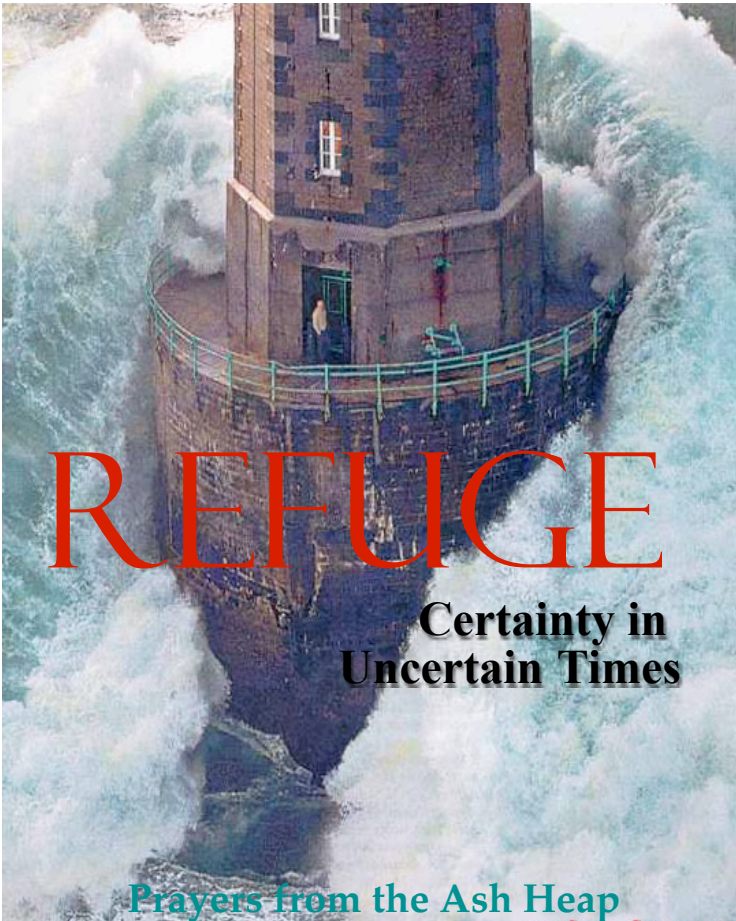


The Covenant Pulpit



Psalm 102

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He was still a teenager when he was named pastor of the famous Park Street Chapel in London. The greatest of the Puritan preachers had spoken from its pulpit. At nineteen years of age, he was the pastor of the largest Baptist church in the world.

By the time he was 21 years-old thousands were attending his church services, and many more were being turned away for lack of room. His sermons were published on the front pages of the leading newspapers in England. The famous missionary, David Livingston carried this young preacher's printed sermons in his coat pocket while he explored Africa.

At age 22 he moved to Exter Hall to accommodate the enormous crowds, but there still wasn't enough room. So he announced that he would preach at the Music Hall in the Surry Gardens. All hell broke loose when he made that announcement. Operettas, traveling vaudeville shows, and circuses were staged at the Surry Music Hall before beer-swilling crowds.

At best, the young preacher's idea was audacious. At its worst, it was scandalous. Across England pastors and bishops railed against this preacher boy who would conduct gospel services in a hall where the devil entertained sinners. Major newspapers ran scathing editorials condemning him as a "publicity-seeking sensationalist."

On October 19, 1856, lines of horse drawn carriages stretched back seven miles in massive traffic jams as countless thousands of people poured into the Surry Gardens. The Music Hall was packed with more than 7,000 people well before the service was to begin. As the young preacher came onto the stage, someone shouted, "Fire!" Panic-stricken people stampeded toward the exits. Seven were crushed to death and 28 others were critically injured. As the shaken preacher boy was escorted out of the hall, he saw crushed and twisted corpses laid out on the grass. He was escorted home in a daze.

When he saw his young wife he collapsed and was carried to his bed. The worst was yet to come. In pulpits across the British Isles, sermons declared that the Surry Music Hall tragedy was God's judgment on this upstart preacher for holding evangelistic services in the devil's playground. The headlines and editorials in English newspapers were devastatingly-cruel. For three weeks he refused to get out of his bed. He would suffer severe bouts of clinical depression for the rest of his life.

