

Psalm 88

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[0 : 0 0] This part of Scripture, this psalm, is possibly the darkest, or at least one of the darkest portions of the whole of the Bible.

Perhaps it's the exception of the crucifixion narratives themselves. The crucifixion, of course, we come at it and we can see a sense of God's purpose, a sense of salvation being worked out.

But here in Psalm 88, there is a darkness that is almost unremitting. And the psalm ends with some of the most powerfully bleak words I've ever encountered.

The darkness is my closest friend. It's often observed that many of the psalms that we have in the Bible begin with a certain sense of complaint against God.

A certain struggling with the difficulties of life and the hardships of life and the doubts of the believer. But that over the course of the psalm, those doubts and difficulties are worked through and resolved.

[1 : 1 0] And the psalm ends with words of praise or doxology. But here in Psalm 88, that pattern is reversed. That we begin with words of praise.

It's, O Lord, the God who saves me. But we end on a note of darkness. The darkness is my closest friend. And indeed, that opening statement, Lord, the God who saves me, is in some senses the only positive moment throughout the whole of this psalm.

With the rest being an almost relentless cataloguing or recounting of the psalmist's struggles, the psalmist's sufferings, and the psalmist's woes is perhaps the best way to put it.

Hardly the kind of thing that would make a positive subject for a Sunday evening meditation, perhaps. But I think it's important to spend some time reflecting upon passages like this.

Because I think there's a very important reason why God in his wisdom, the Holy Spirit in his wisdom, has chosen to include a passage like this within Holy Scripture.

[2 : 2 9] There may be more reasons than this, but I think this is at least one reason. And that is that it's a strong and powerful corrective to the tendencies that are often seen within Christianity to believe that the Christian will never experience doubts and anxiety, or that if they do, they will be short-lived and quickly resolved by means of several timely biblical truths or passages.

The message of a passage like Psalm 88, the testimony of a passage like Psalm 88, is that the experience of faith can sometimes be of an experience of seeing no light at the end of the tunnel, of seeing no hope that this sense of doubt and despair will ever pass.

I have a friend who has suffered at times from quite severe depression. And I remember him once, wryly though wittily, remarking that he felt at that particular point in time as though for budgetary reasons, the light at the end of the tunnel had been switched off.

And he just felt no sense of optimism. He was saying it with a smile and with a joke. But there was a certain bittersweet quality to that statement. That what it revealed was a real sense on his part, that he felt so in the pit of despair that he would never again come out of it.

And the fact is that that's an experience that believers can often have. And Psalm 88 is a testimony to just that. Now I want to work through the psalm tonight, and I want to simply approach it under two headings.

[4 : 15] The problem and the response. In the problem, we'll think a little bit about the psalmist's experience of suffering and the anxiety and the doubts that go along with that.

And in the response, we'll think about something of the pattern that's held up here for how we can ourselves function or emulate what the psalmist does when we ourselves feel this way.

So first of all then, let's think about the problem. The problem is that on one level, the psalmist is experiencing life overwhelming him.

Now there may be different dimensions to this. Clearly the psalmist himself feels overwhelmed by his physical experience of life and of suffering.

Look at the language there in verses 3 and following. My soul is full of trouble, and my life draws near the grave. I am counted among those who go down to the pit.

[5 : 25] I am like a man without strength. I am set apart with the dead like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care. And then moving down, there's the language in verse 15.

From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death. There's a sense here in this, in the language that the psalmist uses, of a physical dimension to suffering in his life.

He feels pain. Now, I'm not sure precisely what that might be. Is he speaking about genuine, actual, physical affliction?

Or is he speaking about just this kind of sense of physical weariness and weakness that we experience when we are emotionally or psychologically downcast?

Let me say something more about his experience of suffering and then come back to that point. In verse 8, you also have the language of loneliness.

[6 : 35] You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape. My eyes are dimmed with grief.

There's a sense here of the psalmist experiencing, simply a sense of being abandoned by others. He uses the language of being made repulsive to them, which could be that he himself has been physically afflicted in some way and has, as a consequence, been ostracized by his friends.

And within the context of Judaism, where certain physical conditions brought with them the status of being unclean, it's quite possible that this is what he's feeling, that this is someone who perhaps has, on an ongoing level, experienced the physical suffering, particularly associated perhaps with skin afflictions or a visibility of that kind, and as a consequence, is ostracized and feels alone and is, in a sense, psychologically responding to that.

That's one possibility. Or the other possibility is that this is someone for whom the experience of life generally has just, in a sense, pushed him over the brink into depression.

And that being depressed, clinically depressed, he is experiencing the kind of psychological and psychosomatic effects that go along with that.

[8 : 08] But as someone suffering from depression or anxiety, he feels as though his friends have turned their back on him, and he feels physical side effects to that.

Because when people suffer from experiences of that kind, there are very real physical side effects that go along with that. People who are experiencing stress and anxiety will often catch colds much more often, will feel weak and weary.

People who suffer from serious depression will often have an effect on their appetite, an effect on their body. What I'm trying to say is that it's difficult to pin down in this psalm whether this is someone who is suffering physically and, as a result of that, has certain psychological and spiritual struggles.

Or whether it's someone struggling spiritually and psychologically, and, as a result of that, has certain physical issues. It's difficult to work out here which is the chicken and which is the egg.

But the point is that his experience, whichever it is, is that life has overwhelmed him. that he simply feels crushed by life.

[9 : 27] And that language of verse 7 perhaps captures it more than anything. You have overwhelmed me with all your waves. Think of the similar language in Psalm 42.

All your waves and breakers wash over me. A sense of simply drowning in the experience of life. But that's the context of the psalm.

