

CHRISTOPHER ASH

The
PSALMS

*A Christ-Centered
Commentary*



VOLUME 4
Psalms 101–150

“These wonderful volumes on the Psalms place the whole church of Christ in their author’s debt. To have carried to completion the vision of such a project is a breathtaking accomplishment. And to have done it with the author’s characteristically loving and careful approach to the text of Scripture, coupled with richness of exposition, humility of spirit, and wise personal and pastoral application, stimulates our admiration and gratitude. In an era when the evangelical church in the West has, by and large, turned its back on the wisdom of two millennia of Christian praise dominated by the Psalms, these four magnificent volumes provide both the equipment and the inspiration needed to discover what our Lord and Savior himself experienced. They deserve to become—indeed, are surely destined to be—the go-to resource for multitudes of preachers, teachers, and students for decades to come. We are richer because of their publication.”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

“Since the Enlightenment, it has become fashionable to hypercontextualize the Psalms, thereby repudiating eighteen centuries of Christ-centered preaching, teaching, and scholarship. In this magisterial commentary, Christopher Ash returns to the old paths by displaying Christ and his glory in all 150 psalms. The Reformers and the Puritans would have loved this warm, devotional, and accessible work, for herein Ash provides the kind of experiential, practical, and Christ-saturated exegesis that they so dearly treasured. With careful historical-theological reflection and a tender pastoral heart, Ash guides the people of God as they seek to better read, sing, meditate on, study, and preach the Psalms. This commentary will no doubt become a staple in the pastor’s library for many years to come.”

Joel R. Beeke, Chancellor and Professor of Homiletics and Systematic Theology, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“Modern readers often gravitate toward the Psalms because in them they see a mirror for themselves and their own emotions. This is not wrong, but as Christopher Ash reminds us, it is insufficient. The writers of the New Testament and many throughout church history read the Psalms because in them they found Christ. Ash provides a comprehensive help to the church to read the Psalms afresh from that Christ-centered perspective, in a way that not only exercises our minds but feeds our souls.”

Iain M. Duguid, Professor of Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary

“How easy it is to quickly read ourselves into the center of the Psalms, and yet how important it is *not* to do this. Christopher Ash can be counted on to see a psalm in its real setting, grasp its proper culmination in Christ, and tell its rich implications to us. Few writers think with as much faithfulness or illumination as Ash does, and these volumes will be the new treasure chest in learning and psalmody.”

Simon Manchester, Former Rector, St. Thomas’ Anglican Church, North Sydney, Australia

“In this four-volume work, Christopher Ash casts a vision of the Psalter that is theologically centered on Christ, typologically related to Christ, and ultimately fulfilled in Christ—a book of the Old Testament that reveals, in type and shadow, through image of king and priest, prophet and teacher, supplicant and sufferer, the divinity and humanity of Christ, who in his humanity perfectly expressed the full range of human emotions and affections in the vicissitudes of his earthly humiliation as he awaited his heavenly exaltation. Therefore, he is the true and better singer of the Psalter, the one through whom and in union with whom the Christian and the church today can sing ‘the Psalms of Jesus’ with eyes unveiled. Encyclopedic in scope, enlightening in content, enthusing in purpose—this magnum opus ought to find a place in every pastor’s library, in every student’s book budget, and on every Christian’s bedside table. These volumes will hopefully change the way we read—and sing!—the Psalms for years to come.”

Jonathan Gibson, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary

“This is a landmark commentary that belongs in the library of every Bible teacher and scholar. Grounded in wide-ranging research, warmed by sincere devotion, and crafted with unusual elegance, this work offers the reader an exegetical and theological feast for both heart and mind. Any believer who has studied and taught the Psalms knows the challenge of handling them in faithfulness as truly Christian Scripture. In these pages Ash has pursued the compelling thesis that the Psalms are emphatically Christ centered from beginning to end, having Christ as their true subject and object. For those who wish to understand how and why this is so, this study is both a treasure and a delight.”

Jonathan Griffiths, Lead Pastor, The Metropolitan Bible Church, Ottawa, Canada

“How pleasing it is to find a modern, scholarly commentary that unashamedly leads us to Jesus the Messiah! The case for this Christ-centered work is carefully argued and applied to each psalm without ignoring original contexts or their relevance to believers. More controversially, Christopher Ash provides the most compelling defense to date for accepting every penitential and imprecatory line in the Psalter as appropriate on the lips of the sinless Savior, the Christian’s covenant head. Helpful quotations from early Christian writers, the Reformers, and contemporary authors add to the commentary’s appeal. I warmly recommend it.”

Philip H. Eveson, Former Principal and Old Testament Tutor, London Seminary; author, *Psalms: From Suffering to Glory*

“To simply call this resource a commentary seems too mundane. What Christopher Ash presents us with here is an extensive and detailed exploration of the verdant theological landscape of the Psalter, with Jesus the Messiah as the lodestar. These remarkable volumes are weighty but not burdensome, erudite but not arid. Ash’s pastoral insights into the Psalms reflect a maturity and wisdom that can be cultivated only over a lifetime spent in the full counsel of Scripture and ministry in the church. What a tremendous achievement this is, what a blessing it is sure to be to the church, and what a testament to the beauty and transforming power of the true and final King, Jesus Christ.”

William A. Ross, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

“With historical breadth, exegetical finesse, rhetorical care, and a deeply doxological thrust, Christopher Ash’s commentary brings the Psalms closer to the center of Christian devotion—and Jesus Christ to the very center of the Psalter. These wonderful volumes have helped me grasp, more deeply than ever before, just why Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the Psalms an ‘incomparable treasure.’ More than that, they have revealed the incomparable treasure himself who sings in every psalm yet whose voice we so often fail to hear.”

Scott Hubbard, Editor, *Desiring God*; Pastor, All Peoples Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota

“This new commentary—in which ‘the person of Christ is central to the meaning and force of every psalm’—is theologically rich, spiritually refreshing, and carefully assembled to understand Old and New Testament themes in the light of Christ. Here is a commentary that will be rewarding in the study as the minister prepares to teach the Psalms or, indeed, the many New Testament passages that reference them. This is also great material for personal devotions. Thank you, Christopher Ash, for such a rich resource to help us know Christ.”

Nat Schluter, Principal, Johannesburg Bible College

“A masterful balance of being thoughtfully Christ centered and warmly devotional at the same time. A blessing for my personal quiet time and my sermon preparation.”

Denesh Divyanathan, Senior Pastor, The Crossing Church, Singapore; Chairman, Evangelical Theological College of Asia; President, Project Timothy Singapore

The Psalms

A Christ-Centered Commentary

Other Crossway Books by Christopher Ash

The Heart of Anger: How the Bible Transforms Anger in Our Understanding and Experience, coauthored with Steve Midgley (2021)

Job: The Wisdom of the Cross (2014)

Married for God: Making Your Marriage the Best It Can Be (2016)

Trusting God in the Darkness: A Guide to Understanding the Book of Job (2021)

The Psalms

A Christ-Centered Commentary

VOLUME 4
PSALMS 101–150

Christopher Ash

 **CROSSWAY®**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary, Volume 4, Psalms 101–150

© 2024 by Christopher Brian Garton Ash

Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Portions of this work are adapted from Christopher Ash, *Bible Delight: Heartbeat of the Word of God; Psalm 119 for the Bible Teacher and Bible Hearer* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2008); Ash, *Psalms for You: How to Pray, How to Feel, and How to Sing* (Epsom, UK: Good Book, 2020); and Ash, *Teaching Psalms: From Text to Message*, 2 vols. (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2017–2018). Used by permission of the publishers.

Cover design: Jordan Singer

First printing 2024

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated into any other language.

Scripture quotations marked CSB have been taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible. Public domain.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible®, copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. www.lockman.org.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked REB are taken from the Revised English Bible, copyright © Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press, 1989. All rights reserved.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Hardcover ISBN (vol. 4): 978-1-4335-6397-3

ePub ISBN (vol. 4): 978-1-4335-6400-0

PDF ISBN (vol. 4): 978-1-4335-6398-0

Hardcover ISBN (4-vol. set): 978-1-4335-6388-1

ePub ISBN (4-vol. set): 978-1-4335-8843-3

PDF ISBN (4-vol. set): 978-1-4335-8841-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023938846

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

SH	33	32	31	30	29	28	27	26	25	24				
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

To Tyndale House, Cambridge,
a fellowship of delight
in the Scriptures (Ps. 1:2).

*Jesus, my shepherd, brother, friend,
my prophet, priest, and king,
my Lord, my life, my way, my end,
accept the praise I bring.*

JOHN NEWTON
"How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds"

Contents

Preface *xiii*

Abbreviations *xix*

COMMENTARY ON PSALMS 101–150

Book 4 (<i>continued</i>)		Psalm 117	247	Psalm 135	483
Psalm 101	5	Psalm 118	255	Psalm 136	495
Psalm 102	17	Psalm 119	273	Psalm 137	511
Psalm 103	33	Psalm 120	331	Psalm 138	529
Psalm 104	47	Psalm 121	341	Psalm 139	539
Psalm 105	65	Psalm 122	351	Psalm 140	557
Psalm 106	87	Psalm 123	363	Psalm 141	571
Book 5		Psalm 124	373	Psalm 142	583
Psalm 107	111	Psalm 125	381	Psalm 143	593
Psalm 108	133	Psalm 126	391	Psalm 144	605
Psalm 109	145	Psalm 127	401	Psalm 145	619
Psalm 110	163	Psalm 128	411	Psalm 146	635
Psalm 111	175	Psalm 129	421	Psalm 147	647
Psalm 112	185	Psalm 130	431	Psalm 148	663
Psalm 113	197	Psalm 131	443	Psalm 149	675
Psalm 114	209	Psalm 132	451	Psalm 150	687
Psalm 115	219	Psalm 133	465		
Psalm 116	233	Psalm 134	475		

Epigraph Sources 697

Bibliography 703

Subject Index 709

Name Index 729

Scripture Index 735

PREFACE

The Nature and Purpose of This Commentary

I am persuaded that the Psalms belong to Jesus Christ. I believe that the Psalms themselves point to a fulfillment only possible in the divine-human person of Christ. Through its quotations and echoes of the Psalms, the New Testament bears witness to a textured understanding in which Christ is central. For the larger part of church history, this has broadly been the way Christians have read the Psalms. This commentary is therefore a Christ-centered commentary, in which I seek to see Christ front and center when reading the Psalms. I have attempted to explain and argue my case in volume 1, *Introduction: Christ and the Psalms*.

Since the so-called “Enlightenment” in the eighteenth century, Christ has been eclipsed in much Psalms scholarship and preaching. With a few notable exceptions, recent commentaries tend either to omit Christ from many or all of the Psalms or mention him as little more than an afterthought. But I have become persuaded that Jesus Christ is the subject and object of the Psalms, that his majestic divine-human person is woven into the warp and woof of the Psalter, and that he is the preeminent singer of psalms, the focus of the Psalter, and the one without whom the Psalms cannot be understood aright. I therefore want to place Christ in the foreground of our reading of every psalm and to do so in ways that are shaped by the New Testament. I want to set before us what the Psalms might look and feel like if in truth they do belong to Christ.

There is much you will not find in this commentary. My background is that of a preacher and pastor rather than a trained biblical scholar. I have sought to interact with a representative sample of writers across the centuries (surveyed in volume 1, *Introduction: Christ and the Psalms*) but

have not, for the most part, attempted to interact with the voluminous and ever-growing secondary literature. I hope I am sufficiently aware of the more significant debates, but for a full study of these things, readers should consult one or more of the recent technical commentaries. I have worked from the Hebrew text but have no particular expertise in the language, especially as regards Hebrew poetry, translation of tense forms, and poetic parallelism. Much scholarly debate surrounds theories of the dating, possible contexts of origins, and putative redaction histories of various psalms. Too often it seems to me that scholars construct theories on the basis of inadequate evidence; furthermore, I am not persuaded that these debates are always useful to Christian disciples seeking to weave the Psalms into their lives of prayer and praise.