Christians can be glad that young Charles Spurgeon finally got up. He overcame his suicidal despair to start a preacher's college, open a string of

orphanages, and write great hymns. At 23 years of age, Spurgeon ignored his critics and held evangelistic services at the Crystal Palace, the largest auditorium in England. On October 7, 1857 more than 24,000 people filled that place—up to that time, the largest crowd to ever hear a sermon. In 1861, when he was 27 years-old, Spurgeon opened the Metropolitan Tabernacle with a worship center that could seat more than 6,000 people in a single service. It was the first mega-church in modern history.

Though Spurgeon is called “The Prince of Preachers” and countless millions of people have been transformed by his ministry, he suffered with depression for the rest of his life. Though his sermons were full of humor, he wrote, “Melancholy is my closest neighbor.” When he stood up to preach one evening, the scene of that tragic night in the Music Hall flashed before his eyes. He said, “My brethren, I am quite out of order for addressing you tonight. I feel extremely unwell, excessively heavy and exceedingly depressed.” He sat down, unable to go on. There would be times when he accomplished great things with enthusiasm, only to fall into seasons of deep despair. Today Spurgeon might be labeled manic-depressive.

Almost yearly, he would become so debilitated by depression that his elders would send him off to Nice in Southern France for three months of rest. The nightmare at the Surry Music Hall never stopped reoccurring in Spurgeon’s mind, each time bringing fresh waves of despair. Before he died at age 58 he was revered as the greatest preacher of his age. But he was also morbidly obese and suffering from severe gout and rheumatism, all complicated by his bouts with depression.

Does it surprise you that such a great hero of the Faith suffered chronic depression? We assume that successful Christians should be happily triumphant. The truth is, the dark times have engulfed God’s greatest saints. On his 40th birthday, Martin Luther said, “I’d sooner go to hell for eternity than to live 40 more years on this wretched earth.” Job asked God to let him die. David wrote, “I am feeble and utterly crushed.” “Elijah begged God to take his life. Jonah cried out, “I just want to die.” Jeremiah lamented, “There is no one to comfort my soul.” Jesus said, “I am overwhelmed to the point of death.” Paul wrote, “I despaired of life itself.” There’s not a saint who hasn’t gone through what St. John of the Cross called, “The dark night of the soul.”

Perhaps you are going through such a dark night. Last week we talked about *dry* times. This morning the Psalmist talks about *dark* times. Psalm 102 bears this title: “A prayer of an afflicted man. When he is faint and pours out his lament before the Lord.” The writer is brutally transparent,

describing his despair in the most graphic terms. Those of us who have gone through the dark times can relate to this Psalm. Those of you who are going through them right now can find hope here. Charles Spurgeon often revisited Psalm 102 when he was going through his darkest seasons. You could reduce its core message to this principle:

Healing comes from a focus that is upward, not inward.

Despair always leads to self-absorption. Notice, in the first eleven verses of this prayer, this afflicted man is fixated on his own troubles. There are three references to God, one to others, and 24 to himself. Three words come in monotonous repetition: “I, me, and my...” True healing does not begin until his lament about his problems turns to the praise of God’s person.

If we are going to understand Psalm 102, we need to understand healing. In his classic book, *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis wrote that modern Christians have an immature view of pain. Seventy years after he wrote that book, I would say that postmodern Christians are even more immature. We live in a narcissistic age when everything is about us, *our* feelings, *our* needs, and *our* happiness. For us, healing is about getting rid of the pain we *feel*. For God, healing goes deeper than the *localized* pain we feel to *holistic* health: body, mind, and soul. It’s not just about healing us as individuals, but healing everything and everyone that we are networked to in our world.

That means God may use a sickness in our body to heal our souls. He may use painful relationships to heal flaws in our character. He might bring a down syndrome baby into a family so that those whose lives touch that special child will be made healthier. He allows natural disasters, financial crises, or war to afflict nations so that people will repent and their countries become healthy again. Abraham Lincoln was convinced that the Civil War was God’s way of purging America of its sickness of slavery. After 14 years of suffering with a “thorn in the flesh” St. Paul could say that he was glad God didn’t heal his physical pain so that he might find a greater spiritual healing. In our immaturity we want quick relief from the affliction we feel. But in his sovereign grace, God wants to give us the more profound healing that we need in our lives, our families, our churches, and our land. That’s why the following three truths of Psalm 102 are critical:

1. Desperate prayers bring healings *needed* more than healings *sought*.

Again, the healing we seek is not always the healing we need. The affliction that drives us to pray desperate prayers is not always the sickness

that is most dangerous. Look at the urgency of the prayer in verses 1&2 of Psalm 102:

“Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry for help come to you. Do not hide your face from me when I am in distress. Turn your ear to me; when I call, answer me quickly.”

