

Vulnerable but Secure

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[0 : 00] And now we come to our Bible reading, which is Psalm 102, which you will find on page 501. Psalm 102 on page 501.

A prayer of one afflicted when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the Lord.
Hear my prayer, O Lord. Let my cry come to you. Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress. Yes. Incline your ear to me. Answer me speedily in the day when I call.
For my days pass away like smoke and my bones burn like a furnace. My heart is struck down like grass and has withered. I forget to eat my bread because of my loud groaning.
My bones cling to my flesh. I am like a desert owl of the wilderness, like an owl of the waste places. I lie awake. I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop.

[1 : 14] All day, all the day, my enemies taunt me. Those who deride me use my name for a curse. For I eat ashes like bread and mingle tears with my drink.

Because of your indignation and anger, for you have taken me up and thrown me down. My days are like an evening shadow. I wither away like grass.

But you, O Lord, are enthroned forever. You are remembered throughout all generations. You will arise and have pity on Zion.

It is the time to favor her. The appointed time has come. For your servants hold her stones dear and have pity on her dust. Nations will fear the name of the Lord.

And all the kings of the earth will fear your glory. For the Lord builds up Zion. He appears in his glory. He regards the prayer of the destitute.

[2 : 15] He does not despise their prayer. Let this be recorded for a generation to come. So that a people get to be created may praise the Lord.

That he looked down from his holy height. From heaven the Lord looked at the earth. To hear the groans of the prisoners. To set free those who were doomed to die.

That they may declare in Zion the name of the Lord. And in Jerusalem his praise. When peoples gather together and kingdoms to worship the Lord.

He has broken my strength in mid-course. He has shortened my days. Oh my God I say take me not away. In the midst of my days.

You whose years endure throughout all generations. Of old you laid the foundation of the earth. And the heavens are the work of your hands.

[3 : 10] 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.

But you are the same. And your years have no end. The children of your servant shall dwell secure. Their offspring shall be established before you.

This is the word of the Lord. And may he bless it to our hearts. I wonder please if you would turn back to page 501 and to Psalm 102.

And let's pray for a moment and ask the Lord's help. Lord we pray. That the power of your word will come into the weakness of our hearts.

That its challenge will come into our complacency. That its comfort will come into our vulnerability. That above all. You will lead us through the written word.

[4 : 13] Through the living word. The Lord Christ. In whose name we pray. Amen. Amen. Quite some time ago I had a long car journey to make.

And on the way there I listened to a famous preacher. And on the way back I listened to another famous preacher. I'm not going to tell you who the names of these people were.

And don't ask me afterwards. Because I'm not going to tell you then either. On the way this preacher was talking about rejoicing in God. Delighting in God. How wonderful I think it was to be a

child of God.

I reached my destination feeling utterly crushed and miserable. I felt I'm hardly a Christian at all. If this is what it means to be a Christian.

On the way back I heard another well-known preacher. He was preaching on one of the lament psalms. Psalm 88 in fact. The deepest and darkest and bleakest of all these psalms.

[5 : 31] And I reached home feeling amazingly encouraged. Why? Because these psalms like this one have not been edited out of the Bible.

If you're feeling like this psalmist. If you've ever felt like this psalmist. Or if you feel like him in the future. Then know that God still has something for you. Because these are in scripture.

And they're in scripture to teach us. Carol Truman who teaches in Philadelphia Theological Seminary. And who also pastors of church. Wrote an interesting article called What Do Miserable Christians Sing?

And he was advocating of course the singing of such psalms. Because as Christians we're rather good at rejoicing together. We're not so good at lamenting and mourning.

Indeed as Truman also says in that same essay. If you look at many Christian hymns. You'll come to the conclusion that the bride of Christ. Spends a great deal of time admiring herself in the mirror.

[6 : 34] Now this psalmist is not admiring himself in the mirror. This psalmist is in the depths. Now this sermon this evening is not part of a series.

It's a one-off if you like. Although in some ways it's a footnote to the Jeremiah series that we finished some weeks ago. Raises the same kind of issues. Graffles with the same kind of problems. There's the same sense of circumstances pressing down. There's the same sense of the faithful God being distant and absent. And yet determined to hang on to that God.

The early part actually verses 1 to 11 are very close to another prayer. The prayer that King Hezekiah prayed in Isaiah 38.

When King Hezekiah was struck with a deadly illness from which the Lord raised him up. But which he thought would bring him to his death. He prays in words very very like this.

[7 : 37] Now we don't know who the author of this psalm is. Or whether he knew Hezekiah's prayer. Or indeed if Hezekiah knew this psalm. But the important thing is this. This is a general psalm.

