

Psalms 88

This evening - we're continuing our overview of the Old Testament book titled Psalms.

With this as our focus - let's open our Bibles to Psalms chapter 88 - and as we make our way to the 88th Psalm...

...I should take a moment to point out that - this is the last - of eleven Psalms - authored by the sons of Korah.

And while the first ten Psalms written by the sons of Korah remain somewhat anonymous...

...the Psalm that we're studying tonight was written by a descendant of Korah - better known as Heman the Ezrahite.

Now - the name - Heman - which comes from the Hebrew word Aman - means faithful.

And as we consider everything the Bible says about this man - what we discover is that...

...Heman was not only a descendant of Korah - but - he was also a SEER - just like his brother - Asaph.

And not only was Heman a Seer who was called to prophesy with harps - stringed instruments - and cymbals...

...but - he was also a man who was known for his incredible wisdom.

At the same time - Heman was also a worship leader who seemed to be struggling with depression.

And it's here in our text tonight - where we find this worship leader expressing his sorrow...

...as he described the afflictions and the adversities that the Lord was allowing him to endure.

Now - it should be noted that - there are several Psalms - written by those who were struggling with the sorrows caused by suffering.

And while these songs begin with lyrical descriptions of depression - and discouragement...

...the disheartened Psalmists conclude their Psalm with a focus on the victory that we have in the Lord.

But not this psalm - no - this Psalm is unique in that - Heman finds no relief from sorrow - and no comfort from his concerns.

It's for this reason that - Anglican Bishop - J. J. Stewart Perowne described this Psalm in this way...

“This is the darkest, saddest Psalm in all the Psalter. It is one wail of sorrow from beginning to end.”

Now - you might be wondering why the Holy Spirit would lead Heman the Ezrahite to write such a sorrowful Psalm.

If so - then - it might help you to consider the perspective of Reverend Albert Barnes - who declared...

“As the Book of Psalms was designed to be useful in all ages, and to all classes of people, and as such a state of mind as that described in this psalm might occur again and often - it was proper that such a condition of utter despondency, even in a good man, should be described, in order that others might see that such feelings are not necessarily inconsistent with true religion, and do not prove that even such a sufferer is not a child of God. It is probable that this psalm was designed to illustrate what may occur when disease is such as to produce deep mental darkness and sorrow. And the Book of Psalms would have been incomplete for the use of the church, if there had not been at least one such psalm in the collection.

Christian - listen - there are seasons of life - when we will struggle to escape our sorrows.

And there are times when depression will drive us to the pit of despair.

And if this sounds like something that you're struggling with tonight...

...then - it's my hope that you will realize that you find yourself in the company of Heman...

...who was not only a worship leader - - but also a wise Seer - who faithfully served the Lord.

With this as our focus - let's turn our attention to the lyrics that we find here in the 88th Psalm.

Look with me - beginning there at verse 1 - where we learn that this is...

Psa 88:1 A Song. A Psalm of the sons of Korah. To the Chief Musician. Set to "Mahalath Leannoth." A Contemplation of Heman the Ezrahite.

O LORD, God of my salvation,
I have cried out day and night before You.

Psa 88:2 Let my prayer come before You;
Incline Your ear to my cry.

Psa 88:3 For my soul is full of troubles,
And my life draws near to the grave.

Here in the beginning of this Psalm - we find Heman the Ezrahite - providing the Chief Musician of Israel...

...to set this song to "Mahalath Leannoth" - which was probably a popular song.

The root word for Mahalath was used of those who were weak with disease.

Not only that - but - the same root word was also used of those whose hearts were fill with grief.

And so - if Mahalath Leannoth was a song - then - it was probably a sad song written in a minor key.

We should also notice how Heman began this Psalm - by appealing to his faith in the LORD.

Look with me again - beginning there at verse 1 - where he declared...

Psa 88:1 O LORD, God of my salvation,
I have cried out day and night before You.

Here in this verse - we find Heman - crying out to the Lord - Who he calls - the God of his salvation.

That word - salvation - was translated from the Hebrew word - yesh-oo'-aw...

...which was used of those who are rescued from distress or danger.

I should also point out that - the Hebrew word - yesh-oo'-aw - is the common alternative form of the name Yehoshua...

...which is actually the Hebrew name of our Savior - Jesus.

That's right - Heman was crying out to the LORD - God of my Yeshua.

And from this - we can see that Heman was an Israelite...

...who was resting in the salvation of our Savior.

