

Loving the Dust

Psalm 102

Easter Evening, 2004

Introduction:

Tonight I want to break from our regular series to consider the resurrection again.

- As we did this morning, I want to take up another Psalm that has something to say about the resurrection—
 - only this time a Psalm that talks about God raising up His people from the days of their captivity in Babylon.
 - The Psalm is Psalm 102.
 - Listen now as I read to you from God's Holy Word.
 - READ> Psalm 102

You will notice in verse 14, it speaks about dust.

- It says that God's servants take pleasure in the rubble and dust of the City of God.
- Tonight I want to show why we should love the stones and dust...

First of all, let me remind you about where we first run into dust...

- It is in the creation account...
- There we learn that God created us out of the dust of the ground...
 - Yet, He called us to take dominion over the ground from which we were made to subdue it.
 - As God's image, we were given absolute authority over the dust, and made to walk upon it and it was to obey us.

What a marvellous arrangement!

- As His image, our rule of the earth was to be a picture of His glorious majesty in Heaven!
- We were given the ability and the authority to conduct the affairs of this world so that every note was played in perfect harmony!
- We were made the lords of the earth,
 - and were given both the wisdom and the power to rule it gloriously.

And so it was, from this perspective, the greatest humiliation when God reversed all this after we rebelled against Him and declared to Adam:

- Gen 3:17: "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': "Cursed *is* the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat *of* it All the days of your life. 18 Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, And you shall eat the herb of the field. 19 In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you *are*, And to dust you shall return."
- Man, the lord of the earth, was sentenced to return to dust!
 - He would have to wrestle and fight with the elements—
 - the dust would rebel against him.
 - the animals would rebel
 - the weather would rebel
 - in a great struggle he would survive and then...
 - The very ground from which he was made and over which he was to rule would swallow him up.
 - The jaws of the grave would chew him up into oblivion!
 - His dominion was taken from him!
 - He would return to dust!

But, my friends, you know that this is not the end of the story!

- In Jesus Christ, God promises to raise up the dust again!
 - And He promises that in Christ, the dust shall inherit the earth forever!
 - Paradise will be restored!
- This is the promise of the resurrection:
 - 1 Cor 15:21: For since by man *came* death, by Man also *came* the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. 23 But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those *who are* Christ's at His coming.
 - 1 Cor 15:51: Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed— 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality. 54 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." 55 "O Death, where *is* your sting? O Hades, where *is* your victory?" 56 The sting of death *is* sin, and the strength of sin *is* the law. 57 But thanks *be* to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now it is very obvious that this has not happened yet.

- Just look at the condition of the church today!

- Most of God's finest people are lying in the grave.
- Their bodies have completely turned to dust.

I. There is a sense in which the church is in ruins like Israel was when she was taken into captivity (the setting of Psalm 102).

- God has redeemed us and delivered us from bondage to sin...

A. But just look at us.

1. We keep struggling to overcome the same sins...
 - Sexual immorality, laziness, inconsistency, covetousness,
 - A cold ungrateful heart,
 - unfaithfulness in marriage
 - slackness in parenting
 - weak leadership in our churches

2. The church is filled with confusion and division...
 - There is idolatry and compromise...
 - The sovereignty of God is denied,
 - The Lord's Day is ignored.
 - We trust in marketing schemes instead of Christ...
 - There is strife and infighting...
 - There is selfishness and greed...
 - We are not known for our love...

3. And there are many of us who are being persecuted today!
 - In China and Sudan and many other places,
 - Christians are imprisoned, slaughtered, raped, and pillaged.

4. But worst of all,
 - There are many whose bodies are lying in the graves.
 - Their bodies have returned to dust.

TRANS> This is an unacceptable state of affairs for God's glorious church to whom He has made so many excellent promises!

B. Psalm 102 is the prayer of one whom God has stirred up to lament over the condition of the church and to pray for her reformation.

1. It was written in the days of the captivity...
 - The unthinkable had happened...

- a. For years, God had spared Jerusalem and guarded his holy temple...
 - He had guarded the temple because it was the place where the gospel was clearly displayed in the OT ordinances...
 - It was the place where Jesus Christ was set forth in the glorious shadows and forms of the temple and the priesthood!

- b. But now Nebuchadnezzar had been allowed to enter with His armies.
 - Many young men in Israel had been slaughtered by his armies...
 - The walls of Jerusalem had been laid flat...
 - And the temple itself was in ruins—
 - The whole city was but stones and dust!
 - Nebuchadnezzar had taken those holy vessels that were to be used for the worship of Jehovah and dedicated them to his own gods...
 - And praised his gods for conquering the God of Israel!
 - This is an entirely unacceptable state of affairs for those who love God!