This commentary is not, therefore, a substitute for technical, scholarly commentaries. What you will find here, I hope, is the Psalms read with the breadth of a whole-Bible perspective allied with the depth of a clear focus on Christ, the center of history and the fulcrum of the Bible story. I thus hope to do four things:

1. To help you understand the lyrics of these songs, what the words mean and what the poetry signifies
2. To assist us in feeling the “tune,” that is, the affectional and emotional dimensions of these songs
3. To point to the volitional commitment that is asked of disciples when we join in the Psalms—for to say the Psalms means moving from the audience, where we listen without commitment, to the choir, where commitment is expected
4. To motivate you to take that step and actively to make the Psalms a part of your lives of prayer and praise

I hope this commentary will prove useful to all kinds of Christian people—and especially to those who preach, teach, or lead studies on the Psalms.

How Each Psalm Is Treated

After one or more chapter epigraphs of quotations from other writers, each psalm is considered in three sections.

The *orientation* section involves consideration of how we ought to view the psalm in the light of Jesus Christ. This includes reference to New Testament quotations and echoes and to the context of the psalm in history (if known) and in its canonical context, especially with reference to nearby psalms. I hope that setting this section first helps the reader engage in a manner that places Christ at the center, rather than on the periphery.

The *text* section begins with consideration of the structure. Since there is an extraordinarily wide variation in perceived structures, I have sought to be cautious and tentative except where the structure seems very clear. The *text* section continues with verse-by-verse commentary, taking into account the *orientation* section and seeking to make clear the meaning of the words and lines as well as the flow of the poetry.

The *reflection and response* section points to what a Christian response might look like when appropriating this psalm.

Three Questions in Psalms Interpretation

Three questions are often asked when reading the Psalms that merit even concise mention at the outset of this commentary. For a fuller discussion, please see volume 1, *Introduction: Christ and the Psalms*. These questions, with my very brief conclusions, are listed below.

1. Who are “the righteous”? A careful analysis of the Psalms gives us a portrait of those who delight in the covenant God and find assurance of final vindication in him. This assurance is rooted in the righteousness of their covenant head. Because neither David nor his successors lived with perfect righteousness, they clearly foreshadow another covenant head who will. “The righteous” in the Psalms, then, are righteous by faith in the covenant God.
2. Can Jesus Christ be considered to be praying the Psalms when the psalmists confess their sins and plead for forgiveness? My conclusion is that he does so as the covenant head of a sinful people, just as he submitted to John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance. The shadow of the cross fell on him, who had no sin, as he prayed these psalms and our sin was imputed to him.
3. How are we to understand the prayers for God to punish the wicked in the Psalms? A study of the New Testament supports the

conclusion that Jesus Christ prays these prayers from a pure heart, and so we pray them—cautiously and with trembling—in him. Every time we pray, “Your kingdom come,” in the Lord’s Prayer, we pray for this punishment on the *finally* impenitent, even as we pray for many to repent before it is too late.

The Superscriptions and the Shape of the Psalter

Much scholarly attention has focused in recent years on the canonical order of the Psalms and the ways in which the five books of the Psalms and the superscriptions may help us understand the significance of this order. I am persuaded that the canonical order is as much the fruit of the Holy Spirit’s direction as is the composition of the Psalms themselves. But I have sought to be cautious in making claims about discerning the meaning of this structure in detail. At the start of each book of the Psalter, I have included a very brief introduction to that book.

I accept the reliability of the superscriptions, while recognizing that we do not understand all the terms used in them. I have commented briefly on these terms (and the word *Selah*) the first time each appears. In particular, I accept that “of David” and similar expressions indicate authorship, and I have sought to argue this position (a minority among scholars) in volume 1, *Introduction: Christ and the Psalms*.

Texts and Translations

I have followed the normal Jewish and Christian understanding that the Masoretic Text is the most reliable witness to the original form of the texts. Some modern translations give considerable weight to the Greek translations (and sometimes also to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the ancient Versions), but I have erred on the side of caution, except where there are overwhelming reasons for rejecting the Masoretic Text. I have indicated where there is significant uncertainty.

When quoting Hebrew or Greek, I provide both the original forms and the transliteration in the main text. In footnotes I provide only the original Hebrew or Greek.

I have used the English Standard Version (ESV) as my base text (though I have at times taken liberty to break stanzas differently from the ESV). I have found this an admirable translation for the purposes of

detailed study. Where there are significant differences, I have sometimes referred to the Christian Standard Bible (CSB), the King James Version (KJV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the New International Version (NIV), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and the Revised English Bible (REB).

Hebrew Tense Forms

Scholars vary in the terminology they use for the two tense forms in Hebrew. One form may be called the perfect, the perfective, the suffix conjugation, or the *qatal*. The other may be called the imperfect, the imperfective, the prefix conjugation, or the *yiqtol*. For simplicity I use the traditional terminology *perfect* and *imperfect*, even though these do not translate simply into English perfect or imperfect tenses, especially in poetry. In general, it may be true that an imperfect form conveys an action that is continuing (typically but not always future), while a perfect form indicates an action that is completed (typically but not always past). But there are many exceptions (especially when following the *vav consecutive*).

The Divine Name “the LORD”

The Hebrew name יהוה, or *YHWH*, often written *Yahweh* and sometimes called the tetragrammaton (after its four consonants), is written “LORD” in quotations from the biblical text (in line with the usual convention for English translations). Outside quotations, I prefer to use the phrases *covenant Lord* or *covenant God*, rather than the word *Yahweh*, partly because we do not know for sure how it was pronounced but mainly because it captures the strong Old Testament context of covenantal lordship.

The Davidic King

When speaking of the Davidic king/King, I have generally capitalized *King* to encourage the reader to think toward the fulfillment of Davidic kingship in Christ, the final King. I have typically used the lowercase *king* when referring exclusively to an old covenant king, whether David or one of his successors.

Psalms Numbering

I have numbered the Psalms according to the Masoretic Text and all English translations throughout. Most patristic writers followed the Psalm chapter

numbering in, or derived from, the Greek translations. This numbering differs from the Hebrew numbering as shown in table 1. So, for example, when commenting on what our English Bibles call Psalm 107, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) refers to it as Psalm 106. But even when referring to the Septuagint or Vulgate, I have translated into the Masoretic Text numbering.

Table 1 Psalm Numbering in English and Greek Versions

Psalm Number in English Versions	Psalm Number in Greek Versions
Pss. 1–8	Unchanged: Pss. 1–8
Pss. 9–10	Combined into Ps. 9
Pss. 11–113	One less: Pss. 10–112
Pss. 114–115	Combined into Ps. 113
Ps. 116	Split into Pss. 114 and 115
Pss. 117–146	One less: Pss. 116–145
Ps. 147	Split into Pss. 146 and 147
Pss. 148–150	Unchanged: Pss. 148–150

Verse Numbering

I have used English verse numbering throughout, with superscriptions labeled S. Where a psalm has more than a very short superscription, the Masoretic Text usually designates the superscription verse 1, increasing all subsequent verse numbers by one. Otherwise, the superscription forms the start of verse 1. I have noted this feature when commenting on each superscription.

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
AcBib	Academia Biblica
ACCS	<i>Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture</i> . Edited by Thomas C. Oden. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998–2010.
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
AD	<i>anno Domini</i> , “in the year of the Lord,” often called the Common Era, CE
BC	before Christ, sometimes called before the Common Era, BCE
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906.
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> . Edited by Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983.
BOSHNP	Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry
ca.	<i>circa</i> , “approximately”
CBSC	Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges
CFTL	Clark’s Foreign Theological Library
chap(s).	chapter(s)
CNTOT	<i>Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.
EBTC	Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , “for example”
esp.	especially
etc.	<i>et cetera</i> , “and so forth”

FC	Fathers of the Church
HALOT	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999.
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , “that is”
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
KEL	Kregel Exegetical Library
lit.	literally
LEC	Library of Early Christianity
LXX	Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures)
MC	A Mentor Commentary
MT	Masoretic Text
NCB	New Century Bible
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NPNF ²	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> . 2nd ser. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 1890–1900. Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987.
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
OTL	Old Testament Library
PTW	Preaching the Word
RCS	<i>Reformation Commentary on Scripture</i> . Edited by Timothy George and Scott M. Manetsch. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011–.
SSN	Studia Semitica Neerlandica
STI	Studies in Theological Interpretation
s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> , “under the word”
TBST	The Bible Speaks Today
THOTC	Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary

TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
Vg.	Vulgate (Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible)
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCS	Welwyn Commentary Series

Commentary on
PSALMS 101–150

BOOK 4 (*CONTINUED*)

BOOK 3 (PSS. 73–89) is dominated by the Babylonian exile. Not all these psalms were originally written in this context, but in their final form, exile casts a shadow over everything. We may naturally expect that book 4, which comprises Psalms 90–106, begins to answer the questions raised by exile, and we will not be disappointed. Ultimately, however, it speaks to the deeper questions that exile represents, the questions of sin and wrath, forgiveness and hope.¹

In addition to the issues mentioned in the introduction to book 4 (see vol. 3, p. 527), Psalms 101–106 relate to exile in at least two ways. Psalms 101 and 103 are the only psalms headed “of David” in book 4. Together with a psalm “of one afflicted” (Ps. 102), they take us back to the messianic hopes and messianic sufferings that were so prominent in books 1 and 2. They prepare us for the significant “of David” collections near the beginning and end of book 5 (Pss. 108–110; 138–145).

Second, Psalms 104–106 give us a grand overview of God’s works, first in creation (which will be free of sin in the end—see 104:35) and then in the history of the people of God (Pss. 105; 106). Psalm 106 ends with a poignant plea for a final return from exile (“Gather us from among the nations,” 106:47), which prepares the way for the thanksgivings of Psalm 107 at the start of book 5 (note 107:2–3: “whom he has redeemed . . . / and gathered in”).

¹ For one understanding of book 4, see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering Their Structure and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 147–82.

Now as the kingdom of David was only a faint image of the kingdom of Christ, we ought to set Christ before our view; who, although he may bear with many hypocrites, yet as he will be the judge of the world, will at length call them all to an account, and separate the sheep from the goats.

JOHN CALVIN
Commentary on the Psalms

David . . . is but a type and shadow of Christ, in whom alone the perfect performance of the duties here premised are to be found.

DAVID DICKSON
A Commentary on the Psalms

The only anointed Son of David who could sing this psalm with perfect integrity at all times is Jesus Christ.

TREMPER LONGMAN III
Psalms

PSALM 101

ORIENTATION

In the kingdom of Christ, all the King's ministers will share the character of the King (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 6:2). In Psalm 101 David resolves that he himself and his kingdom at every level will be marked by the covenant love and flawless justice of God. David failed, but it was good that he longed to govern like this. Derek Kidner (1913–2008) writes, “The psalm is doubly moving: both for the ideals it discloses and for the shadow of failure which history throws across it. Happily the last word is not with David nor with his faithful historians, but with his Son. There, there is no shadow.”¹

All power is exercised through ministers. Every king has a court, each president an administration, every warlord his henchmen, each influencer her devotees. The character of the ministers reflects the attributes of the leader. In Psalm 101 the King's blameless character is seen in the behavior of his ministers. The psalm is a standing challenge and encouragement to everyone who exercises authority, especially in the church but also in all the structures of society, from the family right up to international affairs.

This may well have been David's resolve before he had come into the kingdom or before he brought the ark to Jerusalem (see below on 101:2 for the possible echo of 2 Sam. 6:9).² But although it reads like a resolution made before it was spoiled by failure, it might also be a fresh resolution made by faith later in his reign. There is no way to be sure.

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms*, 2 vols., TOTC (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 2:359.

² E.g., John Calvin (1509–1564), *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, in *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 4:86.

Psalm 100 is the climax of a tremendous series celebrating the reign of the covenant Lord (Pss. 92–100). Psalm 101 reminds us that (as we have known since Ps. 2) the covenant Lord exercises his government through his human Son, the Messiah (cf. Acts 17:31 with Pss. 96:13; 98:9). Alexander Francis Kirkpatrick (1849–1940) suggests that it is placed here “in order to suggest how that kingdom might be made a reality for Jerusalem under the sway of a true ruler, some second David.”³ The creation pattern of a world governed by a man will be fulfilled.

Significant links between Psalm 101 and Psalms 92–100 include (1) “steadfast love” (92:2; 94:18; 98:3; 100:5; 101:1) and (2) “justice” (97:2; 99:4; 101:1).

