

(5) Suffering

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[0 : 0 0] The reading this morning is Psalm 102, which is found on page 601 of the Bibles on the Chairs. Hear my prayer, O Lord, let my cry come to you. 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. For my days pass away like smoke and my bones burn like a furnace. My heart is struck down like grass and has withered. I forget to eat my bread. Because of my loud groaning, my bones cling to my flesh. I am like a desert owl of the wilderness, like an owl of the waste places.

I lie awake. I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop. All the day my enemies taunt me. Those who deride me use my name for a curse. For I eat ashes like bread and mingle tears with my drink because of your indignation and anger. For you have taken me up and thrown me down. My days are like an evening shadow. I wither away like grass. But you, O Lord, are enthroned forever. You are remembered throughout all generations. You will arise and have pity on Zion. It is the time to favour her. The appointed time has come. For your servants hold her stones dear and have pity on her dust. Nations will fear the name of the Lord and all the kings of the earth will fear your glory. For the Lord builds up Zion. He appears in his glory. He regards the prayer of the destitute and does not despise their prayer. Let this be recorded for a generation to come so that a people yet to be created may praise the Lord.

That he looked down from his holy height. From heaven the Lord looked at the earth to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who are doomed to die. That they may declare in Zion the name of the Lord and in Jerusalem his praise. When peoples gather together and kingdoms to worship the Lord. He has broken my strength in mid-course. He has shortened my days.

O my God, I say, take me not away in the midst of my days, you whose years endure throughout all generations. Of old you laid the foundations of the earth and the heavens are the work of your hands.

They will perish, but you will remain. They will wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe and they will pass away. But you are the same and your years have no end. The children of your servants shall dwell secure. Their offspring shall be established before you.

[2 : 5 4] Thank you.

At your discretion. Okay, have you ever faced sleepless nights of worry? Maybe about jobs? Maybe broken relationships?

Maybe sleepless in the face of intense pain or hurt? Have you ever felt so low that you've been unable to eat? Have you ever looked at your life unsure of how you can cope with or face more?

Have you ever felt that whichever way you turn, all you can feel is a massive pain? Most of us will know people who've been through awful situations like this. Many of us can already claim this experience as our own.

And I'd be amazed if at some point in our lives, all of us in this room don't face this at some point. Well, C.S. Lewis was a prolific and moving Christian writer from the early to mid-20th century.

[4 : 17] He wrote a number of thoughtful and very helpful books that are still helpful now. Well, he was also a man who knew sorrow. Both his parents and his wife fell victim to cancer.

In the aftermath of his beloved wife's death, he jotted down his thoughts and feelings in a notebook describing the pain and the anguish that he felt.

This is a book called *A Grief Observed*, which I've got here. I'm just going to read a short couple of quotes from it. At other times, it felt like being mildly drunk or concussed.

There's a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I dread the moments when another house is empty. And on the rebound, one passes into tears and pathos, maudlin tears.

I almost prefer the moments of agony. And he goes on. Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing him, so happy that you attempted to feel his claims upon you as an interruption.

[5 : 23] If you remember yourself and turn to him with gratitude and praise, you will be, or so it feels, welcomed with open arms. But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain.

And what do you find? A door slammed in your face. And a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. The nature of suffering, whether physical or emotional or even spiritual, is not only that it sucks the marrow out of life, but also it calls into question God himself.

Israel faced such questions in its history. God had repeatedly promised Israel that if it didn't stay faithful, it would be exiled from the land he had given them. And in time, after repeated warnings by God's prophets, this happened.

Israel turned away and was duly exiled. The northern tribes taken by the Assyrians, the southern tribes sometime later by the Babylonians. And yet Israel, in spite of the promises, faced these same questions.

Let me read from Psalm 89. How long, O Lord, will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?

[6 : 36] So faith with the pain and the torment of ours and other suffering, where does it leave us? Does it drive us to ask if God abandoned us? Do we wonder if God cares?

Do we ask if God can even do anything about it? Well, as we grapple with these questions and challenges, we come upon the cry of the one afflicted from the psalm that we had read for us today.

And we will see that he is right there in the middle of these challenges. However, before we immerse ourselves in Psalm 102 and see what answers God offers us, we need to spend a short moment on how we should be thinking about the psalms as we read them.