- 2. Those who still had faith were heard to cry out to God as in Psalm 102.
 - a. Hear the earnest plea as it is recorded in verse 1-11!
 - 1 ¶ <<A Prayer of the afflicted when he is overwhelmed and pours out his complaint before the LORD.>> Hear my prayer, O LORD, And let my cry come to You. 2 Do not hide Your face from me in the day of my trouble; Incline Your ear to me; In the day that I call, answer me speedily.
 - Genuine faith cannot look at the church in ruins and be indifferent.
 - It rises to the occasion with fervent prayer!
 - You know how Daniel prayed for Jerusalem three times a day.
 - He could not rest until God had restored His city.
 - The Psalmist continues, speaking of His anguish about the current state of affairs in the most striking terms:
 - 3 For my days are consumed like smoke, And my bones are burned like a hearth. 4 My heart is stricken and withered like grass, So that I forget to eat my bread. 5 Because of the sound of my groaning My bones cling to my skin. 6 I am like a pelican of the wilderness; I am like an owl of the desert. 7 I lie awake, And am like a sparrow alone on the housetop.
 - The people of God feel a sense of isolation when the church is in ruins. Like Elijah, they feel that they are left alone and that all have gone after Baal. And though God assures Elijah that there is a remnant, it is but a small one.

- What a grief it must have been to Shadrack, Meshack and Abenego when they were the only ones who did not bow Nebuchadnezzar's image.
 - When they saw so many of their companions forsaking the God of their fathers to worship idols.
 - How lonely was our Lord Jesus in His purposes—there were none who understood His mission.
- What is perhaps worst of all is that the enemies are given occasion to mock when they see the church in ruins...
 - Where is your God? Why couldn't He deliver you?
 - He becomes just an ordinary deity like all the others that people worship...
 - It is just another religion, no one sees a need to fear Jehovah—because look at His people!
 - They are all scattered and divided, they don't even know what they believe.
 - And so verse 8 continues:
 - 8 My enemies reproach me all day long, Those who deride me swear an oath against me.
 - They make the name of the city of God a curse saying to their enemies...
 - “May you be like Jerusalem.”
 - People of faith know that all this has come about not because God is impotent, but because He is chastening His people for their sins.
 - It is because of His wrath against the church that He has cast her away:
 - 9 For I have eaten ashes like bread, And mingled my drink with weeping, 10 Because of Your indignation and Your wrath; For You have lifted me up and cast me away.
 - In many ways, it seems that the church is coming to an end...Verse 11 speaks of approaching death...
 - 11 My days *are* like a shadow that lengthens, And I wither away like grass.
 - The shadow lengthens and becomes faint when it is about to disappear.
 - The grass dries up and withers after it is cut.

- b. If you have faith, you can't be indifferent about the condition of the church today!
 - It is a sign of faith, not hopeless despair to pray a prayer like this in Psalm 102!
 - You pray because you know that God has promised better things for us!
 - You pray because you believe that He will raise up the church even though it lies in ruins...
 - Like the widow before the unjust judge, you simply won't accept the current state of affairs!
 - You will not leave God alone until He makes His city a praise in the earth again!
 - You will continue to pour out your soul in anguish to Him until He answers and fulfils His promise!
 - This is a true spirit of prayer and supplication!
 - Blessed are those who are given this spirit.

You can have confidence even when the city of God is in ruins...

II. What is the basis for such confidence when the city of God has been reduced to scattered stones and dust?

A. It is that God is not like the dust!

1. There is a great contrast set up in verse 11 and 12!
 - a. The pronouns are emphatic!
 - Psalm 102:11: "**My** days are like a shadow that lengthens (about to disappear), and **I** wither like grass..."
 - Psalm 102:12: But **You**, O LORD, shall endure forever and the remembrance of your name to all generations!"
 - b. Here we see the holy people of God through the ages dying and turning to dust,
 - and we see great advances that were made by many in the church forgotten.
 - But the Lord God is altogether different.
 - He continues from generation to generation.
 - The word **endure** means to sit, as on a throne—

