

Introduction

Unless you're reading the Bible for the very first time in your life, you already know how each story is going to end. Yes, things look bleak for Jacob or Joseph or Daniel or whomever, but in the back of your mind you know that things are going to turn out well in the end. Perhaps this causes us not to seriously consider not just what they went through during those times when they themselves had no glimpse of the outcome, but the length of time they had to endure it with their own thoughts, feelings, and doubts. Paul would later say of his second missionary journey that it was so difficult that at one point their despair reached the point of death. Before they were established by God, our biblical role models endured times of anguish and affliction which seemed not just to go on forever, but completely contrary to what they thought God was doing. Such tests are critical in order to produce the kind of faith that truly establishes one's self in God.

Read verses 1-7

¹Hear my prayer, O LORD!
And let my cry for help come to
You.

²Do not hide Your face from me
in the day of my distress;
Incline Your ear to me;
In the day when I call answer
me quickly.

³For my days have been
consumed in smoke,
And my bones have been
scorched like a hearth.

⁴My heart has been smitten like
grass and has withered away,
Indeed, I forget to eat my bread.

⁵Because of the loudness of my
groaning

My bones cling to my flesh.

⁶I resemble a pelican of the
wilderness;

I have become like an owl of the
waste places.

⁷I lie awake,

I have become like a lonely bird
on a housetop.

Q: What do these opening verses combine to describe? What is this person going through?

A: They describe someone who is so deeply afflicted by issues in their life that it does not affect them just spiritually ("my heart has been smitten"), but physically ("my bones have been scorched").

Q: How does this person view God at this time?

A: The appeals to "hear my prayer", "hear my cry", "incline Your ear", and "answer me" indicate they feel that God is distant and unreachable. They feel alone.

Q: What does it mean in v.5 when it says, "My bones cling to my flesh"?

A: A modern equivalent would be, "I'm nothing but skin and bones" to describe the severity of the physical condition. They're barely alive.

Q: To what does he liken his condition?

A: To birds, all of which are lonely, solitary figures barely surviving in inhospitable places. The wilderness is often a biblical metaphor for places completely lacking in spiritual nourishment or activity and seems to apply to this very situation as well.

Application: Come to the Lord exactly as you are, not pretending to be something that you're not. When we're experiencing deep anguish or affliction of spirit, it's best to present exactly that to the Lord.

⁸My enemies have reproached me all day long;
Those who deride me have used my name as a curse.
⁹For I have eaten ashes like bread
And mingled my drink with weeping
¹⁰Because of Your indignation and Your wrath,
For You have lifted me up and cast me away.
¹¹My days are like a lengthened shadow,
And I wither away like grass.

¹²But You, O LORD, abide forever,
And Your name to all generations.
¹³You will arise and have compassion on Zion;
For it is time to be gracious to her,
For the appointed time has come.
¹⁴Surely Your servants find pleasure in her stones
And feel pity for her dust.
¹⁵So the nations will fear the name of the LORD
And all the kings of the earth Your glory.
¹⁶For the LORD has built up Zion;
He has appeared in His glory.
¹⁷He has regarded the prayer of the destitute
And has not despised their prayer.

Read verses 8-11

Q: What are the two forces which appear to be against him?

A: "My enemies" and God ("because of... Your wrath"). He acknowledges that events have come about as a result of God's will and it's therefore not his imagination that everything is going against him.

Q: What has been his response to the situation so far?

A: The language of v.9 is that of someone engaged in mourning. They're not in denial as to what has happened but truly sorrowful of what took place to cause these things to happen; so much so that they've been in prolonged mourning for what's happened.

Q: How is v.11 describing his greatest concern over what may happen?

A: The references to shadow and grass express his concern that time may be running out and therefore the situation will not change.

Point: When we don't get a response in what **WE** think is a timely manner, we may begin to buy into the notion that He isn't going to respond. Someone stranded on a desert island has no hope until they see the ship on the horizon, but the ship was actually coming their way a long time before they could see it.

