

Psalm 102

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[0 : 00] Well, welcome again for people who joined us, and if you're visitors here tonight, especially! welcome, we're very glad to have you with us. Psalm 102, if you want to keep that open, that might be useful, page 501. When Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II says in her Christmas message, this year's been a bit bumpy, that's a bit of a royal understatement there, isn't it? What she's really saying is that we've had a rough year, it feels. Every year brings with it challenges, that's the nature of living in a fallen world, but we're not surprised by that. Fortunately, it's also full of joys, isn't it? It's not all doom and gloom. Hopes were realised, children born, crises averted, people came to faith. Pregnancy centres were registered. But if you speak to people, it seems like many people are weary, worn down by the increasing grind, the constant churn, by the incessant progress, quote-unquote, hurtling forward at an unstoppable pace, it seems. The uncertainty of not knowing where we're heading as a country, as a world, what's going to happen to the big questions of climate change and the crisis, climate emergency, or how's Brexit going to pan out. Maybe for you it's not those things. Maybe it's just that you're overwhelmed by the barrage of information that comes at us these days, or the communication and obfuscation that comes at us all the time.

We've just been through an election campaign, there's been a lot of that. A think tank in the US called it the fire hose of falsehood. They say it's an unremitting, high-intensity stream of lies, partial truths and complete fictions spewed forth with tireless aggression to obfuscate the truth and overwhelm and confuse anyone trying to pay attention. That can wear you out.

Perhaps it's just the fact that while everything seems to change, at some level nothing seems to change. And life grinds on day after day. I think perhaps, you know, it's not the change itself that is the big thing that wears us down. It's the uncertainty that comes with it.

This isn't a Brexit sermon, I promise you, it's just that that's kind of been in the news. But I don't know if you noticed how all of the businesses were saying eventually, you know, we don't care what's going to happen, just tell us what's going to happen so we can make a plan. Don't care if we stay or leave, just tell us. We need certainty. We're paralyzed by the uncertainty. We can't make decisions. We can't plan. We can't take control of our destinies. Maybe paraphrase a bit there at the end, but, you know, that's really what they're after. That's what we're after, I'd argue. We want to, we need to, at some level, be in control of our lives. That's what so much of our lives are spent trying to get, control, because we're hardwired for having certainty, really. And that's where it goes all wrong, isn't it?

One translation of Romans 8, 21 has, and the hope is that in the end the whole of created life will be rescued from the tyranny of change and decay. Everything changes. That's the nature of living in space and time. And there was a time when that was all going to be good. And we had certainty of a good world and a good creation living with God. And then it all went wrong when we tried to make our own decisions and take matters into our own hands and gain control. And now we're not the masters of change anymore. And we feel it, don't we?

[4 : 48] The change can be a good thing. We know change isn't all bad. Adam and Eve were meant to change the world as they went about subduing and cultivating it. That was always part of the plan.

And there's a truth even just on a very simple level in that old adage, isn't it, that you can't cross the same river twice. We inevitably change the world whatever we do. We want to feel like we've made a difference in our work. And that's so often what people struggle with in their own work, that they feel like, if I didn't do this job, then it wouldn't have mattered at all. We want to see good change in what we do. And often in a world full of sorrow and pain and suffering, we should strive to see more change than the world. It's not all bad. But I think what we're talking about here is not that kind of change, is it? It's the kind of change that's outside of our control. The change is forced upon us.

Sometimes just by the biological fact of getting older. There's a time when you want to be older. And because you're going to go to secondary school, and you're going to uni, and all the life, the world's your oyster.

And then there's a time when you don't want to grow older anymore. Or it's a world that changes morally and ethically beyond what we recognize. Or a world that sometimes seems to grow more hostile day by day towards Christians. One of the greatest sources of distress for Christians today, isn't it, is the increasing hostility towards anything that smells of Christian values in the public sphere?

