Glad*, page).

In Affliction, Pray Honestly (102:3-11)

Next, the Psalmist acknowledges his desperation situation. In verses 3-11, he expresses his anguish to God honestly. Sometimes we call friends when we’re in trials and say, “Can I vent for a moment?” You might call verses 3-11, “holy venting.” The Psalmist pours out his complaint to God. This is a good pattern for us. You should vent to God before venting to others.

In verse 3, he feels **his transience**, “my days vanish like smoke” (3a; Ps 37:20; 68:2; Isa 51:6; Hos 13:3; Jam 4:14). Throughout this Psalm the Psalmist feels that his days are few and that his days are losing meaning (cf., 102:11, 23). In dark seasons, one often becomes more aware of his or her or mortality.

Next, the sufferer acknowledges that his “bones burn like a furnace” (3b), perhaps a reference to inflammation or a **feverish anxiety** (VanGemeren, 646), if this is meant to be a real physical description of his

condition (cf., Job 30:17; Lam 1:13).

In verse 4, the afflicted man speaks of his "heart" (his "self"), saying that it's "afflicted" and "withered like grass" (4a). In other words, he feels **dried up inside** (Williams, *kindle*). Have you ever experienced this? Maybe we should ask, "Are you experiencing this right now?" Do you feel spiritually dry? If so, then pray with the Psalmist! Express your anguish to God!

As a result of his spiritual dryness, the Psalmist has experienced **the loss of appetite**, "I even forget to eat my food" (4b; cf., 9). You have a real problem when you don't even remember to eat (cf., 1 Sam 1:7-8). If you've been in the hospital or visited the hospital, you often find both patients and visitors of loved one's forgetting lunch or dinner because they're overcome with affliction.

Because his suffering and lack of appetite, he adds, "Because of the sound of my groaning, my flesh sticks to my bones" (5; cf., Job 19:20). We can picture a tormented man with a great **loss of weight**. I think of Tom Hanks in the movie *Castaway*. He was abandoned, alone, afflicted, tormented, and terribly skinny on that desert island. But this was no movie. This was real life for the Psalmist. Fortunately, he could talk to God in his affliction. Tom Hanks only had an imaginary friend made from a volleyball! That movie does highlight humanity's need for companionship and community. We weren't made to be alone. We were made for God and people.

In verses 6-7, he adds more poetic descriptions to his condition. He says, "I am like a desert owl" (6a). The precise identity of this bird is unknown. Some translate it as a "pelican" (NASB). A pelican is a coastal bird, and would obviously be out of place in the wilderness. He adds, "like an owl among the ruins" (6b). Owls were unclean (Lev 11:17). The Psalmist essentially says that he's **lonely and rejected**.

Due to the loneliness and rejection, the Psalmist is **restless**: "I stay awake; I am like a solitary bird on a roof." (102:7). Misery often includes in inability to sleep.

In the Psalmist's culture, ill health was regarded as punishment for sins (Allen, 14). Consequently, we read that in verses 8, "My enemies taunt me all day long; they ridicule and curse me" (8). So then, the sufferer is **enduring persecution** because of his negative situation. They taunt him and mistreat him. They may even include the taunt, "Where is your God?" (cf., Ps 22:7-8; 42:3, 10; VanGemeren, 646), thus adding multiplying his suffering.

The Psalmist seems to agree with his enemies saying, "I eat ashes like bread and mingle my drinks with tears because of Your indignation and wrath" (9). What's the reason for his tears and his diet of ashes? He seems to think it's the result of God's anger and wrath. Behind his pain is a theology that says sin brings suffering (cf., Jn 9:2; Jam 5:16). He says, "for You have picked me up and thrown me aside" (10). In other words, he **feels like the victim of divine punishment**. As a result, mournful ashes become part of his life, as he hopes to divert God's displeasure (Allen, 14). But no sin is ever mentioned in this Psalm. And he offers no prayer of confession of sin. Allen says the Psalmist leaves unexplained his reference to divine wrath, not linking it with personal wrongdoing but mentioning virtually as an amoral force" (Ibid). Some classify this Psalm as a penitential Psalm because some associate his sin with his feeling of divine punishment. However, this is questionable. The situation here is vague. Is he denying sin? Is he ignorant of sin? We don't know for certain. We know he feels abandoned, and under the anger of

God. Perhaps, the mystery is really only resolved in the Messiah, the suffering Servant, who bore God's wrath for not fault of His own, but on behalf of sinners. Whatever the cause for verse 10, he knows where to turn for relief (12-22).