At the same time - he was also a man who's heart was filled with sorrow - as he struggled with some sort of sickness.

Let's consider how he explained it here in our text tonight - look with me again - there at verse 2 - where he declared..

Psa 88:2 Let my prayer come before You;
Incline Your ear to my cry.
Psa 88:3 For my soul is full of troubles,
And my life draws near to the grave.

Now - that word - troubles - was translated from a Hebrew word -
which was used of both - Adversity and Affliction.

The same word was used of those who were distressed from
all manner of displeasure.

And while we can't say for sure what sort of distress he
was enduring...

...what we do know is that Heman's life was drawing
near to the grave.

In order to understand the sort of Adversity and Affliction that he was suffering - let's
continue to consider the lyrics of this Psalm.

Look with me - beginning there at verse 4 - it's there where Heman declared...

Psa 88:4 I am counted with those who go down to the pit;
I am like a man who has no strength,
Psa 88:5 Adrift among the dead,
Like the slain who lie in the grave,
Whom You remember no more,
And who are cut off from Your hand.
Psa 88:6 You have laid me in the lowest pit,
In darkness, in the depths.
Psa 88:7 Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
And You have afflicted me with all Your waves. Selah

Here in these verses - we find Heman - describing himself as being
person who was as good as dead.

And while we don't really know what sort of sickness he was
struggling with...

...it seems to me that his illness had left him bedridden - and brokenhearted.

Notice with me again - there in verse 5 - where he described himself as being...

Psa 88:5 Adrift among the dead,
Like the slain who lie in the grave,
Whom You remember no more,
And who are cut off from Your hand.

In other words - Heman felt like the God of his salvation had abandoned him - and left him for dead.

He not only felt like the Lord had forgotten all about him...

...but - he also came to the conclusion that he had been cut off from the power that could heal him.

What's even worse is that - Heman was beginning to believe that...

...the Lord was the One Who placed him in the depths of the lowest pit.

Look with me again - there at verse 6 - where he cried out...

Psa 88:6 You have laid me in the lowest pit,
In darkness, in the depths.

That word - pit - can also refer to a dark dungeon - where criminals and captives were imprisoned.

And it was there on his deathbed - where Heman felt like the Lord had cast him into a dark dungeon of pain and suffering.

That being the case - we shouldn't be surprised to learn that...

...Heman had come to the conclusion that the God of his salvation...

...was afflicting him with the wrath of righteous indignation.

Let's consider how he put it - there in verse 7 - where Heman declared...

Psa 88:7 Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
And You have afflicted me with all Your waves. Selah

Now - that word - wrath - was translated from a Hebrew word - which was used of God's burning anger.

And as we consider how Heman described his suffering - as wrath that was heavy upon him...

...it seems to me that he felt like he was being crushed by the weight of God's anger.

Not only that - but - he also described the waves of affliction that he was drowning in.

That word - affliction - was translated from a Hebrew word - which - in this context...

...was used of those who are overwhelmed with humiliation - resulting in depression

And what this means is that - Heman was not only suffering from physical afflictions...

...but - he was also struggling with the sorrow of emotional pain.

Now - as we consider these complaints - I should take a moment to remind you that...

...the wrath of God is poured out on those who reject the Yeshua of the LORD.

And seeing how Heman the Ezrahite was a man who was trusting in the God of his salvation...

...then - I have a hard time believing that his complaints were correct.

And while I have no doubt that he FELT like he was being crushed by the wrath of God...

...I'm also confident that his feelings were leading him astray.

I like the way that the Prophet Jeremiah put it - in Jeremiah chapter 17 - it's verse 9 - where he declared...

Jer 17:9 "The heart is deceitful above all things,
And desperately wicked;
Who can know it?"

Christian - listen - we can't always trust our feelings - and the reason why is because - the heart is deceitful above all things.

And while this is not to suggest that our feelings are always wrong...

...it would be foolish for us to forget that our feelings could be deceiving us.

And listen - this is especially true - whenever our hearts are filled with those feelings...

...that lead us to question the love of the Lord.

Please trust me when I tell you that - there're are times when the Lord allows the people He loves - to suffer with sickness.

And there are times when He withholds healing from those who trust in Him...

...because - He has a plan to perfect us - in the midst of our suffering.

This reminds me of the thorn in the flesh that Paul was suffering from - which he described in 2nd Corinthians chapter 12.

It's beginning at verse 7 - where he declared...

2Co 12:7 ...lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

2Co 12:8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

2Co 12:9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

2Co 12:10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

According to Paul - he was afflicted with a physical infirmity that was affecting his life.

