

Responding to God's Word

Written by John Fox | 3.3.2024

Text: Psalm 102

FCF: Despair

VFT: Trust

Shaft: Prayer gives God's people a heavenly perspective.

INTRO

Prayer

Good morning, church family. We are currently in a sermon series entitled "Draw Near" in which the intent is to simply draw near to God through various practices and truths we find in the psalms. Last week Pastor Reece led us through what it means to draw near to God through meditation, but this week we are focusing on what it means to draw near to God by responding to His Word. Another way to say it is we are focusing on prayer, because prayer is actually a response to God either through His general revelation (creation) or special revelation (word).

But, there is a caveat. There is no "one" psalm that teaches us how to pray. Rather, the entire Psalter is filled with different kinds of prayer. There are prayers of repentance (Psalm 51), intercession (Psalm 40), thanksgiving (Psalm 113), and more.¹ And they all have things to teach us. However, this morning, we will be focusing on Psalm 102, a psalm of lament.

Why this psalm? It's simply because this psalm teaches us how to pray (respond to God) when life doesn't go the way we want or expect. It might surprise you to learn that psalms of lament make up just over one third of the entire psalter! **(SLIDE)** I believe it's because being depressed, disappointed, or discouraged is probably the most common experience humans have. But how should we respond when it happens? This psalm teaches us three things about prayer.

Main Point

Main Point: Prayer gives God's people a heavenly perspective.

Points: How?

1. How to be gut-level honest
2. How to move on with life
3. How to deal with the waves of grief

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<https://women.lifeway.com/2023/07/20/about-the-psalms/#:~:text=Types%20of%20Psalms,than%20one%20of%20these%20categories.>

1. How to be gut-level honest

1) Respond to the Covenant God

It's really easy to miss but the first thing this psalm tells us about how to be gut-level honest is to have a real relationship with the God of the Bible. We know that the psalmist knows God intimately because he uses His self-disclosed covenant name, "Lord" which is actually "Yahweh".

Psalm 102:1-2

1 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!

The psalmist is undoubtedly in great distress, his life may hang in the balance. Have you ever had a near death experience? What did you do? I know a pastor that says there are often only two responses: 1) prayers, or 2) swears. The psalmist knows God and calls out to him for help.

2) Tell him what's going on

It may seem too simple, but the psalmist writes and sings about his difficulty to the Lord. He doesn't pretend everything is okay.

Psalm 102:3-9

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,

This is a rough situation and he is hurting so he pours out his feelings before God. Notice I said *feelings*. We are not particularly good at doing this, often because we do not speak in "feeling" language. But this is super important because it allows the psalmist to not be fake. I am afraid that

churches are filled with fake prayers these days. Prayers that lightly ask for help from God, *if necessary*, but are really asking for just enough help to fully rely on ourselves again. In contrast, the psalmist throws himself down before God and cries out for help. More than that, he subtly moves from expressing his suffering to ascribing it to God.

3) Engage with God's sovereignty

Psalm 102:10-11

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.

We must be very careful here not to ascribe wrong to God. Perhaps the psalmist was right and the suffering he is experiencing is due to his own sinful actions. Perhaps it is not and he just feels that way. Sometimes we suffer because we live in a sinful world with sinful effects. Regardless, we must learn to take our difficulties and wrestle with them in light of God's sovereignty.

John Piper's Definition of God's Sovereignty²

"God is powerful and authoritative to the extent of being able to override all other powers and authorities."

If God is all-powerful over all things, then he could at least prevent evil things from happening. Now this brings us to a bigger question of theodicy and the problem of evil, but I think it's sufficient to say that there is some measure of wrestling you must do with God to be gut-level honest when you face adversity.

