

# Psalm 102

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] I'd like us to turn for a few moments back to the Old Testament passage we read in Psalm 102, which we are also singing this evening.

That's on page 604 and 605 of the Pew Bible. And I'd like us to look particularly at verse 16, although we'll take the whole psalm as our back cloth.

For the Lord will rebuild Zion and appear in his glory. The Lord will rebuild Zion and appear in his glory.

Someone told me the other day that in this country, the United Kingdom, nine times as many people read the IKEA catalogue as read the Bible.

Now, I don't know whether that can be substantiated, but it's certainly food for thought. We live in a country where once nearly everybody knew the basic biblical storyline, that which today many people, especially of a younger generation, know very little of God's good news, God's goodness to us.

[ 1 : 3 1 ] God is our creator and sustainer. God is our redeemer and saviour. And this psalm, which is a psalm which was used, probably composed, during the exile, when the people of God in the Old Testament were taken away to Babylon, into an alien culture, where they were mocked and laughed at for their faith, their temple in Jerusalem having been destroyed, their nation reduced to a rump.

This was a song which enabled them to rekindle their faith and to believe that the God who had allowed the church of God in the Old Covenant almost to be destroyed, would again revive it.

And this vision that this psalm, and the other psalms of Zion, Zion was the Mount Zion, where the temple was in Jerusalem. There are several psalms called Songs of Zion.

And these songs affirm the faith of the Old Testament people of God in God's faithfulness, that he will indeed work his power and restore his people.

And so, tonight, I would like us, living as we do, in a somewhat similar situation, to see what this psalm has to say to us. I repeat, we live in a society where the church has become, to a large extent, marginalized.

[ 3 : 1 1 ] Of course, when you do that, you create a vacuum. And what happens is, and what is happening is not that scientific, pure society emerges, but rather we have other things emerging.

We find a resurgence of paganism in our land, for example. We find that the pagan federation was re-established, or was established in 1971. And it is at work, throughout our land, to make paganism accessible to anyone who is genuinely seeking a nature-based spiritual path.

This is taken from their website. It also works for pagan spiritual rights, their rights to worship and live free from defamation. I understand that in Peterhead Prison, the pagans have an official chaplain.

They demanded that right, and they were given it. And so what is happening is that as Christianity is being marginalized, we are discovering that the old paganism is reasserting itself.

It's not that we're moving on into some utopia. Rather, it is a situation where we find ourselves going back into a kind of pre-Christian neo-paganism.

[ 4 : 44 ] Callum Brown, who is a professor of social history in the University of Dundee, published a book a few years ago with the title *The Death of Christian Britain*.

He himself was brought up, he tells us, in a Christian home in Edinburgh. In fact, in one or two conversations I've had with him, he's told me that he's got a family link with the free church, although he himself was not brought up in the free church.

And in his book, he contends that the nation's core religious culture has been destroyed. And this has happened, he says, in the last 40 years.

And further, he says, that what has happened here is symptomatic of what is happening throughout the whole of Western Christianity. We're speaking this morning about the important role that women have in communicating the faith.

And Callum Brown maintains that it was when women ceased to talk about the gospel in the 1960s that the church began to decline. When women are the carriers of the gospel, he argues.

[ 5 : 58 ] And when, with the women's liberation movement, that was lost. And Christianity was no longer something that people talked about in everyday speech, the church began to decline.

And so we are living in this kind of declining situation. Christian values are being marginalized more and more in our public life. Church attendance is declining.

Sunday schools are disappearing. There are many churches throughout the United Kingdom that don't have a children's Sunday school anymore. This is the situation that can often depress us.

But it's a situation which is certainly not worse than that that was faced when the temple was destroyed and the people were carried away into exile.

And the experience of the people of God in the past is a great help to us as we face a somewhat similar situation today. It's very important for us to realize that the crisis that we confront today is not the first crisis in the church's history.

[ 7 : 10 ] There were two great crises in the western church's history in the past at least two in which the people of God found new faith in these psalms, the songs of Zion.

The first of these was the destruction of Rome by the Goths in the year 410 A.D. This was an extraordinary shock to the early church.