All of us can make the words our own. All of us in times of distress. In times of depression. In times of danger. Can take these words and make them our own.

Now the other introductory point I want to make is this. Look at the heading. Pours out his complaint before the Lord. Complaint is an unfortunate translation.

Complaint suggests whinging and moaning. Complaint suggests something like what's criticized in Psalm 95. For example. The evil and unbelieving heart.

And the people of God said we're much better back in Egypt. We've been sold short. What God says isn't true. That is whinging. That's complaint.

[8 : 34] That's unbelief. Lament is not that kind of thing. Lament is ruthless honesty. And the point about lament.

It's not about God. It's addressed to God. The psalmist as he utters these words. Is addressing God himself.

He's not going in complaining to other people about God. He's saying Lord. Give me an answer. Why is it like this? You promised. And it doesn't appear to be working out.

And notice how verse 3. It's bracketed by my days pass away like smoke. And then verse 27. You are the same. And your years have no end.

So the book ends of the psalm. Bracketed by the dynamic between human weakness and God's strength. Hence my title. Vulnerable but secure.

[9 : 31] That seems to me what this psalm is about. We are vulnerable but we are also secure. And the poem, the psalm develops really in three stanzas. In three movements.

First of all, verses 1 to 11. There is a prayer of vulnerability. A prayer of helplessness. Full of powerful and haunting imagery.

Verses 1 and 2. There is a sense of urgency. Let my cry come to you. Do not hide your face. Answer me quickly. Answer me speedily. In the day when I call.

This is the prayer of someone very near the end of their tether. Somebody who has had almost too much and just cannot go on. Have you ever felt like this? And here is a psalm for you.

Don't go trying to rejoice. Don't go trying to pretend. Take the words of these psalms. This psalm and other psalms. And make them your own.

[10:29] This is somebody experiencing the opposite of what Isaiah 65, 24 says. Before they call, I will answer. While they are still speaking, I will hear.

That's true, of course. And many of us, perhaps all of us, will have experienced that as well. But this psalmist isn't. And yet, like Jacob, wrestling with the stranger in the ravine, he will not let God go. I'm not going to let you go, God. I'm going to hold on to you. I'm going to keep at it until you answer. And it's a time of illness and distress.

Fever here, I suppose. Verses 4 and 5. My heart is struck down like grass. I forget to eat. How loud groaning my bones cling to my flesh. The sense that life has become gray and stale.

And above all, there are two notes. One is of isolation. Verses 6 and 7. And I'm like a desert owl, like an owl in the waste places, like a lonely sparrow.

[11:34] Kind of feeling you can have surrounded by people. Sense of isolation. Sense that nobody cares. Have you ever sat in a prayer meeting and thought, Nobody's really caring about me.

Because this so often happens. We have these concerns. We have these anxieties. Now, some people are better at sharing these than others.

That's not the point. We're all going to feel times when the Lord is not caring for us. Wonderful illustration of this in Mark chapter 6.

Where Jairus, the synagogue ruler, goes to Jesus with the panicky message, Lord, my little daughter is dangerously ill. Instead of rushing to help, Jesus stops to heal a woman who had been 12 years ill.

Now, you might have thought, well, she'd been 12 years ill. Why can't you wait another few moments so that Jairus' daughter can be helped? Of course, we know the rest of that story.

[12:37] We know that Jairus' daughter died. And when Jesus came, he didn't come to heal the sick. He came to raise the dead. But at the time, it must have been agonizing.

It must have been terrifying for Jairus. So, the sense of isolation. And also the sense of time slipping away. Verse 3. The verse I mentioned, my days pass away like smoke.

My bones burn like a furnace. Verse 11. Again, my days are like an evening shadow. I wither away like grass. Life's lost its meaning.

Life's passing me by, says the psalmist. Wouldn't it be great if we could say to the psalmist, come to the Lord. Everything will be wonderful. Problem is, this psalmist has already come to the Lord.

He's a servant of the Lord, a believer. And this is what he's experiencing. This is a man who loves the Lord. And he's still experiencing this. That is why, ultimately, this is encouraging, I think.

[13:35] Recognize, also, this is part of the life of faith. We came across it often in Jeremiah, didn't we, as we went through that book.

Runs through the book of Job. Runs through the other lament psalms. And in 2 Corinthians, Paul talks about the thorn in the flesh. More, he says, I called on God repeatedly to take it away.

And he didn't. Being a believer is no immunity badge against trials and troubles. Indeed, it may even increase them. And we can easily feel God is angry with us.

