

Perspective in Pain

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[0 : 00] Thank you very much, Esther. My name is Alistair, the privilege of being the assistant pastor, and it is a joy to be with you this morning. But life isn't always a joy, is it? As we read that psalm, maybe you got a hint of what I'm speaking about.

So I'd like to ask us a question. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt that literally you were walking through the valley of the shadow of death?

Those times in life where it's just so difficult. Everything seems to be against you. You feel all by yourself and unable to help.

You're all alone. And the pain keeps on piling on top of you. A man named William Carey went through that very experience.

As a young man, he founded a missionary organization here in the UK and then traveled to India. And in the first seven years that he was there, his son died and his wife's mental health deteriorated very rapidly.

[1 : 07] So he went through real times of pain and suffering and despair. But this is what he said in those times. This is indeed the valley of the shadow of death to me.

But I rejoice that I am here notwithstanding and God is here with me. So the reason that Carey could go through his pain and stand firm in his faith is because he had confidence in his God. And we find similar stories, don't we, in the book of Psalms. If you look at the Psalms, it's as if God has purposefully given us a book full of songs and poems that resonate with every single area of life that we're in.

So if you are rejoicing and you can do nothing but praise God every single day, there are Psalms for that. If you're weak and tired and you just need God's help, there are Psalms for that.

And if you are absolutely down and out, you cannot continue and you are in the valley of despair with the walls closing in every second, there are Psalms for that.

[2 : 25] And we see one of them this morning in Psalm 102. The writer is in pain. It's as if he's looking over his own life and the life of the nation of Israel and surveying the spiritual state of Israel, and he cannot do anything but mourn and lament and despair.

But it's not all doom and gloom. Because in the midst of his pain, the Psalmist finds perspective. That is what we see this morning. Perspective in pain from Psalm 102.

So this Psalm will help us think about how we can suffer well and go through pain with a godly perspective. How we can have a view of God that carries us through those times of pain and struggle.

And we all need this Psalm. Maybe you're in the middle of that valley and you're wondering how to deal with it. Maybe you know that that valley will come one day.

Or maybe you're on the mountaintop and there is no pain in sight. Well then you need this Psalm just as much as everyone else because you need to care for your brothers and sisters in Christ who are in pain. In this Psalm, the writer tells us about the pain that he feels and then the God that he knows.

[3 : 47] So the first 11 verses that we see in this Psalm are the pain I feel. Look at some of the language that the Psalmist uses to describe his physical and emotional pain in verses 3 to 7.

My days vanish like smoke and my bones are like the embers. His whole body is on fire. It's as if there is a fire burning inside him.

There is no escape from this discomfort. No relief from the pain that he feels. The language that he uses, it's as if his very bones are being charred by fire.

It's as if he's on a barbecue and he's being cooked alive. That's how much pain he's in. In verse 4, my heart is blighted. Or if you have an ESV, it says my heart is struck down.

He feels that he's been hit by a truck. You know those times when you're so heartbroken that you can't bring yourself to do anything? Those times where just getting out of bed is too overwhelming? [5 : 00] His heart is withered like grass. Walk through parks in Edinburgh this afternoon and you'll see marks where people have used disposable barbecues.

The grass is brown. It is dried up. It is dead and it is withered. That is how the psalmist feels. Worn out.

Dried up. And chewed up by his pain. In so much distress that he says at the end of verse 4, I even forget to eat. You've probably had times like that, haven't you?

Where the last thing on your mind is food. Life circumstances are all consuming that all of your energy and time is taken up with it. Food tastes like dust.

You have no appetite. That is what this psalmist is going through. And it's been going on for a long time because in verse 5 he says, I am reduced to skin and bones.

[6 : 06] He is nothing but a shadow of his former self. His skin clings to his bones. He's almost a lifeless skeleton because of this pain. In verses 6 and 7 he uses birds as an illustration of how alone he feels.

Like a desert owl that only comes out at night. Surrounded by the nothingness of a wasteland. Flying through the air in an empty place. No companions.

No companions. No contact with others. He feels isolated and alone. He lies awake and he watches and he mourns because there is nothing to comfort him.

And to top it all off, verses 8 and 9, his enemies taunt him all day long and use his name as a curse word. You can imagine, can't you, that the psalmist feels like a defenseless little animal surrounded by a pack of hungry wolves.