And while we aren't told what sort of infirmity he was suffering from...

...what we do know is that - Paul prayed three times - for the Lord to heal him.

But rather than providing Paul with relief from his infirmity...

...the Lord instructed Paul - to learn how to rely on the strength of God's grace.

Now - I have no doubt that this response was hard for him to hear.

And knowing that the Lord has the power to heal those who are suffering with sickness...

...it would've been easy for Paul to question the love of the Lord.

But he didn't - - no - instead - he took pleasure in the infirmity that he was suffering from...

...and the reason why was because - he found a source of strength - in the grace of God.

In light of Paul's example - we will all do well to realize that - there are times when the Lord uses our infirmities...

...to help us learn how to walk in the strength of His saving grace.

And listen - while it might FEEL like the Lord is pouring out His wrath - with waves of affliction...

...it's important for us to take those thoughts captive - to the obedience of Christ Jesus.

With this as our goal - let's continue to consider how Heman's feelings were leading him to falsely accuse God afflicting him.

It's here in the 88th Psalm - beginning at verse 8 - where he declared...

Psa 88:8 You have put away my acquaintances far from me;

You have made me an abomination to them;

I am shut up, and I cannot get out;

Psa 88:9 My eye wastes away because of affliction.

LORD, I have called daily upon You;

I have stretched out my hands to You.

Psa 88:10 Will You work wonders for the dead?

Shall the dead arise and praise You? Selah

Here in these verses - we find Heman - ascribing his afflictions to the God of his salvation.

For example - it's there in verse 8 - where Heman accused the Lord of separating him from his friends.

And not only that - but - he also accused the Lord of making him an abomination in their eyes.

Just to be clear - that word - abomination - found there in verse 8 - was used in reference to anything offensive.

This includes unclean foods - idolatry - child sacrifice - and sexual immorality.

With all of this mind - let's consider the way that Heman accused the Lord of making him an abomination in the eyes of his acquaintances.

The chances are - his friends were comparable to the counselors of Job...

...who jumped to the conclusion that Job was being punished - for the secret sins that they assumed he was guilty of.

If that's the case - then Heman was falsely accusing God of making him an abomination...

...simply because the Lord was allowing him to suffer with some sort of sickness.

We should also consider how Heman accused the Lord of causing his tears - by withholding his healing.

Look with me again - beginning there at verse 9 - where he declared...

Psa 88:9 My eye wastes away because of affliction.
LORD, I have called daily upon You;
I have stretched out my hands to You.

Now - when Heman described his eyes as wasting away - he was referring to the tears that he was shredding because of his affliction.

And I have no doubt that these weren't crocodile tears.

No - instead - this servant of the Lord was suffering from an affliction...

...that led him to cry out every day - for healing from the Lord.

You might be interested to know that the word - affliction - found there in verse 9...

...was translated from a different Hebrew word - than the word - afflicted - found back in verse 7.

In this case - Heman was using a Hebrew word - which - refers to the misery that brings depression.

And as we consider the daily tears that flowed from his eyes...

...we can be certain that Heman was suffering from depression - caused by his afflictions.

With that being the case - we shouldn't be surprised by the bargaining that he engaged in - there in verse 10 - where he cried out...

Psa 88:10 Will You work wonders for the dead?
Shall the dead arise and praise You? Selah

Now - remember - Heman was a worship leader - there at the tabernacle.

And so - these questions seem to be his way of bargaining with the Lord.

And while he doesn't explicitly apply this to his situation...

...it seems to me that Heman was asking God to heal him...

...so that he could arise - and return to his ministry at the tabernacle.

In order to further make my case - let's continue to consider the questions that he presented - here in the 88th Psalm.

Look with me - beginning there at verse 11 - where he asked...

Psa 88:11 Shall Your lovingkindness be declared in the grave?

Or Your faithfulness in the place of destruction?

Psa 88:12 Shall Your wonders be known in the dark?

And Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

Psa 88:13 But to You I have cried out, O LORD,

And in the morning my prayer comes before You.

It seems to me that Heman was trying to convince the Lord that he was more valuable to him alive - than dead.

And according to his human reasoning - those who are in the grave - can't tell others about the loving kindness of the Lord.

And the faithfulness of God won't be experienced by those who end up in the underworld.

That being the case - Heman was trying to convince the Lord that...

...it would better for both of them - for the Lord to heal him.

And it's there in verse 12 - where he asked...