Henry Cadwick, the church historian, says that it was an inconceivable, unimaginable catastrophe for people who witnessed it or heard about it as contemporaries.

Refugees poured across the Mediterranean from Italy into North Africa where Augustine was the bishop of Carthage. And in the face of the destruction of Rome Augustine wrote a book called *The City of God* in which he offers a robust defense of Christianity in which he saw the churches existing for the kingdom of God the true eternal city beyond the rise and fall of all emperors and civilization.

And he borrowed the title for this book from one of the songs of Zion from Psalm 48. God is in the midst of the city it shall not be moved.

[ 8 : 35 ] A theme that is reflected in the book of Revelation where the seer John tells us I saw the holy city the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

And in that hour of crisis Augustine rallied the church and a psalm like this psalm was the psalms like this psalm where the one of the primary motivations one of the primary foundations in which he was able to issue that rally in his well-known book The City of God.

But if we move forward over a thousand years to the time when the church in Europe had lost its message and its testimony in a welter of medieval superstition as a German monk called Martin Luther called the church to rediscover its roots in the gospel.

And he published a booklet in 1520 which he entitled The Babylonian Captivity of the Church and he compared the church to the church's predicament to the deportation and exile of the Israelites to Babylon and he used that book to call for a return to biblical simplicity.

And so how we see that in these two key crises in the history of the western church God used these scriptures the scriptures which emanated from the exile scriptures which enabled the people of God to lament what had happened but at the same time to rekindle their faith he used these to strengthen the church and to give the church a new focus.

[ 10 : 22 ] And for that reason I believe that we need to rediscover these scriptures today because we need a new focus we need to have a much more confident outlook in the church than we often do.

We need to recover our confidence in the gospel and our confidence in God to turn the world upside down. We have a crisis today which is not only external it is also internal.

We face not only antagonism from without but apathy within. And many of us are confused beset by doubt and weariness. And so often we wring our hands and we say we don't know what to do and we hope that something or other may happen.

Now that was not the attitude of Augustine. That was not the attitude of Martin Luther. That was not the attitude of the person who penned the psalm. They brought, they affirmed their hope in God and brought their need to God through the words of these ancient songs.

One of the ways we might face and work our way through the crisis that the churches are facing today is by taking this psalm, Psalm 102, a song sung in the exile or shortly after the return and using it as a lens to enable us to help us to discern in the midst of our confusion God's purpose for his church and for his people today.

[ 11 : 57 ] psalm. Now this psalm must be seen against the background of other psalms of Zion, other songs of Zion which are songs of triumph, not songs of lament.

This is certainly the first part, a song of lament. And there are many laments in the book of Psalms. In fact, the lament genre is the most common in the psalms.

And yet so often in the church today we don't really lament as much as we ought to. We tend to focus on the triumphant side of the gospel which of course is important and I want to emphasize that.

But there is a place for lament. There is a place to bring our concerns to God and to say to God with the bluntness of the psalmist, God why are things the way they are?

This is not as they should be. If you are in control of this situation, what are you doing? That's what the psalmist did again and again. There was a bluntness, a robustness about their piety and about their devotion which all too often we lack today.

[ 13 : 07 ] And these psalms will help us to recover that and help us to bring this situation to God. And there is a sense in which through these psalms God is offering to be held to account and is inviting us to lay hold upon the promises of God and plead these promises before God.

Not just mention them but plead them and say to God as the psalmist again and again said, God these promises are not being fulfilled today or if they are we cannot see it and we want you to demonstrate how you are fulfilling your promises in our midst.

And truly we need to recover this robustness of devotion, this robust piety which the psalms enable us to have.

Now the other song, many of the other songs of Zion are songs like Psalm 48 from which Augustine took his title of his famous book.

46 is another psalm. Psalm 84, Psalm 87. Psalms which emphasise the fact that the city of God will not be moved and that God's purposes will prevail.

[ 14 : 27 ] But of course when the people languished in exile they found it very difficult to sing these songs. How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? The psalmist says in Psalm 137.

Nehemiah when he heard what had happened to the temple in Jerusalem wept. he didn't rejoice, he wept, he lamented. Probably many of the psalms that were sung by the exiles in Babylon were laments.