Psalms 101–103 may form a small group.⁴ With its earnest petition, Psalm 102 expands the cry “When will you come to me?” from 101:2. Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1802–1869) suggests that “it is only the man who can with inward truth utter after him the words of [Ps. 101], that is entitled to appropriate as his own” the promises in Psalm 102 (fulfilled in Christ) and then to sing the glad praise of Psalm 103.⁵

Other scriptures that relate to the theme of Psalm 101 include (1) Deuteronomy 17:14–20; (2) 2 Samuel 23:1–7; (3) Job 31;⁶ (4) Psalms 15; 18:20–24; 24; (5) Proverbs 20:26; 25:5; 29:16; and (6) Isaiah 11:1–5 and 16:5.

THE TEXT

Structure

The two uses of “the LORD” bracket the psalm (Ps. 101:1, 8). The question in 101:2b concludes 101:1–2b, which forms an introduction.⁷ Psalm

3 A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms: With Introduction and Notes*, 3 vols., CBSC 20 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1892), 3:590. Cf. Philip Eveson, *Psalms: From Suffering to Glory*, 2 vols., WCS (Darlington, UK: EP Books, 2014–2015), 2:202.

4 Pss. 101 and 103 are the only “of David” psalms in book 4. Some think this hints that Ps. 102 is also Davidic. See W. Dennis Tucker Jr. and Jamie A. Grant, *Psalms*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 2:495–60; Robertson, *Flow of the Psalms*, 166.

5 E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. P. Fairbairn and J. Thomson, 3 vols., CFTL 1–2, 12 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1845), 3:204.

6 “The king in this psalm and Job in [Job 31] are much alike, both powerful persons with social responsibility and great freedom about how to deploy that power.” Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 432.

7 John Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3 vols., BCOTWP (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006–2008), 3:140.

101:2c–4 focuses on the heart of the King himself (bracketed by “integrity of heart” and “a perverse heart”), while 101:5–8 focuses on his actions toward those who serve him.

Superscription

⁸ A Psalm of David.⁸

The shared designation **A Psalm** links the joy of Psalm 100 to the resolves and longing of the King in Psalm 101. The word **Psalm** is echoed in the verb “I will make music,” which shares the same root (101:1).

101:1–2b Share the Joy and Longing of Christ the King

¹ I will sing of steadfast love and justice;
to you, O LORD, I will make music.

² I will ponder the way that is blameless.
Oh when will you come to me?

The verbs in the first three lines are all cohortative, expressing a strong determination. The first two verbs (**I will sing** and **I will make music**) convey delight and warmth of affection, what Martin Luther (1483–1546) calls “the Gospel with feeling.”⁹ The Messiah delights to be precisely the kind of King who speaks this psalm.¹⁰

The first focus—and the headline of the psalm—is **steadfast love** (covenant love, **רַחֲמִים**, *khesed*) and **justice** (**מִשְׁפָּט**, *mishpat*).¹¹ Although these are often read as distinct and complementary, even perhaps in tension (merciful love with firm justice),¹² their overlap in meaning is more important

⁸ In Hebrew the superscription is the start of verse 1.

⁹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), 11:294.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Psalms*, 4:87.

¹¹ Note the similar opening to Ps. 89.

¹² We often find this distinction in older writers, from the patristic period to at least the Reformation, who used the Greek (ἔλεος καὶ κρίσις) or Latin translations from the Greek. The nuances in the Greek (and Latin) were more differentiated than in the Hebrew. E.g., Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 296–373) speaks of “tempering the judgment with mercy.” Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg, Classics of Western Spirituality (London: SPCK, 1980), 23.

than how they might differ in nuance; each of them means treating people right. The first means a steady, unchanging, faithful, covenantal love and loyalty, the second a clear-sighted determination to act with absolute fairness. These are used together to describe God in, for example, Psalms 89:14; 119:149; and Jeremiah 9:24, and to describe believers in Hosea 12:6 and (most famously) Micah 6:8.

The words **to you, O LORD** in the second line make clear that these qualities are, supremely, attributes of God, which the King delights to share. Far from being a moralistic attempt at imitation, the King's delight flows out of his devotion to the Father.

The third verb (**I will ponder**) means to give attention to, to consider, to understand, to gain insight (used, e.g., in Pss. 2:10 ["be wise"]; 14:2 ["understand"]; 41:1 ["considers"]).¹³ Delight and careful attention are inseparable. In the cohortative here it also conveys a set purpose. Here **the way that is blameless** (the moral life of integrity; cf. Gen. 17:1; Job 1:1, 8; 2:3; Ps. 18:30, 32) is, first and foremost, a description of the ways of the covenant Lord (in parallel with his **steadfast love and justice**); it will shape **the way** of the King.¹⁴ Jesus Christ on earth could sing these first three lines, feeling in his own person a perfect delight in the Father's goodness and teaching these attributes as "the weightier matters of the law" (Matt. 23:23).

The fourth line (**Oh when will you come to me?**) sounds a tone of yearning, almost of lament (lament is often associated with the question "When?"; cf. Pss. 42:2; 119:82, 84).¹⁵ Balancing a joyful coming to God in worship (100:2, 4), here is a longing for God to **come** to the King in blessing (cf. Ex. 20:24; Ps. 119:41, 77). It may echo David's longing in the troubled day of 2 Samuel 6:9, when faced with the unbearable holiness of God ("How can the ark of the LORD come to me?").¹⁶ The tone of the psalm melds glad

13 Some suggest that here it means also to expound or teach this wisdom. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3:141; James M. Hamilton Jr., *Psalms*, 2 vols., EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2021), 2:211.

14 Commenting on integrity/blamelessness, Theodoret of Cyrus (393–ca. 466) writes, "My private face corresponded to my public one." Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. Robert C. Hill, 2 vols., FC 101–102 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 2:147.

15 From this point on, most of the psalm has a "three-two" meter, a longer line followed by a shorter line, often characteristic of laments.

16 Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 3:589.

singing, thoughtful pondering, and sorrowful yearning; delight in God is mixed with the recognition that his will is not yet done on earth as it is in heaven. The psalm invites us to enter into this delight and yearning with Christ the King, who fulfilled what David foreshadowed. Some church fathers took this also as a prayer for the coming of Christ in the incarnation, his coming to each soul by the Holy Spirit (cf. John 14:23), and his returning to us in glory.¹⁷

101:2c–4 Watch and Share the Resolve of Christ the King

- I will walk with integrity of heart
within my house;
- 3 I will not set before my eyes
 anything that is worthless.
- I hate the work of those who fall away;
 it shall not cling to me.
- 4 A perverse heart shall be far from me;
 I will know nothing of evil.

The resolution of the King begins with a positive: **I will walk**¹⁸ (cohortative, expressing a determination) **with integrity** (blamelessness, the same word as in Ps. 101:2a) **of heart** (the inmost being). The blameless way of God is reflected in the blameless walk of the King, who will make the Father known (John 1:18). He does this **within my house**, meaning household or palace, government, and even dynasty (as in 2 Sam. 7). The context here is regal rather than domestic.

The positive of Psalm 101:2c–d is followed by five negatives. The first is about the people of whom the King approves (cf. Rom. 1:32): **I will not set before my eyes** speaks of the King's desires.¹⁹ **Anything that is worthless**

¹⁷ J. M. Neale (1818–1866) and R. F. Littledale (1833–1890), *A Commentary on the Psalms from Primitive and Medieval Writers and from the Various Office-Books and Hymns of the Roman, Mozarabic, Ambrosian, Gallican, Greek, Coptic, Armenian, and Syriac Rites*, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (London: Joseph Masters, 1869–1874), 3:278.

¹⁸ Hithpa'el of הִתְהַלֵּךְ, expressing the idea of walking around, the stuff of everyday life.

¹⁹ Augustine mentions the idioms “He can’t take his eyes off her” and “He can’t even spare me a glance” to demonstrate that “to set before my eyes” means to love. Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, trans. Maria Boulding, ed. John E. Rotelle and Boniface Ramsey, 6 vols. (New York:

means “a thing of worthlessness” (דְּבַר-פִּלְיָעַל, *debar beliaal*; cf. “Belial,” 2 Cor. 6:15).²⁰ The word **worthless** implies moral emptiness and consequent destruction, “unworthy aims which, being achieved, destroy” (as in Ps. 18:4, lit., “torrents of *beliaal*”).²¹ All yearnings except steadfast love and justice are without moral value and end in destruction.

Second, **I hate the work of those who fall away**. The verb (here in the perfect form, unusually for this psalm) indicates a resolute renunciation (cf. Pss. 26:5; 31:6; 119:104). **Those who fall away** refers to those who commit transgression, those who turn from the path of blamelessness, and hence to those who apostatize.

Third—following closely from the second—**It shall not cling to me**, where the verb **cling** speaks eloquently of evil attaching itself to my heart and soul (cf. Gen. 2:24; 34:3; Deut. 11:22; 13:4). The closest parallels are Deuteronomy 13:17 and Job 31:7.

Fourth, **A perverse heart shall be far from me**. This literal translation helps us see how this resolve embraces both “I myself resolve not to have a perverse heart” and also “People with perverse hearts will be kept far from partnering with me.”

Fifth, **I will know nothing of evil**—describing a knowledge of personal experience (CSB: “I will not be involved with evil”).

The King who delights in the covenant Lord and longs for his saving presence (Ps. 101:1–2b) is utterly determined that his own desires will be shaped by this delight (101:2c–4). Christ alone lived out this heart of blameless virtue. When the Spirit of Christ works in us, as he first worked in David, we too will find these resolutions of faith welling up within our hearts.

101:5–8 Live as Those Who May Serve Christ the King

- ⁵ Whoever slanders his neighbor secretly
 I will destroy.

New City Press, 2000), 5:35. The verb “saw” in 2 Sam. 11:2 has the same sense of strong desire but is ironic in view of what David says in the psalm.

²⁰ See this exact phrase in Deut. 15:9 (“an unworthy thought”) and Ps. 41:8 (“a deadly thing”).

²¹ J. A. Motyer (1924–2016), *The Psalms*, in *New Bible Commentary*, 21st century ed., ed. G. J. Wenham, J. A. Motyer, D. A. Carson, and R. T. France (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 551.

Whoever has a haughty look and an arrogant heart
I will not endure.

Psalm 101:5 speaks of how the King treats wicked people. Each description is followed by a crisp resolve to punish. **Whoever slanders his neighbor secretly** speaks of one of the most cruel evils in the abuse of power (cf. Ex. 23:1; Prov. 10:18; 20:19; 30:10; possibly echoed in James 4:11),²² an evil from which David had suffered cruelly in the court of Saul. Such a one “is able to murder any subject, and ruin his state, by secret and false reports of him, while the innocent is ignorant of it, and wanteth all opportunity to defend himself.”²³ These, while impenitent, **I will destroy** (as in Ps. 101:8).²⁴ **Whoever has a haughty look and an arrogant heart** probes beneath the slander to the heart (cf. Prov. 21:4, 24; 29:23). The **arrogant heart** is literally “a broad/wide heart” in the negative sense of having “big ideas” about oneself.²⁵ These, if impenitent, the godly King **will not endure**.

⁶ I will look with favor on the faithful in the land,
that they may dwell with me;
he who walks in the way that is blameless
shall minister to me.

This verse interrupts the negatives with a glorious affirmation (cf. Prov. 22:11): **I will look with favor** (lit., “my eyes on”). Each description is followed by a brief response. First, the unusual phrase **the faithful in the land** speaks of people who are reliable and trustworthy (cf. 1 Sam. 22:14; Neh. 13:13; Prov. 11:13; 25:13). The **land** is the promised land. The reward is **that they may dwell with the King**. Second, **he who walks in the way that is blameless** (echoing Ps. 101:2a), who images the King as the King images God, is rewarded with ministry. Not only will he **dwell with the King**, he will share in his government.

²² Frank Lothar Hossfeld (1942–2015) and Erich Zenger (1939–2010), *Psalms*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, ed. Klaus Baltzer, 3 vols., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005–2011), 3:17.

²³ David Dickson (1583–1663), *A Commentary on the Psalms* (London: Banner of Truth, 1959), 2:200.

²⁴ The NIV rendering, “silence,” adopts a less likely meaning of the verb.