Well, if you're familiar with the psalms, you'll no doubt be aware that the psalms can be something like an onion. What I mean is that they're often different layers of relevance for the truth being spoken by God in the psalms.

Let me try to give you an example. The Davidic psalms, psalms by David, usually have a layer of meaning in relation to the experiences of David and what he went through. But there is a separate layer of meaning which can often be taken to describe the much more greater king, the much greater king promised in the future, the Messiah, Jesus our Lord.

[7 : 46] For instance, many of you will be familiar with some of the psalms which are deliberately referenced in the Gospels in describing Jesus' death. On one hand, they speak of David's experiences, which were often awful.

And yet, in an even deeper way, they speak even more to the experiences of Jesus our Lord on the cross. Well, this morning, we're going to explore two of the layers of the onion that is Psalm 102 as we face the challenge of suffering.

Firstly, we're going to look at it from the perspective of the author of the psalm. This is the perspective of the believer facing suffering. And then secondly, we're going to look at a more profound layer of understanding commended by the New Testament.

We're going to see that on a deeper level, the subject of the psalm is God's suffering king, our Lord Jesus Christ. If you've never come across this idea before, well, please park your natural suspicion.

We'll come back to it in a second point later on. First of all, however, we're going to look at the psalm from the perspective of the believer facing suffering. Let's look at verses 1 to 11.

[8 : 47] Well, right from the word go, it's obvious the psalmist is in a truly sorry state of affairs. Look with me, please, at these first 11 verses. Verse 3, my days pass away like smoke.

Or verse 11, my days are like an evening shadow. I wither away like grass. His life feels like it's slipping away, pointless and inconsequential. Or verse 4, my bones, burn like a furnace.

My heart is struck down like grass and has withered. I forget to eat my bread. There's a sense of physical pain, so intense that he doesn't care what he eats or even if he eats. And against this background of agony and depression, rather than support and encouragement, all he experiences loneliness and mockery.

Look at verse 6. I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop. And in verse 8, all the day my enemies taunt me. No wonder he can't sleep.

And all he's left to do is ponder why he is going through this. He's got angry with him. Why can't he feel God's presence with him? Why does he feel as though God were hiding his face from him? Well, strong challenges, but remembering C.S. Lewis, these cries aren't so alien from ours.

[9 : 56] The psalmist doesn't leave it there. In his agony, he turns to consider God's nature and God's plans. So moving to the first point on our outline.

In suffering, we can trust in an unchanging, sovereign and caring God. In suffering, we can trust in an unchanging, sovereign and caring God.

See, verse 12 marks a sea change in the psalm. From the anguished self-absorption of verses 1 to 11, the psalm moves to God. But you, O Lord, are enthroned forever.

The psalmist looks to God and draws comfort from his nature. For God is in charge and God will remain in charge of the world. God isn't ineffectual, crossing his fingers and wishing people weren't facing hardships, but with no way to help them.

He is the Lord, enthroned forever. And he acts according to his will and his timetable. Look at verse 13 with me. You will arise and have pity on Zion.

[10 : 59] It is the time to favour her. The appointed time has come. God has always planned to rescue his people from their hardships, but did you notice that there is a time for God to save his people?

God doesn't act on a whim, capriciously. He has set a time when he will save his people. Just as in the time of the exile, he had set a time and he would bring his people back. Now, this doesn't always feel as though it's any easier.

The obvious response with one suffering is, well, you may have set a time, God, but I'd like it to be now, please. The lesson of the psalm is that we need to remind ourselves that God is in charge, not us.

He doesn't always tell us much of why he does what he does. He gives few clues as to why he's working to the timetable he has set. Job was never told why he was subjected to the suffering he faced, and the psalmist here is never told why he hasn't had relief yet.

But we, like the psalmist, need to remember that God is in charge and say in the words of the Lord's Prayer, Thy will be done. But that is only half the encouragement for the psalmist also remembers that we're not seeking to subject ourselves to the will of a tyrant, but rather the psalmist knows and remembers that God who reigns is a God who loves his people.

[12 : 14] Look at verse 17. He regards the prayer of the destitute and does not despise their prayer. And again in verse 19, From heaven the Lord looks at the earth to hear the groans of the prisoners to set free those who are doomed to die.

