



Psalm 88

How to Worship When you Despair

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I. Introduction

Let's pray. *Holy Spirit, please help us in our weakness. As we open up one of the darker portions of Your word, some of us may react with discomfort and feel like disengaging. Help us to press into the Word. Some of us haven't experienced the kind of darkness that Psalm 88 describes. Give us empathy for those around us who have. Some of us have known deep despair. Some of us are in it right now. Be gentle with us, Lord. Please show us again that you are our comforter, our healer, our refuge. Give us eyes to see and hearts to understand for our good and your glory. Amen.*

Reintroduce the Series

We're spending the second half of the summer in the book of Psalms. When we began our series last week we said that these Hebrew prayers, and songs, and poems are good for us because the Psalms teach us how to worship God. And we need to know how to worship God because at the broadest level we said "There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships."¹ And Christianity would say that the reason worshipping things in the world (ideas, ambition, things, people) ends in despair is because we were created to worship God and God alone. So our worship of other things is actually a harmful departure from how we've been designed; and the only way to real joy and peace is to come back into alignment with God's design by worshipping Jesus.

And then even within the church we are confused about worship. So for those outside the church and in, the Psalms teach us to worship by centering us in the gospel, shaping our inward heart attitudes, modeling for us an outward posture of worship. They inform our gathered worship on Sundays and in our scattered lives of worship throughout the week. At every level the Psalms help us to come into alignment with our created purpose to worship God.

Last week we talked about how to worship God when he rescues us. Today we're going to consider what it means to worship God when life is at its darkest.

Set Up the Text

Within the book of Psalms, we have multiple categories of psalms – psalms of praise, of thanksgiving, of confession. The largest category in the Psalms is lament - Psalms that give us a model for coming

¹ David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water* (<https://fs.blog/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>)

to God through tears, and pain, and grief, and anger, and suffering. At least a third of the psalms - fifty out of one-hundred and fifty are lament psalms.²

Maybe that strikes you as odd to have so many psalms devoted to talking to God through pain, because Christianity is centered on the joy of salvation in Christ. But when we think about the world that we live in I think it becomes easy to see why we deeply need the psalms of lament. The sheer scope of senseless, insane suffering that happens across the world moment by moment could – should – easily overwhelm us. One pastor said, “Now that we’ve got the internet we’ve got no excuse for not crying every day.”³ Suffering and darkness are an unavoidable reality in our world. And they have been for millennia – since sin entered creation. You know this! I know you know this because I know just *some* of the sorrows happening in your lives.

So what do we say to God when – not if, but when - sorrow comes so heavy that it feels like we are suffocating? How can we worship God in this darkness? These are the hard questions we need to ask as we come to Psalm 88.

Now, Psalm 88 is unique because while other lament psalms cry out to God in sorrow but end with a ray of hope, Psalm 88 seems completely dark. It’s a particularly heavy psalm. And some of you may wonder why we’re giving time to such a “downer,” but I want to invite you to invest yourself in this with me, because if you haven’t needed God in the midst of darkness yet, odds are you will someday. So let God’s word plant seeds that will bear fruit later.

As we look to Psalm 88 together, this is what I hope we’re going to see: **Coming toward God in our despair is not wasted worship.**

II. What is a Psalm Without Hope Forming In Us?

Psalm 88 is striking because it’s incredibly personal and visceral. And at the same time it’s a prayer written for the people of God. It has been put in the psalms to shape us. So as we consider this psalm I want to try to answer one question together: What is a psalm without hope forming in us?

Coming toward God in our despair is not wasted worship. That means it does something. It’s accomplishing something in us even when all we can see and feel is darkness. I really believe that. So, just like you would marinate a piece of meat so that it takes on the flavor of the marinade, as we sit in this psalm what is it meant to work into our hearts? How is it meant to flavor us? I think Psalm 88 should form five things in God’s people: (1) a sober expectation for the Christian life, (2) a unmasked heart before God, (3) a trust in God that transcends circumstance, (4) an assurance that we’re not alone, and (5) an eternal weight of glory.

1. A Sober Expectation for the Christian Life

² Mark Vroegop, “Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy” (29-20)

³ John Piper, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-glory-of-god-in-the-sight-of-eternity>

We don't know exactly why the author of Psalm 88, Heman, has been plunged into this darkness, but the psalm tells us that he has lost all his closest friends and loved ones, he has suffered for a long time, he's facing death, and in his heart he feels cast away and afflicted by God.

Now even though we don't know much about him, Heman is mentioned in a couple other places in the Old Testament. In 1 Kings 4, when the text is trying to communicate how wise king Solomon was it says that he was even wiser than Heman. So Heman was one of the wisest men in the world. 1 and 2 Chronicles tell us that he was a minister in the temple who led the worship of God's people. It seems that he was a wise and faithful worshiper of God. So why in the world is *he* writing this prayer?

The first thing psalm 88 is forming in us is a sober understanding that suffering happens even to the holiest of people, it can last a long time, and may never find resolution in this life.

