

# A Psalm for the Afflicted

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Well, I invite you to turn to the book of Psalms for our text for tonight, Psalm 102 will be our text. It's a somewhat lengthy Psalm so we'll only be able to treat it in a survey fashion here this evening, but I'm confident that the Lord will use our time to be a blessing to your heart.

Psalm 102. Notice the inscription with which it begins,

1 A Prayer of the Afflicted when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the LORD. Hear my prayer, O LORD! And let my cry for help come to You. 2 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. 3 For my days have been consumed in smoke, And my bones have been scorched like a hearth. 4 My heart has been smitten like grass and has withered away, Indeed, I forget to eat my bread. 5 Because of the loudness of my groaning My bones cling to my flesh. 6 I resemble a pelican of the wilderness; I have become like an owl of the waste places. 7 I lie awake, I have become like a lonely bird on a housetop. 8 My enemies have reproached me all day long; Those who deride me have used my name as a curse. 9 For I have eaten ashes like bread And mingled my drink with weeping 10 Because of Your indignation and Your wrath, For You have lifted me up and cast me away. 11 My days are like a lengthened shadow, And I wither away like grass. 12 But You, O LORD, abide forever, And Your name to all generations. 13 You will arise and have compassion on Zion; For it is time to be gracious to her, For the appointed time has come. 14 Surely Your servants find pleasure in her stones And feel pity for her dust. 15 So the nations will fear the name of the LORD And all the kings of the earth Your glory. 16 For the LORD has built up Zion; He has appeared in His glory. 17 He has regarded the prayer of the destitute And has not despised their prayer. 18 This will be written for the generation to come, That a people yet to be created may praise the LORD. 19 For He looked down from His holy height; From heaven the LORD gazed upon the earth, 20 To hear the groaning of the prisoner, To set free those who were doomed to death, 21 That men may tell of the name of the LORD in Zion And His praise in Jerusalem, 22 When the peoples are gathered

together, And the kingdoms, to serve the LORD. 23 He has weakened my strength in the way; He has shortened my days. 24 I say, "O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days, Your years are throughout all generations. 25 Of old You founded the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. 26 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. 27 But You are the same, And Your years will not come to an end. 28 The children of Your servants will continue, And their descendants will be established before You."

This is a Psalm for the afflicted. This is a Psalm for those under the weight and burden of life, finding that life has turned against them, that life is difficult, probably the prayer of a somewhat of a man somewhat later in life perhaps, of finding that time is short and circumstances are adverse and there is no earthly answer to it. What's the solution? Where do you find a comfort for your heart in such times?

Notice in the inscription that I pointed out earlier. This is an unusual inscription as far as the Psalms go because it kind of gives a summary of the content of the Psalm. Other inscriptions we've seen in the past have told us who the author is or maybe something about the historical occasion on which it was written, but this is different in that it's indicating to us under the circumstances under which it was written. This is for somebody who is down and out, who has been kicked to the curb by life and does not have a good easy answer for the things that are upon his heart. We're gonna look at it in three sections here. In this first section, we could call it the complaint; and then in the second section beginning in verse 12, the comfort; and then finally in the last section, we'll call this the confidence that he has. The complaint, the comfort and the confidence is kind of the flow of this Psalm as we look at it ever so briefly here tonight.

What this Psalm does, what the Psalmist does here as often is the case in the Psalms, it opens up with a call to God to help him, a summons to God. It's an invocation. He's crying out to God to get his attention. Look at the opening two verses here.

1 Hear my prayer, O LORD! And let my cry for help come to You. 2 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.

If you look at that a little more closely, what you'll find are there are five requests that he makes all saying similar things, all calling upon God to, "Pay attention to me. God, I need Your help now. I need You to turn Your attention to me." Look at it there with me as he says, "Hear my prayer. Let my cry for help come to You." Thirdly, "Do not hide Your face from me." Fourthly, "Incline Your ear to me." And then at the end of verse 2, "when I call answer me quickly." Hear me. Answer me. Don't hide from me. Positive and negative just pouring out his heart in an urgent request that, "God, I need Your assistance and I need it now." And so he is poetically asking God to pay attention to him and to respond to him, and you get the idea with the urgency of it and the repetition of it, you get the idea that he's been praying along the way and God has not been responding to

him. In that sense, it kind of reminds me of the opening verses of Habakkuk when the prophet cries out, "How long, O Lord, will I call out to You and You will not hear? I cry out to You, 'Violence!' and You do not save." And it's important for us to recognize that this is sometimes the spiritual experience of the people of God, that not only do we go through affliction but there are times where we cry out for help, we're praying for answers and the answers don't come. Instead we're met with a little bit of a baffling sense of divine silence that only seems to heighten and increase the sense of the urgency. And it's one thing, it's one thing to be under the course of affliction, isn't it, but to have the sense that God is not answering prayer, to find no relief coming when you as an earnest sincere believer calling out for help, that's a fate of multiplied discouragement in those times.