Do you see his desperation in the repetition of his prayer? There are five requests in six lines that are virtually identical. “Hear my prayer...let my cry for help come to you...turn your ear to me...answer me quickly.” James Montgomery Boice writes, “Desperate conditions make for strong petitions.”

I believe that this lament comes from a brokenhearted Jew who has seen the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. This holocaust came about because the Jews chased after other gods. Their culture descended into gross immorality. Bigotry and injustice were rampant. People pursued materialism and mindless entertainment. The Israel of the 7th Century B.C. was a lot like postmodern Western Culture. For centuries God had sent the prophets to warn his people of a coming apocalypse. But they lusted after their own pleasures and ignored God. They were sick in every way. So God unleashed the Babylonians from what is modern-day Iraq and Iran.

Understand this: God didn't unleash the Babylonians just because he was ticked off and wanted to slap the Jews silly. He knew that his people were soul sick and they could only find healing in a passionate relationship with him. He was driving them back into his arms.

Too often, when things seem to be going well, we become spiritually lazy. The more we are disconnected from the Source of our life, the sicker we become. So God allows individuals, families, churches, and nations to experience the painful consequences of spiritual neglect. For some of us it takes a whole lot of affliction before we get desperate enough to run to the Lover and Healer of our soul. Only then does our prayer life take on the urgency of self-preservation. We beg God for relief. But he knows that, as quickly as he heals us, we will return like a dog to its vomit. As desperate as our prayers are, we need a healing far deeper than the pain on which we are fixated. Instead of bringing relief, God sometimes turns up the heat.

2. Desperate conditions birth great prayers.

The opening of his prayer in verses 1&2 is necessary, but not great. He sees God as the fixer. He's demanding, like an immature child insisting that

his daddy makes everything better. It's all about him and his pain. God doesn't begrudge childish prayers. Sometimes panic is the only thing that drives us to him. But we receive little from quick answers to prayer.

I don't believe that this prayer was prayed in one sitting. I sense that it was an evolution over days, months, and even years of praying though pain that didn't go away overnight. The prayer changes dramatically in verse twelve, turning from self-focus to God-focus. It goes from immaturity to maturity. But in between verses 2&12 there's a desperate struggle.

Look at the jarringly-graphic phrases in verses 3&4: "...days vanish like smoke...bones burn like glowing embers...heart withered like grass..." This afflicted man laments that he's been tossed on the fire like a log and everything in his life is going up in smoke. How many times have you felt like that? Or you may feel like grass yanked out of the earth, emotionally disconnected from everything that gave you life and withering up in your dryness. No wonder he goes on to say in verse 4, "I forget to eat my food." There are times when our senses are so dead that even food has lost its appeal. In verse 5 he says that all he can do is groan. He has become like skin and bones. Emotional groaning destroys physical health.

With all this comes the loneliness of despair. Look at his pity party in verses 6-10: "I am like a desert owl among ruins...like a bird alone on the roof..." Sleep doesn't come at times like this: "I lie awake..." A kind of paranoia sets in where we are sure that others pity us, or laugh at us, or talk about us behind our backs: "All day long my enemies taunt me..." Our broken heart wells up in tears of self-pity: "for I eat ashes as my food and mingle my drink with tears." We sink so deep that we are sure that even God has abandoned us: "For you have taken me up and thrown me aside." If the spiral goes to its ultimate depth there is nothing left but the thoughts of death in verse eleven: "My days are like the evening shadow; I wither away like grass." This is despair at its rawest. Many of us have been there, and some of you are there now. We might wonder why God lets us come to such a point. I believe that he uses such struggles as a razor sharp scalpel to cut away the cancer of sin that corrupts every part of our life and relationships.