Trusting in God only works if we can trust what his plans are. And trusting in his plans only works if God has the power to do what he wants. You see, it's precisely God's motives and God's ability to rescue his people that is called into question by the world around us.

Well, especially as people face hardship and suffering, the awful nature of the world now. A few years ago, Philip Pullman wrote a very popular trilogy of books aimed at young teenagers called His Dark Materials.

A number of you should have read it. It's beautifully written books. Well, basically, the books were the story of two adolescents, Lara and Will, who were trying to come to terms with adulthood, questioning all their suppositions, and in the middle of a huge battle between, on the one side, God and his church, who were characterized as wanting to control and subdue people, and on the other side, people who just want to enjoy life, the free thinkers, if you like.

And in the great battle at the end of the third book, there is a scene where Lara and Will suddenly come across God himself away from the heat of the battle. God is called the Ancient of Days, in a deliberately biblical reference, and he's depicted as so old and frail that the wind itself would be enough to dissipate him.

[13 : 49] In order to stay alive, he's kept in a crystal tomb to protect him. God is a powerless figure who only ever wanted to evilly control everyone else. Well, it's a grotesque picture dramatically reworked in an appealing literary form.

Nothing can be further from the true picture of God given in the psalm, as is a God who loves his people, who has an appointed time to save them. He is the eternal ruler who is powerful to save.

This is a God we can trust in the hardship we face, and this is a God we must trust in our struggles if we're not to collapse in despair. I don't know if you'd say you're suffering now.

Many of us might well say that life is good. Well, ultimately, it's easy to say we're trusting in God when life is good, when there are no challenges of any great consequence. And of course, we can easily say we're relying on him.

It's when times are tough that that trust is seen for what it is. We must cling to his promises in order to cling to them.

[14 : 50] We have to know them. Do we spend much time dwelling on the very nature and plan of God now? Or are we too busy with the minutiae of life running from one thing to the next, knowing we need to spend time meditating on God's character, but never quite finding the time?

If we are to weather the storms we will face, if we are to be equipped to offer help to our friends facing dark times, we must spend time dwelling on these same issues.

Of course, when times are hard, we're in a different position. That is when we must redouble our efforts to throw ourselves on the mercy of God. This psalm does not offer an easy relief from suffering, pain, anguish and abuse in the here and now.

There is no such thing. Instead, this psalm reminds us that there is a future when the suffering will be a thing of the past. The suffering we face now will not face for eternity if we're trusting in Jesus.

And therefore, we need to draw comfort from his consistent, loving nature. What other encouragement can we offer to the suffering now? I know of no other that isn't bland or trite or just calling for a stiff upper lip.

[15 : 59] God does care. God will save those deemed to die and God will gather his people together when he creates the new heavens and a new earth to his glory. In suffering, we can trust in an unchanging, sovereign and caring God.

Let's move on to our second main point. In suffering, we have a supreme Lord who has been through it all before us. In suffering, we have a supreme Lord who has been through it all before us.

If you hang around with Christians for any reasonable length of time, you're likely to hear about the grey squirrel. The grey squirrel comes from Sunday schools of yesteryear, where if you ever ask the question, what is grey, eats nuts and runs up and down trees, you'd undoubtedly hear the answer, Jesus.

In Sunday schools of yesteryear, children were well trained to know that the answer to everything was Jesus. Well, sometimes we can be accused of looking at the Bible in the same way.

We can too readily jump to Jesus and we can see him everywhere with often little justification from the Bible itself. But whilst that may occasionally be true, here we have strong encouragements to find Jesus, but they may be hard to see from the psalm itself.

[17 : 10] If you look with me at the last four and a half verses, verse 24 onwards, who are they about? Of old you laid the foundation of the earth and the heavens are the work of your hands.

They will perish, but you will remain. They will all wear out like a garment. Well, it seems fairly obvious, doesn't it, that they're about God's constancy and his care for his people.

But let's go back to Hebrews 1, which we helpfully had read for us earlier on page 1203. You see, from Hebrews 1, verse 10 onwards, this passage is quoted.

You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain. They will all wear out like a garment. Like a robe, you will roll them up.