²⁵ Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, WBC 21 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 6.

- 7 No one who practices deceit
 shall dwell in my house;
 no one who utters lies
 shall continue before my eyes.

The slander of Psalm 101:5 introduced the motif of deceitful speech, which continues here. With the verb “to dwell” picked up from 101:6, we learn who will *not dwell in* (be “in the midst of”) **my house** (the palace or government of 101:2), in a place of power: the **one who practices** (“works,” echoing “the work” in 101:3) **deceit** (cf. 32:2; 52:2; 120:2–3), the **one who utters lies**, including the secret slanderer of 101:5 and all other twisters of truth. To **dwell in my house** is to **continue** (“be established”; NASB: “maintain his position”) **before my eyes** (the eyes echoing the first word in the Hebrew of 101:6: “look with favor”). As Philip Eveson says, “David . . . was a type of the Christ who will banish from his heavenly city ‘whoever loves and practises a lie’ (Revelation 22:15).”²⁶ Proverbs 29:12 pictures the invasive power of deceit in places of influence: “If a ruler listens to falsehood, / all his officials will be wicked.”

- 8 Morning by morning I will destroy
 all the wicked in the land,
 cutting off all the evildoers
 from the city of the LORD.

The terrible but necessary climax is the determination of the King to cleanse **the land** (the promised land that will be fulfilled in the new creation), which is also **the city of the LORD**, a reference finally to the New Jerusalem. All the promised land will be the city of God. This he will do **morning by morning**, an idiom expressing both urgency (the first action of the day; cf. Ex. 18:13; 2 Sam. 15:2; Jer. 21:12) and perseverance in the task (what John Calvin calls “unremitted exertion”).²⁷ The verb **I will destroy** echoes Psalm 101:5. The human being to whom this terrible task is entrusted is the King (here, as in 18:40). The repeated word **all** leaves no

²⁶ Eveson, *Psalms*, 2:204.

²⁷ Calvin, *Psalms*, 4:94.

wickedness remaining. The phrase **cutting off** speaks of a final separation from all life and hope (cf. 12:3; 34:16). All impenitent evildoers—and all wickedness—will be excluded from the New Jerusalem (cf. Rev. 21:8; 22:15; note the echoes of lies and falsehood).

REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

1. Our first response is to reflect on this godly determination of David and the desperate sadness of watching him fail. As we watch, we remember that all those who think that they stand must take heed lest they fall (1 Cor. 10:12). We can have no self-righteousness, let alone self-confidence; if even David, the man after God's own heart, should fail like this, no mere human can hope to exercise power aright. Like David, "we shall find need to write a Psalm of penitence very soon after our Psalm of good resolution."²⁸ And yet it is good to resolve to use our power for justice, then to repent when we fail, and again to resolve afresh.

2. We wonder at the godly perfection with which the Lord Jesus Christ on earth both resolved to keep the commitments of Psalm 101 and fulfilled them. And so we cry, "Come, Lord Jesus!" and long for his return in glory. Only then will all power be exercised with steadfast love and justice.

3. Pastors in Christ's church must hear this psalm as a call never to allow our power to go to our heads, never to allow ourselves to become those who misuse our influence, but always to walk by the Spirit of Christ in his footsteps (note how 1 Tim. 3:1–13; 2 Tim. 2:14–26; and Titus 1:5–9 echo some of the themes of Psalm 101).

4. Eveson comments, "It became a practice among a number of puritan families of the seventeenth century for expositions of this psalm to be used by ministers called to give a sermon when a couple set up a new home or when a family moved to a new house."²⁹

5. The grand principle that power is given in order to exercise on earth the steadfast love and justice of God extends beyond the church to everyone given authority in any and every sphere of life, from parents in the family to teachers, managers, and senior people in any organization right up to

²⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon (1834–1892), *The Treasury of David*, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2016), 2.2:240.

²⁹ Eveson, *Psalms*, 2:201.

politicians and heads of state (cf. 1 Pet. 2:14). In the Book of Common Prayer, it is set as a “Proper Psalm for the Anniversary of the Accession of the Monarch.” Luther treated Psalm 101 as a manual for the Christian prince, lamenting that “where there are godless kings and lords, who, according to Psalm 2, are enemies of God and of His Christ, there you have a nice mess.”³⁰ One seventeenth-century ruler sent an unfaithful government minister a copy of Psalm 101; it became a proverb, when an official misbehaved, to say, “He will certainly soon receive the prince’s psalm.”³¹ It would make a good psalm for any president or monarch.

6. Against the nonsense that says a person’s private life is of no significance for his or her public office, David Dickson comments, “He that purposeth to carry a public charge well, must discharge the duty of a private man well in his own person, and make his own personal carriage exemplary to all who shall hear of him.”³²

7. The severe warnings of Psalm 101:5 and 7–8 speak to us when power begins to go to our heads. When our flawless King ushers in his kingdom, there will be no place for any exercise of power other than that which mirrors his perfect covenant love and justice. “This was David’s resolution as a type of Christ,” writes Dickson, “and howsoever in execution much was wanting in the type, yet Christ will perform all this exactly in his own appointed time, and in his own order, partly in this life, partly at men’s death, and partly at the last day.”³³

³⁰ Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 13:180, 182.

³¹ F. Delitzsch (1813–1890), *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. Francis Bolton, CFTL, 4th ser., vols. 29–31 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1892), 3:107.

³² Dickson, *Psalms*, 2:199.

³³ Dickson, *Psalms*, 2:201.

A poor man, one single poor man, is praying in this psalm, and he does not pray silently. We have the opportunity to listen to him and find out who he is; and perhaps we shall find that he is none other than the one of whom the apostle wrote [in 2 Corinthians 8:9].

AUGUSTINE

Expositions of the Psalms

It is Christ, in the days of his humiliation, that is before us.

ANDREW BONAR

Christ and His Church in the Book of Psalms

PSALM 102

ORIENTATION

The Jesus whose young life was cut short by death (Ps. 102:23–24) is the Jesus whose years have no end (102:27) and who is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). The power of his life, destroyed at the cross and yet indestructible (Heb. 7:16), is the only hope of each afflicted believer who prays Psalm 102. The executed sufferer is the eternal Savior. The psalm is supremely about the sufferer who is God incarnate praying to God in heaven. This wonderful paradox lies at the heart of Psalm 102.

We must consider two questions before we can approach the psalm with confidence.¹ The first is the relationship between the individual afflicted believer (102:1–11) and the whole church of God (102:12–22). This move from the intensely personal lament of 102:1–11 to the resolutely corporate focus on “Zion” in 102:12–22 is very striking. We do not know who wrote the psalm, but it is natural to suppose that the author speaks both for himself (in the individual lament) and for his nation. Allan Harman makes the plausible suggestion that he might be “a member of the Davidic royal house who composed it while in exile.”² We cannot be sure.

The superscription indicates that the one who prays is a believer who is afflicted; he pours out his heart to “the LORD” and thereby identifies as a member of “Zion” (102:12–13). He feels his affliction as a part of the sufferings of the church: “The poet is one into whose heart the sorrows of the nation have entered so deeply that he feels them all his own. . . . [H]e speaks not for himself

¹ There is a summary of the bewildering variety of suggested interpretations of the psalm in Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 16–18.

² Allan Harman, *Psalms*, 2 vols., MC (Fearn, Ross-Shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2011), 2:727.

alone, but for the whole body of his fellow-countrymen in exile.”³ As David Dickson writes, “The most kindly grief of a lively member of the church is that grief wherein he sympathizeth with the calamity of the body.”⁴ This grief is felt supremely by Jesus, movingly displayed when he weeps over Jerusalem.

It is likely that the one who laments does so as a representative, even a leader, of the covenant people. Many older writers consider David to have been the author (as of Pss. 101; 103); if that is the case, it is all the more apparent that the psalmist here identifies in his sufferings and hopes with those of the people. As Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg writes, for David, “every man’s prospects for the future are cast after the mould of his own personal experience.”⁵ The superscription, however, does not claim that David is the author, and 102:12–22 accords very naturally with the context of exile. Whenever he wrote, the psalmist prayed by the Spirit of the anointed King in a way that opens up a very natural fulfillment in Christ.⁶ This is confirmed when we consider the second question.

The second interpretive question concerns the quotation of Psalm 102:25–27 in Hebrews 1:10–12.⁷ The author of Hebrews seems to choose this psalm text for at least three reasons: (1) to support the declaration that it was through the Son that God created the world (Heb. 1:2), (2) to underpin the emphasis on Christ’s permanence (especially his permanent priesthood, Heb. 7:23–25), and (3) to support the contrast between this transient order and the eternal order of the world to come (Heb. 12:26–28). So the second question is this: In what sense can these psalm verses be spoken by God (the Father) “of the Son” (Heb. 1:8)?⁸ The problem is that, on the face of it, the whole of Psalm 102:24–28 is a second-person address from the psalmist to God.⁹ How do we resolve this question?

3 Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 3:593.

4 Dickson, *Psalms*, 2:202.

5 Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 3:213.

6 Hamilton observes that Pss. 101 and 103 give “a Davidic tinge to the ‘afflicted’ man who prays [Ps. 102].” He rightly considers that this points to the future hoped-for “David.” Hamilton, *Psalms*, 2:217.

7 For a clear and detailed consideration of the context in Heb. 1 and the text forms in the MT, LXX, and Hebrews, see George H. Guthrie, “Hebrews,” in *CNTOT* 939–42.

8 The words “But of the Son he [God] says” (Heb. 1:8) describe both the quotation from Ps. 45 (Heb. 1:8–9) and the quotation from Ps. 102 (Heb. 1:10–12). Guthrie, “Hebrews,” in *CNTOT* 939.

9 This is how Ps. 102 is punctuated in the CSB, NASB, and NIV, in which the quotation continues from 102:24 through 102:28. The ESV, NRSV, and REB close the quotation at the end of 102:24.

Some think that Hebrews simply takes words that apply to God and refers them to the Son as part of the writer's declaration of the greatness of Jesus Christ. For example, John Calvin argues, especially from Psalm 102:13 and 15, that although Christ is not named in the psalm (it is not explicitly messianic), only in Christ will we find the God who is described in the psalm, who will reunite the whole world.¹⁰

This approach assumes that Hebrews is using the quotation to *declare something* about Jesus rather than to *support an argument* about Jesus. Once we are convinced of the deity of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we will acknowledge the validity of such a declaration; it may be that the author expects his (Christian) readers to acknowledge this declaration already.

Alternatively, he may write not simply to declare but rather to persuade wavering Jewish Christian believers of the greatness of Jesus; he cannot assume that they are already securely convinced. If so, the catena of Old Testament quotations in Hebrews 1:5–13 can have persuasive force only if his readers already know that these texts are messianic and speak of the Son. It will persuade no one for the writer to say, “Here are some verses that say that God is the eternal Creator; Jesus is God; therefore, Jesus is the eternal Creator,” unless they are already persuaded that Jesus is God.

The Septuagint attests to a pre-Christian understanding that Psalm 102:25–27 is messianic; this understanding accords with the theme in Psalms 2, 45, 97, and 110 that the eternal dominion of God will be exercised on earth through his anointed King—and Psalm 45 is even quoted in Hebrews 1:8–9, just before Psalm 102 in Hebrews 1:10–12.¹¹ The Septuagint adds the vocative address “you, Lord” in Psalm 102:25. Although this is not in the Hebrew, it may be that the Septuagint correctly understands 102:25–27 to be God's answer to his Son, who is understood to be praying the psalm.¹² When Hebrews quotes Psalm 102 (almost verbatim from

Since there are no speech marks in biblical Hebrew, all speech marks in translations express the translator's interpretation.

10 Calvin, *Psalms*, 4:47–48. For similar views, see Tucker and Grant, *Psalms*, 2:477; Tremper Longman III, *Psalms*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 355.

11 See the helpful discussions in Stephen Motyer, “The Psalm Quotations of Hebrews 1: A Hermeneutic-Free Zone?,” *TynBul* 50, no. 1 (1999): 19–21; Hamilton, *Psalms*, 2:220–21.

