

PSALMS

Psalm 88 - My Only Companion

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Last week, Cody walked us through what is maybe the most warm and comforting of all the Psalms in Psalm 23. And today I will walk us through what is probably the darkest and harshest of all the Psalms, Psalm 88.

And this Psalm, which we'll read in a second, can seem almost out of place in the Christian faith. Because it represents an important dimension of the Christian's spiritual life that we almost completely ignore and neglect in our day, to our hurt.

These Psalms, remember, are songs, or prayers. And many of us have learned to pray according to the acronym ACTS - Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Which are all good and biblical categories, and line up closely with the Lord's prayer that He taught us to pray in Matthew. But, as pastor Abraham Cho points out, that acronym, though good and helpful, leaves out what is probably the most common type of prayer in all of the bible, the kind of prayer we'll read in Psalm 88, a prayer of lament.

We almost never pray like this at all, but there's a lot of this in the Bible, including an entire book of Lamentations.

And here's how I think not having these prayers in our lives has hurt us. In our day, there's a movement of public deconstruction happening - where people walk away from the faith publicly. Often it is because they were harmed by churches, often it is because they see that Christianity doesn't fit with the moral values of the culture (particularly on gender and sexuality issues) and they choose the values of the culture, often it's because of a desire to live contrary to the Christian way, sometimes it is because of intellectual objections.

But another major reason people leave the faith is that the Christian experience didn't match the impression that was given up front. It wasn't what you'd expect, and their faith lacked the pressure-relief valve that was designed to handle that.

When we were planting the church I earned a chunk of my living as a home inspector, and one common thing we would look at was the hot water heater. And we would check to make sure that the valve on the side and top of it was intact and not clogged. Because that little valve is the pressure relief valve. And if something goes wrong and too much pressure builds up in the hot water heater, if that valve isn't there, it can explode. And we even had the home inspector horror stories that, according to legend, whole hot water tanks have blown out the bottom at shot through the roof of the house.

And lament is the type of prayer we're supposed to pray when the pressure is high, things are going badly, hope is low, and life isn't making sense. Though we sometimes like to spin Christianity as the answer for all of our problems, the Bible doesn't spin it that way, and when our experience as Christians is hard and dark it gives us the resources for handling that.

If you're a student of fine culture like me, you may have seen the Lego Movie. And at the beginning of the Lego movie, a character named Ernest (voiced by Chris Pratt) is a worker at a factory where the theme song is "Everything is Awesome." Everybody works every day at his job, and they tamp down all of the problems they have with their job and their lives, and sing:

*"Everything is better when we stick together
Side by side, you and I are gonna win forever
Let's party forever
We're the same, I'm like you, you're like me
We are working in harmony"*

And often in church, we can present the "everything is awesome" image, and when we experience long-term not-awesome, we can only pretend so long before we just explode.

But prayers of lament, like Psalm 88, were put in our Bible by God to teach us what to do with our complaint, with our losses, with our frustration, and even with the times in life when God seems silent and isn't seeming to answer our prayers, when we know

everything is not awesome, it doesn't feel like we're winning forever, and we don't feel we are like those other people who think "everything is awesome" in this walk with God. And so, while there's no direct hope offered in this Psalm, the fact that God inspired this Psalm is hopeful because it shows us that something can be done in those times of real difficulty.

So let's read this Psalm:

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

**88 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.

We're not sure what exact circumstances gave rise to this song. But just scanning through these lines we know that whoever is singing it is in huge trouble and he thinks he is going to die.¹

In Verse 3 he says he is going down to Sheol, or the abode of the dead.

He has lost his friends (verse 8). Verse 18 says his companions have become darkness (which could be translated "darkness" is my only companion.")

And in this complaint that he's pouring out to God, there is deep cynicism and sarcasm:

Psalm 88:10 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?

God, you work wonders for your people. But if I'm dead, what wonders will you work then? God, you delight in the praise of your people, but if I'm in the grave, what praise will

¹ John Calvin: ""This kind of complaint justly deserves to be reckoned among the unutterable groanings of which Paul makes mention in Romans 8:26. Had the prophet thought himself rejected and abhorred by God, he certainly would not have persevered in prayer."

you get then? Am I gonna die and then tell everybody about how good and loving you've been to me?

