

June 29, 2025

“A Response From Lament”

Psalm 102:1-28

Intro:

Probably the hardest thing for a child to hear from his or her parent is not that they are in trouble, but that the parent is disappointed in them. I’m not talking about a disappointment because the child failed to excel in a sport or an academic contest or something along those lines, but true disappointment that comes from failure in behaviour. Perhaps you have been on the receiving end of such a statement yourself.

A sample scenario is easy enough to picture: perhaps the child, having been taught that he should be kind to others, goes to school and develops a habit of bullying the other kids into giving him their lunch money. He enjoys the power, but he knows that it is something he shouldn’t be doing and so he needs to come up with some sort of system and lie so that his parents won’t find out. Maybe he makes sure to throw out his own lunch (which wasn’t nearly as exciting to eat as what could be purchased with the stolen money), so that his parents will think he is eating all of his lunch like a good kid would. He is careful to not say anything too specific about those lunches and quickly changes the subject if the topic comes up. Maybe somewhere deep down inside he feels guilt over what he is doing because he knows it is wrong, but the thrill of doing it and getting away with it overpowers those little twinges.

Eventually, a rumour of some kid at school taking lunches and lunch money reaches the teachers and the parents, and they ask the boy about it. Knowing that the truth will get him in trouble, he claims ignorance, or more likely, shifts the blame and focus onto another kid who fits the profile of such a bully. Eventually the real culprit is caught, and the parents find out the truth. In the ensuing confrontation, there are the usual questions of motive and declarations of consequences for his actions. There is also, at the end of it all, those dreaded words “I am very disappointed in you.” The child knows that something deeper

than bullying and lies has now been exposed. Trust has been broken. The look of pride that his parents used to direct towards him has fled, and it will take a lot of work to get it back. Serving time in detention and being forced to pay back the stolen money is of very little consequence compared to suffering that heartfelt disappointment.

Have you experienced something similar in your own lives? Perhaps, perhaps not. For most people, being the cause of disappointment like this – and knowing it is out in the open, doesn't sit easy – it affects their sleep, it affects their appetite, and tension follows them wherever they go. It messes with their confidence. Sadness can be seen behind the eyes of everyone involved. In a lot of cases, the regular or normal routine of life together is disrupted and things are just not the same.

This is the kind of space that the person who wrote Psalm 102 is in.

The Psalm:

We are continuing our look into the Penitential psalms, and come to another one that doesn't quite seem to fit. Again, it is mostly because there is a lack of clear language of confession. The psalm reads more like a lament and petition than a confession. However, the extent of the lament suggests that there is something more going on than just feeling like the world is unfair and people are out to get me.

In this Psalm there are three main sections: The first (v. 1-11) focuses on individual lament. The second (v. 12-22) moves to a corporate engagement. And the third (v. 23-28) comes back to the individual, but not in the same despair as in the first section.

As we look at this first section, we find that the psalmist is in great turmoil. He is in despair – his emotions are inconsolable. Whatever is bothering him is doing so from the inside out – which is why it makes sense to have this lament in the grouping of penitential psalms. It is as though a great guilt is eating at him and the

only way he can get relief is to cry out to God for mercy, recognizing that the pit of despair he finds himself in is entirely of his own doing and he is suffering part of the consequences of his actions. He is full of regret, and it is torture to him. He is so pathetic, in fact, that those observing him don't show pity, only mockery. These are people who know he follows God, so their mockery extends to God as well: "If your God loves you so much, why are you so pathetic and pitiful?" In spite of the opening call to God to bend down and listen – which assumes that God is close, the psalmist feels as though there is a great chasm between himself and God, which can't be crossed.

With so much despair over the guilt of his sin, he needs God to hear his regret, his lament, and his sorrow so he can stop living in his current state.

This takes him to the second part of the Psalm, where he places his own challenges within his wider community and sees God in His proper place in that wider community. God is bigger than the guilt the psalmist feels. Such a guilt, like the life of the person feeling it, is fleeting in comparison to the enduring permanence of God. There is hope in this revelation of the psalmist. He looks at the restoration of Zion – of Jerusalem and more specifically, of the proper worship of God that Jerusalem represents, and has hope not only for his own restoration to relationship with God, but also for restoration of those who are not part of God's community. This is not only a present hope for the psalmist, but also a future hope for him and for those who mock him now and in the future.

With this hope, the psalmist places himself within a wider community of believers, a community that together has responsibility to honor God before the nations and to pass on that understanding and responsibility to future generations. The end vision is of multitudes of people, across multiple cities and countries (he uses the word "kingdoms") gathering to worship God. This vision is a gift of grace and forgiveness. If the psalmist is to be part of such a worship experience, then he must have received forgiveness and peace for the sin that has been eating him up. His vision answers the cry that he made in the first section.

From this vast community of worship, he then returns in verse 23 to his own story in the last section of the psalm. He is back to his individual lament, except that it is different now. It is not so much lament as it is petition. Not petition for forgiveness, but petition for the time and life needed to do his part for the wider community that we saw in the previous verses. Part of the healing he longed for in the first section of the psalm was knowing that there is still a great purpose for his life. He acknowledges that God lives forever, while his time is only fleeting, but he pleads with God not to cut his life short. He is still young and there is still much that he can do in service and obedience in God's kingdom.

Conclusion:

The challenge to us from this psalm is to shift from guilt-ridden lament to service-oriented life. What kind of response does our own lament lead us to?

Lament naturally begins with the self – woe is me; my life is so hard; and so on. Release from lament comes when we recognize that we are not alone in that suffering, that others have it worse than we do, and that the only hope for any of us is the mercy of God who was, and is, and is to come. We cannot keep the knowledge of this hope to ourselves. We can not keep God only to ourselves. And so we need to step out and into the world. We need to work towards a worship, as the psalmist puts it, that is made up of multitudes from all the nations. We need to be examples of what that looks like. We need to be living witnesses of knowing the brokenness of relationship with God because of sin, but also of having experienced the healing of forgiveness. This is not something that we can keep to ourselves. This is what Jesus was talking about when he said that those who know Him are to be salt and light in the world. If this is the case, then we also need to accept that we are as much part of the problems of the world as anyone else, and we need to pray accordingly, and live accordingly to bring about change – in our neighbourhoods, our workplaces, our cities, our province, and our country.

John Stott challenges us in this way:

“Christian salt has no business to remain snugly in elegant little ecclesiastical salt cellars; our place is to be rubbed into the secular community, as salt is rubbed into meat, to stop it going bad. And when society does go bad, we Christians tend to throw up our hands in pious horror and reproach the non-Christian world, but should we not rather reproach ourselves? One can hardly blame the unsalted meat for going bad. It cannot do anything else. The real question to ask is: where is the salt?”¹

Psalm 102 is a good example of a Christian worldview that does not get stuck with the self, but remembers the character of God and His on-going work in creation, and by extension of our being followers of Him, our work in that same wider world. How will you rub the salt of Christ into it?

Let's pray.

¹ As quoted by W. Dennis Jr Tucker and Jamie A. Grant, “Psalms. 2 / W. Dennis Tucker Jr. & Jamie A. Grant,” The NIV application commentary (Grand Rapids, mich: Zondervan Acad, 2018), 478.