Verse 10, because of your indignation and anger, you have taken me up and thrown me down. See, God, the Spirit has preserved these for us. God doesn't say, you've no right to talk to me like that.

That's a dreadful way to talk. You ought to be singing and rejoicing. He doesn't. It's kept in the Bible so that others going through this experience can find help. There is no bogus piety.

[14:38] Tell God if you feel like this. Don't pretend to him. The wonderful thing about taking it to the Lord in prayer is we don't need to pretend. Some of you may have read that powerful, unbearably sad little book, *A Grief Observed*, which C.S. Lewis wrote when his wife died.

Very short book, but in that book he talks at the beginning about the strange experience of when we are happy, indeed so happy that we feel we can almost do without God.

His presence is there supporting us, making us, lifting us up, and so on. And yet, when we go to him in absolute pain and grief, where is he?

He compares it to going to a house, a house once full of light and life and laughter. You go to the house. The lights are out. You hear the sound of bolts slamming.

There's an icy silence. That is how the life of faith is often experienced. The prayer of vulnerability. And there are many of these in Scripture.

[15 : 47] Indeed, after all, when you think of it, prayer is, all prayer is vulnerability. If we weren't vulnerable, we wouldn't pray. And if we are vulnerable, we need to pray.

Now, the second stanza, the verses 12 to 22, is praise of the covenant Lord. Now, the honesty of the psalmist, if you like, has cleared the air.

There's no pretense. It's always as if he said, Lord, this is exactly how I feel. There's no immediate answer. But, of course, the phrase, but you, O Lord.

This word, but, is so important in theology. But God, who is rich in mercy and other such phrases. Preacher of a past generation, like Lloyd-Jones, who spend whole sermons on the phrase, but God. But it's hugely important. And yet, it's both helpful and frustrating, isn't it? It's very helpful. It's also frustrating. It's not at all obvious at this moment why God's eternity helps the psalmist.

[16 : 55] It's almost as if the psalmist might well be saying, well, Lord, you're eternal. Why can't you spare a moment to look down and help me in my limited time? I don't have long.

Job says that at one point as well in chapter 7. He said, Lord, you know I've only a short time. Why don't you help me? Before it's too late.

Excuse me. And yet, ultimately, God's eternity is the only answer to fleeting time. Generations come and go. People and events are forgotten.

There's the melancholy sense that nothing matters. Time like a never-rolling stream. Where's all its sons away? They die forgotten as a dream. Dies at the opening day.

And if you go back to a place you've been at once before and talk about people who were prominent then, no one's ever heard of them. That's what the book of Ecclesiastes says, isn't it?

[17 : 53] The king died. The youth came along. Everyone followed the youth. It wasn't long before he was forgotten as well. And so it goes on. So, ultimately, the only answer to our vulnerability, our fleetingness, is God's eternity.

Because there is nothing we can do to build something that will last. Now, that's crystallized in the image here of Zion as the answer to insecurity.

You will arise, verse 13, and have pity on Zion. Now, Zion, of course, is the literal city, the literal Jerusalem, often destroyed.

And we saw in Jeremiah the tragedy of the exile when the city was raised to the ground. And everything, everything that could be burned, burned, and everything that couldn't taken away to Babylon.

But it's also Mount Zion, the city of the living God, which cannot be destroyed. No earthly Zion can ever be altered.

[18 : 56] Notice, verse 16, the Lord builds up Zion. It is the Lord who builds up, not just his people on earth, but the Lord who is building Zion.

The letter of the Hebrews says, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, and to all the people of all the ages. The ages past, the ages present, and the ages yet to come, to the angels, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.

You see, even, and this is why in verse 18, let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that people yet to be created may praise the Lord. This, in the immediate context, refers to the writing down of this psalm, presumably.

Let this psalm be written, so that people not yet born will read it, and will find help in it. And also, now, a wider sense to the whole of Scripture.

God's answer, and the fact that God answers, shows that he cares. Verse 19, he looked down from his holy height, from heaven. The Lord looked at the earth to care for the prisoners, those who were doomed to die.

[20 : 08] You see, the psalmist now, thinking about God, thinking about Zion, it doesn't mean that his own situation has got better. It doesn't mean he can just wish it away.

But that, nevertheless, thinking about that, allows him to see that situation in a wider perspective. The perspective of the Lord, who hears the groans of the prisoners, who frees those doomed to die. In verse 21, that they may declare in Zion the name of the Lord, and in Jerusalem his praise, when peoples gather together, and kingdoms to worship the Lord.