The Psalmist concludes with an additional line about the brevity of life and the feeling of alienation, "My days are like a lengthening shadow, and I wither away like grass" (11). This provides a nice transition into the next section, in which the Psalmist contrasts his fleeting existence with the permanence and faithfulness of God.

Before looking at verses 12-22, we should mention something about the suffering of a Christian. Remember this: "unexplained suffering" doesn't mean "meaningless suffering" (Duncan, "A Prayer"). All of your sufferings are, in a sense, unexplainable. God's inscrutable ways are not always revealed to us. But no suffering in the Christian life is meaningless. In the end, all will be clear, but for now, we live by faith in God. Prayer is an act of faith. It's an act of trust in the goodness, wisdom, and power of God. In the middle of your affliction, learn from the Psalmist and express your heart to God *honestly*. The Psalmist doesn't have all the answers, but at least he's talking to God. He's not turning from God. He's turning to God. This serves as a pattern for afflicted saints.

In Affliction, Pray Confidently (102:12-28)

The Psalmist next teaches us to pray with confidence in God. Though the supplicant's condition is dark, he's not hopeless. He has confidence not only in the character of God, but also in the future work of God. He has confidence that God will restore the city to universal acclaim, at a time of God's own choosing (Wilcock, 113).

The contrast between the Psalmist's condition and the Lord's character is made emphatically, when he says, "But You, LORD" (12). What do you do with your affliction? You need a "But You, LORD" in your vocabulary! You must see beyond your circumstances to the unchanging character of God. This type of emphatic transition happens throughout the Psalms. For example in the famous Messianic Psalm 22, we read of this type of pivot three times (Ps 22:3, 9, 19). If we can but get our eyes off of our ourselves and consider God's character, we will find not only divine help, but even an intimacy with God that we wouldn't otherwise know (cf., Phil 3:10-11). Samuel Rutherford used to say that when he found himself in the cellar of affliction, he found that the Great King keeps the best wine in the basement! (in Piper, "Where the Great King Keeps His Wine")

There are eight characteristics of God that the Psalmist considers during his trial. If you are in the cellar of affliction, drink of God's grace found here in these verses.

God's Eternal Kingship (102:12). The Psalmist begins "But You, LORD, are enthroned forever" (12a). We may pass way like the grass, but the Lord reigns forever (cf., Rev 1:8). In times of grief, you must remember that God is still enthroned above all. He rules over all things, including your affliction. In contrast to the Psalmist's feeling of hatred and wrath, he can say of God, "Your fame endures to all generation" (12b). The Lord will be glorified by countless generations of people. Our affliction will not thwart this unstoppable reality.

God's Compassion (102:13-14). Next, the Psalmist prays with confidence because of God's grace and favor. He says:

You will rise up and have compassion on Zion,
for it is time to show favor to her—

the appointed time has come.
For Your servants take delight in its stones
and favor its dust. (102:13-14)

The Psalmist believes God will arise and have compassion on His holy city, not because he or the people deserve it, but because God is faithful and compassionate. Specifically, the Psalmist knows God will be compassionate because God is faithful to His Word. The Psalmist is probably speaking of the passing judgment of the Babylonian exile (cf., Isa 40:1). God had an “appointed time” (102:13b) for deliverance, which would usher in a season of restoration. He would graciously fulfill His promises.

In verse 14, the afflicted man reminds Yahweh of the ruined condition of Jerusalem, in order to move Him to compassionate action (14b). The mention of “your servants” is an appeal to God’s faithfulness to His covenant people (14). Thus, God’s faithfulness and compassion give the Psalmist confidence in prayer.

In times of despair, it’s sometimes hard to believe in God’s goodness and love. But we must not put our feelings over God’s Word. We must submit our feelings to God’s Word. What we find is that nothing will separate the believer from God’s love (Rom 8:31ff). He loves us with an everlasting love. We may doubt this fact at times, so when we do, we must go to God’s Word and fill our minds and hearts with this medicinal truth.

God’s Sovereignty (102:15). Next, the Psalmist draws our attention to God’s absolute sovereignty. As God restores Zion, the nations will also come to revere His name. The Psalmist says, “Then the nations will fear the name of Yahweh, and all the kings of the earth Your glory” (15). The Psalmist sees his affliction in the midst of the larger story of redemption. God is bringing a people to Himself. That sovereign plan will not be thwarted. The nations will glorify His name. When we read the New Testament, we know even more of that global plan than the Psalmist knew. Through faith in Israel’s Messiah, the nations will come to know the true and living God (cf., Isa 60:3; 62:2).

