

Our Unchangeable God – Psalm 102

Tim Rech, *Clearcreek Chapel*

Introduction

Change – we see and experience it every day. It is working in us and all around us. We see changes in nature, in places, structures, and institutions, in our address, our jobs, in our relationships, and in ourselves – and the list goes on. The world often tells us it is normal and we should learn to embrace it. And sometimes we can see that is a good thing.

However, there is something about change that is deeply unsettling and unnatural to us. In fact, we often fight against it at every turn. And sometimes we go as far as trying to sinfully control all things including people in our lives. But it is all for naught because change comes anyway.

This morning we come to a psalm where change is painfully evident. It is a psalm of one afflicted who brings his plight to God. The psalmist tells us little of the specific situation but we do know it was written during and the time of Judah's captivity in Babylon.

The structure of the psalm begins at a low point but ends on a glorious high. *As Spurgeon wrote, "The whole composition may be compared to a day which, opening with wind and rain, clears up at noon and is warm with the sun, continues fine, with intervening showers, and finally closes with a brilliant sunset."*¹

An Urgent Plea (v 1-2)

102 Hear my prayer, O LORD;

let my cry come to you!

² Do not hide your face from me

in the day of my distress!

Incline your ear to me;

answer me speedily in the day when I call!

Here we find the psalmist making an urgent plea to God. He not only wants an answer but even before that, he simply wants God to give him an audience. "Do not hide your face from me but receive my prayer and give me your ear," he says. "Since I cannot come to you, bend down to me to listen. Just hear me Lord!"

What is wrong with the psalmist? Does he not know the Scripture? God hears every prayer coming from His people. Or has he forgotten this? It is easy for us to see this until we find ourselves in the same place - when our troubles are many and heavy. Life is closing in on us and God seems far away, far enough away that it seems He may not hear us.

¹ Charles Spurgeon, *A Treasury of David*

And once the psalmist gains the hearing of God, he wants an answer – a fast one. Now it is easy for us to say the psalmist is wrong in seeming to demand a speedy answer. But let us not rush to judgment. For in the following verses we will see why he needs an answer “yesterday”. Sometimes asking for a fast response from God is justified. He still may not answer quickly but it is not wrong to ask. Have you ever been there?

An Alarming Condition (v 3-11)

In verses 3-11, we see the reason for the urgent plea:

- ³ *For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.*
- ⁴ *My heart is struck down like grass and has withered;
I forget to eat my bread.*
- ⁵ *Because of my loud groaning
my bones cling to my flesh.*
- ⁶ *I am like a desert owl of the wilderness,
like an owl^[a] of the waste places;*
- ⁷ *I lie awake;
I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop.*
- ⁸ *All the day my enemies taunt me;
those who deride me use my name for a curse.*
- ⁹ *For I eat ashes like bread
and mingle tears with my drink,*
- ¹⁰ *because of your indignation and anger;
for you have taken me up and thrown me down.*
- ¹¹ *My days are like an evening shadow;
I wither away like grass.*

So we see the psalmist in great distress and under great affliction. Verses 3 and 11 summarize his condition with phrases like, “my days pass away or are like an evening shadow” and “I will wither away”. His deteriorating condition is plain to him – his remaining life is fleeting and is measured or numbered in “days” only. His mortality is real and approaching fast.

Verses 4-9 describe what his life looks like. First of all, he has lost heart (v 4) and is greatly discouraged and sorrowful. Like grass struck down, his heart has no life and has withered – despair is right around the corner.

This discouragement has caused him not to take in real food in verse four. Rather his only bread is ash and his drink is mixed with tears in verse nine. His groaning in verse five and likely his lack of food have caused his bones to cling to his flesh.

He is also lonely; lonely like a desert owl in the wilderness and like a lonely sparrow on the top of a house. And even sleep cannot give him a reprieve from his solitary life.

And although he is alone, he is not isolated but surrounded by his enemies who take pleasure in taunting him. They treat him with derision and equate his name with a curse.

In the eyes of the psalmist, there is an ultimate reason for his condition. Verse 10 tells us it is because of God. God is angry with him and has taken him up and thrown him down. Now the psalm gives us no particular sin that he has committed. But remember he is part of a community that is suffering in a land of exile – the land of Babylon – far away from home – consequences brought on by a nation’s disobedience and hardness of heart. Therefore when he speaks, he speaks for a people who feel that God is far away from them, whose current situation is becoming unbearable and discouraging, and whose time and life is withering away – fleeing like an evening shadow.