The world has changed in that way. And in the new year, there's probably going to be another push to liberalize abortion even further, just like it's been in Northern Ireland. Change might be good, but change isn't always good. And our psalmist here understands the feeling of change, uncertainty, and how wearying that is, isn't he? He's not in a good way, is he? Physically and emotionally, he's stretched, it feels like, to the limits of human ability to withstand.

Verse 3, he feels like his days pass away like smoke and his bones burn like a furnace. He's physically not well. And he's so occupied with that mental and physical distress he can't even eat. Verse 4, he's isolated and he feels cut off from the world, like there's no one who understands, like he's a desert owl in the wilderness. He can't sleep. And he feels, to be frank, abandoned by God.

[8 : 01] I think when we listen to that, it's a case of tick all that apply. For some of us, it might be more of those things than we even realize. The person sitting in the row next to you might have more things to tick off there than you realize. But all of us can associate with some of those feelings, at least some of the time.

He's got wave after wave of uncertainty and change coming over him. It's a tsunami of uncertainty, really. You know, if we think about it, when there's something physically wrong with us, isn't it? You know, when we go to the doctor and people struggle to find a diagnosis of what is wrong, even when it's a serious diagnosis, that certainty of knowing what it is that is wrong is a relief. It's the uncertainty that's often even worse than knowing what is wrong with us. And when we know something can be done about it, we can make plans. But it's the uncertainty that gets to us. He has many things that are outside of his control, buffeting him. And he is worn down to the point of not wanting to live anymore.

And we don't know what all those individual troubles are for the psalmist. And I think in a sense that's not what's important. We know some of those feelings.

And we know where he looks to for certainty, for stability, for help. This morning Paul spoke about how no matter what happens in this new year, we know it is in God's sovereign and providential control.

And we can trust in that. The question is why? Why can we trust in God's sovereign control over things? Why can we trust in God even though we know things are going to change, we don't know what's coming. Why can we trust in God's sovereign control over things? Why can we trust in God when we can't trust in our own decisions, our own resolutions and our own promises?

[10 : 20] That's the question that the psalmist answers. People look in various different places and look to answer that question in different ways to deal with the state of uncertainty that we're always in.

You're starting with the only slightly facetious. You know, that seminal Christmas movie, *Love Actually*, Hugh Grant's prime minister character does a monologue at the beginning. And he says, whenever I start to get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow airport.

For him, the answer is to rely on love, to rely on other people's love. That is where we find certainty and stability in a world that often seems like it's falling apart.

The problem with that is he's also editing out the toddlers who are coming off a 12-hour flight, and the people with their lost luggage, and the people trying to find Hugh the birth. And love can be fickle.

Another way is we might try and find certainty and control in making plans for the next year. You might be one of those super organized people who've sat down, taken stock of the last year, written up priorities for next year, and allocated each of those different areas of your life, different levels of focus and priority, and then subdivided that into different categories, and then your three top priorities, and allocated time in your week for each of those.

[12 : 07] Or you might only be doing that next year. By the way, if you plan on stopping procrastinating, then I'll join you next week.

But, you know, we try and get control and certainty by making plans. You know, we look to political solutions for the big problems.

And to be honest, I think that's a big part of what the problem was with this last year, is people look to politics to solve things that it can't, and look to people to solve issues that people will have imperfect solutions to always.

But it is difficult. Just loving relationships and making plans and strategizing and being responsible, they're not bad things in themselves, are they?

But we've got to realize they're never going to give us the certainty we're after. We're always going to miss the point. And, upon reflection, putting us, changeable creatures, who live in space and enduring time, as someone says, at the center of finding stability, is probably not the best idea after all.

[13 : 26] So the question is, where does the psalmist go, when there seems to be no certainty and no hope, when he's at his wit's end?

And what's quite striking is he doesn't go to any of those standard bolt holes in our arsenal against change and uncertainty, does he? And what's really interesting is when you read on in this psalm, that uncertainty, that change from the situation that Israel had before, the state that he longs for when God dwelled with Israel in the temple and when Zion wasn't destroyed before the exile, is really at the heart of his distress.