Like a garment, they will be changed. But you are the same and your years will have no ends. But it's not God who's been referred to here. It's Jesus.

[18 : 23] Look at verse 8. But of the Son, he says. The point is that as we peel back the deeper layer of the onion, this isn't a psalmist crying out to God amidst his or her suffering.

Psalm 102 gives us another insight, a deeper insight into the way Jesus and his heavenly Father related to one another and relate to one another. It's kind of like a divine conversation.

And suddenly, if we turn back to Psalm 102, it suddenly feels very easy to see Jesus, God's Son, reflected in the psalm. Look at verses 1 to 11, the suffering and the abandonment.

His being alone just as Jesus was alone on the cross. His being taunted just as Jesus was taunted on the cross. His own name being used as a curse. Something that happens even now.

Facing God's indignation and anger in verse 10, yet no report of sin. Let alone the shortened lifespan of verse 23. He has broken my strength in midcourse.

[19 : 26] He has shortened my days. And the closing description in verses 24 to 28. See, as we look again, we see that Psalm 102 gives us an insight into Jesus' attitude to the suffering that he underwent to the cross and the motive for how he went through it.

For whilst he suffered and cried to God, he too was able to remember God's promises that those doomed to die would be set free, that many people would gather together to worship God in the new heavenly city.

The psalm reminds us that Jesus was able to draw comfort from a purpose behind his death. And in the last four verses, we are reminded that Jesus knew that God's purposes would be achieved for God had promised Jesus that his death would be life-saving.

Look at verse 28. The children of your servants shall dwell secure. Their offspring shall be established by you, before you. Jesus went through terrible, awful suffering on the cross.

During this, Jesus could draw comfort from the unchanging promises of God and the undefeatable purposes of God. God would keep his promises to save people through Jesus' death.

[20 : 41] This psalm reminds us that as awful as it is, suffering is not a sign of God being out of control. God was fully in control of Jesus going to his death. This was the appointed time where death would be defeated and God's people would be saved.

This was the event the psalmists first look forward to just as we look back in gratitude and wonder knowing that through this dreadful event God's wrath was satisfied by Jesus' sacrifice.

The penalty for our sins was paid by him on that cross. We too can now be with the Holy God for all eternity. See, Jesus' suffering gives us great confidence for we know that God's promises looked forward to by the psalmist have been won now.

We have not only an example to follow in our attitudes but also a confidence in the achievement plan the psalmist longed to see fulfilled. So how do we apply this to us?

Well, firstly, we need to learn a level of confidence in Jesus' achievement on the cross so that when we suffer our hardships or challenges come across we can be confident that they will not last forever.

[21 : 54] It may last all our natural days on this earth but we will be with him forever in the new heavens and the new earth. The truth is that what will give us the courage to go through the suffering is that we must dwell on this truth and we must pray for God to write it on our hearts.

The more we do that the more the joy of the ones doomed to die saved by Jesus will be ours too. We know that there is a great and wonderful future to look forward to and that when we have been there with our Lord for 10,000 years this present suffering will seem like nothing in comparison.

In the New Testament we are called to follow our Saviour in both the willingness to give up our lives in his service but also in seeking to grow more like him. This psalm seen through New Testament spectacles helps us to see how we can do this.

We can learn the motivation of Christ's certainty as he went to the cross and therefore as we take up our cross to follow him we too can look forward based on God's promises.

We won't be paying for the sins of the world when we suffer. We can be confident in God's good plan and Jesus' achievement of all that was required. At the end of the day I'm not claiming that it is easy to follow Jesus and trust in our Father in heaven.

[23 : 13] As we face suffering it will be as hard for us as it was for the psalmist but if God was willing to allow his son to suffer to an untimely death for our salvation we must be willing to trust him and his plan.

He has more than earned the trust he has owed. In conclusion then this psalm does not tell us we won't suffer. It doesn't tell us that it will stop as soon as we ask God to stop it.

After all Jesus didn't get relief from his suffering on the cross but rather this psalm is a great reminder that the suffering will not last forever. God is in control and he will bring it to an end in accordance with his plan.

We will all face events in life that threaten to rock our confidence in God but we must join the psalmist and our Lord in proclaiming that even as we suffer you, O Lord are enthroned forever.

The important time has come. Amen.