And I realize that there are those who would teach us, that would tell us that it's not like that for true Christians, that if you only have enough faith your problems would go away, God would help you, he's just waiting for you to conjure up enough faith and then he'll respond, leaving you in the position, that kind of teaching leaves you in the position of saying not only are you afflicted but it's your fault that God doesn't answer your prayer, and that's a miserably false teaching and it's a miserable misrepresentation of the truth. Job was a righteous blameless man and was afflicted and God did not answer him for a long period of time, he suffered greatly with no explanation, no answer, no relief. Christ cried out on the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" And yet these teachers of modern prosperity and health and wealth would give us the impression that there shouldn't be any trouble in your Christian life, that you won't have these problems and God will answer you if you just have enough faith. Well, when you inevitably you encounter those times where life is hard and there aren't easy answers, you can come to Psalm 102 and find a Psalm that gives voice to the affliction of your heart and to realize that you can pray with the Psalmist, "O God, hear me! God, hear my cry for help! Don't hide Your face from me in this distress! When I call, answer me!" And so on as it goes.

So I just say that by way of encouragement to you, to recognize the fact that if you are under a chronic wave of affliction that has been going on for a period of time and there doesn't seem to be relief for it, just understand that Scripture anticipates this, Scripture gives us Psalms like this in order to give voice to our prayers, to give voice to the emotions of our heart, to give expression to those feelings that are beyond the ability of even our closest friends to really understand; that we have a God who hears us, who provided for us and receives prayers just like this, and that the affliction can be long, it can be prolonged and it can be difficult without any visible answer on the horizon. You know, and one of the things, one of the nature of life as you go further along, you know, and your body inevitably starts to decline and the pain starts to become chronic and all of that, and you recognize that there is not a fountain of youth that you can go and drink from and reverse the effects of aging and reverse all of this stuff. You know, in the younger days you'd get sick, you knew you'd get better. When you get older, that's not necessarily going to happen.

Well, in Psalm 102 we get a sense of perspective on how to respond and how to pray and how to find comfort for our hearts even when the circumstances can't change. It's one of

the things that I've said so many times in the course of ministry, I never get tired of saying it, is to help people understand from Scripture that sometimes we enter into trials and the circumstances don't change and sometimes they cannot change, and it's discouraging. We have to come to grips with that and realize that rather than looking for a change in life, to realize that the way forward spiritually is for a renewed perspective for the help of the Holy Spirit to have an expanded sense of spiritual realities, of what belongs to us in Christ, what belongs to us in our God, and that that becomes the resource that gives us comfort in our hearts, not simply the easing of the earthly affliction. And those of you that are in the midst of that kind of affliction, let me just say by way a word of encouragement to you is this, is that as difficult as it may be to hear and in other context maybe you say, "You're saying that too lightly," I'm not saying this lightly at all, is to recognize that kind of affliction that comes upon you is a spiritual opportunity. In a profound way, it is a gift of grace to you. It is a provision from God that you would learn and you would come into a more intimate knowledge of him, a more intimate knowledge of his grace than you would without the affliction, and for the true Christian, that is a prize above all else. That is a pearl of great price. To know Christ deeply is something that you give everything else for, you would abandon everything else to have that, to know Christ and to know him intimately.

This was the experience of the Apostle Paul. Look at 2 Corinthians 12 with me just by way of reminder in a familiar text, and if it's not familiar to you, I encourage you to make it familiar, to memorize it and to go there often in times of affliction. Paul had been speaking about the blessing that he had had of being taken up to and seeing revelations in the third heaven, but it came at a cost to him. In 2 Corinthians 12:7 he said, "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me--to keep me from exalting myself!" And notice what he said, "Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me." There was an urgency to his prayer, "God, relieve, take away this affliction." The exact same kind of prayer that was being prayed here at the start of Psalm 102 and God didn't answer him the way that Paul was praying. I have no idea how prosperity preachers deal with something like this where the Apostle Paul finds his prayers for relief unanswered. Is it because Paul didn't have enough faith? Please, let's not be absurd in the way that we think about Scripture. No, God had another purpose that went far beyond a relief of affliction.

