

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for November 1: When I am afflicted

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Psalm 102 is one of the great examples in Scripture of taking one's troubles to the Lord. It is not the first time personal affliction has been seen in the Psalms, but it underscores the critical lesson for the believer of how to take one's troubles to the Lord. The point is not that this world is rotten and cruel—no news there. The point is that help from a motivated eternal God is available. This point is so important that it must be emphasized every time the occasion arises. Hence Psalm 102 provides a great place to study the process of how God helps his own when they are greatly afflicted.

The Hebrew language expresses itself through a keen sense of observation of the world and human life. Naturally Hebrew poetry is saturated with vivid expressions of emotional highs and lows. If Hebrew word meanings are at times difficult to express, the conveyed emotions are not and ring through to the modern reader facing similar emotional situations.

It is a fact of life that this world unfairly afflicts and harms people, especially those who belong to the Lord. Therefore, although it never tells us about the afflicted author or the circumstances he faced, Psalm 102 still lends great assistance to the believer who finds himself or herself in a lamentable situation.

At the same time, the progress in the psalm cannot be ignored. The author begins by expressing his misery and pleading for a hearing. That he is given plenty of space to express himself shows the magnanimous grace of the Lord and the capacity of the Lord to listen to his people with patience.

Nevertheless, the unreferenced Holy Spirit works through the prayer so that when the halfway point of the psalm is reached, the author's personal concerns fade in interest in the condition of the Lord's dwelling place (Zion) and its important service to all peoples.

Surprisingly, we find out this psalm actually is a messianic hymn. Verses 23-24 are quoted in Hebrews 1:10-12 to underscore the superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ whose endless life brings endless salvation as an answer to personal affliction which can only have a short run because it is connected to this world that shall soon pass away.

The core statement for the psalm is found in verses 11-12 and repeated in verses 23-24 (the messianic verses). These verses transition from the temporary, though real, afflictions of the author to the eternal life of the Lord. The benefits the Lord offers stream from his life. Therefore being connected to the Lord's life is sufficient promise to address any afflictions we may face.

We are temporarily afflicted (Psalm 102:1-11)

The psalm opens with deep pleadings for a hearing by the Lord. The suggestion to an inexperienced reader could be that the Lord is not capable of handling such situations. This is exactly the opposite of the point the psalm makes. Psalm 46:1, which affirms "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble," and other acclamations in the book of Psalms, help us to understand that the present author's pleadings are urgent expressions of the heart, not terrified searches for an absentee God.

The intense cry for a hearing is seen in five petitions. The verbs of the petitions paint a picture of five incremental phases of action the author envisions the Lord moving through as he answers the prayer. Notice the steps of action: hear, let my cry come, do not hide, turn and answer.

The five petitions also reveal five important matters about the author: he

trusts his covenant Lord, he boldly goes to his Lord, he can trust the Lord even with this dire distress, he sees the Lord responding personally to him and he is confident to ask for a quick response.

These five matters present something of a check list that can help a believer examine the truth of their relationship with the Lord. Each of the five items can themselves become focal points for inquiry into the condition of one's relationship with God. The point is not that our relationship with the Lord must be perfect before approaching him with a serious issue, but that as we lay our issues before our Lord, we should also be seeking to advance in our walk with him.

It is not that God is slow to hear, and therefore five petitions are necessary, but that the author poured out something deeply felt in his heart. We never learn the author's actual situation. Some compare the expressions of verses 1-11 to Job's expressions of anguish. In both lives, the problems faced never were directly answered, but eventually surrendered to the Lord's objectives in the situation.

Verses 3-11 provide the author's description of the emotional turmoil in his life. Something has encroached into his life to the point that he experienced deep inner stress. While emotional stress visits everyone, perhaps, from time to time, the phrasing of these verses is not common to everyday life in our world.

Thus the author's launch into heart-wrenching pleadings could have the effect of leading some to the wrong conclusion that the author's situation is lost, and we are watching his life being consumed. Instead, the psalm wants the believer to know that the Lord listens to such deep heart pleadings and is fully capable of addressing such dire situations.