Yet this psalm is certainly proof that on at least one occasion they were able to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land. I want to suggest that this psalm can help us in three ways.

As we confront the crisis facing the church today, this psalm gives us a lens which enables us to see the situation in a different light from what we might otherwise see it.

First of all it helps us to analyse the plight, analyse our plight today. We see that particularly in verses 1 to 11 where the plight of the believing community in the exile is expressed figuratively in the anguished prayer of a man on the point of death.

[ 15 : 44 ] Perhaps it is voiced by the leader of the community speaking as it represents to. And these verses, the first 11 verses of the psalm are undoubtedly a lament.

We see the colourful language which is common in the psalms. There's a lot of figures of speech. We see the string of similes in verses 3 to 7. My days vanish like smoke in verse 3.

Life's end is approaching. Again in verse 11 he says, My days are like the evening shadow. I wither away like grass. My bones burn in verse 3.

My heart is withered in verse 4. He speaks of his loud groaning in verse 5. All of these things are symptoms of a burning fever. I forget to eat my food, he says in verse 4.

I lie awake at night, he says in verse 7. Life's supportive rhythms of eating, drinking and sleeping were being disrupted in his life. He tells us that he was lonely.

[ 16 : 45 ] I have become like a bird alone on a roof. I am like a desert owl. The owl was an unclean animal, an unclean bird. He was conscious of his sinfulness, conscious of his alienation from God.

He tells us in verse 8 that his enemies taunt him. all of these similes are piled up one upon the other and we need to allow these figures to speak to us and to impact us, not simply up here in our minds but in our hearts and in our emotions.

To hear the heart of this man. This man is speaking as a man who is desperate, as a man who is absolutely destitute, as a man who has come to the very limits of endurance.

He's come to the very limits of life itself, of human existence. And we need to allow these words to speak to us so that we can sympathize with him, we can feel an empathy with him, and we can hear his spirit speaking to our spirits as he builds up this extremely powerful world picture.

And this is a picture not only of an individual case of great sickness, but a symbol of the nation, the crisis that the nation was passing through at that time in its exile.

[ 18 : 19 ] He acknowledges that this plight had come upon the nation as a judgment of God. He speaks of his predicament as being the result of God's great wrath.

And in verse 17 he describes the psalm as the prayer of the destitute. And so this psalm helps us to realize our predicament. Our predicament is much craver than any of us realize.

We are destitute. And until we discover, until we realize that we are destitute, things are unlikely to change. Until we realize that it is God who has got to change the situation, not us, then things are unlikely to change.

It is when God brings us to our extremity. As this man was brought to his extremity, as it were in the very point of death, and he recognized, and he's speaking figuratively here of the church, the church was within an inch of being snuffed out.

And it was then he realized just the greatness, the greatness of his need. And we need to recognize the greatness of our need today. We are over-complacent.

[ 19 : 36 ] We think that somehow or other we can fix it, that somehow or other we are going to solve it. But this psalm tells us no, God is the one who will solve it. We are destitute.

And where this helps us to analyze our plight, to recognize that our plight is serious, our plight is deadly, our plight is a plight that only God can deal with.

But this psalm helps us secondly to visualize our hope. And this takes us into the next section of the psalm, verses 12 to 22. There's a dramatic change of mood at verse 12 where the psalmist says, that.

I mean, he's painted this picture of destitution, he's painted this picture of someone at the very gateway of death. And then he says, that.

But, you, Lord, sit enthroned forever. And the you here in the Hebrew text is an emphatic position.

[ 20 : 46 ] You are in this situation. We are destitute. But you, O God, are upon the throne. And that's what the psalmist wants us to recognize today.

Yes, we are destitute. It's very important we recognize that. But that God is upon the throne. He is not destitute. He is all powerful. He is enthroned forever.

forever. And his renown endures through all generations. Well, the focus in the first 11 verses is upon the lamenter. In these verses 12 to 22, the focus is on the Lord.

The word Lord occurs seven times in these verses. That's the primary focus. There's a secondary focus in Zion, the place where the people of God met and where the Lord presents himself with his people and manifested his glory.