While God doesn’t need us to accomplish His global mission, He uses us. We must see that our endurance in our many afflictions helps to contribute to the outworking of this great plan. We don’t fight as pathetic victims, but as victors in an unstoppable mission.

God’s Power (102:16). Further, the Psalmist can pray with confidence because He trusts in God’s ability to execute His plans. He says, “for the Lord will rebuild Zion; He will appear in His glory” (16). The Psalmist knows that his future, and the future of the city, is entirely dependent upon God. And because it’s dependent upon God, he has every reason to hope. Since Almighty God has promised to rebuild it, he can find comfort (cf., Isa 40:5; 60:10; Jer 31:38-40; Mic 7:11).

In the midst of affliction, we must remember God’s power. He has the power to rebuild our lives, homes, churches, and cities. He can turn mourning into dancing. He can make bones live. He can bring beauty out of ashes. Trust in His power.

God’s Condescension (102:17). Moreover, the Psalmist has hope because he knows of God’s divine humility. The suffering saint says, “He will pay attention to the prayer of the destitute and will not despise their prayer” (17). This great and magnificent God also hears the prayer of His people – in this case, an afflicted people praying for the deliverance from exile! This cry for deliverance is reminiscent of Israel’s slavery in Egypt. We read of that moving

passage in Exodus 2:

The Israelites groaned because of their difficult labor, and they cried out; and their cry for help ascended to God because of the difficult labor. So God heard their groaning, and He remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the Israelites, and He took notice. (Ex 2:23b-25).

Israel groaned and cried out to God. And God saw. God heard. God knew. God acted. He still sees, hears, knows, and acts. Cry out to Him in times of grief and trial.

God's Faithfulness (102:18-22). The Psalmist continues praying with confidence because he knows the future is in God's hands. He speaks of God's faithfulness saying:

This will be written for a later generation,
and a newly created people will praise the Lord:
He looked down from His holy heights—
the Lord gazed out from heaven to earth —
to hear a prisoner's groaning,
to set free those condemned to die,
so that they might declare
the name of Yahweh in Zion
and His praise in Jerusalem,
when peoples and kingdoms are assembled
to serve the Lord. (102:18-22)

This is a particularly sweet part of the passage. Notice that the Psalmist wants God to “look down” (19), “hear a prisoner's groaning” (20), and “set free the condemned” (20b). Again, the Exodus 2:23-25 passage comes to mind. But why does he desire for God to act? It's so that the generations to come might glorify God (18, 21-22; cf., Isa 43:15). The Psalmist is saying saying, “Lord hear my cries so that generations after me may hear of your faithfulness.” He wants God to use his afflictions for the good of others.

When you read the story of Job or Hannah and the Exodus, you have the privilege of knowing how the story ends. But they didn't. Their stories serve as a testimony to God's faithfulness. Their story tells us that the future is God's hands, and we can trust Him. We see that their sufferings might have been unexplainable, but they weren't meaningless.

When you ask God to act on your behalf, don't make it all about you. Ask the Lord to act for the glory of His name, and so that others may hear of God's faithfulness.

This prophetic vision in verses 18-22 takes us from restoration from exile to the full restoration of God's kingdom (VanGemeren, 649). This newly “created” people is striking (18). Kidner says, “This verb [“created”] points to a great act of God, either in renewing a dead Israel or in making the Gentiles “God's own people,” were “once ... no people” (1 Pet 2:9). The translation, ‘a people yet unborn,’ does less than justice to this” (363). For all eternity, the redeemed – from every tribe and tongue – will be testifying to the Lord's faithfulness.

God's Immutability (102:23-28). The Psalm ends with the Psalmist once again reflecting on his own mortality and God's unchanging being and purposes. In verses 23-24, the sufferer seems to think that his affliction will shorten his already short life, not allowing him to see God's future work of restoration:

He has broken my strength in midcourse;
He has shortened my days.

I say: “My God, do not take me
in the middle of my life!
Your years continue through all generations. (Ps 102:23-24)

Verse 23 is a restatement of his condition. He is weakened by trials. He feels the brevity of life. At the same time, because the Psalmist has a relationship with God (“my God”), he cries out for God to spare his life (24). It’s a simple prayer. But it’s honest and genuine.