And in verse 9, God responded to Paul thusly, "He has said to me," Paul says, here's what God said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." The occasion of Paul's suffering was the occasion for the display of the grace of God in his life, and the occasion for Paul to come to understand even as an apostle in a deeper, more experiential way the sufficiency of that grace to sustain him through his affliction, to satisfy and comfort his heart, and to give him all the encouragement and reason that he needed to go forward in joy and in confidence rather than collapsing under the weight of the affliction, and that's the lesson that Paul learned. And Paul, you've got to love him for this, Paul went to the other side of the trial and embraced it at that point. When he realized the principle of grace that was being revealed to him in the midst of it, he said there in verse 9, he said, "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my

weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." He had been praying for this weakness to be taken away, now he says, "I'll boast about it." He says, "Yes, I am weak, I am suffering here, I am under the weight of an affliction here, a messenger from Satan is afflicting me and I want to boast about it. Why? Why would I boast about it? It's so the power of Christ may dwell in me. I'll magnify my weakness because then the power of Christ is operative at that point in my life."

So he says in verse 10, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong." And so our weakness becomes the stage, becomes the platform upon which God displays his power.

Now in our natural, carnal flesh of mind, we never want to go there voluntarily. You know, that doesn't sound too appealing but what we find is that when God brings this kind of affliction to us, that's the purpose that he has for you in it, is that he has brought affliction to you so that you might learn something about the nature of his enabling grace, and that you would grow to love that, that you would grow to live in that, to trust in it and to praise God for it. And I would venture to say that those of you that have a few years of Christian experience under your belt, so to speak, you can look back and see that. "You know what? The Lord brought me into an affliction that I never would have chosen for myself." I know I can say this about some things in my past. "I never would have chosen this. I wouldn't wish it on anybody. But what I came to find was that was a gift from God to me because it was a means of sanctification; it's what He used to change me, to sanctify me, to make more things about to expand my capacity to know Him better, I can know Him better through affliction than I can through prosperity." And this is what the experience of the Psalmist in Psalm 102 is.

Turn back there with me. So he's cried out for God to help him, asking God, "God, give attention to me. Respond to me." And in one sense you could ask the question, "Well, why should God do that?" And the Psalmist says, "God, I need Your help because my need is great." Look at verse 3. Remember he's just made this fivefold request for God to answer him. Why? "For. Here's why You need to answer me, God, because I am suffering." Verse 3,

3 For my days have been consumed in smoke, And my bones have been scorched like a hearth.

It's like he's got some kind of high fever maybe, some kind of physical component to this where he is sick and under that kind of oppressive fever that's making him suffer. But it's more than just a physical affliction, there's a matter of his heart and his affections and his sense of life principle, life vitality. Verse 4,

4 My heart has been smitten like grass and has withered away, Indeed, I forget to eat my bread. 5 Because of the loudness of my groaning My bones cling to my flesh.

His physical affliction was leading to spiritual discouragement, spiritual depression. And so all of this simply to say that his difficulty is taking an emotional and a physical toll on him and he realizes that life is slipping away from him. Look there at verse 3 again with him, "For my days have been consumed in smoke." Verse 4, "My heart is like grass, it's withered away. The loudness of my groaning." You just have this sense that life is getting away from him, life is slipping away, and there's an urgency to it. He needs God's help and that's the ground of his appeal, "God, O Lord, Yahweh, God of covenant-keeping faithfulness to Your people, God, in faithfulness respond to me because I am in serious affliction right now."

And it's more than just that physical dimension, more than just this discouragement, look at verses 6 and 7. He uses birds as a metaphor for his station in life. He says in verse 6,

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

He's picturing these birds in isolation, in loneliness. They're on their own fending for themselves and what he's saying is that, "I have no support here. There is no human help for me in the midst of this, O God. I'm like an isolated bird. I'm on my own here. I'm suffering. I'm sick. God, there is nowhere for me to turn for help therefore You need to respond to my plea for Your assistance."

Where I do my study, I get to see things out the door of where I do my work, and we get ducks at our place and ducks are okay. You know, they're better than dogs, let's put it that way. Okay, we don't need to go there. But ducks, you watch ducks and you observe them and Canadian geese, they're social animals. They protect each other. They go together in flocks and they live together amongst each other. That's part of the way that their dynamic works, for lack of a better expression. And you know, they care for each other and I've seen some remarkable things of the way that these birds care for each other, but once in a while, occasionally something sad happens. There will be a young duck, a little duckling that will lose its mother, maybe it got hit, maybe the momma got hit by a car or something like that, or it got separated from the rest of the flock and it's by itself, and I mean, this genuinely makes me sad even describing what I've seen from time to time. It is so sad to see an isolated duck that is too young to care for itself, that does not have the normal social protection of older ducks to keep it, and I've watched little ducks walk along the edge of our grass quacking and quacking and quacking for a mother who never comes. They are not able to take care of themselves. It was not old enough to fly to get other help, and it was completely vulnerable. And one that I have in particular mind, I found dead a few days later, the victim of an attack from a hawk. Sad.