With every second they seem to get closer and closer. With every growl, with every bite, they are inflicting more pain. Torment rules this man's life.

[7 : 24] All of this makes him mourn and lament in verse 9. In the Old Testament times, a person would mourn by putting ash on their head and tearing their clothes.

And that is what he does in verse 9. Because of his pain, he says, I eat ashes as my food and mingle my drink with tears. There is no respite for this man.

There is no rest, no comfort, just pain, pain and more pain. And so what does he do in this time of distress and pain? Well, verses 1 and 2, he cries out to God.

And you can hear his desperation, can't you? He's pleading that God would hear and listen to his prayer. These are the cries of a broken man.

A person who has come to the end of himself. And he says in verse 1, Lord, hear my prayer, please. Verse 2, turn your ear to me, answer quickly.

[8 : 32] Where do you run in your times of distress and pain? Our human tendency is to rely on our own strength. To exhaust our own means or to try to fix things on our own.

Maybe that's because we've been told that we need to be independent and manage things by ourselves. But the reality is that that will lead to frustration and disappointment.

When we focus on our pain and we moan about it, we're speaking to ourselves. We're speaking to people who ultimately can't do anything about it.

What we should be doing is turning to God in prayer because he is the only one who can fix our problems. Nothing is too big or unfixable for God.

When we turn to him, he is the only one who can make a difference. But do you see how this psalmist pain and distress is magnified because of what it says at the end of verse 2?

[9 : 36] Do not hide your face from me. He feels that God has turned away and abandoned him.

Have you ever been in pain, either physical or emotional, and all you want to do is spend time with someone?

You call your mom, but there's no answer. You call your dad, but there's no answer. You call your brother and your sister, but there is no answer. With every single phone call, your distress becomes more and more.

All you want is someone to spend time with, someone to talk to, someone to comfort you, but no one is around. It feels as if every single ear that you know has been turned away.

That is how the psalmist feels. That is his pain. But he knows something about his pain. Look at verses 10 to 11 with me. And we see why the psalmist is in agony.

Because of your great wrath. For you have taken me and thrown me aside. My days are like the evening shadow. I wither away like grass.

[10:51] The pain that the psalmist feels is a result of God's wrath. As we go through the psalm, we see that God's wrath is not just against him, the writer of this psalm, but it is against the whole nation of Israel because of their sins and wrongdoing against God.

Now we don't know which particular part of Israel's history the psalm was written in, and I don't think that we should guess or speculate. If it was important, the psalmist would have told us. But the point is that suffering that he is enduring is a result of sin. And it is a result of rebellion against God.

The nation's defiance of God's law led to God judging them and bringing them into times of pain and turmoil. Now maybe you're sitting there thinking, why on earth would I follow a God who is so severe with people who disobey him?

That's a good question to ask. But the truth is that we all deserve this judgment. Each and every one of us here this morning is a sinful, broken human being who has rebelled against and rejected God.

[12:14] We all fall short of his perfect standard, therefore we are all deserving of this wrath that we read about. Somebody needs to take that punishment.

But do you know what? Somebody has. There is a man who willingly stood up to take God's wrath for everyone.

For all those who would follow him, there is one who went through this very pain and agony in our place and his name is Jesus Christ. The psalmist is crying out in pain for God to listen to him. And in the Garden of Gethsemane, we see Jesus calling out to God in emotional agony as he sees the cross just hours away.

The moment where he would bear God's wrath. The very wrath that the psalmist is lamenting about. Jesus took that for those who follow him.

[13:16] The psalmist is begging God to listen to him. God, hear my cry. And Jesus calls out to God and asks, if it be possible, take this cup, take this wrath from me.

The psalmist is in pain because of the rebellion against God. And as Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane, in so much pain that his soul is sorrowful to the point of death.

Why? Because in just a few hours, he would become subject to the very wrath of God against the sins of the world. So the truth is that we all deserve this kind of pain.

This kind of judgment. But the wonderful news is that Jesus took it in our place. That is what we'll be celebrating later on in our service when we come to communion.

That Jesus bore God's wrath, meaning that those who have put their trust in him don't have to. Jesus paid it all.

[14:23] All to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain and he washed it. white as snow. So if this is the case, if Jesus took that punishment, why on earth are we still suffering?

The suffering and pain that we feel in this world today are the effects and consequences of sin.