Application: Even though we sincerely **repent** and are sorry for what has led to our times of anguish, we have to be **patient** and **endure** them according to His **schedule**.

Read verses 12-17

Q: So how is this section contrasted to the previous?

- Whereas he was beginning to despair that time was running out, it has not because God is acting according to His own timing ("the appointed time has come").
- Whereas he felt nothing but wrath and indignation, God now responds with compassion (v.13), graciousness (v.13), and pity (v.14).
- Whereas he previously felt completely alone, isolated, and unheard, the reality is that "He has regarded the prayer of the destitute and has not despised their prayer".

Q: What is Zion and why would God have special regard for it?

A: It's not just another name for Jerusalem but is representative of the ultimate, spiritual plans of God to make it His throne and the center of worship for the whole earth.

Q: How might these things apply to us personally?

A: First, we're **NOT** on our own but God is acting according to His own timing and ways. Second, He has a plan and future for us that is much greater than we suspect, especially during times of personal turmoil.

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¹⁸This will be written for the generation to come,
That a people yet to be created may praise the LORD.
¹⁹For He looked down from His holy height;
From heaven the LORD gazed upon the earth,
²⁰To hear the groaning of the prisoner,
To set free those who were doomed to death,
²¹That men may tell of the name of the Lord in Zion
And His praise in Jerusalem,
²²When the peoples are gathered together,
And the kingdoms, to serve the LORD.

²³He has weakened my strength in the way;
He has shortened my days.
²⁴I say, "O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days,
Your years are throughout all generations.
²⁵Of old You founded the earth,
And the heavens are the work of Your hands.
²⁶Even they will perish, but You endure;
And all of them will wear out like a garment;
Like clothing You will change them and they will be changed.
²⁷But You are the same,
And Your years will not come to an end.

Application: Just because God does not **respond** as fast as we wish does not mean He is not **responsive**; He's working out something much **greater** than the current circumstances would seem to indicate from our limited **perspective**.

Read verses 18-22

Q: So what is the greater plan which God is working out?

A: The establishment of His people, wholly devoted to Him alone. Although they once faced the seemingly hopeless circumstances of death and bondage, He freed and established them.

Q: To what purpose are God's people freed and established?

A: "To serve the LORD". (v.22)

Point: We were not freed from bondage to this world or from the second death just to make ourselves more comfortable or happy, but to serve Him. Have you noticed how often our biblical role models prayed not for themselves but for God's name, glory, and work?

Application: The purpose of God's **timing**, of His allowing difficult circumstances to linger beyond what we might wish, is to prepare us for His **service**.

Read verses 23-28

Q: Why does the Psalmist seem to revisit the opening observation that God is working against him?

A: He is contrasting his original feelings with how they've now changed in the light of the knowledge of the eternal working of God, that in fact nothing ever was, is, or will be out of God's will and control.

Q: How does likening God's changing of His works of creation like the changing of clothes speak to the Psalmist's original condition when he first came to the Lord?

A: At his low point at the opening of the Psalm, he felt like it was impossible for things to change, feeling so far away from God. The imagery now conveys his renewed hope in the knowledge that God can and does change all things. It's a very poetic way of expressing his faith that God is working for his good and is in complete control.

Q: What is the final hope expressed?

A: That God's work will not just be restored and continue in the Psalmist's own lifetime, but continue through him to future generations. He has more than glimpsed the fact that there is not just personal, spiritual restoration to be enjoyed, but continuing work for the Master's kingdom.

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²⁸The children of Your servants
will continue,
And their descendants will be
established before You.”

Application: God is not just working through us within our ***lifetime***, but with an eye toward future ***generations*** to come.

Overall Application

We may ***feel*** alone, but we are not. There are times when we may feel that God is distant and not working, but He is always there. One of the lessons of faith that we have to learn is that our feelings are often inaccurate spiritual indicators of what God is doing, and therefore we need to come to Him in complete honesty just as we are that we might once again gain reassurance of His Word and ways. Only then are we truly established in Him.

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