

Hope in God, O My Soul! The Psalms of the Sons of Korah

Psalm 88: “Darkness”

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**A Song. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah. To the choirmaster: according to Mahalath
Leannoth. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.**

- ¹ O LORD, God of my salvation,
I cry out day and night before you.*
- ² Let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry!*
- ³ For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.*
- ⁴ I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
I am a man who has no strength,*
- ⁵ like one set loose among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.*
- ⁶ You have put me in the depths of the pit,
in the regions dark and deep.*
- ⁷ Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves. Selah*
- ⁸ You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a horror to them.
I am shut in so that I cannot escape;*
- ⁹ my eye grows dim through sorrow.
Every day I call upon you, O LORD;
I spread out my hands to you.*
- ¹⁰ Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do the departed rise up to praise you? Selah*
- ¹¹ Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,
or your faithfulness in Abaddon?*
- ¹² Are your wonders known in the darkness,
or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?*

- 13 But I, O LORD, cry to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.*
- 14 O LORD, why do you cast my soul away?
Why do you hide your face from me?*
- 15 Afflicted and close to death from my youth up,
I suffer your terrors; I am helpless.*
- 16 Your wrath has swept over me;
your dreadful assaults destroy me.*
- 17 They surround me like a flood all day long;
they close in on me together.*
- 18 You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me;
my companions have become darkness.*

What's This Doing in the Bible?

When you first hear Psalm 88, your immediate response might be, “Wow! That’s depressing. What is that doing in the Bible?” Well, the Bible is a very realistic book, despite what many people think or say about it, and the Psalms are a very realistic collection of prayers and songs. John Calvin famously called the Psalms “an anatomy of all parts of the soul” and said that there’s hardly an emotion of which people are capable which is not reflected in the Psalms. And, for sinners living in a fallen and broken world, sadness is one of our most common emotions.

Many of the Psalms have been classified as laments, songs of sorrow arising out of distress. Almost all of these have “happy endings” – that is, they end by expressing confidence in God’s steadfast love or His coming deliverance. Just two Psalms are deep heart-cries to God without the upbeat ending. Psalm 39 is the other, but it does have a note of relative hope and confidence, which comes in the exact middle of the psalm, which I’ve told you before is very important in Hebrew literature. Psalm 39:7 says:

*“And now, O Lord, for what do I wait?
My hope is in you.” – Psalm 39:7, ESV*

Even this relatively mild expression of hope and confidence is missing from Psalm 88. The most hopeful line in Psalm 88 is the opening line, where Heman the Ezrahite addresses God as “O LORD, God of my salvation.” Beyond this opening line, the most

hopeful thing we can say about Psalm 88 is that it is a prayer. Heman may be feeling absolutely overwhelmed and completely hopeless, but he's continuing to cry out to God. He's going to the Lord with his soul full of troubles.

So, one obvious reason why this kind of psalm is in the Bible is to help give us language to express our deepest sorrows and most troubling struggles, when the darkness will not lift, and we have lost our hope. If you look again at the title, you'll see that not only did Heman the Ezrahite pray this and write this, but it is "A Song. A psalm of the Sons of Korah" written "to the Choirmaster." So, this was definitely set to music to be sung in gathered worship under the direction of the Choirmaster and the leadership of the Sons of Korah, the Levitical singers whose Psalms we've been studying this summer. Can you even imagine singing this in worship? The last verse is perhaps best translated as "You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my only companion now is the darkness." Darkness is the last word of this song.

We do sometimes hear songs about darkness. Back in 1965, Simon and Garfunkel recorded Paul Simon's song, "The Sound of Silence," which begins: "Hello darkness, my old friend, I've come to talk with you again" Then, in 1989, heavy-metal band, Metallica, had a hit song with "One," a song that is about a World War I soldier who has a landmine explode right in front of him. It has the lines:

Darkness imprisoning me
 All that I see
 Absolute horror
 I cannot live
 I cannot die
 Trapped in myself
 Body my holding cell

Interestingly, of these two popular songs, although "The Sound of Silence" is more popular, Metallica's song has stronger parallels with Psalm 88, because it is also written as a desperate prayer: The song repeats desperate prayer several times:

O please, God, wake me . . .
 O please, God, wake me . . .
 O God, help me . . .

O please, God, help me . . .

I'm certainly not saying that James Hetfield and Lars Ulrich from Metallica are Christians or were expressing any kind of true faith in God, still, the song has the same kind of gut-wrenching, desperate hopelessness that we find in Psalm 88.

If our faith in God is to be real, life-changing, and life-sustaining, then we have got to learn how to pray and seek Him in every circumstance, in every emotional state, in every moment of our lives.

But there's another important reason why Psalm 88 is in the Bible. Not only did John Calvin teach us that the Psalms are an anatomy of all parts of the human soul, but he also taught us that the Psalms are the prayer-book of Jesus. So, through the Psalms, God not only gives us language for our own prayer and worship, but He gives us language that joins our hearts to the heart of Christ in His incarnation, in His prayer life. Isaiah 53:3 tells us about Jesus:

*He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

As we will see later, while this psalm arose out of the life experiences and emotions of Heman the Ezrahite, it is even more fully true of the life and experiences of Jesus, the despised and rejected One, the Man of Sorrows who was deeply acquainted with grief.