We still live in a fallen, broken, sin-stained world and we will feel the pain of that. But I want you to know that God does not give people cancer because they're a sinful person.

cancer is a disease that is a result of us living in a broken world with broken bodies. We will feel the effects of sin.

We will suffer the consequences of our sinful desires and actions. And during those times, we may think that God has abandoned us. We may think that we are all alone, but the reality is that God is right there with us in the middle of our pain and suffering.

[15:34] So that is the pain that the psalmist feel. He feels. But what is it that gives him perspective? Well, it's the God that he knows. In verses 12 to 28, the God I know.

So you can see the turning point in the psalm in verse 12, can't you? Despite his pain, he says, but you, Lord, sit enthroned forever.

Despite how his circumstances might make him feel, the truth is that God is in control and no amount of suffering will change that. I read a poem this week by Elizabeth Elliot and it made me think of this psalm.

Elizabeth's husband, Jim Elliot, was trying to reach a tribe in Ecuador with the good news of Jesus. And when his plane landed, the tribe that he was trying to reach came out and killed everyone on board.

Elizabeth later met the very people who were responsible for the death of her husband. She knew pain. But she too found her comfort in God.

[16:44] Here are just a few lines from that poem. My father's way may twist and turn, my heart may throb and ache, but in my soul I'm glad to know he maketh no mistake.

Though night be dark and it may seem that day will never break, I'll pin my faith, my all in him, he maketh no mistake. Her understanding of who God was, who God is, gave her perspective in her pain and helped her through it.

That is what the psalmist is telling us here in Psalm 102. The truth that God is in control comforts him because he knows that God is faithful and that God has promised time and time again that a day would come when Israel will be restored.

That's why, even in his pain, he can say with absolute confidence 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. So God is the one who has brought this time of affliction on them. But God does not leave his people in pain.

[18:07] It might seem that God has turned away and that makes the whole nation reflect on their sin and their lives. But there is always light at the end of the tunnel because God promised them a future.

A time when God's people will dwell in God's place under God's rule. The character of God gives the psalmist perspective because he knows that there is an appointed time where God will show favor.

Are you here this morning? And as you look out at the global church, you can't help but mourn. Things are not as they should be.

The church is not united. Faithful teaching seems to be on the decline in certain areas. Obedience to God's word is no longer a given.

The church might seem weak and hurting. The truth is that God is faithful. God's people have always had their enemies.

[19:15] Israel had the Babylonians and more. In Jesus' time, it was Rome. Since then, the church has faced massive persecution and attacks on all fronts.

But the wonderful truth that keeps us going, the wonderful truth that should give us confidence and perspective as we struggle on for God is that Jesus Christ is building his church and the very gates of hell will not prevail against it.

God is on his throne. God is on his throne. Nothing will overcome him. And on that day when God restores the nation of Israel, verse 15, it will lead to all the nations praising God.

They will fear the Lord and revere his glory. If the world gets but a glimpse, a tiny glimpse of God's power, of God's glory, of his goodness and his faithfulness, they will be able to do nothing else than praise his name for the rest of their days.

And this is all written so that we can sit here and understand the wonderful news of the faithful God who is sovereignly controlling this world and we can praise him.

[20:36] Verse 18 says, Let this be written for a future generation that a people not yet created may praise the Lord. That is us this morning as God's church here in Edinburgh.

This is written so that Bruntsfield Evangelical Church may praise the Lord. But our praise and our rejoicing in God is even greater than that of the psalmist because of verses 19 and 20.

He says, The Lord looked down from his sanctuary on high. From heaven he viewed the earth. Why? To hear the groans of the prisoners and to release those condemned to death.

God didn't look down from his sanctuary on high to see the fame or creativity or creativity of mankind. God looks down to hear the groans of prisoners.

God cares and listens to those who are tied up but he does more than just listen. He releases those condemned to death. The Bible says that all people who are living in rebellion against God are on a path that leads to death and punishment.

[22:00] Every single human being born into this world is at odds with God. But God looks. God listens. And God looses the chains that bind our sinful hearts.

And that is what we see in Jesus. God in the flesh stooped down from his place of glory and honor in heaven in the presence of God and stepped into our sin-stained broken corrupt world.

He lived the perfect life died the death that we deserve. Why? So that we can be free to serve him. Free from the chains of sin that shackle our hearts and free from the sentence of hell.

