

Psalm 102 — A Refugee's Cry for Help

Joel Stephen Williams

We frequently read in the news about the plight of refugees. It is a timeless problem that seems to be found in almost every generation throughout history. Psalm 102 is about a man who is a refugee, a member of a nation, most of whom are refugees. Their homeland has been destroyed, and they have been deported. Now difficult living conditions have discouraged this man. Think of Psalm 102 as a refugee's cry for help.

For several millennia people have been given the advice to go to the Bible when they are overwhelmed with problems and difficulties. The pages of Scripture are supposed to be a source of encouragement and hope. In particular, the book of Psalms has been recommended for such purposes. Psalm 102 is a good example of why Psalms, in particular, and the Bible, in general, has this well deserved reputation as a book of comfort. Recommend this psalm to those who need encouragement when things have gone very badly for them in their lives.

We do not know for certain who wrote Psalm 102. The author felt alone, tossed about, insecure, unsettled, finite and weak. The author was an unknown Jew who was probably writing during the exile in Babylon. Nevertheless, he was hoping that God would have mercy and rebuild Jerusalem, which was lying in ruins (Ps. 102:13-16).

Mankind is finite and our lives are brief. The psalmist faced the possibility of a short life due to illness. He probably had a fever (Ps. 102:3b). He had no appetite (Ps. 102:4b) and was losing weight (Ps. 102:5b). He was having difficulty sleeping (Ps. 102:7). Likely he was middle-aged, so he was not ready for death (Ps. 102:24). He used three metaphors for the brevity and uncertainty of life. Life was like smoke from



a chimney which quickly dissipated (Ps. 102:3). His days were "like the evening shadow" (Ps. 102:11). Finally, his life was like grass that withered away (Ps. 102:11).

Another reason the psalmist might have been staring death in the face was because of the threats of enemies and opponents. He cried out to God, "All day long my enemies taunt me; those who rail against me use my name as a curse" (Ps. 102:8). His enemies taunted him when they saw his weakness and his sickness.

A third rationale for the finiteness of human existence for the psalmist was the punishment from God that was disrupting his life. He knew these difficulties were because of God's "great wrath" (Ps. 102:10). He lamented, "In the course of my life he broke my strength; he cut short my days" (Ps. 102:23). The Babylonian exile was God's punishment on the Israelites of which the psalmist's plight was a part. The psalmist did not complain about God's discipline. Instead, he prayed for deliverance. As difficult as all of these experiences must have been, they gave the psalmist awareness of his limitations and of God's eternal greatness.

God is infinite and eternal. Man is weak and finite, but God is on his throne forever: "But you, O Lord, sit enthroned forever; your renown endures through all generations" (Ps. 102:12). Our lives are brief, but God is eternal: "In the beginning 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 all wear out like a garment...But you remain the same, and your years will never end" (Ps. 102:25-27).

The psalmist found hope for Zion in the eternal strength of God. The psalmist felt certain that God would rebuild and restore the fortunes of Jerusalem. "You will arise and have compassion on Zion...For the Lord will rebuild Zion" (Ps. 102:13, 16). The psalmist pictured God looking down from heaven, seeing the misery of the Israelites, hearing their groans and coming to their aid (Ps. 102:19-20). He believed that future generations would once again sing God's praises in Jerusalem. And when we read the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the fulfillment of this hope and expectation of Psalm 102:21-22 is recorded.

The psalmist prays to God for help. The psalmist prayed and begged that God would help him in his distress (Ps. 102:1-2, 18-22). The psalmist knew that God would preserve his chosen people, but the fortunes of a single individual might be different from the destiny of the nation as a whole. He cried out, "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" (Ps. 102:1-2). At the end of the psalm he again spoke a prayer for deliverance: "So I said: 'Do not take me away, O my God, in the midst of my days'" (Ps. 102:24).

The message of Psalm 102 is simple. We are weak and finite. Our lives are brief and often full of trouble. God, however, is eternal and almighty. Trust in God. Depend on the Lord. Rely on the Ancient of Days. Hope in the Almighty. Pray to God for help, because he "will arise and have compassion" (Ps. 102:13).