12 Although κύριος has been used to translate יהוה earlier in the psalm, here it seems to refer to divine wisdom or the Messiah; see Guthrie, “Hebrews,” in *CNTOT* 940. The LXX also (1) translates the root ענה in Ps. 102:23 with “he answered” (ἀπεκρίθη), presupposing the root pointed as ענה rather than the MT rendering, ענה, and (2) follows the kethib in the MT, “his strength”

the LXX), it does so knowing that its readers rightly understand the psalm as messianic. The writer can argue from this understanding to persuade them of the greatness of Jesus the Messiah.¹³

In this way the New Testament teaches us to read Psalm 102 supremely as both the prayer of Jesus, the representative head of the church (102:1–24), and the answer of the Father (102:25–27). The psalm is given, in Christ, to each afflicted member of the church. As we read 102:25–27, we rejoice and marvel that the eternal Son of God, to whom these verses are addressed, is one with God the Father in the Holy Spirit. We may therefore read 102:25–27 as addressed to God by the afflicted psalmist, so conscious of his days being cut short, appealing to the eternal God to save him and his people, and as addressed simultaneously by the Father to the Son on behalf of his church. It may be that the statement “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8) echoes Psalm 102:27.¹⁴

In its canonical context, Psalm 102 expands the anguished cry of 101:2, “Oh when will you come to me?” The other significant links with Psalm 101 are (1) “the city of the LORD” (101:8) with “Zion” (102:13, 16, 21) and (2) the heart (101:2, 5; 102:4).¹⁵

Other scriptural links include (1) the language of lament in Psalms 22; 69; 79; and 143:3–4; (2) the concern with transient mortality in Psalm 90, the first psalm of book 4 (note “grass,” “days,” “years”); (3) the eternity of God in the context of the distress of Zion in Lamentations (e.g., “all generations,” Ps. 102:12; Lam. 5:19); and (4) some of the language of Isaiah 40–66.

(כֹּחַ), rather than the kere, “my strength” (כֹּחִי). The verse then begins, “He [i.e., God] answered him [the psalmist] in his [God’s] strength.” These LXX readings suggest that the translators understood 102:25–27 as God’s answer to the psalmist.

13 This understanding is supported by Eveson, *Psalms*, 2:211–12; Geoffrey W. Grogan (1925–2011), *Psalms*, THOTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 172; Kidner, *Psalms*, 2:362–63; Michael Wilcock, *The Message of the Psalms: Songs for the People of God*, 2 vols., TBST (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 2:116–17; Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 170–71; Andrew A. Bonar (1810–1892), *Christ and His Church in the Book of Psalms* (London: J. Nisbet, 1859), 303. Many, perhaps most, post-“Enlightenment” commentators regard the Hebrews citation as arbitrary and unjustified by modern standards.

14 Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 3:29; Harold W. Attridge, “The Psalms in Hebrews,” in *The Psalms in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 203.

15 Other verbal but insignificant links are listed in Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 3:16.

Because the psalmist's sufferings come from the wrath of God (Ps. 102:10), this has traditionally been seen as one of the seven penitential psalms.¹⁶

THE TEXT

Structure

Psalm 102:1–11 is a personal lament. This is followed in 102:12–22 by a corporate expression of faith (divided into 102:12–17 and 102:18–22). An important link between these sections is the word “prayer” in 102:S, 1, and 17. Psalm 102:23–24 returns to an urgent prayer of lament. At the same time, 102:25–27 is the promise of the Father to the Son and the continued prayer of the afflicted believer to the triune God, with a particular focus on Jesus the Son (see the *orientation* section above). Psalm 102:28 is a concluding word of trust.

Superscription

- ^S A Prayer of one afflicted, when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the LORD.¹⁷

The word **Prayer** (repeated in Ps. 102:1, 17) emphasizes the theme of supplication.¹⁸ The rest of the first line focuses on the state of the petitioner. The preposition **of** (לְ, *le*) in the phrase **of one afflicted** includes the meanings that it is spoken by one **afflicted** and that it is given for others who are **afflicted** (i.e., both “*of* one afflicted” and “*for* one afflicted”). The word refers to one who is humbled or brought low (see the significant uses with reference to the Messiah in Zech. 9:9 [“humble”] and with reference to Zion in Isa. 54:11, notable in view of the focus on Zion in Ps. 102:12–22). To be **faint** means to languish, to feel one’s strength ebbing away, to pine with grief (see the uses in Lam. 2:11–12 of Zion in exile and in Pss. 61:2; 77:3; 107:5; 142:3; 143:4).

The second line describes what the psalm expresses on the lips of this believer. He **pours out** (cf. Pss. 62:8; 142:2) **his complaint**, where the word

¹⁶ The traditional penitential psalms are Pss. 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143.

¹⁷ In Hebrew the superscription is verse 1; subsequent verse numbers are increased by one.

¹⁸ Note also the significant occurrences of the noun “prayer” in Ps. 72:20 (conclusion of books 1 and 2) and in the superscriptions to Pss. 17; 86; 142 (all of David) and to Ps. 90 (of Moses).

complaint (תַּשׁוּ, *shiakh*) means an earnest lament rather than a grumbling (e.g., 1 Sam. 1:16 [“anxiety”]; Pss. 55:2; 64:1; 142:2).¹⁹ All this is **before the LORD**, for Jesus our afflicted one brings us into the presence of God in prayer.

102:1–11 Each Believer Prays and Laments with Christ

- ¹ Hear my prayer, O LORD;
let my cry come to you!
- ² Do not hide your face from me
in the day of my distress!
Incline your ear to me;
answer me speedily in the day when I call!

As Christ prayed with loud cries and tears (Heb. 5:7), so each member of his suffering church begins this psalm with intense urgency. **O LORD** is the first word in Hebrew. The language is similar to Psalms 39:12 (102:1a); 18:6 (102:1b); 27:9 (102:2a); 59:16 (102:2b); 31:2 and 71:2 (102:2c); and 31:2; 56:9; and 69:17 (102:2d). For God to **hide his face** means to remove his favor and cause **distress** (e.g., Job 13:24; Pss. 69:17; 88:14; 89:46; 104:29; 143:7; contrast the blessing of Num. 6:25). Notice how **the day of my distress** is also **the day when I call**, for prayer is the response of the believer to pressure.

Psalm 102:3–11 is wrapped in words of transience (“days,” 102:3, 11; “grass,” 102:4, 11).

- ³ For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.
- ⁴ My heart is struck down like grass and has withered;
I forget to eat my bread.
- ⁵ Because of my loud groaning
my bones cling to my flesh.

Four images of pain are piled one on top of another. Psalms 37:20 and 68:2 use similar imagery to that in 102:3–4 to describe the destiny of the wicked, for the petitioner in Psalm 102 is bearing the wrath of God for sinners. The

¹⁹ In Ps. 104:34 the word תַּשׁוּ has a contrasting sense of a joyful noise.

first image (102:3a) is **smoke**, a vivid picture of transience (**my days pass away**, are consumed, vanish); I long to endure, but I cannot last, survive, or have any enduring existence. The second and fourth images (102:3b, 5) focus on **my bones**, the substance of my embodied being, what gives me strength, “the interior fortress of the body.”²⁰ These **burn like a furnace** (as if I was in an oven or on a hearth) with a fever that will consume me. And **because of my loud groaning** (lit., “the voice of my groaning,” a sad moaning, a sighing; cf. Job 3:24; 23:2; Pss. 6:6; 38:9; Lam. 1:22), they **cling to my flesh**, which probably means extreme emaciation (cf. Job 19:20; Ps. 22:17; Lam. 4:8). The third image (102:4a) is **my heart**, the core of my being, which **is struck down** (smitten, beaten, attacked, blighted) **like the transient grass** of a hot climate **and has withered** away (cf. 90:6). **I forget to eat my bread** is not so much an image as a description of the loss of appetite for life, the absence of all desire. This state, sometimes called *acedia*, can lie behind the inertia of the sluggard who cannot be motivated to lift his food to his lips (Prov. 19:24), but here it is a sign of very low spirits (cf. 1 Sam. 1:7; 28:22–23; Ps. 107:18; and—in contrasting contexts—1 Sam. 28:20; 1 Kings 21:4). Here is a believer—and finally Jesus Christ—under the shadow of death, standing at the very gates of hell.

- 6 I am like a desert owl of the wilderness,
like an owl of the waste places;
7 I lie awake;
I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop.
8 All the day my enemies taunt me;
those who deride me use my name for a curse.

In Psalm 102:6–7 the picture shifts to the desperate loneliness of the night. **Desert owl** and **owl** translate words whose precise meaning is uncertain. The first (תַּעֲזָז, *qaath*) is an unclean bird that dwells in wastelands (see Lev. 11:18; Deut. 14:17 [“tawny owl”]; Isa. 34:11; Zeph. 2:14). The second (כּוֹס, *kos*) is also an unclean bird (Lev. 11:17; Deut. 14:16). The picture is filled out by **the wilderness** (or desert), **the waste places** (חֲרֵבָה, *kharebah*, used in Lev. 26:31, 33, in connection with covenant curses), and the adjective

²⁰ Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 3:215.

lonely (cf. “a wild donkey wandering alone,” Hos. 8:9) with the location **on the housetop** (the flat roof).²¹ The identification of the **sparrow** is uncertain; its misery is seen also in Lamentations 3:52 (“a bird”). Paradoxically, the same bird finds a home in the temple in Psalm 84:3. **I lie awake** conveys something of the misery of being exhausted but unable to sleep. While others rest, this believer wrestles alone in prayer (cf. Jesus in Gethsemane, Matt. 26:40).

If the nighttime is miserable, **all the day** is lonely in a different way, surrounded by **my enemies** who **taunt** (revile) **me** and **deride me** (cf. Ps. 42:10). They **use my name for a curse**, which means something like “I wish you were cursed like that person; just look at his (well-deserved) misery!” (cf. similar idioms in Ps. 44:14; Isa. 65:15; Jer. 29:22). Being separated from fellowship and friendship, mocked as under the judgment of God, this is misery indeed.

- ⁹ For I eat ashes like bread
and mingle tears with my drink,
¹⁰ because of your indignation and anger;
for you have taken me up and thrown me down.

The move from pain to loneliness reaches its climax in Psalm 102:9–10. To **eat ashes** (or dust) **like bread** (cf. Lam. 3:16) is a picture of being cast down to the ground and eating the ashes that have been thrown there; it is to be the lowest of the low, like the serpent (Gen. 3:14) or Job outside the city (Job 2:8). To **minge tears with my drink** expresses deep and unbroken sorrow.

But the climax comes in Psalm 102:10. All this is **because of your indignation and anger**; what I suffer, I endure as the righteous judgment of God, **for you have taken me up and thrown me down**, a vivid and terrible image of being picked up and thrown away as rubbish. To be **thrown . . . down** is what happens to the wicked (Job 27:20–22), what happened to innocent Job (Job 30:22), and what happens when Israel is “cast out” (the same verb) of God’s sight in exile (Jer. 7:15). Finally, this is the atoning suffering of Jesus Christ.

²¹ Cf. the image of grass on the housetop in Ps. 129:6.

- ¹¹ My days are like an evening shadow;
I wither away like grass.

Psalm 102:11 brings the personal lament to a summarizing pause (it will be reignited in 102:23–24). The **evening shadow** is literally “the lengthening shadow,” whose only future is to disappear (cf. 109:23 of David, fulfilled in Christ). I at the start of the second line is emphatic, to be contrasted with **you** at the start of 102:12 and 13 (italicized to show the emphasis). To **wither away like grass** recapitulates 102:4. Every believer may pray and lament with Christ like this, for even when some days are happy, we belong to the Christ whose members (the church) are suffering, and when one suffers, all suffer together (1 Cor. 12:26).

102:12–22 Christ Leads His Church in a Prayer of Trust

The personal prayer of Psalm 102:1–11 becomes a corporate expression of faith focused on “Zion” (102:13, 16, 21) in 102:12–22. The individual sufferer (fulfilled in Jesus Christ) leads the church in a corporate prayer.

- ¹² *But you*, O LORD, are enthroned forever;
you are remembered throughout all generations.
- ¹³ *You* will arise and have pity on Zion;
it is the time to favor her;
the appointed time has come.
- ¹⁴ For your servants hold her stones dear
and have pity on her dust.