- He continues to be seated on His throne through all the changes of this world,
 - constantly working out His purposes without a skip.
 - c. In fact, even the captivity itself and the ruin of the city of God is an evidence of His power and His reign—
 - not His weakness and His lack of control.
 - It is a sign of His authority in disciplining His people.
2. This is brought out very strongly in verses 23-28.
- a. Verse 23 shows that He is the one who weakens us and shortens our days.
 - v. 23: He weakened my strength in the way; He shortened my days.”
 - It is part of His plan to weaken us so that we will learn to live by faith...
 - Mark talked about this last week from Hebrews 12.
 - There is too much pride in us, so we need captivity and trouble that we might learn to pray like the widow before the unjust judge.
 - God knows the lessons we need to learn for all eternity, and He is teaching us those lessons.
 - See how the prayer rises out of the trouble? (v. 24)
 - You look and you see the church in trouble and you say:
 - “O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days...”
 - “You have not accomplished your purpose for your church yet!”
 - In the Old Testament,
 - it was that the Messiah had not yet come...
 - For us,
 - it is that all things are not yet brought under His feet.
 - He cannot take us away in the midst of our days...
 - before He has fulfilled His promises!
 - “O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days...”
 - b. And then you come to focus on His eternal stability, authority, and power!
 - He is not like us!

- Psalm 102:24: I said, "O my God, Do not take me away in the midst of my days; Your years *are* throughout all generations. 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 endure; Yes, they will all grow old like a garment; Like a cloak You will change them, And they will be changed. 27 But You *are* the same, And Your years will have no end.
- Everything around Him is changeable
 - We are changeable—
 - Even the heaven and the earth are changeable—
 - But the reason they are changeable is because God can change them at will.
 - He alone is unchangeable.
 - He is not like us who have become dust and rubble.

B. But what good is it to us to know that God does not change?

- How does it help you to know that He is strong and firm in the midst of all your struggles and changes,
 - when you see the church's weakness and feel your own impotence?
 - When you see the city of God is but scattered stones and dust?

1. It helps because you know that this great potentate has plans for the church...

- and because you know that He will accomplish all His will concerning her!
 - a. Look at verse 13!
 - v. 13: "You will arise and have mercy on Zion! For the time to favour her has come, yes the set time has come."
 - This is not just wishful thinking!
 - God has promised that He will raise up His church at the appointed time!
 - All the stones and all the dust that has been cast down will be brought together again and the city of God will be eternally glorious and perfect...
 - and no enemies will molest her ever again!
 - Everything—even death itself—will be brought under Christ and nothing will remain that is not put under Him!

b. Do not despair about the grave where our bodies turn to dust!

- Learn to take pleasure in the stones and the dust!

- God loves the stones and the dust of His city—
 - He has made a promise to the stones and dust and He will have mercy yet!
 - God’s true servants do as verse 14 declares:
 - “Your servants take pleasure in her stones and show favour to her dust.”
 - They know that the dust of God’s city is not like any other dust because it has God’s promise...
 - Let it be scattered all over the world, God will bring it together and build His glorious temple!
 - When you have faith in God’s promise,
 - you do not show contempt for the church in her weakness and sin—in her desolation...
 - But you rejoice in her and boast of her glory!
- Only faith can do this!
 - Its hard to boast in the church where there is so much confusion... so much error... so much that is ugly and unworthy of God.
 - But the church is not glorious because of what she is today...
 - She is glorious because of what God promises that she shall be.
 - Don’t allow yourself to despise her!
 - Do not accept her idolatry, for that is not faith...
 - But do not give up on her and forsake her, because God has not forsaken her!

2. Let me tell you,

- a. Your love for the church even when she is stones and dust will make the mightiest kings of the earth to tremble!
 - That’s what it says in verse 15
 - Psalm 102:15: So the nations shall fear the name of the LORD, And all the kings of the earth Your glory.
 - Do you see what this verse is connected too?
 - It is not God showing mercy to the church that causes them to fear that is in view here...
 - It is His people loving the dust and the stones—loving the church when she is in ruins!

- b. Do you see how this makes them fear?
 - It is because they see that your faith is in God, not in yourself.
 - It can't be in the church itself because the church is in ruins, but you are looking to God...
 - You believe that God will raise her up and establish her.

