

# Blues Psalms

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



*"Robert Johnson Playing Guitar" by Natasha Mylius*

## Prayer of Illumination

Holy One, our strength in suffering and our hope for salvation,  
lift up your Word of life and pour out your Spirit of grace  
so that we may follow faithfully all the way to the cross;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Background

One of the more important features of Psalm 102 is its heading that we'll hear shortly. There's nothing quite like it in any of the Psalms. Before the poem Psalm 102, the Bible gives us instructions that this is the Psalm to read or pray when you find yourself broken-hearted. It's for when God seems far, far away and you find yourself "up a crick." In other words, Psalm 102 is a blues psalm.

We all get the blues from time to time. It's part of the human experience. We need the blues to get through the blahs. The blues will help us through the pandemic. The blues helps us process seasons of change, loss, and trauma. The blues give voice to our pain, so we can move to praise.

The blues originally came out of the black experience—of struggling with the individual's and a people's trials and tribulations, the abuses and bruises suffered in a society hostile to them. But the blues also go back to the Psalms. Blues in the Psalms are daring and devout prayers of a people in exile. They're gutsy and honest prayers.

*So let's hear the Word of the Lord from ...*

### **Scripture: Psalm 102:1-28 (MSG)**

*A Prayer of One Whose Life Is Falling to Pieces, and  
Who Lets God Know Just How Bad It Is*

<sup>1-2</sup> God, listen! Listen to my prayer,  
listen to the pain in my cries.  
Don't turn your back on me  
just when I need you so desperately.  
Pay attention! This is a cry for *help!*  
And hurry—this can't wait!  
<sup>3-11</sup> I'm wasting away to nothing,  
I'm burning up with fever.  
I'm a ghost of my former self,  
half-consumed already by terminal illness.  
My jaws ache from gritting my teeth;  
I'm nothing but skin and bones.  
I'm like a buzzard in the desert,  
a crow perched on the rubble.  
Insomniac, I twitter away,  
mournful as a sparrow in the gutter.  
All day long my enemies taunt me,  
while others just curse.  
They bring in meals—casseroles of ashes!  
I draw drink from a barrel of my tears.  
And all because of your furious anger;  
you swept me up and threw me out.  
There's nothing left of me—  
a withered weed, swept clean from the path.

<sup>12-17</sup> Yet you, God, are sovereign still,  
always and ever sovereign.  
You'll get up from your throne and help Zion—  
it's time for compassionate help.  
Oh, how your servants love this city's rubble  
and weep with compassion over its dust!  
The godless nations will sit up and take notice  
—see your glory, worship your name—  
When God rebuilds Zion,  
when he shows up in all his glory,  
When he attends to the prayer of the wretched.  
He won't dismiss their prayer.

<sup>18-22</sup> Write this down for the next generation  
so people not yet born will praise God:  
"God looked out from his high holy place;  
from heaven he surveyed the earth.  
He listened to the groans of the doomed,  
he opened the doors of their death cells."  
Write it so the story can be told in Zion,  
so God's praise will be sung in Jerusalem's streets  
And wherever people gather together  
along with their rulers to worship him.

<sup>23-28</sup> God sovereignly brought me to my knees,  
he cut me down in my prime.  
"Oh, don't," I prayed, "please don't let me die.  
You have more years than you know what to do with!  
You laid earth's foundations a long time ago,  
and handcrafted the very heavens;  
You'll still be around when they're long gone,  
threadbare and discarded like an old suit of clothes.  
You'll throw them away like a worn-out coat,  
but year after year you're as good as new.  
Your servants' children will have a good place to live  
and their children will be at home with you."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## SERMON – Blues Psalms

The town of Bernice, Louisiana is a small town with a population just south of two thousand. Somewhere on Sunday morning, Robert Finley is leading worship in a small southern church. He's been doing this for the last 18 years. Robert grew up one of eight children, a sharecropper's son. He never went to school.

*"We were just working from day to day and from year to year," he says.  
"I never did see a bonus. It was like every year we would do better next year. You're bound to break even and then you go on back in debt."*

At age seven, he started singing in his church choir. He had the loudest voice in the choir. His pastor told him don't stop. Robert, you just keep singing at the top of your lungs. When he was eleven years old, his dad gave him \$20 to get some shoes. He came home with a guitar instead.

After serving in the army, Robert returned to Louisiana, continued playing music, and worked as a carpenter. Then came marriage, fatherhood, divorce, and a house fire. Through the highs and lows, Robert kept playing and singing his music—blues, gospel, spirituals, and soul.

About seven years ago, Robert lost his eyesight to glaucoma. He may be blind, but he sure didn't lose his voice. Finley had to hang up his hammer for carpentry, but he hit the road touring—singing blues and soul. A couple of years ago, he made it to the semi-finals in season 14 of *America's Got Talent*. But Simon voted Robert out—and the crowd rightfully booed him. But Robert still kept singing and playing.

Now 67 years old, his new blues and soul album *Sharecropper's Son* came out a few months ago and is getting rave reviews. Its release was delayed a year because of COVID. But that still couldn't stop Robert. In the album he circles back musically to his church-going roots, and he channels his deep personal history of hardship with his perfectly raspy and soulful voice:

*I may not see your face  
but I can feel the love in this place...  
I'm finally starting to see  
What the Lord has given to me*

*"Losing my sight," says Robert, "gave me the perspective to see my true destiny. Deep down inside, there's that hope that comes from the church and makes you don't give up and makes you don't stop."*

Singing the blues helps you walk by faith, not by sight. The gospel has been described as *"the blues' perfect cousin."* And we learn best about the blues from the Psalms and David.