What I want you to see is that that's the kind of experience that the Psalmist is describing here. He's saying, "God, I'm alone. I'm vulnerable." And he's creating this picture from the animal kingdom of a bird that needs help and protection and doesn't have it and he's vulnerable to whatever would come and bring affliction and for predators to come and take advantage of it. That's what he's describing and if we can have a little bit of

sympathy for what I described with the young duckling, vulnerable, quacking for its mother, "Quack! Quack! Quack!" and expecting momma to come and it never comes, you get a sense of how helpless and what a plight that is. That's the kind of spirit that the Psalmist is describing, "God, I'm defenseless here. I am vulnerable here. I need Your help and I need it now!"

And he goes on and describes it and what's the danger here? Well, verse 8, he's got people who have him in their sights. Verse 8,

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

So he has enemies that are after him of some kind. It's a general reference, we don't know exactly what he has in mind but it's a general principle saying, "I have human opposition in my vulnerability and, God, I can't even defend myself."

So in verse 9 he expresses the grief of his heart.

9 ... I have eaten ashes like bread And mingled my drink with weeping

Ashes in those days were a sign of mourning. He's grieving. He is fasting rather than eating. And he recognizes that ultimately in one way or another, this circumstance, this situation has come to him by the hand of God.

Look at verse 10. He says,

10 [It's] Because of Your indignation and Your wrath, For You have lifted  
me up and cast me away.

He's poetically saying, "God, I understand that my life is under Your sovereign hand. The nature of my circumstances are like You have become angry with me and cast me aside, and so, Lord, I am praying to You to turn Your providence, to turn the nature of Your dealings with me." All he's really saying here is, "God, I realize that my trials ultimately are coming from You, and here I am in this isolated, vulnerable, painful situation, it has come from Your hand and so, God, turn Your hand, would you? This hurts! This is painful! It is more than I can bear!" is the cry of his heart.

And he says in verse 11,

11 My days are like a lengthened shadow, And I wither away like grass.

There in verse 11, what's he saying there? Well, what happens to shadows when the sun goes down? The shadows get longer as the angle of the sun changes. He's saying, "Lord, the sun is setting on my life. I don't know where else to turn. I wither away like grass." He's a Psalmist that has a love for these natural metaphors, these metaphors from nature. "God, the sun is setting on me. I'm like grass that is withering up and is going to die and

blow away and, God, here I am as one of Your children in this circumstance. You being my God, God, You can't let me go like this! Don't let me go like this, God!" is what he's praying. "Time is coming to an end for me." The end of life is upon him and he's in a miserable condition, and so what's he doing? He's crying out for mercy in the midst of it, crying out for mercy in the midst of this discipline from God.

Notice as you read through this Psalm, he doesn't confess any particular sin. He's not equating this discipline, he doesn't connect it with sin, his own personal sin or he would have confessed it like David did in Psalm 51. No, this is just a providential turn of difficulty from God and he's asking for relief before he dies and his life ends on this melancholy note.

So it's a pretty serious situation for him and what I like to remind people from time to time, people like you that listen to me when I teach, is that I think it's very important for us to understand that we are meant to sympathize and learn from the Psalmist, not sit in judgment of them. There are those who criticize the Psalmists and say, "You know, the Psalmist is displaying a lack of faith here." Well, that's not at all why the 150 Psalms are given to us. These Psalms are giving voice to the real spiritual experience of the real children of God, and we are meant to learn from him and to follow and to see where God works in his life rather than sit in judgment of his spiritual experience. And sooner or later, the sad thing is that those who have that critical attitude toward biblical writers, biblical characters, the sad thing is that sooner or later God will teach them. They will learn eventually these realities. For us, we just want to adopt the posture of a disciple of the Bible, a learner from the Bible, to learn from God's inspired word, to say this is sometimes the spiritual experience of the saints, what can I learn from it, so that we learn, we come with a teachable spirit rather than a critical one. The way that you approach Scripture on these matters is really vital and important.

So what can we say at the end of this section here, his complaint to God in the midst of it? We're not going to take the time to do the counting here but in this section the Psalmist has used the first person singular 27 times by my count: I, me, my. He's giving voice to his complaint and there is this personal significance to it, this personal focus to it that is expressed by the way that he speaks: I, me, my, and all of that. Well, I point that out because the emphasis changes suddenly and dramatically in the next section. It's almost like a different person is writing. It's not, this is a unit from the same author, but the emphasis changes suddenly in the next section. It's like he snaps himself to attention. It's like he changes the subject, you might say, in his own mind and in the writing of this Psalm. He turns from earth to eternity. His suffering becomes a means to clearer faith in his heart and that's where he finds his comfort, as we go to the second section here. This is where he finds his comfort in the midst of his complaint.