And where is God in all of this?

At best, He seems to be hiding (verse 14). God seems far. God is silent.

But more than that, it seems to him like God is actively against Him - in places He describes God as the active agent in causing his problems:

Verse 6 "You have put me in the depths of the pit"

Verse 7 "you overwhelm me with all your waves"

Verse 8 "You have caused my companions to shun me"

Verse 14 " you cast my soul away"

Verse 15 "I suffer your terror"

He isn't just praying to God about his problems, he is blaming God for his problems. If God is sovereign and ruling over all things, then certainly He has a hand in causing all of these problems.

And in verse 15 when he says it has been like this "from my youth up," it's like he's saying, "God, you've never been there for me."

You read this and you almost feel like you'd get struck by lightning if you pray like this. If someone started praying like this is a prayer meeting, you might scoot your chair away a little just to be safe.

And, what's crazy, is this is coming from a person who has a relationship with God and who prays constantly.

Verse 1 "**88 O LORD, God of my salvation,**"

He calls Him Yahweh. He calls Him by the name God's covenant people used. And he says He is the God of his salvation. He has been saved by God.

And he prays all the time. "Day and night" (verse 1), he cries out in prayer (verses 9 and 13), he prays every day (verse 9).

So He is one of God's people, saved by God, faithful in prayer.

So what does this tell us?² Why did God inspire this?

1) This tells us, and this is so important, that darkness like this can come into the life of a real Christian, and can stay there for awhile.

In "everything is awesome" Christianity, there is no category for things being like this. We must either not be Christians, or God must not be real, or we must have somehow sinned and done something wrong, or we aren't praying enough, because we believe times of darkness like this can't enter a faithful Christian's life.

And sometimes we even present following Christ as a fool-proof way to ensure there won't be times like this. We sweep under the rug the times when people who believe what we believe have life fall apart, or have kids who don't thrive, or who have troubles in their marriages, or have times when God feels far and silent, or even seems to be allowing big troubles in our lives.

But these prayers of lament show us that even though God is real, even though you really are a Christian, even though you've done nothing more wrong than anybody else, there are times like this. Times when God doesn't make sense, when prayers seem to go unanswered, when God seems silent and distant.

And it doesn't necessarily mean you've done something wrong or that something too strange is happening.

And as you read the stories of great Christians and missionaries, you see in almost all of them prolonged periods of darkness like this.

In the early 1800s, Adoniram Judson was the first to bring Christianity to Burma - which has led to there being about 3700 Christian churches there today. But the work was incredibly hard and the country was hostile, and under those terrible conditions, his first and second wife died, as well as a number of his children. He was imprisoned, and

² A few of these points were derived from Tim Keller's sermon on this Psalm 88 entitled "How to Deal With Dark Times" located here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulmaUtbayGY>. Additionally, Carl Trueman's article "What Do Miserable Christians Sing?" located here was quite helpful: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/what-do-miserable-christians-sing/>

isolated, and in his duress he wrote, “God is to me the Great Unknown. I believe in him, but I find him not.”

Great Christians talk like this. And not only the great Christians, but Jesus Himself told us:

Matthew 10:24-25 “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. 25 It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.”

If Jesus suffered innocently, then certainly we can suffer without having done anything to deserve it.

So here’s a little bit of hope: God put this Psalm in the Bible to tell us this happens. So if you’re in a time of darkness, even a prolonged one, let that alleviate the additional suffering of the false guilt that keeps telling you that real Christians don’t go through this, I must have done something I don’t know about to deserve this, or if I was just a better Christian this wouldn’t be happening.

Andrew Peterson wrote these lyrics in his song, “The Silence of God:”

*It's enough to drive a man crazy; it'll break a man's faith
It's enough to make him wonder if he's ever been sane
When he's bleating for comfort from Thy staff and Thy rod
And the heaven's only answer is the silence of God
It'll shake a man's timbers when he loses his heart
When he has to remember what broke him apart
This yoke may be easy, but this burden is not
When the crying fields are frozen by the silence of God
And if a man has got to listen to the voices of the mob
Who are reeling in the throes of all the happiness they've got
When they tell you all their troubles have been nailed up to that cross
Then what about the times when even followers get lost?*

Most Christians who have walked with God for a long time, if they’re honest, will tell you that part of their journey has been sometimes long seasons of darkness. And some will tell you they’re in it now. But God inspired this Psalm so we can know that’s normal, and no surprise. And lament is one of the resources God has given us to persevere through times like that.

“Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.”

Sometimes we present the Christian faith as the solution to sorrow like this: “The moral of the story is if you believe harder or know the right theology, your suffering will end.” But that doesn’t end the darkness for the Psalmist - sometimes it’s there, unfixable, unexplainable.

2) This tells us that God invites us to pray like this

It feels almost wrong to think thoughts like this about God. And sometimes our thoughts about God are wrong, or exaggerated, or even sinful. But by putting this prayer in the Bible, God is saying, “Cast it all on me.”

In Jesus he showed us that He is a God who, out of love for us, will take on all the garbage that we throw at Him. No, he doesn’t deserve it, but He says pray it to Him, he can take it.

God says here, “just pour it out on me.” Maybe in your words there will be something God needs to forgive, but He is a God who abundantly pardons. God gave us these words as an invitation to pray like this and to give language to what we’re feeling.

Romans 8:23- "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans"

We can speak honestly knowing that a) God knows we don't know how to pray well and b) the Spirit will help us. And sometimes if it’s just a wordless groan in prayer, we are invited to pray it.

3) Because the Psalmist is coming to God when he feels like this, we are shown that we don’t have to clean ourselves up first before we come to God.³

God doesn’t say, “Until you are all straightened out, don’t come crying to me.”

³ Abraham Cho made this point in his sermon on this passage.

He says, “Cry to me when you are totally undone. Cry to me in your sin and misery. Cry to me when you don’t think I’m hearing. Cry to me when it feels like your whole life I’ve never been there for you and I’m making everything go wrong in your life. Cry to me when you’re still sarcastic and cynical and bitter and just so frustrated with how the Christian life is going. Don’t wait to be ok first.

And don’t feel like you have to totally give up on the Christian life when you know your Christian life has all kinds of troubles.

When you’re brokenhearted, know that God is near the brokenhearted even when you don’t feel that.

When you’re broken and contrite, know that God does not despise a broken and contrite heart.

When you are weak like a bruised reed or your faith feels like it’s about to be extinguished like a smoldering candle:

**Isaiah 42:3 “a bruised reed he will not break,
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;**

This guy is a wreck, and he is bringing his wreck to God who doesn’t seem to be listening. By inspiring this Psalm, God is saying, “Do it like this guy.”

What a gracious invitation from a loving Father. The God who inspired this is the Father in the story of the prodigal Son, who says, “You can always come home. Come home when you’ve spent it all on crazy living, come home when you’re empty and hungry, come home when you’ve got nothing to offer, come home when you need to be forgiven.” And here He says, “come to me with the darkness that’s in you.”

4) This Psalm is here to give us sympathy for suffering people

Sometimes when someone goes through a crisis, we convince ourselves that they must have done something to deserve that. Especially when it’s a big crisis - that must have had a big cause. We think people can get in little fender benders and those things happen, but the big cataclysms, God wouldn’t allow those in the lives of innocent people. But this Psalm says we’re wrong about that.

It keeps us from being like Job's friends who blamed Job when he was suffering, these lamentations show us that some people have it very hard. And they don't need our blame or correction (sometimes that's warranted, but we shouldn't assume it is.) Sometimes I can get very "woe-is-me" in my thinking unnecessarily and I need a friend to gently correct me and help me see the truth. But sometimes things are just bad and hard, and I need a friend to sit with me and just be a friend.

And to be that kind of friend we have to know that not all suffering was caused by the person suffering, and not all of it can be fixed by people.

Our family went through a major crisis a few years back, and it wasn't the kind of thing anybody could fix. And a few of our friends knew what was happening, and they were so consistently kind with notes and meals and check-ins and care, just being there. And they couldn't fix anything, but again and again we were able to tell our kids, "This is what the Christian church is like- look how good the church is to us."

And to really love the suffering like so many of you already do, we need to hear these words of a suffering person so we don't rush to accusation and fixing, but we rush to care.