A Confidence in God’s Promise (v 12-17)

His thinking and his prayer take a hopeful turn in verses 12-17 though:

- ¹² But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever;
you are remembered throughout all generations.*
- ¹³ You will arise and have pity on Zion;
it is the time to favor her;
the appointed time has come.*
- ¹⁴ For your servants hold her stones dear
and have pity on her dust.*
- ¹⁵ Nations will fear the name of the LORD,
and all the kings of the earth will fear your glory.*
- ¹⁶ For the LORD builds up Zion;
he appears in his glory;*
- ¹⁷ he regards the prayer of the destitute
and does not despise their prayer.*

With a single word “But”, the psalmist turns the direction of his prayer. The urgency and speed of his thoughts return to like that of verses 1-2. After recounting his alarming condition in detail, He pivots his prayer to the One who does not experience nor exhibit any such condition. No, He is the One who not only lives forever but even more so, is enthroned forever. God is the only One whose forever existence spans across the generations of those who wither away like grass or who live on the earth only as long as an evening shadow. The psalmist has come to the only One who can prevail over a sin cursed and downward spiraling world. And all generations, including that of the psalmist, know it.

And this God who is enthroned forever had made a promise and the psalmist and the exiled people with him were quick to remind Him of it (as if that were possible!). You see God had promised that at an appointed time He would come and deliver them (Jer 25:12, 29:12). He would have pity on them and give them favor once again – the favor they had once enjoyed and which now seems so far away.

The psalmist says in verse thirteen it is the appointed time. To him it had to be since he had so little time left. In essence he says, “God it is time to rise and fulfill your promise – you have so much to do for your people.”

The psalmist gives four reasons for it being the appointed time. First it is that God’s people hold Zion dear in verse 14 – His kingdom is precious to them. And for them it is their homeland which is in ruins. They hold even the stones and the dust in high regard for what it used to be and what it will be in the future according to God’s promises.

God’s rising up will also cause the nations and all its kings to fear God’s name and His glory. They understand the kingship and great kings and know they will ultimately be held accountable to the divine King. For a people who have been subject to captivity by the greatest king and kings on earth at that time, it must have been comforting to meditate upon verse 15. There would be a time where everything would be made right.

And in verse 16 God’s glory would be made evident when He rises to build up Zion. For in the present, God seemed to be quiet. Therefore the nations could seemingly do whatever they wanted. The psalmist and His people ask the Lord to rise and build up His kingdom – “show your glory Lord!”

The final reason is in verse 17: God hears the prayer of His people – His destitute people. God loves them and is pleased to hear their prayer for help – a prayer from a people who are destitute not only in earthly standing, in possessions, and a homeland but destitute in spirit. These are the true believers who long for their God.

God’s promise for His people and for the establishment of His kingdom had not changed and the psalmist knew it. And in the midst of his great distress, gave occasion for his bold and confident prayer – a prayer of faith that God would deliver His people in the future – an act that would be cause for future generations to praise and worship the Lord in a place and time appointed by Him.

A Confidence in God’s Future Deliverance (v 18-22)

We read on in verses 18-22:

- ¹⁸ *Let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD:*
¹⁹ *that he looked down from his holy height;
from heaven the LORD looked at the earth,*
²⁰ *to hear the groans of the prisoners,
to set free those who were doomed to die,*
²¹ *that they may declare in Zion the name of the LORD,
and in Jerusalem his praise,*
²² *when peoples gather together,
and kingdoms, to worship the LORD.*

The psalmist says “write it down”. Future generations would then know what God had done at the appointed time and praise Him for it. He had God’s future glory and praise in mind.

And what is this act of God? For the original audience of this psalm, it was the deliverance of God’s people from Babylon. Yes, God would cause the release of God’s people to return to their land and rebuild. And once again, there would be worship of God from His people in God’s timing and in the place designated for them.

But there is more. The psalmist, while not understanding fully, is speaking of more than a single nation’s release from exile. Verse 22 tells the reader of “peoples” that will gather together referring to those many nations across the earth. As part of future generations standing on the opposite side of Christ’s work, we can see God’s act of deliverance more clearly. What is in view is those across the earth destined to die as prisoners of sin and death and the sending of God’s Son to set them free. For the psalmist it was not clear how God would save His people but was certain of it nonetheless – he is pointing to a more complete and permanent deliverance.

So the call is to record the works of God on behalf of His people – works that record God seeing His people groaning under afflictions and then delivering them. This record would be cause for worship and praise by God’s people when they gathered – on days like today – a people from many nations declaring His name and all for which His name stood.

A Great Contrast (v 23-27)

The psalmist now returns to His plight in verses 23-27:

²³ *He has broken my strength in midcourse;
he has shortened my days.*

²⁴ *“O my God,” I say, “take me not away
in the midst of my days—
you whose years endure
throughout all generations!”*

²⁵ *Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.*

²⁶ *They will perish, but you will remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.*

You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,

²⁷ *but you are the same, and your years have no end.*

A Life Cut Short (v 23-24)

The psalmist is not only afflicted but is convinced God will shorten the days of his life – he would only live a portion of the typical years allotted to man.

