

Sunday 20 September 2020

SONGS FROM A STRANGE LAND

Psalm 102: “The God who hears”

Living and life-giving God,

in faith and trust we come to petition you –

to pray for ourselves, for one another, and for our world;

to bring the concerns of daily life before you;

to lift our loved ones into your presence;

to commit the affairs of our world into your hands.

Lord of all, hear our prayer.

As I come into God’s presence I choose to praise him in the words of Psalm 97:1-5.

- ¹ The LORD is king! Let the earth rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad!
- ² Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
- ³ Fire goes before him,
and consumes his adversaries on every side.
- ⁴ His lightnings light up the world;
the earth sees and trembles.
- ⁵ The mountains melt like wax before the LORD,
before the Lord of all the earth.

Life is not always straightforward. As we walk with God we can often find our thoughts and emotions in conflict. At the same time we want to raise our voice in praise, like that of Psalm 97, yet feel conflict, bitterness or pain that we have heard expressed in the Psalms we have recently reflected on. Psalm 102 is an example of this inner conflict. In the space of twenty-eight verses it moves from a prayer for help to lament and complaint, to praise and an expression of hope and confidence, back to complaint and plea, before returning to praise and a final expression of confidence.

- 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.
- ³ For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.

- ⁴ My heart is stricken and withered like grass;
I am too wasted to eat my bread.
- ¹² But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever;
your name endures to all generations.
- ¹³ You will rise up and have compassion on Zion,
for it is time to favour it;
the appointed time has come.

Psalm 102:1-4, 12f

Like the other Psalms we have looked at recently, the background to this Psalm is the experience of disaster and exile, though in this case we are probably at the end of that time, when the prospect of returning home was in the air. Hence the Psalmist's ambivalence. While Israel viewed the exile as deserved punishment, they also concluded at some point that enough was enough (see Isaiah 40:1-2). At that point, the reality of exile became viewed as an opportunity for God to perform a new exodus and to have "compassion on Zion" (13).

It is this longing to see Jerusalem and the temple restored that is at the heart of this Psalm. Zion was a symbol of God's willingness to be present in space and time with a particular people. But the Psalmist knew that Israel was constantly disobedient, making it necessary for God to bear the burden of their sin. In short, the ongoing existence of God's people was testimony to God's mercy and grace.

For the church, that Zion symbolism has been transferred to Jesus, and his life, death, and resurrection are the ultimate demonstration of God's reign, which takes the form of mercy and grace. The church professes to be heir to Israel's story, and its history certainly demonstrates that it continues to live not by its own merit or worthiness but by the grace of God. Jesus is the seal of God's faithfulness. We find hope in the words of Jesus, which make essentially the same promise for the future as Psalm 102:28: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). The good news for individuals and for the whole church is that by the grace of God we are indeed "established in [his] presence" (v. 28).

We pause and pray together with all who long to see the grace and mercy of God made known in that time and place.

Pause and pray

As we close, we return to Psalm 102 and listen to its final declaration of praise.

- ²⁵ Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
- ²⁶ They will perish, but you endure;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You change them like clothing, and they pass away;
- ²⁷ but you are the same, and your years have no end.
- ²⁸ The children of your servants shall live secure;
their offspring shall be established in your presence.

Psalm 102:25-28

Lord of all

*touch my heart with your living presence
and fill my life with your grace,
so that my love for you may grow,
my faith be deepened,
and my service strengthened.*

*Lord of all, hear my prayer,
in the name of Christ. Amen.*

NEXT WEEK: Psalm 137 – Greif and rage