

Psalm 88—How To Walk with No Light

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I. Introduction

A. Have you ever felt like the psalmist—“Darkness is my closest friend”?

1. The questions are—do you believe the darkness will lift someday? Do you trust that the sufferings and difficulties of this life have a purpose? Does God test our faith? Are there consequences in this life for our sin? Does God discipline us? How can this possibly be good for me? Will it ever end? Is Christ worth waiting for?
2. It's the darkest chapter in the entire Bible. There's no praise at the end. No breakthrough moment. No emotional turnaround. It starts in pain and ends in silence. But God put it in your Bible for a reason.
 - a) Psalm 88 is here to teach us this: When all you feel is darkness, you must hold on to him and never let go.
3. I happened to be reading this psalm in my yearly journey through the Bible on Easter.
 - a) After I read the psalm and reflected on it, I asked myself—“Would I continue trusting the Lord if I find myself in such darkness?”
 - b) What about you? Whatever your answer is, I hope very much that this witness will be a beacon of light to you in your darkness.
 - c) Because I think that's the main point.

II. Main Point

A. A witness of faith in the darkest of moments

III. Outline

- A. Pleading in Pain (1-7)
- B. Perplexed in Isolation (8-12)
- C. Persevering in the Pit (13-18)

IV. Exposition

A. There are psalms of praise, psalms of thanksgiving, psalms of lament—and then there is Psalm 88.

This psalm is unique. It begins in sorrow, and it ends with the line: “Darkness is my closest friend.” There is no resolution. No rescue. No revival. Only prayer in the dark. And yet, God has preserved this psalm in Scripture. So, let's explore what the cry of a God-fearing soul looks like in the darkness.

1. Let's first discover who this psalm is about.

- a) If you will notice there in your Bible, the psalm has a title.
- b) The title indicates that the psalm was written by the sons of Korah and in particular, Heman the Ezrahite. He is the one pleading in the darkness.
 - (1) According to 1 Kings 4:31, Heman is named among the wisest of men and only exceeded in wisdom by King Solomon. (This might not be him but the truth remains)
 - (a) One conclusion that can be drawn from this is that even the wisest suffer. Wisdom doesn't keep you from suffering but rather it informs you how to respond when it comes.
 - i) Wisdom is often described as wagon tracks throughout the book of Proverbs. In other words, wisdom lays out for us a well worn path by which to walk with God even when it's dark and lonely.
 - (1) You may not have any light, but you can feel the well worn path under your feet.
 - (2) One simple thing you will take from this psalm is that prayer is the act of dependence and faith that is necessary in the darkest of days.
 - ii) Another conclusion to be drawn here is to seek the wisdom of God which is Christ so that you can continue following Christ when things go from bad to worse.

2. You might be wondering why I chose to preach Psalm 88 which is described as being the saddest psalm of all.

- a) Maybe for myself—after reading it back in April, I have thought about it a lot. I want understand how I might endure possible dark days ahead of me. I want to be ready and equipped.

- b) Second—I want the same for you. This is to equip you for hard days ahead. There are possibly people in this room going through hard things right now and we need to see that others have walked that difficult road before us. God expects us to trust him and to lean not on our own understanding but in every way acknowledge him even in the darkness.
- c) The third reason is that you might be a help to someone going through “the valley of the shadow of death.” Instead of abandoning that person, you can plead with them. You can be their companion in the pain.
 - (1) There will be people among you going through such things that you may never know.
 - (2) It’s possible to be lonely even in a crowd. It’s possible to feel isolated in church.
 - (3) We should keep building relationships and strengthening those we have in the church. You will likely need each other someday.
 - (4) And let’s not be like Job’s friends. Let’s be a people who listen well and are slow to speak. Let’s be near when we can and plead with them and for them in their pain.
 - (a) I recall some dark days in seminary that my friends would just come and read scripture to me. They didn’t say anything. They could tell I was still struggling.
 - (b) Find ways to love the strugglers around you.
- 3. Now, let’s see how the God-fearing soul pleads in his pain beginning there in verse 1.
 - a) Verse one is a confession of faith—O LORD, God of my salvation.
 - (1) There are a lot of psalms that start like this but there are none that end like this one.
 - (a) He affirms the exclusive source of his salvation and help—YHWH.
 - i) He may feel abandoned by God for some reason, but he will not abandon the Lord.
 - (b) The Lord is mentioned first before the pain.
 - i) From the first two verses, we do not even know there is any trouble.
 - (2) The second half of verse 1 gives us this picture of persistence—day and night he cries out.
 - (a) Persistence reveals ongoing trust. Persistence says that he believes God will respond.
 - (b) Heman’s persistent prayer is described as crying out.
 - i) It means to shout loudly.
 - ii) Maybe like blind Bartimaeus, he doesn’t care who thinks he’s silly, he will not be quiet until God hears his plea. I mean who else could make Bartimaeus see? He believed Jesus, the Son of David could. So too Heman. God is his salvation.
 - b) Verse 2 may seem odd but it is a plea for God to hear his persistent loud cries.
 - (1) This is not unusual. It is in fact normal.
 - (a) It is a normal response that we all do. Have you ever asked someone a question but they did not answer? Is it not right to ask a follow up question—I’m sorry. Did you hear me?
 - (b) God hears his prayer but he hasn’t responded with any help. Don’t give up.
 - (c) Therefore, he demands that his prayer be allowed to come before him and that he would listen.
 - (d) The Lord has his reasons for his delays. We do not understand. But God is content to allow us to feel the silence.
 - i) Tim Keller wrote in his book on prayer—“God will only give you what you would have asked for if you knew everything he knows.”
 - ii) We must remember that God is good and he will always do what is best for us.
- 4. Now, we hear the reason behind his persistent loud cries to God in verse 3—For my soul is full of troubles and my life draws near to Sheol.
 - a) We are given no details about his troubles but this is typical of the psalms. In other words, this psalm can be an example of how to fight the good fight of faith whether it’s depression, PTSD from military service, persecution, cancer, bypass surgery or numerous other difficulties we face as believers.
 - b) Many of these struggles start off small. They don’t seem to be a big deal but sometimes things get worse.