So he cries out to God that it not be so. And judging by the overall tone of his prayer and reflection on God in this psalm, it is not a selfish plea. He is not asking for an extension so that

he might spend these years on himself but rather that He might get a glimpse of what God was about to do for His people. He cries out to God, “might I just have a taste of the glorious future you are about to bring about? Might I gather with all your people in your kingdom to worship you? Might I just share this experience with my children and those yet to come?” This is a fitting prayer for a person whose life consists only of “days” – a life that is fleeting, a vapor.

He is a man of “days” and God, unlike all others, is of “years”. Man lasts only for a short time on the earth but God endures across all generations. The psalmist knows this and asks not only for more years but longs to share in God’s eternal and unchanging nature. Although he and we understand death is coming, we are never comfortable with the thought. The pain and sorrow accompanying the death of a friend or family member is never natural to us. If there were another way, we would take it.

A Life Eternal and Unchanging (v 25-27)

So the psalmist says in essence, “God you understand my plight though since your ‘years endure across all generations’. You have seen all the generations of man past, present, and future. In fact, you have always been here because you have created the heavens and the earth – those things which seem permanent to mortal man.” All generations have seen the sun rise and set, the planets rotate in their orbits, the stars located in their familiar places in the night sky, and the great and immovable mountains. We count on the law of gravity, the laws of thermodynamics, and the changing of the seasons. Relative to the psalmist and to mankind in general, these things are fixed.

However, even the present heavens and earth are wearing out and are finite. Under sin’s curse, we see changes in the heavens as stars die and their light is extinguished. We see the earth changing all the time; as a result of the recent earthquakes in Nepal, scientists believe and are working to confirm that Mt. Everest shifted several centimeters. Yes, the heavens and the earth are on the clock as well. They are wearing out like a garment and will someday perish completely. God will cause them to pass away like a man changes his clothing - it will be a simple and short work for Him. Yes, the seemingly permanent heavens and earth God created will pass away yet He will remain.

Now so far in this psalm, the writer has been showing the reader a contrast in longevity between he (man) and God. And he has spent the majority of the text on his mortality. But now in one short verse He brings forward the complete extent of God’s side of this contrast. Verse 27 says “but you are the same, and your years have no end” and this should cause us to pause.

God is the same and cannot change. It is how He is distinguished from His creatures – they are subject to change but He is not. God can know no change because He has no beginning and no ending.² And He is the same in His being, in His attributes, and in His purposes.

Concerning His being, God is completely unaffected by the passage of time. Never has there been a time in the past when God was not God and never will there be a time in the future when God will not be God. He is not and will not be getting better at anything because He is already

² Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House Company, 1975), p. 37.

perfect - there is no room for Him to improve in anything. And there is no possibility He will get worse – deterioration cannot occur in God.³

James 1:17 says with God, “*there is no variation or shadow due to change.*”

No, God cannot change in His being. And we cannot even think of God this way, because at that moment, we are thinking of someone else – someone who is less than God.⁴ God is unique from His creatures and is self-sufficient and self-existent. If He were subject to any change, He could not be these things because He would be subject to some agent of change and to some degree be dependent on someone or something.

And God is unchanging in His particular attributes. God is not growing in holiness since He is and will always be perfect in holiness. God’s power does not ebb or flow – the Bible says He holds all things together by the Word of His power, so are you not glad? His wisdom never changes – always perfect. He not only knows all things perfectly well but has always and always will know everything – He need not take a refresher course from time to time. God’s love is perfect and unchanging. And although man tries to alter or distort it, God’s Word never changes either. God says in Malachi 3:6, “*For I the Lord do not change...*”.

Concerning His purposes, God is unchanging as well. His purposes and will in time and in eternity never waver. As we have seen in this psalm, He purposed that there would be a creation. His will decreed there would be a passage of time made up of a series of events that would occur over this period – including the creating and calling of a people for His own. His creation will then end right on time and in a manner that is as easy as it is for a man to change his robe. Psalm 33:11 says, “*The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.*” God does not change His plans – and why should He? He is God.

A Blessed Reality (v 28)

This unchanging God, our God, was who the psalmist was approaching. Despite his afflicted state and fading life, God’s unchanging nature was his source of confidence for himself and for God’s people for all time. We read in verse 28:

²⁸ *The children of your servants shall dwell secure;
their offspring shall be established before you.*

The psalmist looked through eyes of faith to a future and certain day where God’s promises would be fulfilled for His people - generations of believers resting secure and found established before Him. A.W Tozer writes, “*The sacred writers...face up to man’s mutability...They have found the cure for the great sickness. God, they say, changes not. The law of mutation belongs to a fallen world, but God is immutable, and in Him men of faith find at last, eternal permanence.*”⁵

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1961), p. 81

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84

The truth of this psalm is vital today for we too are subject to the change of a fallen world. And informed by the person and work of Jesus Christ, God's unchangeableness, His attribute of attributes, takes on even greater significance. So what do we see?