As so often in the Old Testament, behind this is the great Exodus story, when the Lord looked down, rescued the prisoners, brought them out of Egypt, and took them to the promised land.

And this is the model for all God's saving grace and actions. And in verse 22, the gathering of all God's people in Zion.

[21 : 09] See how the psalmist is holding on to these great certainties. The old hymn says, Standing on the promises which cannot fail, when the howling storms of doubt and fear assail.

I've often said this before, I'm sure. The old resurrection gospel hymn, You ask me how I know he lives. He lives within my heart. No, that's not good enough. That's fine when my heart is rejoicing. When my heart is grieving, wintry, and in pain, I need to know that he lives and reigns in heaven and earth. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

Not my feelings about that. My feelings about these things and your feelings will come and go. It's a great reality that he lives and reigns and he is building up Zion. That brings us to the third stanza, verses 23 to 28.

Now, you'll notice first, there is still a sense of weakness. Verse 23 and 24, He has broken my strength in mid-course.

[22 : 14] Now, it would be great, wouldn't it, if he'd just gone on from, say, verse 21, The peoples gather together in kingdoms to worship the Lord. Now I'm feeling great, so I can sing happy songs.

That's not what happens. The singing joyful Psalms does not take away the situation of verses 1 to 11. That's why I'm reminded of this in verses 23 and 24.

And that is why he appeals to the God of eternity to remember this child of time. Of old you laid the foundations of the earth, the heavens are the work of your hands.

They will perish, but you remain. Now, it's very interesting. The letter to the Hebrews in chapter 1 quotes these very words and applies them to the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Because after all, he is the one who suffered as this Samus did, suffered loneliness, suffered isolation, suffered his life being cut off in the middle of his days, suffered hatred, suffered hardship, and spoke the ultimate lament, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[23 : 27] So you can see where this Samus is going. This Samus is impelling us, as the whole of Scripture does, towards Christ, towards the cross, towards the resurrection.

But, does he really care? The majestic words of 25 and 26. They will perish, but you will remain. They will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe. They will all pass away. But you are the same, and your years have no end. You see, these are magnificent words, but they can raise another problem, can't they?

If he is as eternal and great as that, how can a God like that care for a tiny planet circling a minor star in a remote galaxy on the edge of the Milky Way?

How much less can he care for you and me? What does it matter to that God whether I'm in the pits or not? What does it matter to that God whether I'm ill and depressed? What does it matter to that God whether I've got a job or not?

[24 : 28] What does it matter to him whether I, you know, the way my life is going? Surely, surely, he is too great to care. But the Samus, Isaiah does this as well in chapter 40.

The Samus says, when we think of the majesty and greatness of God, we can draw the wrong conclusion that he is too great to care. The right conclusion is that he is too great to fail.

He is too great to let us down. He has shown in Christ his total commitment to Zion, his total commitment to his people. And notice that that is a commitment that is greater even than to the physical universe.

The children of your servants shall dwell secure. Their offspring shall be established before you. See, this is the conclusion to which the Sam is working.

Look up at the remote galaxies, far more than the Samus would know about these amazing, amazing island universes revealed by the radio telescopes.

[25 : 38] And then look down at your own little life and read these words, the children of your servants shall dwell secure. There is present help, in other words.

There is help now. But it's not just help now. There's help for future generations. Their offspring shall be established before you. In this world, partially, but in the world to come when all God's people are gathered in design.

So you see how this Sam is such a powerful and such a relevant one for us. We are vulnerable. We are, as a 20th century poet says, I a stranger and afraid in a world I never made.

That's what we often feel. Made the wheeling galaxies, made the great march of history. Where on earth is there a place for ordinary people? Well, here it is.

That God who is so great, that God who revealed himself in Jesus. And just as we finish, let me refer to the letter to the Hebrews again.

[26 : 45] Remember that great verse in Hebrews 13, Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today and forever. I'll say that's a very, very beautiful the way that's phrased.

It's not Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Because tomorrow soon passes and becomes yesterday. Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

That is the living Lord. That is the Lord who made heaven and earth. That is the one who came down to earth and remembering in a moment as we were around his table to die for us, demonstrating beyond all doubt that he does care that one day that care will be fully seen by all his people.

Amen. Let's pray. They will perish, but you remain.

But the children of your servant shall dwell secure. Their offspring shall be established before you. God, how we wonder and marvel that you are so great and so marvelous a God beyond all our understanding.

[28 : 00] and yet you came right down into our human condition, took it upon yourselves and as a human being died for our sins, rose again for our justification, ascended to glory and will one day return again.

We pray, Lord, that as we think these thoughts that your spirit will take them and bless them to us. in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.