We might wish that God were not so silent when we cry out our many words to him. Or so slow in responding to our frantic pleas for instant relief. But this is what Oswald Chambers calls his "severe mercy." He lets us struggle deeply so that he might take us beyond the *unhealthy* desperation of verses 1&2—shallow desperation that only summons God to fix things so that we can get back to pain-free living. He brings us to a *healthy* desperation

in verse twelve where we are driven to know God passionately and gain his perspective on life. And only when the focus goes *upward* to gain God's heart, and *outward* to meet the needs of other people's hearts will the *inward* focus of self-absorption disappear, and our despair with it.

3. Prayer turns desperation into healthy deliverance.

As you read the rest of this Psalm, you can be sure that this man's troubles are not over. He will probably never see Jerusalem again in his lifetime. Spurgeon never forgot that night at the Surry Music Hall. Its pain, and the depression it triggered, haunted him for the rest of his life. There are some scars that never disappear and "thorns in the flesh" that are never removed. But the afflicted writer of Psalm 102 is healed in ways that go far beyond his *felt* pain. He becomes a mature man of God in the process. And some 2700 years later, we contemporary sufferers find medicine for our souls in the struggles of an anonymous Jew that we will never know or get to thank until we get to heaven. But with him we can find the greatest deliverance of all by:

1) Resting in the sovereignty of God...

He prays in verse 12, "But you O Lord sit enthroned forever..." The beginning of all healing is to rest in the sovereignty of God. When we understand that he sits on the throne of the universe, we are able to relax. He's God, and we're not. We can even rest in his timing. The afflicted man prays with calm assurance in verse 13, "You will arise and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to show favor to her; the appointed time has come." God has an appointed time for everything. Nothing will take place a nanosecond before or a blink of an eye later. Are you afflicted about the Presidential Election in less than 100 days? Are you losing sleep over your finances, or the sickness of a loved one, or the price of gas at the pump? Stop worrying! Get out of the dumps! Even the tragedy of the Surry Music Hall and the destruction of Jerusalem are within his sovereign will and control. Rest in his Lordship and find your healing in the words of our Savior: "Father in heaven, not *my* will but *yours* be done."

2) Trusting in the pity of God...

In verse 14 the afflicted man appeals to God to restore Jerusalem. He reminds God that he feels great pity for the devastated city. He goes on to beg God to restore his beloved city to its glory. In verse 17 he ends with these words regarding God's response to the prayers of the destitute Jews: "he will not despise their plea." God cares about the things we care about.

He is moved by those things that move us, especially when they line up with the things that move him. We can trust in his love for us when we pray for his goodness in areas of our life that are devastated.

3) Knowing that God will maintain *his glory*...

He is confident in verse 19 that God *will* "...look down from his sanctuary on high..." He declares boldly in verse 20 that God "...*will* hear the groans of the prisoners, and release those condemned to death." He says in verse 18, that God will do this so that "future generations, those not yet created may praise the Lord." He repeats in verses 21&22, "So that the name of the Lord will be declared in Zion and his praise in Jerusalem when the people and the kingdoms will assemble to worship the Lord." A day is coming when the *New Jerusalem* will descend and the *only* true "Anointed One" will come in the clouds of the air with a shout of triumph. And all the nations of the world will gather before God and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God. I can rest in the fact that all creation—including myself—will be restored to full healing because I know that nothing will stop God from being glorified in everything.

4) Counting on God to *keep his covenants*...

In verse 24 he returns to an earlier thought that his life was going up like smoke. He desperately wants to see Jerusalem restored before his death. But then he remembers in verses 25&26, that though he withers like grass, and the world is in flux, God never changes. He cries out in verse 27, "But you remain the same, and your years will never end." Suddenly it's okay if he doesn't live to see Jerusalem restored. He remembers that God has made a covenant with Israel, and it is as sure as his unchangeable character. So he cries out a triumphant ending to his prayer in verse 27: "The children of your servants will live in your presence; their descendants will be established before you." Even if the exiles of his generation never see Jerusalem restored, their descendants will. God keeps his covenants. And just as importantly, he has found healing in the struggle of the dark times. He who began his prayer in self-centered desperation to be fixed, now looks upward to rest in God's character and forward to celebrate the joy that others will have in the restored Jerusalem. He never found the healing he asked for, but he discovered a healing far more spectacular. And so can you, if only you will look upward instead of inward.