Doesn't the Bible say God is working all things for the good of those who love him? Shouldn't we experience blessing because of faith in Christ? Yes. Absolutely. But the Bible also shows us that in this life we may never know what God's good purposes are and that the blessings of faith are often forged through the fire of sorrow and struggle. And so the darkness that you experience is not an indicator of whether or not God is pleased with you.

And this helps us because we can be naive about this. We live in a place of comfort and privilege that is unique in the world today and unique in history that can lead us to believe that ease and comfort are promised parts of the Christian life, but they aren't. That might seem bleak, but it actually helps us because our expectations will drastically influence how we experience life.

What if I told you to walk through a closed door into a room, but before you walked in I told you that it was a honeymoon suite, then when you walked in you saw a typical bedroom? You'd be pretty indignant, right? Now what if, before you went through that door, I told you it was a prison cell? Your expectations control how you understand the very same circumstances.⁴ And if you go into life expecting that because you are a good person or because of your faith God would never let anything bad happen to you, you will be shaken down to your core. Jesus was a good person, he didn't have a good end, did he? What makes you think you're above him? Heman's prayer here is just another way of saying what the New Testament says: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." (1 Pt 4:12). It works in us a realistic and wise expectation for the Christian life.

2. An Unmasked Heart Before God

When we read this psalm we read the words of a man who is not holding back or cleaning up his words as he talks to God. It's almost like an indictment: *God, I'm crying out to you night and day. Where are you? I'm dying here, God! You did this to me! You've put me here! You've taken my friends away! How can anyone give you glory because of this, God? God, I'm talking to you! Why?! I'm drowning in this, Lord. You've taken away every comfort and I have no one!*

⁴ Borrowed from Tim Keller, "Heman's Cry of Darkness" (<https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/heman-s-cry-of-darkness-5556/>)

Can you imagine praying like that? It's so impolite and unfiltered. We might take pains to make sure our prayers are theologically correct or properly respectful, but Heman seems completely uncaring about those things. What we need to see in this is that God does not expect us to clean ourselves up when we come toward him. If you ever feel the need to hide yourself from God – to wait until you've got it together before you "bother him with yourself" then you need to hear that you are believing a lie that says you can hide your mess from God – you can't.

Have you ever seen a child make a mess while they're eating and then try to clean it up? They think they're cleaning it up, but really they're just smearing around. We are just like that when it comes to cleaning ourselves before God – we just make a bigger mess! What we need to see in Psalm 88 is that God can handle your messy unfiltered thoughts. He can even handle your criticism. He can handle you completely losing it at Him! In fact, he invites it! Another psalm, Psalm 62, says "pour out your heart before him. God is a refuge for us." God is not a referee who's going to call you on improper form when you come to him. He calls you to cast your cares on him because he cares for you (1 Pt 5:7).

3. A Trust in God That Transcends Circumstance

Look at verses 6-8: 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. ⁸ You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a horror to them..."

Now skip down to 16: ¹⁶ "Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me." And then look at 18: ¹⁸ "You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness."

Heman is accusing God of bringing all this affliction. It's a messy, uncomfortable prayer. And yet, it is a *prayer to God*. The fact that Heman is puking his guts to God shows faith and it's a faith that, through tears, acknowledges God's sovereignty. He acknowledges that God is ruling, reigning, in control, accomplishing his will, his plans, and his purposes – even in his suffering.

Some people try to give comfort by saying things like, "This isn't from God." Or "This wasn't his plan." But this is not the God that Heman is praying to. Heman is praying to a God that is in control over his suffering. And this harmonizes with the picture of God that's painted throughout the scriptures. We get uncomfortable with the idea of a God who could be sovereign over our suffering, but on the other hand isn't there a flimsy-ness to a god who is surprised by our suffering, or not powerful enough to have all things under his control? Couldn't there be an arrogance to believing that something is not good because we cannot see the goodness in it? And could there be strength and comfort in trusting in a God who is too wise to be mistaken, too good to be unkind, and too powerful to be out of control? This is why we take comfort in scriptures that tell us that God is the one "who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will." (Eph. 1:11). Psalm 88, even in its pain, is working in us a trust in God's sovereign control, even in the darkness.

Now, honestly, if you are in the midst of pain and darkness right now there is a good chance that all the things I've said offer little to no comfort for you. If you love someone who is hurting, it is probably

not helpful to try and comfort them by trying to make them see things from a different perspective or saying, “at least God is in control” or “This is going to work out for something better.” Don’t do that. That belittles people’s pain. We’ve already said God is big enough to sit with us in our unfiltered grief. We don’t want to be like Job’s friends who were helpful to their suffering friend until they opened their mouths. The best thing you can do is be present, be quiet, listen, empathize, and pray.