In the midst of and, beloved, that's just so important, in the midst of such difficult affliction, while it is still ongoing, not after it has ended, in the midst of it, he looks up in faith and with an emphatic change of direction in his writing in verse 12, he says this, "But You, O LORD. But You, O LORD." He's changed from the "I, me and my" focus to the second person, "You." He's gone from something horizontal to that which is vertical.



He is turning to God in faith in his comfort, and keep in mind that he has been expressing the transitory threatened nature of his own life. He is on the brink of death in his own perspective as he's writing this, and what do we do on our deathbed? What do we do when life is ebbing away from us? Well, here's what you do: you turn away from the temporary nature of your life and give praise to God for the eternal nature that is his.

Verse 12,

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

The Psalmist has just described himself earlier, "I'm like smoke that vanishes. I wither like grass." But he says, "But Lord, You're different from me. You're of a different nature. You're of a different essence. You, O LORD, You endure forever and You never change, and in the midst of the affliction and the change and the decay of my life, O God, I can turn to You and I find One who is above it all, who is eternal, who is immutable," meaning unchanging, "And so, God, when everything else is giving away in my life, I turn to You and I find that You're the same God that You've always been." What a great blessing that is and for those of us that are getting, you know, are getting on the other end of life, what an important thing for us to remember that the God that we came to know in our younger days, the God that saved us maybe in our youth, the God that saved us in our young adulthood and through the days of our strength and vitality was with us and made himself known, and we knew him as that great conquering God in our lives, to remember that when we start to decline, when we start to decay, when life is slipping away and adversity multiplies against us and we don't have the strength to respond to it, that the God who was great in our youth is the same great God in the days of our age.

He is the same and that becomes the spiritual foundation upon which we can stand and, look, we've got a lot of young people in here, we've got a lot of young adults and people that are in the vigor of life right now. Well, praise the Lord for that but just understand that now is the time to sink these things deep in your mind and deep in your understanding and to get to know God deeply now in your youth because that is the knowledge, that is the spiritual growth and the sanctification that will help to sustain you because the flower of youth eventually fades. And you can look to some of us guys that are losing our hair and losing the color of our hair and, you know, gravity starts to take its effect on our physical existence, go and ask them and they'll tell you. The flower fades. It seems like it never will but it comes quick enough and when it does, we need to draw upon the eternal nature of God and to realize that while we are changing, while we are failing, our experience is not God's experience. He's above it all. That doesn't happen to him and therefore that is where we find our anchor, that is the unchanging constant in our lives when everything else is falling apart around us. And that's what he's laying hold of here.

So he goes on and he says that the unchanging nature of Yahweh has certain consequences. Verse 13,

13 You will arise and have compassion on Zion

Zion being a poetic reference to the city of Jerusalem, the place where God made his presence known. The Babylonians ransacked Jerusalem in 586 BC and it seems like, at this point, the Psalmist is identifying with the city and with the suffering of the city there, but God had promised that he would bring restoration to the city after their time of discipline. The Old Testament prophets were full of this kind of prediction. And he says in verse 13,

13 You will arise and have compassion on Zion; For it is time to be gracious to her, For the appointed time has come.

What's he saying there? He's saying, "God, You are a God of faithfulness and, God, the times and epochs of human existence are in Your hand and they are in Your control, and You have promised that You will be a faithful covenant-keeping God to Your people, and because You never change, because You endure forever, it is certain that that will be the outcome to Your afflicted people. Eventually Your people will see on display Your faithfulness and grace to them. You will restore them from their difficulty." And so he in his personal, private difficulty is identifying with the broader affliction of the people of God and that leads him to find confidence in the future.

Verse 14,

14 Surely Your servants find pleasure in her stones And feel pity for her dust.

He's saying that, "As Jewish people on the receiving end of Your promises, we care what happens to Your city and the fact that there is rubble where once stood great, you know, the great monuments to Your faithfulness to Your people, now it's in rubble? We feel sympathy as we look upon this decrepit condition that the exile has brought to us. We feel sympathy for that but, God, the time has come and You will be gracious to her, and we identify with that and we look forward to the time where You restore us."

Verse 15,

15 So the nations will fear the name of the LORD And all the kings of the earth Your glory. 16 For the LORD has built up Zion; He has appeared in His glory. 17 He has regarded the prayer of the destitute And has not despised their prayer.

And so what he's saying here is this, is, "God, Your loyal love brought Your people into existence in the first place. When Your people suffer, when affliction comes upon us, You haven't changed and the same faithfulness that brought us into existence in the first place will one day restore us, and Your faithfulness while we are in the valley by way of our human experience, Your purpose is unchanged and as Your people, we will see the perfect goodness, the perfect graciousness of Your purposes displayed to us even though they seem to be veiled and hidden from our eyes right now." That's the general gist of

what he's saying here. What's underlying this, the theology that is underlying this is that he knows who God is. "God, You're a God of loyal love. You're a sovereign God. You're eternal. You're immutable. You're unchanging. You're faithful and so it could be no other way than if You brought us into existence by Your grace and love, that there will be an outcome that displays Your grace and love no matter what happens in between those two points."