As Christians we are no longer dead in our sins but we have been made alive through Christ. We've been taken from the deepest dungeons of judgment and been given a seat in the palace of the king. We are now called children of God. Therefore as Christians we have all the more reason to rejoice than the psalmist because this very promise has been fulfilled in Jesus.

[23 : 19] that is the perspective that will carry you through every trial and hardship. That is the truth that will keep you anchored in every storm.

Jesus is the only one who can break the chains of sin that bind you and he sets you free. He is the only one who can reconcile us to God.

God. Now if you're here this morning and you are not a Christian would you listen to that wonderful news? That God has made it possible through Jesus Christ for you to go from being dead to have real life.

Would you listen to Jesus and put your trust in him? Because without Jesus you are still a prisoner to your sin. And on the day that the Lord comes and judges the world nothing will save you from God's wrath but the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross for the world.

Will you repent and put your trust in Jesus? And in verse 23 it seems that the psalmist almost comes back down to earth.

[24 : 38] He comes back to his pain and the situation in the nation of Israel. And he remembers that all of this is God's doing. And so he prays in verses 24 to 28.

And in this prayer he focuses on some of the attributes of God that give him perspective in his pain because he knows that God is with him. Verse 24 He is a God whose years go beyond all generations.

Creation is just one demonstration of how powerful and in control God is. God speaks light into being. He created the land that we live on, the sun that gives us warmth, the moon and stars which light up the sky at night.

They are God's handiwork. We haven't even begun to fully understand or explore the fullness of this earth. But what does it say in verse 25?

God laid his very foundations. That is how powerful he is. Verse 26 He is everlasting.

[25 : 47] There is no end to his days. No end to his reign. And verse 27 He remains the same. Think about that one for a second.

Why do these truths of the character of God bring the psalmist perspective in his pain? How can these truths give us perspective as we suffer today?

Well they give us perspective because we know that regardless of what situation we are going through, regardless of what life may throw at us, our situations do not determine God's love and favour for his people.

Even when we suffer we can know that God is unchanging. Our suffering does not change God. He is compassionate and loving.

He is in control and he is faithful. These attributes of God should give us perspective in pain because this is the wonderful God that we know and serve.

[26 : 54] This is the God who is standing right with you in your pain and suffering. God is faithful and he has promised and what he has promised he will bring to pass.

Therefore we live, we camp in the promise of verse 28. The children of your servant will live in your presence, their descendants will be established before you.

Now I know that some of us are here this morning are in pain. I know that there are times in our lives where we may feel that God has abandoned us.

But friends, the truth is that God has not walked away. God has not left us to fight any storm by ourselves. When the difficulties and pain of life come crushing down on us, God is right there with us in the midst of our pain and suffering.

base your life on the wonderful truth of verse 28. That there is a day when all of this pain and suffering that we feel now will be gone.

[28 : 04] There will be a day where pain will be but a distant memory. Tears will be no more. Peace will reign in the land as God dwells with his people forever.

A day where the effects of sin has have been stopped and we are with God. That is the future that I long for. That is the future that awaits you this morning as a follower of Jesus Christ.

That is how we have perspective in our pain. We remember the God that we know. The God who has revealed himself to us in his word, the Bible.

The God who listens and loves his people and the God who has promised to be with us in our pain until the very end. God has not left you.

God is faithful. He never changes and his promises to always be with you and always be with those who love and obey him.

[29 : 11] God is in your times of pain in this world. Be comforted by the wonderful truths of the amazing God that you know. That is the only way we can endure because we have the living God by our side.

Let's pray together. Just in a moment of silence, maybe you want to bring your prayers before the Lord. Bring your prayers of adoration and confession that you need his strength and his help. Before the throne of God above, I have a strong, a perfect plea, a great high priest whose name is love, who ever lives and pleads for me.

Jesus, we thank you that we do not have to suffer God's wrath because you bore that wrath on the cross. We thank you that even though we may suffer in this world, that we can know that you are right there with us.

God, we thank you for who you are. Holy Spirit, we thank you that you dwell within believers and you remind us of the wonderful promises of who God is. God is. God, forgive us for the times where we forget to focus on you.

[30 : 45] And we ask that you would lift our eyes to the glorious truth and let us be in awe of the wonder of the cross and the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ in whose holy and precious name we pray.

Amen.