He looks beyond himself in a way that is probably a good example for us. Whatever he's feeling personally, whatever other emotional and physical distress and worry and uncertainty he's facing in his own life, his concern about God's honor is actually where most of his focus is at.

If 2019 was a bumpy year, as our Sovereign Lady rightly said, then heads up, don't be surprised if 2020 has more speed bumps, aggressive speed bumps, than a newly resurfaced West Ealing suburban street.

Unfortunately, it's a good thing that people turn to God when there's uncertainty and change, isn't it? After 9-11 and after the financial crash, churches in New York and London were full.

[15 : 15] They overflowed. The sad thing that comes with that is, unfortunately for many people, the solution to a changing attitude towards the church, towards God, towards Christian values, and even indeed Christians, is that we must become more relevant.

We must become more relevant, you know, to reach people, whatever that means. That means so many different things for different people. For some people, that means the gospel must change and we must bring a new gospel for a new era.

If the world is changing, then God must change with us. We need a new God, a different God, a God who responds to our needs and our desires.

I was really struck by a piece I read the last couple of days in The Guardian. The Guardian does have good things as well, where the writer talks about how churches should follow the models of many cathedrals.

That seems to be a me-centered, one-stop shop, he says, of therapy and community. That's what people need. The answer to a longing for congregation, the cathedral's answer to a longing for congregation and communal space.

[16 : 38] The key is a quality unfashionable to social analysis. The offer of solitude with beauty. You need not be of faith to sit quietly and contemplate the loveliness of a cathedral.

As the dean once hinted to me in a whisper, here we don't bang on about God. The sociologist Grace Davey described a cathedral as a vicarious religion.

Somewhere an individual can be private, undisturbed and uplifted by architecture and music. They are psychotherapy in glass and stone. Now, unfortunately, if we think that creating a calm space for ourselves is going to solve our need for certainty and stability in an inherently uncertain and changing world, then that writer's got another thing coming.

So we can't block out the uncertainty and the change and the hostility in the world forever. And the psalmist doesn't go there either. He finds his hope, doesn't he, in an entirely different way.

I don't know if you saw that, but for him it's the fact that God doesn't change that gives all the hope. In contrast to that cathedral dean who says we don't bang on about God, for the psalmist, it's all about God.

[18 : 02] And it's all about a God who doesn't change. And that's a very counter-cultural thing for us to do, to find our trust in a God who doesn't change.

But it was in those days, too, to be honest, when all the cultures around Israel had gods that you could change. When you were tired of one, you got a new one. When one didn't seem to work anymore, you got another nation's gods because they seemed to be working.

You could swap them around like football cards. And he gets things back in perspective when he realizes that while God's able to take him out of this life, God's years endure throughout all the generations.

God, he says, will outlast the foundations of the earth. He will outlast the heavens. I don't know if you knew this, but Mount Etna, the volcano outside Sicily, is actually sliding into the ocean at a rate of about 14 millimeters a year.

Now, don't be entirely worried just yet. It's going to take about 100,000 years at that pace for it to slide into the Mediterranean Sea. And I think it might cause a tsunami. Mount Etna, that's caused destruction over centuries, is sliding into the ocean.

[19 : 33] I don't know. I hope this doesn't come as news to you, but God is going to outlast Mount Etna. There's a qualitative difference between us and God, isn't there?

And the rest of creation and God. We change. The world we live in changes. And since the fall, much of that change isn't good. But it isn't so with God.

The fact that God doesn't change is good news. Because it means this God who is love, this God who has promised mercy and forgiveness to those who return to him, that this Lord God who made a covenant with his people to be their God and for them to be his people, who promised a saviour for his people, and who promised that no one that he gave to his son will fall away, it means that God will not and cannot break those promises.

We can't trust in our own resolutions. I don't know if you're going to the gym next week. We'll see how that goes by the end of January. We get promises by politicians.

We'll see how much we can rely on that. But we need a God that we can trust in who doesn't change. And we need that more than just for our day-to-day needs for the next year.

