

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Speaker: Mr. David Pulman

Lessons from Bible birds: The Pelican, the owl and the sparrow - the comfort of God

Introduction

Good morning. Today we look at the fourth and last talk in the series "Lessons from Bible Birds". The three previous talks considered "The Raven", lessons in the grace of God, "The Eagle", lessons that highlight the strength of God, and "The Hen", a beautiful illustration of the protection of God. This morning we will consider from Psalm 102 "The Pelican, the Owl and the Sparrow", to draw our attention to the comfort of God.

Psalm 102 does not give its author in its title. Both Psalms 101 and 103 are stated to be psalms of David and many Bible scholars consider that this Psalm, sandwiched between them, is probably a Psalm of David. However, in general terms the content could easily apply to a period in the nation's history much later than the time of David, such as the captivity period of the Babylonian and Medo-Persian Empires. Psalm 102:13-16 seem to point to the latter view as they are used by the psalmist in giving expression to his desire for the recovery and restoration of Zion.

For ease of consideration we will divide the Psalm into the following sections:

- A Distressed Believer (Psalm 102:1-11)
- A Changed Perspective (Psalm 102:12-22)
- A Prophetic Digression (Psalm 102:23-27)
- Conclusion (Psalm 102:28).

The verses which connect to the title of our talk this morning are found in the first section. Psalm 102:25-27 are quoted in Hebrews 1:10-12 where they are applied to our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of this, Psalm 102 is known as a Messianic Psalm so we have more than one reason to study this interesting part of Scripture.

Spurgeon likened this Psalm to a typical weather forecast we would hear today when he said, "The whole composition of Psalm 102 may be compared to a day which, opening with wind and rain, clears up at noon and is warm with the sun, continuing fine with intervening showers and finally closes with a brilliant sunset".

A Distressed Believer (Psalm 102:1-11)

A desperate prayer

In the first section of this Psalm the writer is occupied with himself. He uses the personal pronoun more than 20 times. In the opening two verses we start with a desperate cry to Jehovah, "*Hear my prayer, O LORD, and let my cry come to You. Do not hide Your face from me in the day of my trouble; incline Your ear to me; in the day that I call, answer me speedily*" (Psalm 102:1-2) An intensely distressing situation has come upon the Psalmist. We are not told about the problem immediately, but the effect upon the writer is devastating.

A description of how the Psalmist is feeling

In Psalm 102:3-11 the Psalmist seeks to describe his situation and how he is feeling. He has taken to heart some dreadful issue which may well be not of his making. This to me is very similar to the distress that Nehemiah felt when his relatives came back and delivered the distressing news about the state of Jerusalem and the people who had returned there. The city was more or less in ruins and the people vulnerable to oppression from the unfriendly nations that surrounded them. Read Nehemiah 1, because there we see a godly man identifying with God's punishment upon His wayward people, even though Nehemiah was not personally responsible in that failure.

This is a message for all Christians today when we see failure all around and some times, sadly so, even in Christian fellowships. Are we praying for recovery? Are we seeking revival? Are we praying for those affected? Are we looking

for power in our Gospel preaching so that once again we see lives being changed from the inside-sins forgiven-to the outside-changed lives being lived for the glory of God?

Here in this Psalm it is the same kind of thing. Psalm 102:3-5, *“For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned like a hearth. My heart is stricken and withered like grass, so that I forget to eat my bread. Because of the sound of my groaning my bones cling to my skin.”* This is the inward distress that this godly man is feeling. There is no substance to his days, they are like smoke. His bones are aching, a restlessness in his life. There is no longer any love or affection in his heart; it is like dried withered grass. Finally there is the loss of appetite and presumably accompanying weight loss.

Next we have Psalm 102:6-7 which describe his loneliness, *“I am like a pelican of the wilderness; I am like an owl of the desert. I lie awake, and am like a sparrow alone on the housetop.”* It is from these verses we have the title for this morning’s talk.

The pelican is classed as an unclean creature and not to be eaten by the people (Leviticus 11:18). Apparently Dr Tristram in his book, *“Natural History of the Bible”* (ISBN: 9780543890030) describes the pelican as follows, *“The comparison of the Psalmist of himself to the pelican in the wilderness is suggested probably by the melancholy attitude of the bird ... it sits for hours or even days with its bill resting on its breast”*. The wilderness here is probably uninhabited land. The land is good for nothing, poor grazing and useless for growing crops. The pelican is a very vivid picture of melancholy and shows how the man feels, being both depressed and miserable.

The owl, like the pelican, is an unclean creature, not to be eaten by the people (Leviticus 11:17). The owl is naturally a solitary bird, flying alone seeking its prey. The desert suggests a place of ruin, desolation and destruction. Therefore, we have a picture of failure and defeat.