I. **When the Darkness Will Not Lift**

We don't know very much about Heman the Ezrahite or about the original circumstances which led him to write this psalm. The only two people in the Bible who are explicitly called Ezrahites are Heman and Ethan, who wrote Psalms 88 and 89. We know that Ethan the Ezrahite had a great reputation for wisdom. **1 Kings 4:30-31** tells us "*Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations.*" (ESV). This seems certainly to be the same Ethan the Ezrahite as the author of Psalm 89, which we're going to hear next week. A man named Heman

is mentioned right after Ethan, but he's not also called an "Ezrahite" here in I Kings 4.

Another candidate for the Heman of Psalm 88 and his relation to Ezra comes from the Levites who were appointed to lead the singing and to play the bronze cymbals under David when the Ark of the Covenant was brought up into Jerusalem: Heman, Asaph, and Ethan (I Chronicles 15:19). Now, we know Asaph was a Psalm-writer, and so it makes sense that Heman and Ethan were, too, and so these two could be the same men as mentioned in I Kings 4, but it's also possible that many men in their line also carried their same name, as we saw was the case with Asaph.

Heman was almost certainly a well-known person who had a prominent role in leading music and singing in Jerusalem, either under King David or under a later king. That makes this song even more remarkable for its brutal honesty and deep pain.

Heman does not hold back from the strength and urgency of his plea, does not minimize the terror and danger of his situation, and does not hesitate to place the whole cause of his distress at God's feet:

*O LORD, God of my salvation,
I cry out day and night before you.
Let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry!*

*For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol. – vv. 1-3*

*You have put me in the depths of the pit,
in the regions dark and deep.
Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves. Selah*

*You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a horror to them. – vv. 6-8*

Many people, who might even have the best of intentions, say that God really has nothing to do with our troubles and sorrows. Others will tell you that, if you are suffering at the hand of God, it must be because you've either sinned badly or you

lack faith. That's not what the Bible teaches. The Book of Job shows us Job's unbelievable sufferings, and we are given a glimpse into heaven, and we are allowed to see that Satan is the immediate cause of all of righteous Job's sufferings. Job's friends accuse Job of some grave unconfessed sin that must lie at the root of his troubles. Job himself pours out his heart in anguish and seeks answers from God. Like Heman, Job is direct, blunt, and clear about the depth of his sorrows and the fact that God must be behind them.

Interestingly, when God does show up at the end of Job, he doesn't answer Job's questions or demands for an explanation. He basically tells Job that understanding why these things happen is too far above his ability to understand because he does not have the mind or wisdom or power of God. But then, God turns to Job's friends, and He tells them, "*My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.*" (Job 42:7). Throughout Job, it is Job's friends who actually sound more properly pious, and Job, much like Heman the Ezrahite here, sounds like he's teetering on the brink of blasphemy, but God commends Job and condemns his friends.

God does not want us to be self-righteous, smug, and complacent. He also doesn't want us to be mask-wearing hypocrites and He doesn't want us to think that the bad things that happen to us are beyond His control, because they're not. Think about it this way: If God has no control over the bad things that happen to us in life, why would we seek Him in our distress? Why wouldn't we just try to figure things out on our own?

No, we need to seek the Lord because He is our help and hope in trouble, but only because our deepest troubles are within His control.

In verses 10-14, Heman asks hard questions:

Do you work wonders for the dead?

Do the departed rise up to praise you? Selah

Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,

or your faithfulness in Abaddon?

Are your wonders known in the darkness,

or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

*But I, O LORD, cry to you;
 in the morning my prayer comes before you.
 O LORD, why do you cast my soul away?
 Why do you hide your face from me? - Psalm 88:10-14, ESV*

Now, we typically look at these kinds of questions and we wonder if Heman even believed in heaven, in life after death. We have to remember that this was written around 1,000 years before Jesus rose again from the dead. But also, if Heman's life is in imminent danger, he is concerned that his voice and his leadership in the praise of God will be missing.

Verse 11 is one of the most painful verses in this painful psalm, as it is the only mention of the steadfast love of the Lord, and it's asked in a doubting question: "*Is your steadfast love declared in the grave?*" The implication is that it wouldn't do the Lord any good to crush Heman to death, because in the grave he wouldn't be able to declare God's steadfast love.

As the psalm continues, it only gets darker and sadder:

*Afflicted and close to death from my youth up,
 I suffer your terrors; I am helpless.
 Your wrath has swept over me;
 your dreadful assaults destroy me.
 They surround me like a flood all day long;
 they close in on me together.
 You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me;
 my companions have become darkness. – Psalm 88:15-18, ESV*

II. “Man of Sorrows”

How could such a sad, despairing psalm have anything to do with Jesus?

