

Psalm 102: Honest Prayer Leads to Eternal Hope

How is *Lent with Jesus* proceeding for you? What are the *penitential psalms* contributing to your experience of self-examination, prayer, and repentance? Let's ask our Triune God to use these remaining Lenten days to awaken us to His presence, to his praying with and in us in Jesus the Christ, as we face truth in ourselves, the world as it is, and the world that "ever shall be."

Looking at the medieval *ladder of repentance formed by the seven penitential psalms*, we follow the steps of our early church fathers and mothers in their desire to teach the power and process of repentance in each Christ-follower's life. They saw a way for the *seven penitential psalms* to chart that path. Here's the ladder again, starting from the bottom step, step one:

Step 7. Prayer Against the Final Judgment, *Psalm 143:2*

Step 6. The Distrust of Self, *Psalm 130:6*

Step 5. Longing for the Heavenly Jerusalem, *Psalm 102:16*

Step 4. Love of a Cleansed Soul, *Psalm 51:7-8*

Step 3. Hope for Pardon, *Psalm 38:15*

Step 2. Sorrow for Sin, *Psalm 32:5*

Step 1. Fear of Punishment, *Psalm 6:1*

This ancient ladder highlights and centers on *love*, the changed, renewed "core" (heart, soul, life) of a broken and repentant person of faith in Israel's God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus the Christ.

Psalm 102, *Step 5* on the *ladder of repentance*, shows us the continuing struggle of a faithful, humble Israelite who is in long-term anguish, distress and affliction, yet finds hope in "the LORD who will rebuild Zion...and appear in his glory." (**102:16**)

Read **Psalm 102** aloud. It's a prayer of *lament* that models urgent, honest praying and also a prayed *hymn* that contrasts human brevity with divine eternity that God longs to share with us his people.

1. In **102:1-2** we hear this devout person crying out to God, pleading for God to listen very closely to his urgent prayer.

The superscription is unusual because it scans nicely as a line of poetry and may have been written as the first line of the poem and not added later by an editor. (Alter, *Book of Psalms*, 353)

What do you notice about this person, his relationship to God, and his relationship to time?

Scan through the psalm and mark “day” and “days,” the recurring theme of “transience” in this psalm.

2. 102:3-11 show that the psalmist’s urgent prayer to YHWH (LORD) comes from suffering so intense that it is taking away his will to survive. What images of his suffering stand out to you and why?

What additional sources of pain does the psalmist describe in **102:8** and **10**? How would you describe this devout person’s complicated struggle? How realistic does it seem to you? When have you faced or been around struggles like this?

Consider how the lament in **102:1-11** seems personal, but also might signify in some way what his nation is going through. He is a representative Israelite.

3. The tone of **Psalm 102** changes abruptly in **102:12** from *complaint* in **102:3-11** to *consolation* in **102:12-22**. A devout individual’s lament shifts to a confident description of the LORD’s meeting the needs of the nation Israel and of the whole world.

The *lament* of human frailty and vulnerability transitions into a *hymn* to the permanence of the LORD and to his redeeming compassion. What do you think might have prompted this shift in the psalmist’s prayer focus?

In **102:12-14**, the psalmist begins describing who the LORD is to Zion (Israel), the psalmist’s nation and people. He starts recalling who Israel’s God is, how God’s character leads to God’s action, and how people respond.

Unlike transient humans, The LORD rules forever and *who he is* endures throughout all generations of people.

What does the psalmist highlight about God’s character in **102:13**?

4. Continuing the consolations of **102:12-14**, the psalmist keeps recalling the LORD’s promises to Zion (Israel). In **102:15-16**, he recalls their certainty based on the LORD’s past faithfulness. Finally, he builds to a high point of the LORD’s glory in **102:17**, the centerpiece/pivot of **102:12-22**.

According to the unknown psalmist of **Psalm 102**, when all the nations of the earth see and recognize the glory of the LORD who rebuilds Zion, what will they also see to be true about who the LORD is and what the LORD values? (**102:17** and echoed in **102:20**)

5. After these words of *consolation* for himself and his people, the psalmist resumes his *complaint* in **102:23-24** and pleads to “My God,” very personal again. This final “ask” by the psalmist reveals that he is not an old person. Yet he faces a life-threatening situation (perhaps an illness or some other physical

threat). How does he show clarity about his limited humanity and God's eternal nature?

6. The author of Hebrews applies this psalm, and in particular **102:25-27**, to Jesus. In **Hebrews 1:10-12**, the writer quotes these verses to describe the nature of the Son of God.

Like this psalmist, Jesus certainly experienced the dark realities of a hostile world. He suffered infinitely and voluntarily on our behalf.

We all need this psalm. It helps those in comfortable circumstances to enter into the pain of the troubled and share their burdens. But most of all it helps anyone feeling like this to see they are not alone, that others, including Jesus himself have been there and came through. (Tim and Kathy Keller, *The Songs of Jesus*, 249)

Like Jesus, this psalmist faced a short life span and untimely death. He couldn't have known it cognitively, but his rejection, agony, early death, and wasting under God's wrath (v. 10) foreshadowed the sufferings of Jesus (**Hebrews 1:10-12**).

When Psalm **102:25-27** is quoted in **Hebrews 1:10-12**, the words are presented as words from God the Father to God the Son. The heavenly Zion, to which all nations would stream, would be one beyond imagining (**Hebrews 12:22-27**).

How does **Psalm 102** create in you a longing for "Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem"?

This is the place the church is moving toward where we will dwell "unshaken" in the presence of God, angels, Jesus the Lamb of God, and all those written in the Lamb's book of life,

How do you think longing for the Heavenly Jerusalem helps in the process of repenting from sin?

7. Jesus now leads this prayer for any believer who has grown weak, who is experiencing the desperation of not having any lasting being. Unfading life is found in the afflicted Son of God; this is the comfort **Psalm 102** points us toward. But before it becomes *our* prayer, it is the prayer of the Son of God. He leads us in solidarity with our sin and our suffering. He is in us and we are in him, sharing in his indestructible life. He leads us to our eternal home in him in the Heavenly Jerusalem.

How can you use **Psalm 102** now to pray for yourself and others? Who needs your prayers? How can this psalm help you repent of prayerlessness? What other "changes in direction" does this psalm prompt in your heart?