The points that I’ve made so far are things that we need to hear so that when suffering comes, you might see the darkness differently (which is why I’m preaching them). But if you are experiencing suffering right now my guess is that you might want to say to me, “All these things are well and good, but I still hurt!” And that is a completely valid way to feel. Which is why there’s more to say.

Alongside all these things, Psalm 88 work in us:

4. An Assurance That We’re Not Alone

When we walk through pain and suffering everything about our experience is telling us that we are alone – that darkness is our only friend. The people who love you don’t understand. They might pity you, but no one is feeling your pain.

And yet what Psalm 88 shows us is that someone has walked this road. You are not the first one to feel totally abandoned and afflicted. There are others who have been there too. Heman was there! And so much of what we long for when we suffer is not just pity, but empathy. Not someone who will offer solutions, but someone who feels our pain and will weep with us. But my offering of comfort to you is not just that other people like Heman have known the pain that you’re going through. It’s that God knows your pain.

At the bottom of the darkest pit of despair, Heman prayed this prayer and even though he felt totally alone, he wasn’t. Even though Heman felt that he was in the deepest, loneliest darkness he was not alone. And you aren’t alone either. There is One who has known utter separation. Complete loneliness. The psalm says “O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?” (v. 14). What Heman only perceived as reality, Jesus Christ experienced utterly and completely. On the cross, Jesus cried out the most hopeless of prayers, “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?!” (Matt. 27:46, Mk 15:34).

We see in the psalm, the final note of hopelessness is that Heman is cut off from his loved ones and his friends and darkness is his only friend. To be cut off from those we love might be the deepest kind of suffering, but when we look at the cross we see the ultimate picture of One who loves us and isn’t indifferent to our suffering and our darkness, but takes our sorrows and our misery so seriously that he was willing to bear it himself. Tim Keller wrote, “On the cross Jesus went beyond the worst human suffering and experienced cosmic rejection and pain that exceeds ours as infinitely as his knowledge and power exceeds ours. In his death, God suffers in love, identifying with the abandoned and the god-forsaken.”⁵

⁵ Keller, Reason for God, 30

Psalm 88:10 asks, “Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you?” In Christ the answer is YES! He *DOES* work wonders for the dead! He *CAUSES* the departed to rise up to praise him! Jesus didn’t just become the ultimate empathizer who walks with us in our suffering by dying on the cross. He rose again! He has victory over sin and sorrow. In the resurrection, we have confidence that “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:5). And his resurrection is the seal for us of his promise that one day the dwelling place of God will be with man and we will be his people and he will be our God, and “He will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore...” (Rev. 21:4).

And so, because of Christ, we can sit in this most hopeless psalm and say, “though weeping may last for the night, joy comes in the morning.” That night may last for a long time, even for the rest of our lives yet we can take hope because the resurrection of Jesus tells us that the morning is coming. And so “we do not lose heart.”

5. An Eternal Weight of Glory

Because of Jesus this prayer in Psalm 88 and the life you live with all its hills and valleys and every moment in between – every circumstance, every time you feel that the darkness surrounding you is impenetrable, every moment of hopelessness – all of it can be read through New Testament eyes. And the New Testament says this, in 2 Cor. 4:16-18: “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light and momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.” This is final thing that this hopeless psalm is working in us: an eternal weight of glory.

I said in the beginning of the message that in opening up Psalm 88 my hope was that we would see that *Coming toward God in our despair is not wasted worship.* That even a hopeless prayer is doing something in the follower of Christ.

John Piper, in speaking about this last text from 2 Corinthians says, *“Not only is all your affliction momentary, not only is all your affliction light in comparison to eternity and the glory there, but all of it is totally meaningful!... every millisecond of your pain from the fallen nature or fallen man, every millisecond of your misery in the path of obedience is producing a peculiar glory... So that if anybody says to me that a believer’s suffering was meaningless... I’m going to come back and say, ‘it wasn’t meaningless!’ I don’t care if it was cancer or criticism. I don’t care if it was slander or sickness. It wasn’t meaningless!... It’s doing something! It’s not meaningless! Of course you can’t see what it’s doing! Don’t look to what is seen. When your mom dies, when your kid dies, when you’ve got cancer at 40, when a car careens into the sidewalk and takes her out, don’t say, “its meaningless!” It’s not! It’s working for you an eternal weight of glory. Therefore...do not lose heart...”*

So we do not lose heart.

IV. Conclusion

Coming toward God in our despair is not wasted worship. It's accomplishing something in us even when all we can see and feel is darkness we can know that it is forming in us: (1) a sober expectation for the Christian life, (2) a unmasked heart before God, (3) a trust in God that transcends circumstance, (4) an assurance that we're not alone, and (5) an eternal weight of glory.

So, to all who are weary, to all who are hopeless, to every single person who has ears to ear: even in your darkest hour - especially in your darkest hour - come toward God in your despair. Jesus has given himself for you so that in your darkness you might not be alone. So that Your worship is not wasted. It's not meaningless. Because of Christ, it is working in you an eternal glory that far surpasses this light and momentary affliction.