As the Psalmist ponders his frailty, he immediately thinks of God’s eternity. Thomas Watson said, “When God lays men on their backs, then they look up to Heaven” (quoted by I.D.E. Thomas, *The Golden Treasury*, 18). He considers God’s unchanging nature and purposes saying:

Long ago You established the earth,
and the heavens are the work of Your hands.
They will perish, but You will endure;
all of them will wear out like clothing.
You will change them like a garment,
and they will pass away.
But You are the same,
and Your years will never end.
Your servants’ children will dwell securely,
and their offspring will be established before You.” (102:25-28)

In the midst of darkness, he stops and considers the fact that the pre-existent God created the world (25; cf., Ps 90:1-2). If God can create the world, and sustain it, He can sustain us in our trials! Further, the Psalmist depicts the creation as a garment – something that will change (26). It will be transformed (2 Pet 3:10). But God is unchanging (26-27). God’s faithfulness will outlast the world. Finally, the Psalmist shows us that in our grief remember God’s unchanging purposes. He will keep His people so that they may worship Him forever (18).

When you feel like giving up, or like you’re drying up, remember that God never grows weary and never gives up. Not only does He never give up, He never loses. He will accomplish His purposes. His character never changes, and His purposes never change.

God’s Son (Heb 1:10-12). But we’re not finished. The Psalmist not only speaks about the greatness of God to His generation, but he also spoke about something so great that he couldn’t even grasp it entirely himself. The writer of Hebrews cites Psalm 102:25-27 not with the Psalmist addressing God, but with *God addressing the Messiah* (Heb 1:5-12). In Hebrews 1, the writer uses Old Testament texts as proof of the Son’s deity. Jesus is Lord (Phil 2:10-11; Jn 1:1; Col 1:16). The author of Hebrews draws attention to the Son’s deity later in his letter, with language of Psalm 102 again saying, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13:8).

Furthermore, Wilcock says, “Already before the time of Christ there were those in Israel who understood Psalm 102 to be messianic” (116). One could read the entire Psalm as pointing to Christ, the afflicted one, who was wounded for our transgressions (Isa 53). The Psalm foreshadows the sufferings of a Greater One. In verses 1-11, it’s easy to see abandonment and the bearing of God’s wrath (at no fault of his own) in Christ (cf., Ps 22); in verses 12-22, we can see Christ’s life cut short and the new city of God and its recognition among the nations; and in verses 23-28, we can see the anguished prayer of Christ, and the Father’s assurance to His eternal glory.

For the suffering Christian, take heart. Don’t quit. Your Savior knows affliction. Not just because He knows all things, but because He also experienced suffering. Your Savior bore the

wrath that you deserve (cf., Isa 53). Even though your affliction may be great, He already took the greatest affliction for you! He rose from the dead, conquering your greatest enemies. He now gives us access to the Father, allowing us to cry out for grace in our time of need (Heb 4:14-16). Through Christ, we can approach the throne of grace with “confidence” (Heb 4:16, ESV). He will grant us grace to endure our many afflictions, and afterward, the risen Messiah will “bring many sons to glory” (Heb 2:10). He stood in the place of us, and now He intercedes for us (Heb 7:25). One day we will stand with Him, in a new city, where suffering will be no more (Heb 13:14). So while we suffer, let’s offer of the sacrifice of praise to Him (Heb 13:15), and pour our hearts out to Him.

Augustine said somewhere, “God had only One son without sin, but He has no sons without affliction.” Don’t be surprised by suffering. Learn to pray in the midst of it. Learn to see Christ as your unshakable hope to endure it, and your great hope for getting on the other side of it. Remember that this Psalm of lament, and the other Psalms of lament, should lead us to say, “Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus!” Soon our faith will end in sight, and laments will be no more. Laments will be replaced with loud shouts to the triumphant Lamb (Rev 15:3).

Reflect and Discuss

- Are you going through deep affliction presently, or do you know someone who is? How does this Psalm relate to these afflictions?
- Does it encourage you that there are so many Psalms of lament? Why or why not?
- What do verses 1-2 teach us about prayer?
- Do you find it easier to “vent” to people rather than first pouring out your problems to God in prayer? What does this Psalm teach us about praying honestly before God?
- Why is the transition in verse 12 so important? What does this “pivot” teach us about the life of faith and the practice of prayer?
- What does this Psalm teach us about God’s sovereignty?
- What does this Psalm teach us about God’s compassion?
- What does this Psalm teach us about the nations?
- How does this Psalm point us to Jesus?
- Take a few moments to pray with the Psalmist, praying desperately, honestly, and confidently to God.