- (1) The language the psalmist uses is “full of troubles.” This fullness is like that of being full after a meal. In this way, he is saying he has had enough.
 - (a) There are many who understand how he feels in the following verses.
 - i) The second half of V. 3—my life draws near to Sheol—Forgotten in life and forgotten in death. No one will be a my funeral. No one will even miss me when I’m gone.
 - ii) V. 4—I am counted among those who go down to the pit—means not only will no one notice he’s gone but they actually regard him as good as dead. People are repulsed at his presence.
 - (1) This “counted” is the same word used in (Genesis 15:6) And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.
 - (2) That means it’s more than just assuming but rather he is considered worthy of death.
 - iii) The second half of V. 4—I am a man who has no strength.
 - (1) In other words, he is a man with no help within himself and he has no one to help him.
 - iv) The images of death continue in verse 5
 - (1) Like one set loose among the dead—this image reminds me of the demon possessed man that Jesus heals who lives among the tombs. Heman feels like this. There’s nothing that ties him to this life. No job. No family. No friends. Nothing. He is free to roam among the dead.
 - (2) Like the slain that lie in the grave—pierced and buried. Covered up. Forgotten.
 - (3) Like those whose you remember no more, for they are cutoff from your hand.
 - (4) V. 6— You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep.
 - (a) Not only do the people around him regard him as those who go down to the pit but he says God has put him there.
 - (2) We needed to see this dark reality. We really do not know why he is full of troubles. We do not know why this is happening to him. We do not know the reason God has put him in the pit.
 - (a) But—and this is super important to see—despite the darkness, being forgotten and forsaken, he prays day and night.
 - i) Indeed, he is praying—lamenting—these words we are discussing.
 - ii) What do troubles do to us?
 - (1) Do they control us or do we use troubles as a warning light to pray?
 - (2) Spurgeon comments—“It is better to be in the dark with God than to be in the light and without him.”
 - (3) Real faith can exist even when immediate relief is nowhere to be found.
5. In verse 7 we may have some insight as to why this is happening.
 - a) He acknowledges that God’s wrath lies heavy upon him and he describes it as all his waves breaking over him.
 - (1) If you’ve ever been to the ocean, this image is frightening. One wave crashing over you is bad enough. Waves without end or all at one time is overwhelming when no relief comes.
 - (2) To speak of God’s wrath means Heman is acknowledging his sin. What that is specifically is unknown to us.
 - (3) Yet, he describes this scene with the same image as Jonah does when he ran away from the Lord.
 - (4) In other words, it seems that Heman—like Jonah—recognizes his guilt and the waves of his wrath are expected but so is mercy.
 - b) Of all things, when we sin is the place where the enemies has the most pleasure and the most progress.
 - (1) The snake will say—it’s over. There’s nothing you can do now. You’ve gone too far. God will never forgive you for that. You might as well enjoy life while you can. Forsake God. Stop praying. You are wasting your time.