Now a little time out, a little pause button here. Beloved, what I want you to see is that theology matters and knowing God matters. You can only pray this way and develop this kind of faith and confidence in the midst of affliction if you know who God truly is, and we must come to the point where we look at our circumstances through the prism, through the lenses of the character of God and say, "God is great, faithful, loving, gracious, patient," etc. etc., and that means that my circumstances must be interpreted in light of that rather than saying, "My circumstances, my afflictions are great, God, why are You doing this? How could You be kind?" And you reason from your earthly circumstances to question the character of God. We have to approach it from the exact opposite way. Start with the knowledge of God, the loyal love of God, the faithfulness of God to his people and say, "God, whatever else is happening to me, I understand that You have a faithful purpose that is going to be played out in the end, and my affliction now doesn't contradict the purpose of the ages that You've established before time began."

Now look, the only person that can talk that way is the person that knows God, and the only way you can know God is to know his word, and the only way you can know his word is to read it and to study it and to be under the teaching of it, like you guys are here tonight. Thank God for that. But what you've got to see, beloved, is that these things have consequences. It matters when a local church gathers together for the teaching of God's word. It matters when people gather together consistently under the teaching of the word like you love to do. This is where we need to be. We need to be with each other. We need to be around the word of God together. This is where we come to know him and understand him, and when we know and understand him, we are positioned to glorify him and to prosper even in the midst of our affliction and that's a benefit that does not come to those, that does not belong to those who treat, you know, the word of God in a superficial, flippant, come-and-go attitude. No, we have to give ourselves over to it consistently, patiently, line upon line, precept upon precept. This is where we find our knowledge of God. This is where we find the power. This is where we get to know him intimately. And so because I know that's true, all I can do is thank God that you're here and that you're so, you know, you're so here so consistently because we understand that God is building something in us that will sustain us in the days to come and, beloved, here's the thing, is that God does that in response to your faithfulness and he does it in ways that are imperceptible at the time. From Sunday to Tuesday, to Sunday to Tuesday, you're not even aware of what's happening. You're not aware of how the base of your trunk is growing and expanding out and becoming an oak from the early twig that it was as a young Christian. But when affliction hits, you find that you have something to draw upon, you have a faith to draw upon, you have a God to go to that you know and you can appeal to him this way, but the reason you're able to appeal to him that way in the midst of the affliction is because you've been devoting yourself to the pursuit of God in his

word all along. So I can't tell you, I can't begin to describe to you how important it is that we do what we do together and what a blessing it is from God that we're able to do it.

Now because God is a faithful covenant-keeping God, he will act on behalf of his people, and there is one more thing. I'll preface, actually let's just get into the text and I can save this for just a moment. Verse 18 he says,

18 This will be written for the generation to come, That a people yet to be created may praise the LORD. 19 For He looked down from His holy height; From heaven the LORD gazed upon the earth, 20 To hear the groaning of the prisoner, To set free those who were doomed to death, 21 That men may tell of the name of the LORD in Zion And His praise in Jerusalem, 22 When the peoples are gathered together, And the kingdoms, to serve the LORD.

Now keep in mind that the Psalmists writing in centuries afterwards, in the back of their mind was always the idea that God had delivered his people from their affliction in Egypt. God delivered them miraculously, gave birth to a nation by delivering them from slavery in Egypt, transporting them ultimately to their land where a nation was established, and the point is this, is that in those days of affliction, God saved them. He heard their groanings in Egypt, which you can read about in the book of Exodus. And what the Psalmist's point here is, is that if God's people are afflicted in the present time, it simply means this, it simply means that somehow, some way, some day, he's going to act again to deliver them because that's who he is. He is a God of salvation. He is a God of deliverance. That's who he is to his people. He is eternal and he exists beyond time so that he, himself, is not afflicted by or affected by what happens in the realm of time, like we are. He's outside of it in that sense, and yet because he is God, he is God over his creation and he's God to his people, God acts inside the bounds of time to help his people. That's who he is. Eternal, beyond time, and yet gracious, powerful Lord of his creation, Lord of his people, and he helps us in the midst of time to help us.

God delivers his people and so we rejoice in that. We benefit from that. We love him for that. But beloved, understand something about what the Psalmist is saying here, is that he is looking beyond his own life in what he says. He realizes that his faithfulness and his affliction has consequences for a generation yet to be born. He has responsibilities to the people of God who will come after him. My friends, this is so vitally important for us to understand and to own and to embrace and to realize the prerogative and privilege that's ours that is taking place in the midst of our lives.