[21 : 00] Malachi talks of a day when God will deal decisively with the brokenness and the change in this world, doesn't he? Malachi writes a prophecy from God.

He says, I will draw near to you for judgment. There will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker and his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

For I, the Lord, do not change. Therefore, you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. Now that, that last bit seems to come out of the blue a bit, doesn't it?

I mean, we know God is not going to let injustice by without action, no matter how the world looks. And that's a great source of comfort as the world seems uncertain and unjust in so many ways. You know, we know that God is going to deal with it because he does not change. He's the same just and righteous God for always. But he says, because he doesn't change, we won't be consumed.

[22 : 16] Because he doesn't change, he won't forget his promise of mercy to us. Yeah, and the glory of the Christian doctrine of God is that it is the unchangeable one who is in control of all the change in the universe.

He is who he is, isn't he? Not who he might become with us. Yeah, to wrongly paraphrase Hebrews 6 a bit, it's not that he swore by himself so that, so let us hold relatively tightly to the hope we profess because he who promised probably won't let us down.

That wouldn't be any hope at all. No. A changing, uncertain world needs a God who does not change. The amazing thing is, God doesn't need us.

He's perfect and he's always been. So, any change in God would be a change for the worse. God isn't a creature like us.

He isn't an inanimate object that doesn't change. When we say God doesn't change, it's not like we think of a table or a chair or something that stays the same day after day, dead.

[23 : 46] No, he's life itself, isn't he? He's utterly perfect, utterly alive. And he is his mercy and his love and his forgiveness and his justice and his trustworthiness.

He is all of those things, always, totally. He's more alive than we can think of being alive. Even when we talk about God, even at some level, it's even like our language starts to strain, our language stops being able to talk about how God really is, more than we can imagine. He is, for the lack of a better term, the most mostest. And if he had to change, he wouldn't be. And here at Christmas time, we remember the gift of Jesus Christ, it's good to remember James 1 as well, where he says every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. this very source of stability that the psalmist turns to, this perfect gift from God, Jesus Christ, is what the writer of Hebrews talks about when he talks about the Son of God, when he talks about why the Son of God is more perfect than angels.

He quotes these verses from Psalm 102. At the end there, he says, in Hebrews 1, he says, And you, the Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work for your hands.

[25 : 25] They will perish, but you remain, they will all wear out like a garment. Like a robe, you will roll them up. Like a garment, they will be changed, but you are the same, and your years will have no end.

That is the Son of God who was born as a person, as a human being, God and man at Christmas. It is right at Christmas time that we talk about how God became man.

How the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, took a human nature as well to him. A changeable, changing human nature. He grew up through being a toddler, and being a child, and becoming a human being.

He had human emotions as well. But maybe we will do well to remember that it is the unchanging God who did that.

And that he came into this world of uncertainty, this world of tyranny, of change and decay, so that he will be that unchanging hope that we need. he's still the internal unchangeable God who will accomplish his plans to save a people for himself from all nations.

[26 : 49] What's really fascinating is when the psalmist looks beyond his own knees, when he looks to who God is, he sees how there's a point where all nations will come to Jerusalem.

There's a point that is beyond what he's known, a change from before, but a good change. He's looking with certainty to a time when all the nations will come to Jerusalem, when a new thing will happen, when all the people and kingdoms coming to Jerusalem will be there to worship God. And that change started to happen when the unchanging God came into this world to become one of us. A changing uncertain world doesn't need more change.

It needs, it doesn't need a more relevant church which doesn't bang on about God. The nations will come to Christ, the rock of our salvation, because he is the unchangeable, eternal God.

A changing uncertain world needs a God who doesn't change, the God we can depend on, that same God who came to rescue us. Your plans for next year, for your life, might not last the next week, or month, or year, but those things aren't the things that are going to give you certainty.

[28 : 19] It's not going to come from politics, it's not going to come from Twitter, from your school results. Do work hard at school though, or going through the motions at church.

Those things all change. The question for you and me is, are we going to rely on changing things this coming year, or are we going to rely on the unchanging God?

Amen.