In 2017, Beth and I got to visit Israel, and one of the unexpected highlights of the trip for me was the visit to Caiaphas' house. Caiaphas was the ruler of the high priests, the most powerful Jewish religious leader in Israel. Jesus was arrested by the high priests and the Temple guard in the Garden of Gethsemane at night, after the Last Supper of the Passover Meal when He instituted the Lord's Supper, after He washed

His disciples' feet, after He taught them both in the Upper Room and in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus prayed alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, and He agonized in prayer so strenuously that His sweat became drops of blood. Then, Judas came with the guards and betrayed Jesus with a kiss on the cheek to identify Him, while all of His other disciples scattered.

Then, they took Jesus to Caiaphas' house. It was probably around 10:00 at night, maybe a little later. In the early morning hours before sunrise, maybe around 4 or 5 a.m., they would have a trial, where they would condemn Jesus to death. In the meantime, they put Jesus in the pit. We got to see the pit prison at Caiaphas' house. Today there are stairs so you can safely walk down into the pit – stone walls, no windows, no doors – probably an old cistern. Jesus would have been lowered down using ropes. Imagine that.

Outside, in the courtyard, Peter would have been denying three times that he even knew Jesus, even calling down curses on himself, swearing that he never knew the man. Jesus knew this. He had predicted it. He knew it was happening. Later, they would take Jesus outside on His way to His trial, and He would make eye-contact with Peter, who would look away and then run away in shame.

And why was Jesus suffering this kind of lonely agony – sitting in the utter darkness of the pit, betrayed and abandoned and denied by His closest friends, utterly alone and awaiting death? Because the wrath of God was on Him, the wrath due to us for our sin, that He willingly took on Himself. He was being made sin for us and was bearing the punishment He didn't deserve. He had submitted to this when He prayed in deep agony in the Garden, "*Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but Yours be done.*" Three times He prayed that prayer, and three times no answer came, but the answer was clear enough by the silence of God.

As our tour group was going down the steps into the pit in 2017, I read Psalm 88 to them, and it was then that I understood the psalm, really, for the first time in my life. Every word of this psalm was true of Jesus in His darkest hours, from the agony of the garden to the lonely darkness of the pit to the brutal beating at the hands of the soldiers to the agony of the cross. On the cross, Jesus would cry out the words of Psalm 22:1, "*My God, my God why have you forsaken me?*" And He was forsaken, because He was sin. In the Garden and on the Cross, no answer came to the

agonizing cries of Jesus. He had to drink the cup of God's wrath. He had to be forsaken.

Why? Because it was the only way for us to be saved, the only way for us to see and know and receive the love of God and full forgiveness for our sins.

2 Corinthians 5:21 puts it succinctly: "*God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*"

Romans 3:21-26 spells it out in more detail:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (ESV)

“Propitiation” is a sacrifice that satisfies divine justice, that settles God's just and holy wrath due to us for sin. Jesus redeemed us by His blood by taking the full weight of all of our wrongdoing and all of the punishment we deserve on Himself. He took the cup of God's wrath, and He drank it down to the bottom. He did this willingly because He loves us. He wanted to save us, and He knew we could be saved in no other way.

But the fact that He was willing doesn't make what He suffered any easier. His agony was unspeakable, and Psalm 88 gives us just a hint of the pain, the isolation, the deep rejection of being made sin and being made the just object of God the Father's holy wrath. It is the heartbeat of our suffering Savior, and for that reason it should be precious to us.

III. The Surprising Answer to Bitter Questions

And because Jesus willingly underwent this agony for us, and because He did so obediently, faithfully, God the Father received His offering of Himself, and His justice

was fully and finally satisfied. Jesus was able to say, from the cross before He died, “*It is finished!*” and “*Into Your hands I commit my spirit.*”

And three days later, God the Father raised Jesus from the dead to live forevermore. And Jesus’ victory over sin on the cross and over death in His resurrection means that we get a very surprising answer to Psalm 88’s bitter questions:

Do you work wonders for the dead? - Yes, God does!

Do the departed rise up to praise you? - Yes, they do!

Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,

or your faithfulness in Abaddon? - Yes, it is!

Are your wonders known in the darkness,

or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? - Yes, as all those who have ever trusted the Lord and His promises receive full forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus’ victory.

Yes, yes, yes, yes! This is God the Father’s resounding, powerful answer in Jesus Christ to these hard, dark questions.

When you are in the darkness . . .

And so, what do you do when you are in the darkness?

Don’t just try to grit your teeth and bear it.

Don’t turn your back on God.

Don’t fake it with God.

Cry out to Him! Cry out to Him, knowing that the Man of Sorrows, who is acquainted with grief, has endured even worse for you and for your salvation. He loves you, and He is Emmanuel, God with us, even in our deepest darkness.

The Apostle Paul knew agonizing darkness in the form of a “thorn in the flesh,” which he describes as “*a messenger from Satan to harass me.*” And, in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10, he wrote:

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the

power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (ESV)

Remember, in your darkness, that His grace is sufficient for you, and that when you are at your weakest, the power of Christ rests on you, and when you are weak, you are strong for He is strong in you and through you.