- (a) Do you know how to fight this?
 - (b) Psalm 88 is your guide. Keep praying. Keep fighting. You need “gutsy guilt.”
 - i) If I wrecked my dad’s car while doing something stupid, do I automatically pack my bags and find a new place to live? No. Most dads will forgive you and move on. If we will do that, do you not think our Father in heaven will not do more?
 - ii) Fight like this. In (Micah 7:7-9) ⁷ But as for me, I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me. ⁸ Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me. ⁹ I will bear the indignation of the LORD because I have sinned against him, until he pleads my cause and executes judgment for me. He will bring me out to the light; I shall look upon his vindication.
 - iii) Really we have no other option. God is our only hope of salvation.
 - iv) If you stop praying, you are cutting yourself off from the only source of hope you have.
 - (1) If you stop praying, will the pain and guilt go away?
- B. Well we’ve walked through the first seven verses of this psalm. Can it possibly get any worse? We have watched Heman plead in pain but now it gets worse as he is perplexed in isolation.
- 1. We are going to move a lot quicker through the rest of the psalm.
 - 2. V. 8 describes not just the people of the community who consider Heman as one who goes down to the pit but he companions have shunned him. God has made him a horror to them.
 - a) This language is very similar to that of Israel when they are sent into exile for continually breaking the covenant.
 - (1) This is supposed to make them long for restoration. For many in exile it did. The story of Ezra and Nehemiah make that case. They did not give up. Neither did Daniel.
 - (2) That seems to be true of Heman as well. He’s still praying and seeking rescue from the Lord.
 - b) Notice there in verse 9 that even in sorrow, he calls upon the Lord every day.
 - 3. Though he has talked a lot about death, he doesn’t want to die. He wants to live. He wants to praise God. He wants to see his wondrous works.
 - a) The center of this psalm is verses 10 and 11 which seems to be Heman’s biggest concern—Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you? Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon?
 - (1) Heman is appealing for deliverance from the God who shows steadfast love. The God who does wonders!
 - (2) It seems that Heman wants to behold God’s glory.
 - (a) He believes God created the world to make himself known and enjoyed.
 - (b) He has known him and enjoyed him.
 - (c) His appeal to God is this—will that continue if I die and buried in the grave? (These three —Hamilton 129)
- C. We hear that appeal vividly in our last point—persevering in the pit.
- 1. V. 13 reminds us that Heman is still praying—But I, O LORD, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you.
 - a) The idea of morning is a hopeful one! Are there new mercies awaiting me when the morning dawns? Will the Lord come to my rescue? Will he shine light into my darkness?
 - b) He asks more questions—why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?
 - (1) He seems to be provoking God to prove his love for him!
 - 2. The scene continues to be grim.
 - a) Afflicted and close to death. Suffering terrors and helpless.
 - b) Your wrath has swept over me. Your dreadful assaults destroy me.
 - c) Again—like Jonah—they surround me like a flood all day long.
 - d) They close in on me together.

- e) You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness.
- 3. That's it. That's how it ends.
 - a) There's no resolution. No turn of events. No praise at the end. Just a man praying in the darkness. In fact, the darkness is his only companion.
- 4. So what do we do with this?
 - a) We must conclude that God is our only hope.
 - b) Christ is worth holding onto in the darkness. In the silence. In the loneliness. In the pain. Heman is a witness that says very clearly that all of these are true.
 - (1) But How? Why?
 - (2) Because there's no one who experienced this more vividly than Christ did.
 - (3) He too was forsaken as he cries out from the cross—my God, my God why have you forsaken me?
 - (4) When he was arrested, all his followers fled and denied him. When the Shepherd was struck, all the sheep scattered.
 - (5) Despised and rejected. Marred beyond comparison.
 - (6) Christ kept praying over and over in the garden of Gethsemane.
 - (7) He goes to the cross to swallow up the wrath of God for people like Heman and people like me and you. Indeed, God's wrath did break over him.
 - (8) By his strips we are healed. He was pierced for our transgressions.
 - (9) But he was raised from the dead because unlike the rest of us, he was innocent. Indeed, there is hope beyond death for those who trust in Christ. For those who repent and believe in him, eternal life awaits us.
 - (10) In him, we are forgiven and counted not among the dead but righteous. Christ takes our sin upon himself and he gives us his righteousness. By faith in him, we have a right legal standing with God. And we have hope beyond the pain and darkness of this life. For those who trust in him, we will behold his face like the noonday sun!
 - (11) Will you have him? Will you fight the good fight of faith to the very end by his grace in the power of the Holy Spirit?
 - (12) Come, to the light of the world. Someday, there will be no more darkness for those who hold on to Jesus.