

Psalms 102:11

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

My days are like a shadow that declineth; and I am withered like grass.

Analysis

My days are like a shadow that declineth; and I am withered like grass. This verse employs two metaphors expressing life's brevity and the psalmist's sense of impending death. "My days are like a shadow that declineth" (yamai k'tzel natui, יָמָי קְצֵל נָטוּי) compares life to an evening shadow that lengthens as the sun sets, soon to disappear entirely into night. Natui (נתוי) means stretched out, extended, or declining—suggesting the day's end approaches.

Shadow imagery for life's transience appears throughout Scripture (1 Chronicles 29:15, Job 8:9, 14:2, Psalm 144:4, Ecclesiastes 6:12). Unlike substantial realities, shadows have no weight, permanence, or independent existence—they depend entirely on the light source and vanish when it's removed. The psalmist feels his existence fading, his vitality draining away.

"I am withered like grass" (v'ani ka'esev ivashti, וְאַנְיִכְעָשֵׂב כְּבָשָׂתִי) uses agricultural imagery familiar in Palestine's climate. Grass greens during brief rainy seasons but quickly withers under relentless sun (Psalm 90:5-6, 103:15-16, Isaiah 40:6-8, James 1:10-11, 1 Peter 1:24). Yavash (כְּבָשׂ) means to dry up, wither, become ashamed—connoting not just physical deterioration but loss of honor and dignity.

These metaphors express more than physical illness. The psalmist feels forgotten, his life passing without significance, his existence as fleeting and inconsequential as shadows and grass. This despair sets up the contrast with God's eternity in verse 12.

Historical Context

The shadow and grass metaphors pervade ancient Near Eastern literature, not unique to Israel. Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Ugaritic texts similarly lament human mortality and life's brevity. However, Israel's faith transformed this universal observation: while pagans despaired at life's meaninglessness, Israel contrasted human transience with God's eternity and found hope in covenant relationship.

For exilic Israel, these images carried corporate significance. The nation itself seemed to be withering—Jerusalem destroyed, Temple burned, people scattered, dynasty ended. The shadow of Israel's glory was declining into the night of foreign domination. Yet even this darkest moment couldn't extinguish hope in God's eternal purposes.

Jesus used grass imagery to challenge anxious pursuit of material security (Matthew 6:30, Luke 12:28)—if God clothes temporary grass beautifully, how much more will He care for His eternal children? Peter quotes Isaiah's grass metaphor to contrast perishable human glory with the imperishable word of God that endures forever (1 Peter 1:24-25).

The early church faced life's fragility acutely under persecution. Believers might be arrested, tortured, or executed at any moment. Psalm 102's imagery spoke to their experience while verse 12's promise of God's eternal reign provided hope beyond immediate suffering.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How does recognizing life's brevity (shadow, grass) affect our priorities, ambitions, and daily decisions?
2. In what ways might modern culture's denial of mortality and suffering prevent us from honestly facing the realities expressed in this verse?
3. How can believers hold together both the truth of life's transience and the promise of eternal significance through Christ?

Interlinear Text

אִבְשָׁן כְּעֵד שָׁב תְּאַנְּתִי גַּזְלִי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ כְּעֵד שָׁב תְּאַנְּתִי גַּזְלִי
 My days are like a shadow that declineth H589 like grass and I am withered
 H3117 H6738 H5186 H6212 H3001

Additional Cross-References

Job 14:2 (Parallel theme): He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not.

Psalms 109:23 (Parallel theme): I am gone like the shadow when it declineth: I am tossed up and down as the locust.

Psalms 144:4 (Parallel theme): Man is like to vanity: his days are as a shadow that passeth away.

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