Verse 18, notice it again. He says, "This will be written for the generation to come, That a people yet to be created may praise the LORD." He's saying, "What's happening to me and even what I'm writing here has a purpose that transcends my life. There will be believers, there will be a generation of the people of God who will come up after me and what's happening in the midst of my affliction is for their benefit. As God helps me, it will be a testimony to them and will help them to persevere, to trust God, to follow Him, to worship Him." And part of the reason that you and I, beloved, persevere in the midst of

our affliction is we do it, part of the reason, part of the reason that we do it is for the sake of people we'll never meet here on earth. We do it for the sake of people to come afterwards.

This is a common theme in the Psalms. Listen as I quote from Psalm 22:3-31. It says, "Posterity will serve Him; It will be told of the Lord to the coming generation. They will come and will declare His righteousness To a people who will be born, that He has performed it." And so there is this sense, there is this consciousness that we walk about with whether it be our children, our grandchildren, descendants in our bloodlines yet to come that we leave a testimony behind for them to come and know about, that our children, that our grandchildren would tell their children and grandchildren about. No. "You know what? I saw mom, I saw grandfather, I saw the way that he lived. Let me tell you about what he did. I saw the doctrine that they stood for even when it was unpopular, even when no one wanted to agree with them. They stood firm. They believed it." And it has a testifying impact to a generation that's not born yet and that you and I probably will never meet, but there will be that effect. We are to understand our lives in a context that transcends our own personal individual experience, and we are to live for Christ, we are to honor him for his glory as a testimony, yes, to those around us but mindful of the fact that there will be a ripple effect, that there will be an echoing that takes place beyond us, and that helps in part under the renewing work of the Spirit of God in our hearts to persevere.

The thought of apostasy, the thought of walking away just because I'm having some personal trials and personal difficulties that I don't understand? Really? Would we really, would we really just turn our backs on the God who saved us and let that be the testimony that comes after us? Oh, oh, no, God forbid! I'd rather be struck dead than to have that happen in my life and to leave that kind of testimony behind. I mean it. I'd rather fall dead on the spot than for that to be the case.

Where would we be, where would you and I be if men like Augustine, men like Athanasius, men like Calvin and Zwingli and Luther had caved under the pressure of their day? Where would we be if Spurgeon hadn't stood firm and tall in the midst of the "Downgrade Controversy" when everybody considered him to be wrong, to be too harsh, to be mistaken? Where would you and I be if the generations before us had caved under pressure? Where would we be?

Well, beloved, this is the day that the Lord has given to us. He's given to us this age in which we live. He's given to us these days of apostasy in which to be faithful and to prove ourselves. And by the grace of God, by the hope and power of God, maybe just maybe something that you or I would do would have an effect that goes beyond our lifetime, that goes to generations yet to come. If so, we will be people greatly blessed. The people yet to be born could somehow look to us and find a path that they, themselves, can follow just like we look to those great men of the past and say, "There's the steps that we need to walk in."

This whole mindset of every generation finding its own truth and redefining, you know, their confessions of faith and all of that, that's not healthy, that's not a sign of spiritual growth at all. No, we believe in historic Christianity and we respect the men who articulated faith in the past, and we want to be faithful to what we've received and transmit it to another generation. That's what we stand for here at Truth Community Church, among other things.

So how will faith be vindicated? Verse 22, there is a coming day still future to us when the peoples will be gathered together at Jerusalem, and the kingdoms to serve the Lord. The Old Testament often points to a coming time of universal acknowledgment when nations will go to Jerusalem and honor the Messiah. The prophet Habakkuk, whom I've referred to earlier, says the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Zechariah 14 says the Lord will be King over all the earth. We haven't experienced that yet. There's this time coming where Christ is recognized as King in Jerusalem and our faith looks forward to that. We find our comfort in that, that this eternal, transcendent God will accomplish his purpose and the outcome will be that the faith of his people throughout the ages will be vindicated when Christ is recognized as King and his glory is recognized throughout all the earth.

And so that leads to his concluding confidence in the final section of the Psalm, his concluding confidence. He comes back and he brings that, he comes kind of full circle in verse 23, after expressing and articulating this confidence he says,

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

He wants to live but he sees impending death in light of eternity and he asks God here to grant him life, "Give me some more time, Lord, so that I could see Your vindication while I'm still here on earth. Don't take me away just yet in death." And it goes on and emphasizes the eternity of God once more in verse 25,

25 "Of old You founded the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. 26 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.