The reminder also is important that Hebrew poetry, like English poetry, uses vivid descriptions to convey a message. Therefore the overall point of

verses 3-11 is that the author's issues had left him wasting away. He was unable to eat or sleep (vv. 4, 7). He groaned to express his pain (v. 5). He felt alone (like an owl, v. 6, or a bird, v. 7). His enemies taunted him in his agony (v. 8). He was in mourning (ashes, v. 9). His days were meaningless (v. 3). His body wasted away (vv. 5, 11) and was consumed as if by fire (v. 3).

The purpose of this part of the Sunday school lesson is to point out that afflictions in life are temporary. This hardly is seen in the petitions of verses 1-2 and the descriptions of verses 3-9. The author's complaint is bitter and reminds the reader of Psalm 22 which often is associated with the agony of Jesus on the cross. The similar description of the author's agony in Psalm 102 shows in how deeply his own affliction has affected him.

The temporary nature of affliction is implied more by the author's movement away from his own troubles to concern for Zion and by the affirmation of the eternal dimension of God's life (vv. 12, 24). It also is perhaps suggested in verse 23, which indicates the Lord "cut short" the author's days, thus ending the agony the author faced.

The problem of interpreting the message of this is that answers that "tie up all loose ends" or provide "five easy steps to a solution" are expected by many. It is better to realize that the great blessing indicated in this psalm is the Lord's three-fold answer to heart-rending affliction is delivered on an epic scale. First, the Lord patiently listens to his people. God personally attends to his children. His presence in our lives is in itself a sufficient answer to anything that besets our lives. Second, the Lord shares his own heart with his people. He has his own large-scale concerns as he faces our world. Thus mutual sharing has occurred in the prayer process of this psalm. Third, ultimate answers to our afflictions are found in the eternal being and authority of the Lord. In other words, things will work out for us in the Lord's plans (remember the messages of Psalm 8 and Romans 8). We

have expressed ourselves, the Lord has listened, and now we must trust him to work his marvelous grace in our lives.

God reigns forever (Psalm 102:12-14)

The reference to the stones and dust of Zion (v. 14) are taken by some to refer to the destroyed temple during the years of the Babylonian exile. Whether this was the case or not is unknown. Nevertheless, these verses seem to contrast the eternal nature of the Lord's rule with the (at the time) condition of Zion. Zion did not reflect a true impression of the Lord and the author prophesied the time had arrived to rectify this issue.

Zion is the name given to the figurative location of the Lord's dwelling place on earth. It always has been associated with the city of Jerusalem and more specifically with the temple mount. It is important to note, however, that the true condition of Zion, the grand city of the all-powerful, eternal Lord, was never thought to parallel the condition and status of the human Jerusalem. Yet in Psalm 102, the author proclaims it is time for (the human) Zion to reflect the true nature her Lord.

That God reigns forever is a great message to proclaim and must ever be included in the active affirmations and worship of God's people. Yet a delicious parallel is suggested in these verses. The author's afflicted life no more accurately reflects an eternally ruling Lord than the stones and dust of Zion. By implication, the solution for Zion also will be the author's solution. Curiously, the author's heart throes have been replaced by equally strong proclamations that the Lord's favor and compassion has come to Zion.

Apparently the author already has received validation of an answer coming to his pleadings before the Lord. Verse 17 states his confidence that the Lord will respond to the prayer of the destitute. Certainly the author once saw himself as destitute, perhaps not in an economic sense, but certainly in

emotional and spiritual senses. Where did such confidence come from if not from the ministry of the Holy Spirit who ministers to the heart and answers with such affirmation that the heart is calmed and made strong again?

God never changes (Psalm 102:24-28)

Verses 18-22 help explain in indirect fashion the great ministry of the Lord in the author's life. The Lord's actions parallel the petitions of verses 1-2 and reference aspects from the author's description of his inner agony. But the author's message is bold: the Lord answers the prayer of deeply hurting people. This truth must be written as a testimony for future generations. Psalm 102 is that written testimony.

Verse 23 must not be separated from verse 24 any more than verse 11 should be allowed to be separated from verse 12. The message is important: the author was wasting away in his affliction, but he appealed to the eternal Lord for deliverance. The answer received was eternal as well. The world is of temporary existence, as are our problems, but the Lord himself is eternal and never changes. To know the Lord is to have eternal life (John 17:3) and to know eternal life is to have an answer to the temporary problems stemming from living in this fallen world. This is not the expedient answer nonbelievers desire, but it is the grand-scale answer believers cherish.