David was not only a king, but a musician. A harp player who played his concerts in palace halls to soothe King Saul's blues and unpredictable mood swings. David found himself on the road a lot too—on the run from enemies—external and internal. He often found himself caught between the meltdown of his ego and the breakdown of his relationship with God. So naturally, a fair amount of the Psalms are blues songs—laments dealing with situations of estrangement, frustration, displacement, and being flat on your back.

The Psalms don't sugar coat things. They allow you to encounter God as you are, wherever you are. There's a real freedom to this. You don't have to pretend. Reading and praying the Psalms help us experience God no matter how you feel. No matter if you're:

- Angry or afraid of change
- Grateful or grieving or just feeling guilty
- Sad or stressed out
- Jealous or joyful
- Lonely or loving

The Psalms allow us to express and entrust our feelings, our "blues" to God. We can pray no matter what shade we're feeling—blue, green, red, or gold. God reminds us in the Psalms not to bury those emotions inside. Instead, we lift all of them up to God in prayer. God wants expression rather than depression. Keeping our emotions inside makes us sick.

David was no saint. He was a man after God's own heart but he was rough around the edges. He had a lust for power and women, but also a passion for God—dancing in his skivvies before the Ark of the Covenant. He was incredibly selfish and selfless—and God stuck with him. And God sticks with us too, through thick and thin. The blues train us to be true blue to God and ourselves.

There was a study done several years ago on flight attendants. With all of the stress that they experience—difficult passengers, brutal schedules, communicating flight delays. To cope they sometimes develop a persona. The persona is where you smile, wave, constantly speak in a welcoming voice and just run on autopilot. With time your soul becomes hollow if you stay in this mode. You can get stuck in that persona. All the while, the real you is withering away as you say with a plastered smile on your face, "thanks and ba-bye."

Pastors have similar struggles in their profession as well. That's why we need the Psalms, especially the blues Psalms, so bad. We learn how to be authentically human in both the highs and the lows. Not only the Psalms, but Job, Jeremiah, and Lamentations help us sing the blues, too. There we find the words of God to pray back to God. We can plead with God against God. The blues are prayers for "thy kingdom come, thy will be done"—spirituality for the real world.

These powerful images are from Psalm 102 alone:

God, I'm heartsick and heart-broken. My days vanish like a puff of smoke. You've picked me up only to fling me into the trash heap. My fever makes my bones ache—like charred logs in a fire pit. My days are like a fading shadow. My spirit withers like sunbaked grass. Mention of my name brings scorn and smirks. I'm skin and bones: Ashes are my bread, tears mingle with my drink. I'm as lonely as an owl hooting in the ruins or a solitary bird on a rooftop. Lord, hear my prayer. Make haste to answer me. I'm at the end of my rope. I'm feeling like I'm sentenced to death row. This is the stuff of good blues and down home country songs. And it's in the Bible for us to use.

The blues are the soul's cry for God to act, to change things.

The blues articulate different kinds of complaints:

“I-complaints” about personal suffering.

“They-complaints” about nagging enemies.

“You-complaints” about the suffering God has brought on his people.

The blues give us a needed spiritual cleanse, a divine detox. Instead of keeping our raw emotions bottled up, we can uncork our strong emotions and pour them out to God. We can put words to our tension that cry out for resolution. The blues perfectly position us to make that sudden turn that happens in verse 12 where our catastrophe is transformed into a eucatastrophe. There’s a sudden turn to the good in the midst of the bad. We can have confidence, even in the midst of tragedy. We can be forward-looking, believing in a rebuild of earth in this life, or at least a New Jerusalem in heaven.

We’re moved and transported from singing the blues to singing praise. Our focus shifts off of our frailty to God’s eternity. *“But you O Lord are enthroned forever.”* Your name endures for all generations. You will arise God and take pity on Zion. Now is the time to have mercy on us, God. You will not despise the prayers of the destitute. People yet unborn will praise you. You are the same, your years have no end.

Worship leads us to witness. Here, praise leads to prophecy. We have a bold hope in what will come in the future.



*St. John the Baptist in Prison, Visited by Salomé (Giovanni Barbieri)*

I think of John the Baptist who had the blues when King Herod threw him in prison. He was second-guessing Jesus and himself—

Did he miss it?

Was Jesus really the Messiah?

Was his life for nothing?

Would he die in prison?

John sent a disciple to talk to Jesus for him. Jesus gave these words of comfort to be shared with John in his prison cell:

*"the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.  
Blessed is the one that takes no offense at me."*

Hear the good news Immanuel: Our immortal and compassionate God entered into our mortal and messed up world to bring the deliverance we yearn for. The infinite entered the finite. We are not alone. We're not stuck in our predicament. Jesus listens to our doubts and fears. Jesus of Nazareth himself cried out in the garden on behalf of the world, on behalf of himself,

*"Lord hear my prayer."  
"Take this cup from me."  
But ultimately, "Not my will, but thy will."*

While fully human, God was in Christ, reconciling the world. God crying out to God, God suffering the blues for his people. God answered his Son's cry and he answers our cry to Christ.

And so we can sing:

*The blood of Jesus,  
washed away my crimson sin,  
washed away my blues,  
and made me whiter than snow.*

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Robert Johnson Playing Guitar*" by [Natasha Mylius](#)

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