But the primary focus is upon the Lord, not upon the church. Important as Zion was, important as the temple was, important as the church is, the primary focus in this psalm is upon the Lord.

[ 21 : 55 ] And the psalmist visualizes the Lord arising from his throne to have compassion on Zion. You will arise. You're on the throne and you will arise.

You're going to do something about this and have compassion on Zion. But it is time to show favor to her. The appointed time has come.

The Lord will respond to the prayer of the destitute, he tells in verse 17. He will not despise their plea. And that is the promise that we are given here.

That if we recognize that we are destitute and we come with the prayer of the destitute, God will respond to the prayer of the destitute.

He will hear the groans of the prisoners and release those who are condemned to death in verse 20. No less than three times in these verses.

[ 22 : 57 ] This is the Lord's mercy in Zion and its citizens anticipated. And this divine compassion will take the form of the Lord rebuilding Zion, returning there to appear in his glory and causing his name to be declared there.

This hope is based upon the promises of the Lord concerning his people. A focus which in the Old Testament was on Zion but today is upon the church.

And so the psalmist is here probably languishing in exile or perhaps immediately after the exile when there were so many problems in the land when the people returned and the situation seemed to be hopeless and yet through this psalm he articulates a hope.

He visualizes his hope. He visualizes a totally different situation. The temple was destroyed. The great majority of the people had been taken away and he has got this vision of God restoring the situation.

He doesn't as it were dwell in his focus upon the destruction and the desolation. His focus is upon the restoration upon the revival of God of God's work among his people.

[ 24 : 21 ] I wonder do we visualize what the church in Scotland would be like if the Lord were to rebuild it and appear in his glory among us. So Ezefah is looking out today to look to see all that is wrong and there are many things wrong.

But this psalm is challenging us to look out and see that situation changing and seeking by faith to visualize what it would be like if God were to revisit us in Scotland, if God were to revive his work.

And I believe that God wants us to visualize his renewal, to visualize what it would be like in order that we might be more keenly motivated to pray for that to become a reality in our generation.

There's much talk today about finding the right strategy for the churches. There's a great focus and there's much we can learn from management studies. There's a lot that we can learn from these things but ultimately it must be God who will restore his people.

It must be God who will revive his work. And I believe that God is calling us to visualize what that may be like so that our prayers may become imaginative and that as we pray for revival we imagine what revival might be like and we can learn from the past, we can learn from the psalm, we can learn from other scriptures.

[ 25 : 50 ] so that when we pray we are able to picture in a measure what revival might be like. Perhaps God is calling us today to imaginative praying, to visualize revival, to visualize reformation and to see, to anticipate God at work.

Verse 17, God responding to the prayer of the destitute, is the pivot verse of the section verses 12 to 22. God responding to the prayer of the destitute, what difference would that make and what would Aberdeen be like?

If God were to revive his church in this city, what would it be like? Let's pause. I'm not suggesting that I tell you tonight what I think it would be like.

I think this is a challenge for all of us. It's a challenge for our prayers to pray that what we think it might be like might just be the beginning of a new work which God will do in our generation.

God has made us in such a way that visualization helps us to, helps people to accomplish things. God wants us to be part of the answer.

[ 27 : 14 ] God has made us in such a way that when we visualize an outcome, that helps us to achieve that.

outcome.

we see this in sport, we see it in a whole lot of other areas of life. And I think it's important for us in the church that we learn from this. God wants us to visualize what success in his terms may be like, what revival may be like, what reformation may be like, so that we may have a goal.

Now that goal may fall far short of God's goal, but nevertheless it is better than the present situation, which so often there's a less afraid attitude or simply waiting for circumstances to change, allowing circumstances to dictate the pace.

The third lesson that we learn from this psalm is to mobilize, for the church to mobilize its people. And we see this in the latter part of the psalm, beginning at verse 23.

[ 28 : 36 ] 23. At that verse the focus moves from the Lord and from Zion back to the poet, back to the lamenter, back to the psalmist, who is now no longer lamenting, he is now petitioning.

But he went through the lament in order that he might come to the petition. And he recognizes that he is destitute and now he comes and makes his plea.

as a destitute person. And it's interesting that in these verses he's got one simple compelling request. We see it in verse 24.