- c. Did Daniel not cause kings to fear when he loved the dust?
 - Daniel knew that God was not finished with His church when it lay in the dust...
 - He understood from the writings of Jeremiah that God had appointed a set time to restore His city...
 - Daniel 9 begins:
 - 1 ¶ In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the lineage of the Medes, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans— 2 in the first year of his reign I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years *specified* by the word of the LORD through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. 3 Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.
 - Daniel was a man who had this faith all along.
 - And He stood before the mightiest kings of the earth with this confidence and made them tremble...
 - He made Nebuchadnezzar tremble and confess that:
 - “the Most High rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomever He chooses.”
 - He made Belshazzar tremble so that his knees knocked together...
 - He knew what God had done through His father, but he did not humble himself—so when the hour of judgement came, he was terrified.
 - He made Darius tremble before God...
 - He made a decree that all should worship Daniel's God who saved Him from the mouth of the lions.
 - Daniel did not make them tremble because he was a severe or august person...
 - He made them fear because he trusted entirely in the true and living God...
 - even in a time when the church was but dust and stones.

- d. You will do the same when you love the church, though she be small and weak!
- 1) Your faith is that God will build His church, He will raise up His city no matter what it may look like now...
 - He will hear the prayer of His people and deliver them at the appointed time.
 - This is what He promises in verses 16-17:
 - 16 For the LORD shall build up Zion; He shall appear in His glory. 17 He shall regard the prayer of the destitute, And shall not despise their prayer.
 - 2) The people around you will see that your faith is not in the church, but in God who raises up the church...
 - Your faith at such times points straight to Him!
 - No one can resist this testimony!
 - As Paul said in Philippians 1:27:
 - Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God. For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, (Philippians 1:27-29 NKJV)
 - Do you see what Paul is saying here?
 - The Philippians were small and the Romans were mighty and powerful—
 - The Romans were persecuting, but Paul tells the Philippians to not be afraid of them.
 - They were rejoicing in the stones and the dust.
 - They were a little people, yet they knew that their God was great and that they were there forever.
 - When you serve God with the people of God in times of trouble...
 - it terrifies your mightiest enemies because they see that you are quietly resting in something over which they have no control!
 - They see your confidence and it makes them tremble.
 3. God will display His own glory by pouring out His blessing on the church.

- That's what it means to be a vessel of mercy—
 - the dust and stones of the city of God are there to display to the whole universe the mercy of God!
 - God has mercy on them when He hears the cry of the destitute and responds just as He did in Egypt when His helpless people groaned before Him in their bondage and oppression.

- a. Future generations will see how God answered our prayers...
 - Psalm 102:16-18: For the LORD shall build up Zion; He shall appear in His glory. 17 He shall regard the prayer of the destitute, And shall not despise their prayer. This will be written for the generation to come, That a people yet to be created may praise the LORD.

 - We can look back at the early reformers and we marvel at their faith—how they stood alone for God...
 - How they suffered and died for their faith!
 - See an old reformer tied to stake, about to be burned alive for his faith...
 - He lifts his head to heaven and rejoices that Christ is on the throne, and that He will be worshipped from the river to the ends of the earth!
 - Now we get to look back and see how God answered the prayers of men like this!
 - He did a glorious work in His church...
 - And here we are, feeling lonely and weak in a church that has turned to dust and rubble again...
 - Do not lose heart!
 - God will do His work!

- b. The day will come when He will answer our prayers...
 - 1) Think of all the saints in the OT who waited for Messiah—
 - who endured days when idolatry was everywhere in Israel, when everyone worshipped at the high places...
 - when enemies overran the city of God and when most of their captive neighbours turned to worship the gods of their conquerors...
 - Yet they waited and then we, their spiritual descendents, got to see how God answered their prayers and sent Christ...
 - Verses 19-22 have been fulfilled.

- Psalm 102:19-22: For He looked down from the height of His sanctuary; From heaven the LORD viewed the earth, 20 To hear the groaning of the prisoner, To release those appointed to death, 21 To declare the name of the LORD in Zion, And His praise in Jerusalem, 22 When the peoples are gathered together, And the kingdoms, to serve the LORD.
- 2) The same thing will happen again as we long for the appearing of Jesus the second time—we groan as we wait for the resurrection...
- The day is coming when God will gather all His city together...
 - When all the kingdoms will be brought together to serve the Lord.
 - He hears our cries for this and He will do it!
 - Do not grow weary in your prayers!
 - Do not grow feeble in your faith!
 - God has promised and He is mighty to do it!
 - God has promised and He is merciful to do it!

The conclusion is in verse 28...

- Psalm 102:28: The children of Your servants will continue, And their descendants will be established before You."
- The stones and dust will serve God forever and ever!
 - God loves the stones and the dust...
 - So should you.
 - I don't care what the church looks like today—how sorry its state...
 - God will raise it up and it is for you to love it.
 - Love it like Daniel did!
 - God will make His city glorious!
 - The stones and the dust will be raised up again.
- May God help us to recover such faith again!