

What if the Local Church were Taken Away?

In my previous article from Psalm 102, I reminded us that—because of the blessings of other Christians in the local church—we never have to face our struggles alone. We’re continuing to look at the Psalmists prayers for God’s help in distress. In verse 8 we see his misery connected to the “taunts” of his enemies. Mocking, ridicule and laughing are tactics which are sometimes used with the intent of degrading God’s people. Although this type of thing is never enjoyable—rather than trusting the good providence of God—Christians can often find themselves asking, “Why would a good God leave me in such misery?” We’re not told the reason behind the Psalmists suffering. Could it be connected to his own *personal* sin?

The language of verse 10 “for you have taken me up and thrown me down” seems to be something akin to Job 30:22 where we read: “You lift me up on the wind; you make me ride on it, and you toss me about in the roar of the storm.” Scholars have called attention to the parallels between the language of Job 30:22 and Psalm 102:10, and yet, we know that Job was *not* being punished for his *own personal sin*. What may God be teaching us when *we* suffer? John Calvin reminds us that the *important* point that we need to focus on in times of severe sickness and suffering is searching our hearts to see if it’s possible to determine the *cause* of our misery. He writes: “When God strikes us with his hand, we should not merely groan under the strokes inflicted upon us, as foolish men usually do, but should chiefly look to the cause that we may be truly humbled. This is a lesson which it would be of great advantage to us to learn.” This first section, as we’ve seen, focuses on the severe misery that the Psalmist is experiencing. But, as we proceed in the passage, the Psalmist shows us that the events of his *personal* life can never be separated from the lives of the people of God *corporately*. Let’s move on now from prayers for God’s help in distress to:

—Promises of God Recalled

Verses 12-17 have the Psalmist moving away from the focus on his personal distresses to remembering the promises of God for *all his people*. This section begins by recalling how God is “enthroned forever” and that God “will be remembered throughout all generations.” In our *interpretation* of this text, we want to give proper weight to the fact that it’s written by an individual who’s clearly suffering. And yet, the Psalmist will not allow us to take his words as *individualistic*. He’s a member of the covenant community and therefore, he ties his destiny—good or bad—to the lives of his covenant brothers and sisters. The *promises of God that the Psalmist recalls* are not tied *merely* to a group of disconnected individuals, but rather, they’re promises given to the people of God as a corporate body. James Montgomery Boice writes, “The writer [of this Psalm].....does not look only for his own restoration but links his personal survival to the restoration of Zion.”

In verse 13 *we now see* the Psalmist praying for the people of God collectively. “You will arise and have pity on Zion; it is the time to favor her.” Verse 14 seems to draw attention to the

destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem that took place at the time of the Babylonian captivity. This is one of the strongest reasons why this Psalm is tied to that particular historical event. “For your servants hold her *stones* dear and have pity on her *dust*.” With the Temple being destroyed, and the people of God taken away from Jerusalem and taken to Babylon, the primary way that God determined to be *present with his people* is taken away. This is the most devastating aspect of God’s punishment.

This should be an eye-opening reminder to Christians today. What would it be like if our ability to gather as the people of God and worship God in the local church on the Lord’s Day were taken away from us? We can get a *true* picture of where our hearts are at if we’re not *horrified* by that prospect! Sadly, many Christians think of their relationship with God as, *primarily or exclusively*, an individual relationship. Faithful membership in a local church can become a choice primarily based on, “what’s in this for me.” We must never assume that it would be just as spiritually beneficial to worship at home in private rather than gathering corporately for worship. When we gather with the congregation on the Lord’s Day, under the oversight of ordained shepherds and under the authority of the preached word, God is *present* in our lives like no other time. (Ex. 40:34-38; Nehemiah 8, 9; Matt. 18:20; Ephesians 4:8-16; 1 Thess. 2:13; 1 Tim. 3; Titus 1; Hebrews 10:25; 13:17). What a tragedy it would be if this were taken away!

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