Well first of all, we see Jesus. He was the ultimate afflicted one - picked up and thrown down by the Father on our behalf – His days cut short in the midst of His days on the earth. But the grave could not hold the Christ, the perfect sacrifice, the unblemished Lamb of God. He is our deliverer.

We also see an unchanging Jesus. The writer of Hebrews, in proving the vast superiority of Christ over the angels, quotes these verses 25-27 in Hebrews 1:10. Jesus Christ is the same and His years will have no end. This is absolutely critical to us for the writer will go on to describe Jesus' completed and ongoing work, that of having opened for us a new and living way to God through His flesh (Heb 10:20) and now standing as the perfect high priest who "always lives to make intercession for us" (Heb 7:25). And this "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8). Jesus cannot and will not change. Therefore, for those in Him, He has and will complete His vital work on our behalf.

God can and will keep His promises in Christ. For what would it be like if God could change His promises? He would then be losing a degree of His power and unable to keep His promises or He could be unfaithful and decide not to keep them.⁶ This is a big deal. We cling to His promises such as our sins have been removed as far as the east is from the west, that He will keep us throughout this life by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, and not allow anything or anyone to pluck us from His hand. He promises to never leave nor forsake us. And how about His future promises such as sending His Son again to raise us and take us home, creating new heavens and a new earth, and perfecting us in righteousness and giving us new resurrection bodies? No, He cannot change – it is impossible and His promises must remain intact.

And His attitude towards us never changes; He has the same attitude towards us today as He did yesterday, or the day Jesus hung on the cross, or the day this psalm was written, or anytime in eternity past. Have you thought about this? And as we walk with Him, He always receives our approach and hears every prayer regardless of the reason. He is always available. Unlike us, He never changes His mood or allows His affections toward us to cool – He is always enthusiastic about us.⁷

But on the other hand, His attitude never changes towards sin and towards the unrepentant sinner. He will not compromise or be manipulated into doing so – He cannot be persuaded to alter His Word or to bend His holy requirements which are to receive His only offer of His Son and to repent of sin. All change must occur on the part of man – His clear terms must be met and our lives through His Son must be brought into alignment with His will revealed in His Word.⁸ Once this occurs, His power towards us begins to operate.

⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1994), p. 168

⁷ Tozer, pp. 88-89

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89

There is also comfort – unlike ever changing man, we can depend on God; people’s affection and approval change on a whim, those we trust can abandon us, and specific promises can be broken either intentionally or not.⁹ He will never leave nor forsake us. And perhaps right now you are receiving a heavy dose of change; fraying relationships, a decline in health, the loss of a loved one, or the loss of a job. Take heart – God has not changed one iota.

Meditating upon God’s unchangeableness also moves us to pray. For God does not grant a request one day and then retract it the next. And everything He grants is always for the good of His children since it is according to His will. (1 John 5:14)¹⁰

And change, while we are never comfortable with it, needs to be viewed by the Christian in a new way. God’s design for change actually works for us and not against us (2 Cor 3) – a gift from God for which we ought to be thankful. You see redemption rests upon change which is what repentance is all about; the murderer stops killing, the idolater stops worshiping the false god, the thief stops stealing, the angry soul becomes a gentle one, and the harsh becomes loving. Overall, the new believer changes spheres from that of Adam’s to the life of Christ and the old man puts on the new man. God is working in the process of sanctifying change to bring us eventually to a permanent condition of Christ likeness. Only God can work this process, the only One who is outside the current sin driven process of change and who is unaffected by it.¹¹

To the unbeliever, God’s unchangeable nature means nothing. But it does exhort us to proclaim the gospel for his sake. For God means what He says about sin and judgment. He hates sin for eternity and will never change His mind. His warnings are meant to be heard. Judgment is sure for the one not found in Christ and the sands of time are running out for him. Ought we not to double our efforts to obey Christ’s command to proclaim the gospel wherever we are? For our unchanging God has made a way, and we, as His ambassadors, are commanded to hold out the truth of the gospel for all to see.

Yes we, like the psalmist who has gone before us, are changing and this temporary world is changing around us. There is decay all around us and eventually a time of death appointed for each of us (unless the Lord returns first). But take heart, our God will after a little while, bring us to a place of permanence – a place we naturally long for, a life unending spent in the presence of our unchangeable God - where we are fully established and dwell secure. And until then, the Lord Jesus Christ, His completed work perfectly and unchangeably effective on our behalf, stands at the right hand of the Father making intercession for us. Our unchangeable Savior and Lord Jesus Christ is doing this work. By His grace and power in our lives, may our singular worship of and devotion to Him be found unchangeable as well.

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⁹ Pink, p. 39

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40

¹¹ Tozer, p. 85