Meningitis Example 1

In the Fall of 2014 I got up for work one day and fell over. I tried to stand again, but couldn't do it. I was in seminary at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, working full time in a machine shop, was a deacon in the kids ministry at church, and a new dad. I was doing too much and after a lot of testing determined that I had viral meningitis. I was hospitalized immediately and the next day the infectious diseases doctor told me it was good I came in because if I waited another day I probably would have died. Needless to say this greatly changed our lives. It necessitated moving back to Houston from Louisville, being on bedrest for three months, and beginning a very slow journey of finding a job and rebuilding my strength.

It was a dark season. I was weak, continually depressed, and struggling with *why* God would allow it. I had no choice but to be gut-level honest. So I resonate with the psalmist. But eventually, I had to move on, like him.

² <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-is-the-sovereignty-of-god>

2. How to move on with life

1) Remind yourself of God's promises.

There is quite the dramatic shift in verse 12 where all of a sudden after talking about himself for 11 verses the psalmist turns his eyes heavenward and reflects on the eternal God.

Psalm 102:12-17

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.

When the psalmist starts to consider GOD, eternal, enthroned, all-powerful, his perspective starts to change. This is what Pastor Reece was talking about last week. With meditation on what God has said and his promises now the psalmist calls to mind echoes of God's promises to Zion, His people. And what is his conclusion? God regards the prayer of the destitute and does not despise their prayer. Remind yourself of God's promises when you are blue.

2) Recognize God's plan involves others

God is also doing more with our afflictions than we realize.

Psalm 102:18-22

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 recognizes that his own story is meant to be recorded so that when other people hear of God's own care and provision in his life it would result in worship to God. Now this one is hard for us because we simply do not see all things that God is doing with the afflictions we experience. Sometimes we get to see a snippet of a picture. But God is still using our story to help other people know him.

Meningitis Example 2

I don't know all the reasons why I had meningitis and had my strongest days cut short. Perhaps it was because I needed to learn to rest. But I think that one practice that came of it that otherwise wouldn't have happened. We had a two year old by that point and moved from house-to-house through the Summer. All I could do was pray, a lot. But it's hard to do that with a two year old. So, everyday I would have him pray with me, and when he got restless, I would put him on my back as I knelt to pray. Surprisingly, he just laid there. Even though I was praying, I believe that had a profound effect on my oldest son.

Who knows what God is doing in the midst of our suffering? It's so easy to grow bitter and jaded with God and others in our adversities. We need to be honest with God about them, yes, but we also need to move on as best we can. God has so much more for us and for others, even if we don't see it.

3. How to deal with the waves of grief

1) Be honest, again

But the psalm is not over yet. We're in for another round.

Psalm 102:23-24

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!"

This psalm is the real deal. I know because this is exactly how grief works. It's often said that grief comes in waves, often when you don't expect it. I think that's what's happening again towards the end of the psalm. Again, the author is lamenting his situation. Again he turns to God over it.

2) Move on, again

Psalm 102:25-28

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

Did you notice how quickly the turn was this time? I take this to mean that we can get better at lamenting. Let the waves come, feel them, and let them turn you to God.

3) See Jesus in this psalm

When the author of Hebrews spoke of this same God the psalmist prayed to he saw Jesus. Why do I say that? It's because the author quotes the end of Psalm 102 as proof for how much better Jesus is than angels.

Hebrews 1:8,10-12

8 But of the Son he says,
10 And, "You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;
11 they will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment,
12 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 end."

Do you know what this means? It means that Jesus, unlike the psalmist, cried out but did not receive an answer. The psalm began by crying out to Yahweh, Adonai. But what does Jesus do on the cross? He "cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

Jesus' flesh stuck to his bones with his strength spent, had smoke in the air as it was a place to burn dead bodies in a wasteland, and his strength was broken in the prime of life.

But Hebrews tells us that by his death on the cross for his people he also became the heir of all things, that includes you and me. He also has all power and will one day roll up creation and roll out a new one with the city of God coming down from heaven. Even better, he will never change and his years have no end being resurrected from the dead. This is a word we can respond to. In our affliction, turn to respond to this powerful Jesus who loves us so much.

CONCLUSION

Main Point: Prayer gives God's people a heavenly perspective.