But you (the first word of 102:12) and **you** (the first word of 102:13) are emphatic, in contrast with the emphatic “I” that begins the second line of 102:11. The focus in 102:12 is on the covenant Lord as **enthroned** (lit., “seated”; cf. 29:10; Lam. 5:19) and **remembered** (lit., “your memory/memorial”; see on “his holy name” in Ps. 30:4); God reveals his name, and that name will never cease to be **remembered** (cf. Ex. 3:15), in marked contrast with the sufferer, who cannot even remember to eat his food (Ps. 102:4). With the Lord is endurance (**forever . . . throughout all generations**), in strong contrast with the transient “days” of 102:3–11 (cf. Ps. 90). The kingdom of God, brought to earth in the kingdom of Christ,

endures forever, unlike the reigns of the Davidic kings before him. As Hengstenberg explains,

Though the symptoms of the destruction of the family of David (the culminating point of which family was Christ), and of the church be ever so threatening, the eternal dominion of the Lord forms the sure guarantee for its maintenance. Whoever wishes to destroy it, must first put down God from his throne, which throughout eternity shall never be done.²²

The first line of 102:13 has two verbs with no connective and is marked by a beautiful consonance: **You will arise** (אַתָּה תִקוּם, *atah thaqum*), you will **have pity** (תִּרְחֶם, *terakhem*) **on Zion**, the old covenant church, with a suggestive movement from **you** (the first word) to **Zion** (the last). This is the sure consequence of the eternal government of God (102:12), that God will **arise** for action (cf. 3:7; 68:1) and take **pity** on the church. The two words **time** and **appointed time** are synonyms here, emphatically claiming that there is an appointed time, the right time, at which God will act (cf. Gal. 4:4); this time is always near, always “now,” always to be prayed for and expected soon.

Covenantal love is at the heart of the restoration of the church. **For your servants** (covenant servants) love the church, which is the focus of God’s promises in Christ. They **hold her stones dear** and **have pity on her dust**, the rubble and debris of Jerusalem in the exile (cf. the same noun in Neh. 4:2 [“heaps of rubbish”], 10 [“rubble”]).²³ There may be an allusion to the destruction of a leper’s house; in Leviticus 14:45 the same nouns are used for “stones” and “plaster” (i.e., dust);²⁴ in their uncleanness the people of God came under judgment, just as Jesus would later come under judgment for them that he might make the leper clean (Mark 1:40–42). Jesus loves the broken church, and in him the love of God is poured out for her.

¹⁵ Nations will fear the name of the LORD,
and all the kings of the earth will fear your glory.

¹⁶ For the LORD builds up Zion;
he appears in his glory;

²² Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 3:218.

²³ For this same imagery of ruin, see Ezek. 26:12 (of Tyre).

²⁴ Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 3:219.

- 17 he regards the prayer of the destitute
and does not despise their prayer.

Psalm 102:15–17 shows us the astonishing **glory** that will come at the appointed time. Not only **nations** in general but **all the kings of the earth**, in their comprehensiveness (**all . . . the earth**) and their power (**kings**), **will fear** (in Hebrew one verb does duty for both lines) **the name** and the **glory** of the covenant Lord. This extraordinary vision of worldwide gathering (cf. Isa. 2:2–4; 59:19–20; Hag. 2:7) is fulfilled in Christ and the new Jerusalem, which shines with God’s glory (Rev. 21:10–11). Psalm 102:16 shows us what causes (**for**) worldwide worship: the building of Christ’s church. As Augustine writes, “The work is going on now. Come on, then, you living stones [1 Pet. 2:5], run to take your places in an edifice that is sound and no ruin. Zion is under construction.”²⁵

The link between Psalm 102:16 and 17 is that the building of Christ’s church (cf. 69:35 for the association of Zion with being built up) when the **glory** of God appears on earth is, at the same time, the outworking of God heeding the **prayer** of his **destitute** Son. The word **destitute** (הָעֲרֵר, *haarar*) means stripped or naked. Jesus hung naked on the cross, and our proper self-understanding in prayer is that we come spiritually naked (Rev. 3:17), bringing nothing of our merit but clinging to that cross in our hearts. Psalm 22:24 is very similar to 102:17 in the context of the sufferings of Christ.

- 18 Let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD:
19 that he looked down from his holy height;
from heaven the LORD looked at the earth,
20 to hear the groans of the prisoners,
to set free those who were doomed to die,
21 that they may declare in Zion the name of the LORD,
and in Jerusalem his praise,
22 when peoples gather together,
and kingdoms, to worship the LORD.

²⁵ Augustine, *Psalms*, 5:61.

Psalm 102:18–22 moves from God’s actions toward the church (102:12–17) to a **recording** of those actions (102:18) that leads to a **declaration** of the gospel (102:21). **Let this be recorded** (or “this will be recorded”)²⁶ **for a generation to come**, so that the memorial of God’s saving grace will continue through all generations (102:12). Something similar is prophesied in 22:30 as a result of the cross of Christ. The **people** are described as **yet to be created**, using the verb that refers to God’s work in creation (בָּרָא, *bara*). This will be a new humanity, “the church of the future,”²⁷ which was once “not a people” but is now “God’s people” (1 Pet. 2:10; cf. Isa. 43:7; 48:7)—they will be a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

What will be recorded is described in Psalm 102:19–20. It begins when God **looks down**, as he did before the exodus and as he always does in unmerited grace and mercy. He looks **to hear the groans of the prisoners** (cf. 69:33; 79:11; 107:10; Lam. 3:34), living under the shadow of death (for **doomed to die**, lit., “sons of death,” see on Ps. 79:11, which is very similar to this verse). What is **recorded** is a new exodus, to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The result of this recorded and retold gospel is given in 102:21–22, a declaration **in Zion of the name** (the revelation) of the covenant Lord. This declaration will be made and heard by those spoken of in 102:15, the **peoples and kingdoms** who will be **gathered together . . . to worship** (lit., “to serve”; cf. “your servants,” 102:14) the God and Father of Jesus Christ. The fulfillment of this prophecy runs from Acts 2 all the way to Revelation 7:9.²⁸

102:23–28 A Prayer and an Astonishing Promise: The Reassured Church Prays in the Name of the Reassured Son

²³ He has broken my strength in midcourse;
he has shortened my days.

²⁴ “O my God,” I say, “take me not away
in the midst of my days—
you whose years endure
throughout all generations!”

²⁶ The verb form may be translated as either a jussive or a simple future.

²⁷ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 3:116. Cf. Hamilton, *Psalms*, 2:220.

²⁸ Harman, *Psalms*, 2:732.

With Psalm 102:23 we return to the lament of 102:1–11. But the subject of the verbs is still the God whose gospel actions have been celebrated in 102:18–22. The rebuilding of the church is not contradicted by the shortened life of the psalmist (**broken my strength in midcourse, shortened my days**); rather, it is guaranteed by it. Psalm 102:24 sets side by side the transient mortality of this believer under the shadow of death (**in the midst of my days**; cf. 55:23; Isa. 38:10) and the eternity of God (**you whose years endure / throughout all generations**; cf. the contrast of “days” and “years” in Ps. 90). The verb **I say** gives emphasis to this petition. What happens when the eternity of the God of the covenant is set side by side with the mortal transience of his covenant servant? Psalm 102:25–27 answers this question in a surprising way.

- 25 Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
- 26 *They* will perish, but *you* will remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
- You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,
- 27 but *you* are the same, and your years have no end.

Psalm 102:25–27 is “a closed segment” of text and should be considered as such.²⁹ Psalm 102:25 includes the usual merism³⁰ (**earth . . . heavens**) to indicate the entire created order as the work of the Creator’s hands (cf. Isa. 51:6). This is the afflicted believer’s word to God and also the Father’s astonishing assurance to the Son (see the discussion in the *orientation* section above). The focus is not mainly on creation but rather on endurance, as 102:26–27 makes clear. **They** (emphatic)—the elements of the created order in this age—**will perish** (cf. 2 Pet. 3:7), **but you** (emphatic, the Son, who is one with the Father and the Spirit in the triune God) **will remain**. In a startling image, the created order of this age is compared to a **garment** or a **robe** that will **wear out** and be changed and **pass away**. But **you** (emphatic, first word of 102:27) **are the same** (lit., “you are he”; cf. Deut. 32:39; Isa. 41:4; 46:4; etc.), **and your years** (years contrasted with transient

29 Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 3:21.

30 A literary device for including everything between two opposites.

days) **have no end**. This, true of the triune God, is true of God the Son, true astonishingly of the man Christ Jesus, who is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8).

28 The children of your servants shall dwell secure;
 their offspring shall be established before you.

Psalm 102:28 ends the psalm, which contains such sore distress, on a note of confidence. Because Jesus Christ has suffered and died, he will build his church, he endures forever, and therefore, **the children of your servants** (future generations of covenant servants; see 102:14, 22; cf. 69:36) **shall dwell secure**, back from exile, living in the promised land of the new creation. **Their offspring shall be established**—the very opposite of transient mortality—**before you**. The church of Christ is sure because Christ has died. Christians who suffer and die may be sure that they and all the church will endure forever with their eternal Savior.

REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

1. In the light of Hebrews 1:10–12, it is a healthy discipline to begin our meditation on Psalm 102 by considering the sufferings of Jesus, the one supremely “afflicted” and “faint” (102:S, 1–11), and to continue by reflecting on his promise to build his church (102:12–17) and on the gospel in which all this is recorded and declared (102:18–22) before pondering the astonishing paradox of 102:23–27, that the Jesus who suffered is Christ the eternal Son.

2. The psalm is also given for each and every believer who is “afflicted” and “faint” and who “pours out his complaint.” We may pray the urgent prayer of Psalm 102:1–2 and voice the terrible lament of 102:3–11 not simply when our own sufferings seem to approximate this description in some way but also when we want to express our solidarity with the persecuted and suffering church.

3 Setting Psalm 102:1–11 alongside 102:12–22 helps us remember that no Christian suffering is purely individual; each groan, each troubled day, each lonely night, is a part of the sufferings of “Zion,” the church of Christ. The assurances of 102:12–22 refer not simply to “Zion” as a

whole but to each man, woman, and child who belongs to “Zion”—that is, who is in Christ.

4. The lament of Psalm 102:23–24 is answered by the remarkable promise of 102:25–27. We are rightly amazed that this promise relates not simply to the eternity of God in some abstract way but specifically to the eternity of the Son, who is the covenant head of his church. Our endurance rests on his eternity, even as we take up our cross daily and walk in his footsteps, even as we know what it is to have our days cut short.

5. Psalm 102:28 sets the tone of the close of the psalm and encourages us, whatever our distresses, to let the psalm move us from the affliction and faintness of its superscription to a wonderful assurance that Christ will build his church (Matt. 16:18)—that Christ will raise up on the last day each and every one whom the Father has given him (John 6:39).

Let our soul bless the Lord. Let it bless the Lord our God for every gift he gives us, for every consolation he sends, for every rebuke, for the grace he has deigned to shower on us, for the forgiveness that stays the punishment that was owed to us, and for all his works.

AUGUSTINE
Expositions of the Psalms

There is too much in [Psalm 103] for a thousand pens to write, it is one of those all-comprehending Scriptures which is a Bible in itself, and it might alone almost suffice for the hymn-book of the church.

CHARLES H. SPURGEON
The Treasury of David

*Praise, my soul, the King of heaven,
To his feet your tribute bring;
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Who like me his praise should sing?*

HENRY FRANCIS LYTE
“Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven”

PSALM 103

ORIENTATION

Every blessing of Psalm 103, this beautiful psalm, is found in Christ because all the devotion of the psalm was first perfectly lived by Christ. David is a type of Christ as he sings the psalm; Jesus in the perfection of his obedient life lived out this adoration, entirely without sin. He was the first and only Israelite fully to fear the covenant Lord (103:11, 13, 17) and wholly to keep the covenant (103:18). Only because he did so could he die as the propitiation for our sins. He leads his church in celebrating the forgiveness of our sins because he himself has won that forgiveness for us. The sins that were passed over in the old covenant context of the psalm have been paid for by his atoning death (Rom. 3:25–26).¹ By his covenantal obedience, the many are made righteous (Rom. 5:19). Mary echoes Psalm 103:11, 13, and 17 when she sings that “his mercy is for those who fear him” (Luke 1:50),² a mercy fulfilled in the son she bears. James echoes Psalm 103:8 when he writes of the Lord being “compassionate and merciful” (James 5:11); he does so both in the context of God’s mercy to Job, who in his restoration is a type of Christ in his resurrection, and in the context of the return of the Lord Jesus (James 5:7), who will bring that covenant compassion and mercy to its consummation. In the drama of Mark 2:1–12, Jesus demonstrates that he exercises the authority of God to forgive sins and to heal diseases, thus fulfilling Psalm 103:3. Jesus brings in the kingdom of God to rule over all, where the “throne in the heavens” (103:19) is inseparable

¹ Harman, *Psalms*, 2:735.