Even, you know, the transitory nature of life even affects the heavens and the earth. Not just us personally but all of creation. The Apostle Peter said in 2 Peter 3, he said the day of the Lord will come like a thief in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat and the earth and its works will be burned up. And what the Psalmist is saying is, "Lord, everything that I see is going to be done away with but when that happens, You will still be there. You will be the same God that You have always been." And he finds himself rooted in the eternity of God.

In verse 27, you see it there, he says, "Even though that's going to happen to creation," verse 27,

27 "But You are the same, And Your years will not come to an end.

God endures unchanging on. And there's a significance to this. We're not going to take the time to look at this because time has gotten away from me, but if you read Hebrews 1, you will find that the writer of Hebrews applies this very passage to the Lord Jesus Christ. It's a great statement of the deity of Christ. Christ is superior to angels. He is superior to every Old Testament figure. The fact that Scripture interprets Psalm 102 and applies it to Christ means that our Lord is the Creator, it means that our Lord is immutable, it means that he is eternal, it means that he is the full deity of God, so much so that in Hebrews 13:8 he can say Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Now beloved, give me an extra minute or two here tonight so that we can think through the implications of that, okay? Think about it with me. Let's think about it in terms of your conversion to Christ and what made that possible, how that came to pass. What did Christ do? He left heaven and came to earth and went to the cross for you in grace and love and mercy, sacrificed himself, and in doing so, displayed beyond question the love of God. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Undeniable. Loving, gracious, eternal, unchanging Christ.

Those of you that are in Christ, what can you, you look back on your conversion, what was Christ in the midst of your sin and guilt but he was gracious and loving and good to you. He saved you and the Spirit of God brought you to him in your inability and your sin and your guilt and your condemnation and you found forgiveness in Christ. This is wonderful to think about. Well, 2,000 years ago he gave himself at the cross. Sometime in the past you were converted to Christ by a gracious act of his. In heaven he's going to bring you to perfection. Well, just think that all the way through and realize that whatever is happening in your life right now, Christ has not changed because he's the same yesterday, today and forever. And so you find your spiritual anchor in the unchanging nature of Christ, you have a benefit that the Psalmist didn't have, you've got the full revelation of God, you look back and you see Christ on the cross and you see more of the reality of the character of God than the Psalmist knew when he wrote this.

And what effect should that have on you? It should bring you comfort in the midst of your affliction. It should bring you confidence of the purposes of God in your life. It should bring you to praise and gratitude and thanksgiving that such a gracious God who has always been like that, has made himself known to you and nothing has changed since the cross, nothing about Christ has changed since the cross, nothing has changed about Christ since your conversion. He's the same in his character yesterday, today and forever and, beloved, that's your comfort. That's your confidence always, ever, and he will achieve his purposes without fail.

Verse 28, look at it there with me.

28 "The children of Your servants will continue, And their descendants will be established before You."

One day, the Psalmist is saying, we could all say the same thing, you know what? One day it's gonna be time for us to exit the stage. Our role will be over. Our time will be done and our perspective on that should be one of eternity, one that says, "Yes, I'll go the way of all flesh, I'll wither away like grass, but, O Christ, You will continue and You will continue to be God to Your people, You will continue to build Your church just like You said You would, and therefore I can leave the stage in peace."

So what can we say to close here? Those of you walking in heaviness, you're not alone. This Psalmist understood. You're treading a path that many a saint have trod. What encouraged them is available to you as well. God knows your times, God appointed your affliction, the God who saved you at the start is the same God now in the midst of it, and even in our latter days when our flesh fails and sometimes even our hearts will fail, Psalm 73, that even if your latter days are weary, even if they are profoundly lonely, God's transcendent nature is your constant refuge. His grace is sufficient for you for his power is perfected in your weakness. James Montgomery Boice said about this Psalm, he said, "The Psalmist has reminded himself that God is sovereign, therefore what happens in life is no accident. It has been given to him by God so regardless of what happens to him," the Psalmist, "he will anchor himself in God's eternity and go on from there."

Beloved, our lives change but Christ never does. He is our Shepherd. He will lead us. Let us trust him always and find our comfort in him and in him alone.

Let's pray together.

*O God, You know the nature of our lives, You know the complaints that sometimes fill our hearts. We praise You tonight as our eternal comfort, the God who never changes, the God who has a good purpose in it all, and with the Psalmist we affirm our trust to You, we affirm our trust in You. We love Christ and we magnify His name and we pray for those here who do not know Him, that You might work by Your Spirit to lead them to a saving knowledge of Christ. Anchor us, Lord, more deeply in Your eternal love, Your eternal character. And Father, in the words of the Psalm, the song, I should say, the modern song that was said, as You work in our lives, Father, we pray that You would do so in a way that all who come behind us might find us faithful. May the fire of our devotion light their way. May the footsteps that we leave lead them to believe. We pray these things, O God, in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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