Psa 88:12 Shall Your wonders be known in the dark?

And Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

In other words - Heman was asking - if I'm dead - how can I speak of the miracles - and the marvelous works of the Lord?

And if I am cast into the land of the forgotten - how will I rejoice in your righteousness?

I like the way that Spurgeon summed it up in his commentary of this text - here's how he put it...

The whole argument amounts to this—if the believer dies unblessed, how will God's honour be preserved? Who will bear witness to his truth and righteousness?

From this perspective - we can be sure that Heman was trying to bargain with the Lord...

...by assuring the God of his salvation - that if He healed his servant...

...then he would be happy to bear witness to the truth and righteousness of the Lord.

We should also notice how Heman continued to make his case for why the Lord should heal him.

It's there in verse 13 - where he declared...

Psa 88:13 But to You I have cried out, O LORD,
And in the morning my prayer comes before You.

From this - we can see that Heman - which means - Faithful - was faithful to cry out to the LORD - every morning.

And in this way - he seemed to be making a case for why the Lord should heal him.

And I can't help but to wonder how many of us have tried to convince the Lord to heal us...

...because of all the ways that we've spent time serving Him.

Christian - listen - if you try to bargain with God in this way - then - you're only going to end up depressed...

...if God decides that He has a different plan - which is different from yours.

And listen - if you think God should heal you - because - you've been faithful to serve Him...

...then - you're only going to be discouraged when you realize that - God doesn't owe us anything.

And even if we've been the most faithful believer that has ever blessed the body of Christ...

...the fact still remains that God has a perfect reason for the afflictions that he allows.

With all of this in mind - let's consider how Heman concluded this sorrowful Psalm.

Look with me - beginning there at verse 14 - where he asked...

Psa 88:14 LORD, why do You cast off my soul?

Why do You hide Your face from me?

Psa 88:15 I have been afflicted and ready to die from my youth;

I suffer Your terrors;

I am distraught.

Psa 88:16 Your fierce wrath has gone over me;

Your terrors have cut me off.

Psa 88:17 They came around me all day long like water;

They engulfed me altogether.

Psa 88:18 Loved one and friend You have put far from me,

And my acquaintances into darkness.

Here in the final verses of this sad song - we discover that Heman's condition was an affliction that started during his youthful years.

And if I understand him correctly - then what this means is that - Heman had suffered from a chronic illness...

...since the days of his childhood.

Now - we aren't told what sort of affliction he was suffering from - it could've been dropsy - or epilepsy - atrophy - or consumption.

We can't really say for sure - - but what we do know is that...

...Heman was convinced that his affliction was caused by the wrath of God.

And it was for this reason that he was distraught.

Now - that word - distraught - found there at the end of verse 15 - was translated from a Hebrew word...

...which was used of those who were perplexed - and disconcerted.

And what this means is that - Heman was not only suffering from Physical pain - - and emotional depression...

...but - he was also distracted by the perplexing questions...

...about why God was allowing him to suffer in these ways.

And in light of his situation - I have no doubt that there are some here tonight...

...who are also struggling with a similar situation - after suffering with a chronic illness - for many years.

And much like Heman the Ezrahite - the believers who suffer from a chronic illness ...

...will often times struggle with depression and discouragement as they wonder why the Lord is ignoring their prayers.

You might not know this - but - investigators at Johns Hopkins Medicine engaged in a novel analysis of more than 375 published studies.

And when their research was completed - they concluded that there is a staggering association...

...between chronic pain - and high rates of depression and anxiety.

As a matter of fact - 40% of adults with chronic pain experienced “clinically significant depression and anxiety.”

Christian - listen - if this sounds like your situation - then I encourage you to realize that you are in good company.

Remember - Heman was a seer — and a worship leader - who served the Lord at the tabernacle of God.

And at the same time - he suffered from a chronic illness from the days of his youth...

...which led him to write the saddest song on the entire Bible.

I'm also reminded of many other Biblical heroes - who struggled with afflictions and depression.

There was Job - and Jonah - - there was Moses and Hannah - there was Queen Esther and King David.

The Bible is filled with stories of Saints - who wrested with afflictions and depression.

And yet - God still used them to accomplish incredible things for the glory of God.

And so - if you're a believer who is allowing daily afflictions - and emotional depression - to keep you from serving the Lord...

...then - I encourage you to take those thought captive - to the obedience of the Lord.

And then - let's walk by faith - and not by sight - so that we can become those believers...

...who learn how to find supernatural strength - as we stand in the grace of God.