² David W. Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Luke,” in *CNTOT* 261; Hans-Joachim Kraus (1918–2000), *Theology of the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 195.

from Christ (Rev. 4:2). Jesus Christ is both the lead singer and the central subject of the psalm.

Psalm 103 looks back to Psalms 101 (the other “of David” psalm in book 4) and 102. The most significant links with Psalm 102 are (1) human transience in terms of passing “days” and “grass” (102:3, 11, 23; 103:15–16), (2) “ashes” and “dust” (same Hebrew term; 102:9; 103:14), (3) God’s anger (102:10; 103:8), (4) God’s rule (102:12; 103:19), (5) God’s enduring (102:12; 103:17), (6) God’s works (102:25; 103:22), and (7) the organic flow of Psalm 102 into 103 as Psalm 103 responds to the God who has kept his promise that he “will arise and have pity on Zion” (102:13). The Davidic words of Psalm 103 take on a fresh relevance in the context of book 4 with the hope of return from exile. But as Alexander Francis Kirkpatrick notes, the psalm “furnishes fit language of thanksgiving for the greater blessings of a more marvellous redemption than that of Israel from Babylon.”³

Links between Psalms 103 and 104 include the following: (1) “Bless the LORD, O my soul” (103:1, 22; 104:1, 35); (2) “messengers/angels” (103:20; 104:4); (3) humans as “dust” (103:14; 104:29); and (4) God’s “renewal” (103:5; 104:30). Together, Psalms 103 and 104 praise God for redemption and creation.

The reign of God in 103:19 connects the psalm with Psalms 93–100.

The most significant wider Old Testament link is with Exodus 32–34. The psalm includes an allusion to Exodus 33:13 (in the clause “He made known his ways to Moses,” Ps. 103:7) and a quotation of Exodus 34:7 in Psalm 103:8.⁴ There are similarities of language with the Prophets, notably Isaiah 40–66. The psalm also shares thematic links of prayers about Israel’s sin with, for example, Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9, and Daniel 9.

The word “all” is a distinctive of the psalm at the beginning (five times in Ps. 103:1–6) and end (four times in 103:19–22). The twenty-two verses (the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet) may also hint at completeness (although the psalm is not an alphabetic acrostic).

There are remarkable points of contact with the Lord’s Prayer, including (1) God’s fatherly compassion (103:13), (2) God’s holy name (103:1),

³ Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 3:600.

⁴ For descriptions of God in the Psalms echoing Ps. 103:8, see 78:38; 86:15; 99:8; 111:4; 145:8.

(3) forgiveness of sins (103:3, 10–12), (4) satisfaction (daily bread, 103:5), and (5) God ruling on earth as in heaven (103:19).

THE TEXT

Structure

Psalm 103:1–5 begins with the King speaking to his “soul.” In 103:6–18 the focus broadens to Israel—past, in the days of Moses, and present, as the King’s blessing flows out to bless his church. In 103:19–22 the horizon is the entire created order as it is brought together under this King (Eph. 1:10). These form the most natural three main sections.

Superscription

^s Of David.⁵

We do not know if a particular event in David’s life prompted the psalm.

103:1–5 Let the Individual Believer Bless the Covenant Lord for all the Blessings He Gives Him or Her in Christ

¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless⁶ his holy name!

The King exhorts himself and every disciple who speaks this psalm to **bless the LORD**. This exhortation, repeated in Psalm 103:2 and in the final words of the psalm, sets the tone. The repeated name **the LORD** (103:1, 2, 6, 8, 13, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22 [2x]) is an especially appropriate address in view of the background in Exodus 32–34, for this is the covenant Lord who reveals **his . . . name** in Exodus 3:13–14 and 34:6. The psalm celebrates the perfections of his **holy** nature. On the verb “to bless,” J. Alec Motyer makes a helpful distinction: “When the Lord ‘blesses’ us, he reviews our needs

⁵ In Hebrew the superscription is the start of verse 1.

⁶ In Hebrew the one verb “bless” does duty for both lines. Translators add a second “bless” to make this clear.

and responds to them; when we ‘bless’ the Lord, we review his excellencies and respond to them.”⁷ **My soul** means my being, focused especially on myself as one who has desires and delights.⁸ This is intensified to **all** (the first “all” of the psalm) **that is within me**⁹—my body, my heart, my will, my emotions, my affections, my feelings, my appetites, my desires.

- 2 Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,
3 who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
4 who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
5 who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.

After the emphatic repetition of **Bless the LORD, O my soul**, the King’s focus shifts to **all** (the second “all”) the **benefits** of the covenant Lord given to the King and to his people. The noun **benefits** (גְּמוּלָה, *gemul*) is used in this sense in Psalm 116:12 and 2 Chronicles 32:25; the same root appears in Psalm 103:10 (“he does not *deal*,” i.e., how God treats us). To **forget** means not just the absence of cognitive recall but failing to respond in trust and blessing; such failure, which is moral and not strictly intellectual, is a major theme in Deuteronomy (e.g., “lest you forget,” Deut. 6:12). A proper remembering of **all** the **benefits** of God leads to a proper response from “all that is within me” (Ps. 103:1).

Psalm 103:3–5 expands on these **benefits**. “Now listen,” says Augustine, “to all the ways” God has benefited you.¹⁰ Colorfully, Charles H. Spurgeon says that David “selects a few of the choicest pearls from the casket of divine love, threads them on the string of memory, and hangs them about the neck of gratitude.”¹¹ Five participles (**forgives . . . heals . . . redeems . . . crowns . . . satisfies**) express what God characteristically does.¹²

7 Motyer, *Psalms*, 552.

8 The original meaning of נֶפֶשׁ is “throat” and hence “appetite.”

9 אֲרָבִי, a unique plural form—“all my inward parts.” Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 3:30.

10 Augustine, *Psalms*, 5:82.

11 Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 2.2:276.

12 A participle often has this nuance of meaning (i.e., characteristic action).

First, he **forgives all** (the third “all”) **your iniquity** (cf. the prayer of Moses in Ex. 34:9 and the new covenant promise of Jer. 31:34). This is the foundational benefit of the psalm, for, as John Calvin says, “Reconciliation with him is the fountain from which all other blessings flow.”¹³ The psalm uses the words **iniquity** (Ps. 103:3), “sins” (103:10), and “transgressions” (103:12). **Iniquity** (עֲוֹן, *avon*) focuses on the wickedness of deeds and the guilt they cause, “sin” (חַטָּא, *khete*) refers to offenses against God in general, and “transgression” (פְּשָׁע, *pesa*) means a deliberate crossing of a moral boundary.¹⁴

Second, forgiveness is linked with the **healing of all** (the fourth “all”) **your diseases**. The word **diseases** (מַחֲלָאִים, *takhaluim*) is used of covenant-curse disasters in Deuteronomy 29:22 and is connected with exile in Jeremiah 16:4. The same root is used of the “griefs” borne by the suffering servant (Isa. 53:4). The connection between forgiveness and healing is profound (see on Pss. 6; 38), for death entered the world because of sin (Rom. 5:12), and only the sin bearer can remove the curse. This restorative work was foreshadowed in Christ’s earthly ministry (cf. Matt. 8:17; Mark 2:1–12) and will be fulfilled at the end of this age. It may also be experienced in a partial sense in this life (James 5:15–16).

Third, he **redeems your life from the pit**. The verb **redeems** (גָּאַל, *gaal*), with its cognate noun “redeemer” (גֹּאֵל, *goel*), is used when a family member reaches out in covenant loyalty to buy something or someone back (e.g., Ruth 4:1–7; Jer. 32:7); it is used often of God (e.g., Gen. 48:16; Ex. 6:6; 15:13; Pss. 19:14; 69:18) and of his Messiah (e.g., 72:14). **The pit** is a place of corruption, where human beings rot (e.g., 16:10). Some older writers linked this with the horrible corruptions of the human heart, “as though it were swarming with the maggots of our corruption” even in this life, for “even to be born here, in a mortal body, is the onset of our maladies.”¹⁵ **The pit**, however, is most often a shorthand for death (e.g., 30:9). To be redeemed from the pit must ultimately mean bodily resurrection (cf. the implications of 16:9–11; 49:7–9, 13–15).¹⁶ In the end, the forgiveness of sins and the healing of diseases point to this glorious destiny.

¹³ Calvin, *Psalms*, 4:126.

¹⁴ Ben Witherington III, *Psalms Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 239.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Psalms*, 5:83.

¹⁶ Kidner, *Psalms*, 2:365.

Fourth, he **crowns you with steadfast love** (כֶּסֶד, *khesed*; cf. 100:5; 101:1; 103:8, 11, 17; 106:1, 7, 45) and **mercy** (רַחֲמִים, *rakhamim*, lit., “compassions”; cf. “caused them to be pitied,” 106:46, which translates the same root here). Motyer comments, “The former is love centred in the will, the love of commitment, unchanging; the latter is the love of the heart, surging and emotional.”¹⁷ These terms are the climax of the covenant, given to us in the incarnation and the atonement.

Fifth, he **satisfies you with good**,¹⁸ where the word **good** indicates, as often in the Old Testament, the blessings of the covenant (cf. on 4:6). For the vivid image of satisfaction, see 90:14; 91:16; and 104:13. The second line of 103:5 may indicate a consequence (**so that**) or simply a statement (as in the CSB, REB). The clause **Your youth is renewed** (cf. 51:10; 104:30; Lam. 5:21) **like the eagle’s** is puzzling if it is understood to mean “Your youth is renewed as the eagle’s youth is renewed” since eagles grow old and die. Commentators from as long ago as Augustine have made reference to myths that speak of eagles renewing their strength in strange ways¹⁹ or have even connected this verse with the myth of the phoenix,²⁰ but these are very implausible. The closest parallel is Isaiah 40:31, which simply uses the eagle as a picture of strength. It is better to translate “eagle” without the apostrophe-s: “Your youth is renewed [to become] like an eagle [that is, to become strong]” (cf. CSB, NASB). Ultimately, this promise is fulfilled in the bodily resurrection of Christ and the future bodily resurrection of each believer.

103:6–18 Let the Church Bless the Covenant Lord for All the Blessings He Gives Us in Christ

- 6 The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed.

17 Motyer, *Psalms*, 552.

18 There is a translation puzzle concerning this phrase, lit., “who causes to be filled with good your ornament [תְּכֵן].” The closest attempt to translate the MT here is perhaps Goldingay: “who satiates you in your finery.” Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3:163. The NIV follows the LXX, which guesses that the word may mean “desires.”

19 Augustine, *Psalms*, 5:88–89. Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 3:34; Tucker and Grant, *Psalms*, 2:483; Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2007), 358.

20 E.g., Mitchell Dahood (1922–1982), *Psalms*, 3 vols., AB (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 3:27.

With the fifth **all** and another participle (**works**), the focus broadens from what the Lord does for the King and each of his people to what **the LORD works for all who are oppressed**, a horrible word that speaks of violent extortion or the removal of human dignities (cf. on Pss. 72:4; 73:8; 105:14). **Righteousness** is a plural, “righteous acts,” with a focus on what God does rather than simply on who God is; for other examples of this plural, see 1 Samuel 12:7; Psalm 11:7; and Micah 6:5. **Justice** is also plural, “just decisions or verdicts” (cf. “your judgments,” Ps. 36:6). When God works in Christ, he always sets free those oppressed by sin and its consequences. The paradigm for this liberating work was the exodus, to which David turns.

7 He made known his ways to Moses,
 his acts to the people of Israel.

The first line echoes the prayer of **Moses** in Exodus 33:13 (“Please show me now your ways”), where those **ways** include exodus redemption and a salvation that continues despite the sin of his people (the golden calf, Ex. 32); these are the ways celebrated in Psalm 103:2–5.²¹ These **ways** are paralleled by **his acts**, what he has done as the expression of his nature.