The third bird is the sparrow. A sparrow is gregarious and would normally be found in groups, either large or small. When they visit the bird feeding station in our garden during the winter, they take over the place! By force of numbers all the other birds are pushed away! But they are also easily frightened. So when the psalmist talks about being like a sparrow alone upon the housetop, he is speaking of what is out of character and unnatural for the bird. This would tend to indicate that the bird was either ill or it had lost its mate. If it is this latter situation, you would hear the sparrow calling but there would be no answering response.

Let us read Psalm 102:8-11, *“My enemies reproach me all day long, those who deride me swear an oath against me. For I have eaten ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping, because of Your indignation and Your wrath; for You have lifted me up and cast me away. My days are like a shadow that lengthens, and I wither away like grass.”*

Psalm 102:8 mentions enemies and so this man has no friends. It is very lonely being friendless and some times it can be very frightening. In Psalm 102:9 the writer depicts his situation like some one who is in mourning due to the sad issue that he is concerned about. Psalm 102:10 indicates that the psalmist believes it is a hopeless situation. It has God’s hand behind all the trouble and he feels it very acutely. His complaint is that at one point God had lifted him up, in other words he felt wanted by God, but now the opposite has occurred. No longer wanted and valued but cast away like an unwanted broken toy or piece of furniture. So the psalmist ends this section in Psalm 102:11 with the thought that this is the end, there is no hope. The psalmist is a very downcast man and, no doubt, in his present state of mind, considers the situation hopeless!

I am sure we can identify, or at least some of us can, with the above experiences of this psalmist. Have we been in one or more of these hopeless situations? Are we currently in a situation like this? Well, there is comfort at hand. There is the God of comfort. Until now, the psalmist is thinking that God is not hearing and that he has been abandoned. But this is not true. God always hears the cry of His people. Believers are not, and can never be, abandoned. This does not mean we will escape the difficulties that are connected with this life. We all have problems. We might seem to be alone and even unique in our difficulties. But God has seen it all before and we have a wonderful Saviour and Lord who identifies fully with all our sorrowful situations.

Before we go through the remainder of the psalm, I would just like to read two verses from 2 Corinthians 1, *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God”* (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). I will come back to this scripture a little later.

A Changed Perspective (Psalm 102:12-22)

A number of translations commence Psalm 102:12 with the word “But”. This is the turning point, the contrast with what has gone before (Psalm 102:1-11) and what is now coming in the remainder of the psalm. The psalmist was looking at self and circumstances but now he is looking up to the eternal God of power, strength and ability. There are

two things in Psalm 102:12, *“But You, O LORD, shall endure forever, and the remembrance of Your name to all generations.”* It is as if the psalmist has suddenly remembered the One to whom he prayed in Psalm 102:1-2 and poured out his heart's distress in Psalm 102:3-11. We can become so caught up in distressing situations that we forget the only One who can help. We may even neglect to read our Bibles and so fail to hear what God has to say to us. Now the psalmist brightens; he remembers the everlasting God and that in all generations His name is remembered.

Psalm 102:13 states, *“You will arise and have mercy on Zion; for the time to favour her, yes, the set time, has come.”* Full of confidence that God will now deal with the situation that is causing his anguish, *“You will arise...”* We now are given the reason for the writer's distress, it is Zion. Zion and Jerusalem are almost synonymous, although Zion is an area within the city of Jerusalem. Zion is often seen as the heart of the life of the nation Israel. There is confidence expressed for Zion's recovery. It is only the LORD who can bring comfort to the distressed people. Psalm 102:14 exclaims how the stones and dust of the city are valued by the people, *“For Your servants take pleasure in her stones, and show favour to her dust.”* Every thing about this city is precious. Do we long for the exaltation of the church to glory? Every believer in Christ is precious to Him!

Psalm 102:15-16 show expanding confidence: *“So the nations shall fear the name of the LORD, and all the kings of the earth Your glory. For the LORD shall build up Zion; He shall appear in His glory.”* This part of the psalm is yet to be fulfilled. It is still in the future. This is a promise from the LORD and it will be fulfilled. The return from captivity was not the full restoring of Israel to its former glory, the days of David and Solomon. It was a temporary recovery which lasted until the Romans destroyed the city in AD 70. Although today we see a Jerusalem once again under Jewish control, there is no realisation that their Messiah has come and returned to glory.