But so far, there has been one major piece of information about this Psalm that I've been leaving out that allows us to really get this Psalm and for its meaning to explode in our lives and for it to do its intended work of ministering to us.

I recently heard a comedian talk about his hippy friend, who was also a comedian. And in the evenings she would go to play at the little comedy clubs, and one of her opening bits was that she would get up with her guitar and announce, "Tonight, I'm going to sing you a song I wrote. It's a song for the whales."

And she would spend a long time tuning her guitar, then do a long strumming introduction, and lean into the microphone and make whale noises. And everyone would laugh.

And one night she went to the comedy club to do this bit, she did the set up, she tuned, and strummed, and leaned in and started making whale noises - and nobody laughed. Then it occurred to her that she forgot to tell them it was a song for the whales.

So the whole thing made no sense at all to the people listening.

And to really make sense of this Psalm and all the Psalms, we need to know that

5) these are the prayers of Jesus.

All of the scriptures are about Jesus. And if we ask, “Where is Jesus in the Psalms?”, one of the places is He is the one praying these things.

This particular Psalm has no direct note of hope, but Jesus is the hope in this Psalm.

In fact, reading these words as the words of Jesus strips the sarcasm and cynicism:

Psalm 88:10 Do you work wonders for the dead? YES!

Do the departed rise up to praise you? YES, on the third day

11 Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, It sure is.

or your faithfulness in Abaddon?

12 Are your wonders known in the darkness, on the cross, they are.

Matthew 27:45-46 “Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. 46 And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The ultimate answer to the lament in this Psalm is Jesus.

It isn't fixed circumstances, it isn't that in this life one day we'll understand why we suffered, it isn't that it definitely all gets better someday in this life.

It's that Jesus rose from the grave, death and darkness did not have the final word, and because He did, all of his followers can have confidence that they will, too.

So in the despair and darkness, you will never go wrong in clinging to Jesus.

And when you pour these things out on Jesus, you can know that He fully understands your suffering because He suffered it too.

He suffered the darkness on the cross as the Father forsook Him. He suffered those hours of the silence of God. He suffered the waves of God's wrath pouring over Him.

So He really knows:

Peterson's song goes on:

*There's a statue of Jesus on a monastery knoll
In the hills of Kentucky, all quiet and cold
And He's kneeling in the garden, as silent as a Stone
All His friends are sleeping and He's weeping all alone
And the man of all sorrows, he never forgot
What sorrow is carried by the hearts that he bought*

He knows your sorrow and pain, He knows the darkness, because He has been through it. He has prayed this, too.

And He loved you enough to go through this for you.

So run to Him. Run back to Him. Run with your sorrow and lament and pain. And of all those who come to Him, he won't lose one. He was forsaken by God so you never have to be, He endured the deepest darkness so that you can know that one day your darkness will lift in His presence. The pain is real and searing. But if you're His, one day you'll rise up from your grave and praise Him.

Let's pray.

Prayer of Confession

Father, it's a great kindness that you'd inspire these words. Again your grace and mercy is evident as you invite us to pray this to you when we don't even deserve to be in your presence. And your love is evident as you sent your son to feel this, and pray this more truly than anyone ever has.

So Father, forgive us for failing to bring our lament to you. By tamping it down and pretending it isn't there, or by praying to everyone but you about our problems, allowing bitterness against you to grow in us.

Jesus, thank you for experiencing the darkness and staying faithful. Faithfully praying, faithfully lamenting, faithfully dying, and faithfully rising - you did all of this well.

Spirit, help us to bring our lament to the Father. And, especially in the hopeless times, remind us of our Gospel hope - a hope that doesn't solve the problems now or fix every circumstance. But a hope that comes from remembering what's true about your love for us, and the future we have with you.

Assurance:

God has heard our prayers in Jesus.

Ephesians 1:7 “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,

Sermon Discussion Questions:

- 1) Is praying prayers of lament a part of your life? If not, why not?
- 2) Can you describe a time in your life when the darkness (of circumstances of internal problems) would not lift? How did you handle it?
- 3) How can lament be a “pressure relief valve?”
- 4) Tim Keller suggests that periods of darkness help us see whether we are only using God for His gifts. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- 5) How does the resurrection take the edge off of hopeless lament?
- 6) Why do you suppose we are hesitant to pray prayers like Psalm 88?