8 The LORD is merciful and gracious,
 slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Psalm 103:8 is virtually a quotation of Exodus 34:6, perhaps the most quoted and echoed part of the Old Testament in the Old Testament (e.g., Num. 14:18; Ps. 86:15). **Merciful and gracious** conveys the outpouring of undeserved love and a feeling of tender warmth. **Slow to anger** indicates a great patience, while safeguarding the eventual righteous wrath of God (see on 2:12). Paired with **abounding in steadfast love** (תַּחֲנוּן, *khesed*), this phrase opens a window into the astonishing kindness in the covenant heart of God. To feel the wonder of this overflowing grace, we should read through the narrative of Exodus 32–34. Here, ultimately, is “the breadth and length and height and depth” of “the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge”

21 For the significance of Moses in book 4, see on the superscription to Ps. 90.

(Eph. 3:18–19). Calvin writes of “the unspeakable riches of grace, which have been manifested to us in Christ.”²²

- 9 He will not always chide,
 nor will he keep his anger forever.
- 10 He does not deal with us according to our sins,
 nor repay us according to our iniquities.

The four negatives of the four lines of Psalm 103:9–10 help us grasp the wonder of his love. Psalm 103:9 expands on “slow to anger” (103:8). The verb **chide** means here to pursue a court prosecution against us; that he **will not always** do this means that although he disciplines his church, he will not destroy us (cf. Isa. 57:16; Hos. 11:8–9). **Nor will he keep** (i.e., hold on to) **his anger forever** parallels the first line. The words **your anger** are supplied in translation as being implied in Hebrew (lit., “nor forever will he keep”). The verb **deal** is from the same root as “benefits” in Psalm 103:2; he could repay us with wrath, but he repays us with undeserved benefits. On the Hebrew words for **sins** and **iniquities** (here and in 103:12), see on 103:3.

- 11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
 so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
- 12 as far as the east is from the west,
 so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

For indicates that 103:11–12 supports and explains 103:9–10. With a vertical image, **his steadfast love** is as far **above** us (beyond what we know by nature in human affairs)²³ as **the heavens are above the earth** (cf. 36:5; 57:10; 108:4). The same Hebrew word (לָּ, *al*) is translated **above** in 103:11a and **toward** in 103:11b to make the comparison very direct in Hebrew.²⁴ **So great** is literally “so strong” and implies an overwhelmingly strong com-

22 Calvin, *Psalms*, 4:133.

23 Cf. Samuel Crossman’s (1623–1683) hymn “My Song Is Love Unknown” (1664)—that is, unknown on earth except through Jesus Christ. Public domain.

24 Perhaps the following translation may convey this idea better: “As high as the heavens are *over* the earth, / so great is his steadfast love *over* those who fear him.”

mitment. The phrase **toward those who fear him**, in reverent, trusting fear, appears also in 103:13 and 17.

Then, with a horizontal image, the separation of God's people from their sins is described. **As far as the east** (the rising sun) **is from the west** (the setting sun) is an idiom for the greatest distance possible: "The place of sunrise will always be as far as the eye can see from the place of sunset."²⁵ As Theodoret of Cyrus says, "If [the psalmist] had found distances greater than these, he definitely would have brought them to bear in his desire to bring out the unlimited quality of the divine goodness."²⁶ The root for **as far as** and for **remove** (cause to be far) is the same (הִרְחִיק, *kirkhoq* . . . *hirkhiq*).

- ¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
- ¹⁴ For *he* knows our frame;
he remembers that *we* are dust.

There is a nice consonance between the first word of 103:12 (כִּרְחֹק, *kirkhoq*, "far") and the first word of 103:13 (כֶּרַחֵם, *kerakhem*, "as the compassion"). The word **compassion** has the same root as "mercy" in 103:4. As David Dickson observes, "The love which nature teacheth a father to bear toward his obedient children, is but a shadow of the love of God to believers."²⁷ God's love makes us his children in Christ, and then, because we are his children, he shows that fatherly love to us. On the repetition of **those who fear him** from 103:11, Derek Kidner comments, "If immeasurable distances are one way of expressing immeasurable love and mercy (cf. Eph. 3:18f; Is. 55:6–9), the intimacy of the family is another. By the first, we are led out into 'a large place,' to walk at liberty; by the second we are brought home."²⁸

Psalm 103:14 has an emphatic **he** in line one and an emphatic **we** in line two, italicized above to highlight the contrast. To **know** and to **remember** (i.e., to bear in mind) are here synonymous, "to know and to act on what is

²⁵ Hamilton, *Psalms*, 2:229.

²⁶ Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms*, 2:158.

²⁷ Dickson, *Psalms*, 2:220.

²⁸ Kidner, *Psalms*, 2:366.

known” and “to remember and to act on what is remembered.” What God knows is **our frame** (נֶצֶר, *yetser*), from the verb “to form, fashion,” often used of a potter or woodcarver and used of God in Genesis 2:7–8. And with a further allusion to Genesis 2:7, **he remembers that we are dust** (cf. Pss. 102:14 of the ruins of Zion; 104:29; 113:7). He looks on us—not only in our createdness but in our frail, fallen mortality and even our corrupting sinfulness—with eyes of compassion. This is wonderful indeed.

- 15 As for man, his days are like grass;
 he flourishes like a flower of the field;
 16 for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
 and its place knows it no more.

Psalm 103:15 is brutal in its direct opening, delivered with no verb, literally, “Man like grass his days.” The word for **man** is עֲנוֹשׁ, *enosh*, man in his frailty and transience (cf. “You return *enosh* to dust,” 90:3). For the image of grass, see 37:2; 90:5–6; and 129:6. **He flourishes like a flower of the field** uses the same root (צִוֵּץ, *tsvts*) for the verb and the noun: “He flowers like a flower.” For the effect of the **wind**, see also Isaiah 40:7. For the **place** no longer knowing it, see Psalm 37:10. As Augustine preaches, “The whole panoply of human glory—honors, sovereignty, wealth, men’s bluster and conceit—all this is no more than a transitory wild flower.”²⁹

As Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 329–390) puts it,

Our life on earth, brothers, is such that our existence is very transitory. We play, as it were, a game on earth: we do not exist, and we are born, and being born we are dissolved. We are like a fleeting dream, an apparition without substance, the flight of a bird that passes, a ship that leaves no trace on the sea.³⁰

- 17 But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
 on those who fear him,
 and his righteousness to children’s children,

²⁹ Augustine, *Psalms*, 5:102.

³⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *On His Brother St. Caesarius, Oration 7.19*, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (hereafter cited as ACCS), ed. Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998–2010), 8:225.

¹⁸ to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.

With the repetitions of **those who fear him** (103:11, 13, 17) and **steadfast love**, the nature of God and his covenant love to us in Christ as **from everlasting to everlasting** is contrasted with our transience. In parallel with **steadfast love** is **his righteousness**, acting in covenant faithfulness to do right and to give a status of righteousness **to children's children** (echoing Ex. 34:7) down through the whole history of Christ's church (cf. "from generation to generation," Luke 1:50).

Those who keep his covenant—together with **those who fear him**—raises the paradox of the old covenant, that the covenant continued in spite of the absence of any single Israelite who did this perfectly. It is only possible for the new covenant church to claim these promises, as it was for believers in the old covenant church, because Christ is the true Israel, the keeper of the covenant, the perfect one who feared God in his life on earth.

103:19–22 Let the Created Order Bless the Covenant Lord for All the Blessings Given in Christ

¹⁹ The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.

Psalm 103:19 broadens the focus finally from the church to the cosmos. The second line explains the meaning of the first. The **throne** of God (cf. 93:2; 97:2) **in the heavens** is **established** (made firm) when his will is done on earth as it is done in heaven, when **his kingdom rules over all** (this further **all** beginning another group of *alls*). Here, finally, when Christ "delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power" (1 Cor. 15:24), the throne of God in heaven (Rev. 4:2) will govern the new heavens and the new earth. "Of whom can this be said," asks Augustine, "that he has established his throne in heaven—of whom but Christ? He who descended and later ascended, who died and rose again, who raised up to heaven the humanity he had assumed, he has established his throne in heaven."³¹

³¹ Augustine, *Psalms*, 5:104.

- 20 Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his word,
obeying the voice of his word!
- 21 Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers, who do his will!
- 22 Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.
Bless the LORD, O my soul!

The fourfold **Bless the LORD** moves through the governing powers of the cosmos before returning (in the final line) to the **soul** of the King and of each believer in Christ. The **angels** (cf. Pss. 91:11; 104:4; 148:2) are called **mighty ones**, but the emphasis is not so much on their power (supernatural though it is) as on their obedience: **who do his word**, and then, for emphasis, **obeying the voice of his word**. Those who have followed Satan into rebellion will be cast into the bottomless pit, so that every supernatural power in the new creation follows the lead of the King and all his people in wholehearted blessing. Psalm 103:21 repeats the same thought, with **his will** using a word that expresses God's delight (רְצוֹן, *retsono*) rather than simply his command (cf. KJV: "that do his pleasure"). The two uses of **all** in 103:22 encompass the entire created order, for **all his works** refers to all creation, and **all places of his dominion** means all places without exception (cf. 103:19). Here at last is "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them" blessing the one "who sits on the throne and . . . the Lamb" (Rev. 5:13). But as the final line reminds us, none of this is possible without the wholehearted adoration of the King for his Father, now echoed by each man and woman in Christ.

REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

1. We begin with pondering what it meant for Jesus of Nazareth to express through this psalm the perfect fear of God and wholehearted keeping of the covenant. It is wonderful to picture him stirring up his own heart, morning by morning, to blessing his Father in this way.

2. As we walk in his footsteps, Psalm 103:1–2 reminds us that "continual incitement" is necessary for us to bless God, for we will not naturally do

this on our own because we are hindered by spiritual “sluggishness.”³² Let us use this psalm to stir up our dull spirits to the great work of blessing God with warm and full hearts.

3. The foregrounding of forgiveness in Psalm 103:3a and the emphasizing of this theme in the remainder of the psalm press home to us that only when we are deeply conscious of our sin will we be deeply gripped with the wonder of God’s benefits. For many of us, this happens through painful experiences of moral failure. Spurgeon suggests that David wrote this psalm in his later years, “when he had a higher sense of the preciousness of pardon, because a keener sense of sin, than in his younger days.”³³ We cannot know if this is the historical background, but in the life of many a believer, this psalm grows more precious with time for this very reason.

4. Many of us will know times of conviction of sin in which the truth of Psalm 103:12—the removing of our transgressions “as far as the east is from the west”—must be pressed home to our consciences and hearts.

5. Psalm 103:2–5 is given to us that we may meditate, line by line, on all the blessings God has given us in Christ, from forgiveness all the way to resurrection and eternal joy.

6. Commenting on the word “good” in Psalm 103:5, Augustine writes profoundly about how we sinfully seek “some apparent good” and need to have our hearts trained to seek the true good to be found only in God the Holy Trinity.³⁴

7. Psalm 103:6–18 is a profound meditation on the astonishing story of blatant sin and amazing forgiveness in Exodus 32–34. We may look not only back to those events but forward to God’s ways with us in Christ, his extraordinary patience and sovereign determination to get every one of his people to the new creation.

8. Psalm 103:19–22 stirs us to remember that the goal of redemption is the entire created order remade, the kingdom of God consummated, and every created being drawn into wholehearted blessing of God in Christ.

³² Calvin, *Psalms*, 4:125.

³³ Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 2.2:274.

³⁴ Augustine, *Psalms*, 5:86–87, 90.

*We behold a vast fabric consisting of sky and earth and all things
within them, and from the greatness and beauty of all that is
crafted we have some inkling of the greatness and beauty of the
craftsman himself. We do not yet see him, but we already love him.*

AUGUSTINE
Expositions of the Psalms

*O measureless might, unchangeable love,
Whom angels delight to worship above!
Your ransomed creation, with glory ablaze,
In true adoration shall sing to your praise.*

ROBERT GRANT
“O Worship the King, All Glorious Above”

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.*

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS
“God’s Grandeur”