Notice the continuing confidence in Psalm 102:17-18: *“He shall regard the prayer of the destitute, and shall not despise their prayer. This will be written for the generation to come, that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD.”* Yes, our God and our Lord Jesus Christ regard the prayers of the saints today. Prayers are valued. Prayers are our heavenly communication link to all the resources in heaven. These things were written for a generation to come and they were true for succeeding generations of God's earthly people and just as true for every succeeding generation of Christians. It is not only prayers but praise. Always remember to be thankful!

As is often true in the psalms, we have the same truth reiterated in a slightly different way. It is reinforcing the truth that the LORD is interested in His people. He does not forget them. He hears and feels the distress that His people are experiencing. For the eventual intention is that the name of the LORD will be declared in Zion and His praise will resound throughout the city. This will take place when Christ establishes His millennial kingdom and every one will serve Him. Let us just read Psalm 102:19-22, *“For He looked down from the height of His sanctuary; from heaven the LORD viewed the earth, to hear the groaning of the prisoner, to release those appointed to death, to declare the name of the LORD in Zion, and His praise in Jerusalem, when the peoples are gathered together, and the kingdoms, to serve the LORD.”* This will be a glorious kingdom and the world will blossom like it was before sin came in by Adam and Eve's failure.

A Prophetic Digression (Psalm 102:23-27)

As we consider these closing verses, many Bible scholars consider that the psalmist is returning to the earlier verses of the psalm and beginning to feel depressed again. This may well be the immediate application of Psalm 102:23-24: *“He weakened my strength in the way; He shortened my days. I said, ‘O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days; Your years are throughout all generations.’”* We can see his comparison as someone who felt his frailty and understood about God's eternal existence. However, we also see a reference to our Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of Man facing the final hours before the cross.

Christ prayed in the garden saying, *“O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will”* (Matthew 26:39, 42, 44) At the age of about 33 as a man in this world with the cross and death in a few hours time, his life is to be cut short. The prophet Daniel in 9:26 speaks in this way: *“Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself.”* The life of Jesus Christ was cut short by way of the cross, a sacrifice for sin, as it is stated in Hebrews 9:26, *“Now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.”*

There were two parties that needed the sacrifice of Christ.

1. God's holiness required a suitable sacrifice to deal with sin in its entirety.
2. There needed to be a means of blessing repentant sinners so that they might achieve an eternal forgiveness.

Psalm 102:25-27 state, *“Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will endure; yes, they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will change them, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will have no end.”* Prophetically this is God's response

to the Lord's words in Psalm 102:23-24. These words from the psalm have a fuller meaning when we compare them to Hebrews 1:8-13. In this scripture, we see their application to our Lord Jesus Christ, "*To the Son He says: 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of Your Kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions.'* And: '*You, LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You remain; and they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will fold them up, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not fail.'* But to which of the angels has He ever said: '*Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool?*'" I commend your meditation on these verses in the psalm and Hebrews to see the prophecy being clearly centred on the Son of God.

As we draw to a close on this psalm, we need to remind ourselves of the title of our radio talk, "Pelican, owl and sparrow - the comfort of God". We have seen the distress of the psalmist especially in the early verses of the psalm, which was illustrated for us by the pelican, owl and sparrow. We have noticed how his spirit has been raised as he looks up and contemplates the greatness of the LORD. The psalmist sees that the LORD had not forgotten His people or the devastation of the beloved city of Zion. Promises are made and they will be fulfilled in God's time. I trust that we have also seen something of the greatness of God, His promises and that their fulfilment is bound up with our Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion (Psalm 102:28)

Psalm 102:28 is a wonderful conclusion to this Psalm. Let us read this verse, "*The children of Your servants will continue, and their descendants will be established before You.*" The godly repentant sinner can say, whether in Old or New Testament times, "*The children of Your servants will continue.*" We continue because we have such a great and compassionate God who has blessed us beyond our comprehension. Serving is one way in which we can express our thankfulness. Descendants from Israel's perspective would be the nation. From the Christian perspective, it is every succeeding generation of new believers.

Finally, as with all distressing situations, let us come back to 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, mentioned earlier. These verses teach so much. We are brought into a new relationship, that of knowing God as Father. Then we are reminded of our Lord Jesus Christ who is both our Saviour, who gave Himself upon the cross, and He is our Lord. We find that our Father is the Father of mercies and the God of **all** comfort. There is no issue that is outside the comfort of God because comfort comes in **all** our tribulations. Additionally, as we experience God's comfort, it prepares us to be a servant, used by God, to comfort others. This gives a very positive dimension to any troubling situation we might experience.

Finally, a thought on the sparrow as mentioned in Luke 12:6-7: "*Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten before God. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of **more** value than many sparrows.*" These verses bring together the sparrow and the comfort of God. Let us ever remember that we "*are of more value than many sparrows*" to the heart of God and to Christ!

The Lord bless you today and thank you for listening.

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