Do not take me away, O my God, in the midst of thy days. Do not take me away, O my God, in the midst of my days.

This seems to me to be saying to us that the psalmist having been given this great vision and having been able to articulate it and express it in the words of this psalm.

[ 29 : 45 ] Now, ask God to allow him to see it becoming a reality. He wants to live to see it becoming a reality of his generation.

He recognizes that God will revive his work, but he will revive it through people like him. and he wants to be there so that he might be part of it. He recognizes, as we've said already, as William Carey said, that God works through ordinary means.

He works in an extraordinary way, but through ordinary means and through ordinary people. And so the psalmist not only visualizes his hope, he not only visualizes what he anticipates would be spiritual success in terms for the church of God.

He's willing to be part of building that, or be part of making that success happen. He looks to the future, and he sees a new future for the people of God.

And he recognizes that future must be built as well as imagined. And it can only be built by divine power and human energy.

[ 31 : 03 ] And it's that combination of divine power and human energy that God, through which God revives the church. His power is absolutely crucial.

But God's power seldom works through thin air. It works through people. It works through scriptures. It works through the witness of the people of God. It works through the mobilization of the people of God.

God's power and God says there must also be human energy. There must be human commitment. We must be willing to be fellow workers with him.

We must become his partners in the work of God. In business today, people speak of the importance of what they call energy management.

in order to maintain high levels of energy in the workplace. Surely, there's a sense in which in the church of God we need to ask God to build out energy.

[ 32 : 08 ] It's so easy for us to become tired. It's so easy for us to feel weary. It's so easy for us to fall into a routine. We need God to give us new energy.

not only his power but our energy. We need to ask God to renew, to revive, to strengthen our energy.

God works through people and God has mobilized his church down through the centuries. I've had the privilege over the past 25 years to visit many parts of the world and see churches of huge variety of description.

The way they did things was very different. But I discovered that all the churches that I visited that were growing, and many of them are growing in the world today, that they had one common denominator and that was that they were able to mobilize their people to be witnesses for Jesus.

Jesus has said that he will use, it is as we witness to him, he's called us to be witnesses, and you shall be witnesses to me, he said to his apostles, and we see in the book of Acts that not only the apostles but the whole people of God became witnesses.

[ 33 : 40 ] They went, as they were persecuted across Judea and beyond into Samaria, they went as witnesses and the church expanded, the church spread. And it is as we are willing to be part of the answer by being witnesses to God's glory, witnesses to the gospel, witnesses as we are given opportunity to testify to the Lord Jesus Christ that the church, that God will renew his church.

Preaching is crucially important, but preaching from the pulpit is not the end of preaching, that preaching must be carried out into the community and out into the world.

And it's not the preacher who does that, it's the people. And so the mobilization of the people of God is fundamental to the well-being of the church.

And if God is going to revive his church today and he will do it as he has done it in the past through ordinary means, then he will do it through people like you and people like me.

And that's why it's so important for us to be willing, to be mobilized by him, willing to be used by him, willing to be his witnesses in our day and generation.

[ 35 : 04 ] And so we need to ask God to give us not only vision generation, but also energy renewal, that we may indeed have that energy which will enable us to be faithful witnesses to him so that his power may flow through us to touch and to transform the lives of others.

So as we face the future, let us remember that God has a future for the people of God. Augustine wrote his book in Africa, North Africa.

You go to North Africa today, the church spiritually exists. Why? Because in spite of Augustine and many other great leaders of that church, the church did not witness to the local people.

The church did not witness to the North Africans. The church restricted the gospel to Roman colonists. And when the empire fell, the church in North Africa fell with it.

Augustine's call in that sense was only partially heard. God is challenging us today to share the gospel with others.

[ 36 : 21 ] It is as we share the gospel with all that the church will survive. God has granted his decree that this is the pattern through which he builds his church.

And he is challenging us to be part of that pattern today. May we and all of us here and may this congregation here in Bonacord be part of that pattern of God renewing and reforming his people and his church.

And that we may see not only this church but all the churches of our land revived and reformed and renewed, reinvigorated as the people of God of a new vision and new passion and new desire to see God glorified in our time.

Thank you.