But in a real sense it's not the problem. The real problem is what this does to the psalmist's perception of God and his relationship to God.

Throughout the psalm there is the language, or the awareness rather, that every experience that the psalmist has is something that has come upon him by God's hand and by God's will.

Look at the language there in verse 6. You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Verse 7.

[10 : 34] Your wrath lies heavily upon me. You have overwhelmed me with all your waves. Verse 8 is the same. And as we come to verse 16.

Your wrath has swept over me. Your terrors have destroyed me. There's a strong sense running through this that the psalmist is in a sense doubly overwhelmed by this experience because he sees it as something coming to him by God's hand.

And the power and the significance of this psalm is not that it's a psalm of an atheist. A psalm who says, my life is full of suffering and pain and the world is full of suffering and pain so how can we believe in God?

But it's the psalm of a theist. It's the psalm of someone who believes in God and believes that God is who. and yet is experiencing suffering and is having to wrestle and grapple with that fact.

The language that he uses as well is language of wrath and anger. And I want to spend a moment thinking about this. Look at the language there in verse 6.

[11 : 53] Your wrath lies heavily upon me. And echoed there in verse 16. Your wrath has swept over me. Your terrors have destroyed me.

In verse 14. Why do you hide your face from me? The language of wrath and terrors is language that the psalmist uses to capture his sense of why this is falling upon him.

Now, there are two possibilities and then a kind of mediating possibility for how he's using this language. The first thing is that he believes he is suffering quite explicitly and quite simply as a result of God punishing him for his sins.

That he feels as though God is judging him and chastising him because of some sin or some sins in his life that need to be dealt with.

Now, the problem is and that's something perhaps we all at times when we go through times of suffering what have I done that God is causing this to happen to me?

[13 : 07] I suddenly have a Travis lyric in my head and I am resisting with some urgency the desire to quote Travis because that would be bad not only for the sermon but for my personal credibility.

but this person is saying why is this befalling me? Why is this happening to me? And part of the answer is to think it must be because of some sin in my life something I have done.

But there is no confession of sin anywhere in this psalm. The psalmist doesn't hold up his hands and say I know why this is happening to me it's because of such and such a thing that I did that I know I need to confess before you and repent well it's because of a particular thought that's been going through my head or some habit that I'm not dealing with.

There's none of that in the psalm. The other possibility is that the psalmist is simply using the language of wrath and anger because almost figuratively because it's the kind of language you use to describe suffering for you perceive that it's coming from God that it's as though God was angry with me but I know he's not actually angry.

I wonder if the truth actually lies in a kind of mediating position that the psalmist experiences suffering at God's hand and perhaps feels as though it's some kind of judgment upon him but he can see nothing in his life that has brought this upon him no reason why he should suffer in this way no stain upon his hands or no guilt upon his conscience that could have led to this experience.

[14 : 53] And part of the reason for saying that is because so often that is our experience and it's an experience that can crush us on another level that we can suffer we can feel overwhelmed by life and we can feel that there must be something in my life that's wrong that leads me to this place of suffering that leads me to this experience of feeling like God is far from me a million miles from me it's something wrong with me that leads to this situation and the psalmist in a sense bears witness to that and bears witness to the fact that we can have that experience even when there is nothing in our life that falls into that category no habitual sin that we're not striving to deal with nothing in our lives that is uncontrasted and that we simply experience it because at times life is overwhelming and because from our earthly perspective without the benefit of the divine perspective on all things life often looks absurd in many ways that's the driving theme of a book like Ecclesiastes that life looks absurd that things don't add up from our perspective because we don't see the big picture we don't see all things now I want to just pause and think about this for a moment and to think about the significance of

Sam AP revealing this kind of mentality and to think about how we might apply that to ourselves before we go on to look at the Sam's response the application is quite simply that the experience of faith is quite often one of feeling overwhelmed and that that doesn't necessarily indicate that you have a poor faith or a weak faith or a lesser faith it doesn't necessarily indicate that there is some sin in your life that you need to deal with it may indicate that there is a sin in your life and certainly ask yourself by all means if there is something wrong in your life but the fact is where we have sins in our lives we're usually pretty well aware that they're there we usually know if there's a sin that we haven't confessed we usually know if there's a sin that besets us

Paul's language is that the acts of the sinful nature are obvious and if we look at our lives and can see nothing then there's no reason to crush ourselves with some burden of guilt and again as we felt this morning and as important to constantly remind ourselves God's relationship to us is framed not in terms of our faithfulness to him but in terms of his faithfulness to us in terms of the finished completed work of Jesus Christ the death offered on our behalf and the life that has come to us through the spirit what this psalm testifies to is that even the strongest even the most faithful of believers can experience a dark time of the soul that has no glimmers of light on the outside and no sense of hope and if that's where you are and if that's what you experience tonight or at some stage in the future then there's a comfort from reminding yourself that that is not an experience alien to the

Christian but it's an experience common to the Christian that it doesn't mean that you are not a Christian because you're feeling this way and if anything this particular sense of grappling with pain and life is intensified because of Christian belief because of a conviction that God is good that God is love and that God loves me that's the first thing then this problem that lies in the psalm let's move on now to the psalmist's response and I want to mention three things hopefully I'll remember all those three things tonight the first element of the psalmist's response that I think is tremendously important and in a sense glaringly obvious is that the psalmist's phrase this whole psalm is essentially a prayer from beginning to end now that might be so obvious it barely needs saying but it's a point that I think we need to remind ourselves of because at times when we go through these experiences when we feel like we're far from God when we feel life is overwhelming us and particularly when we feel that it's overwhelming us and that God is in a sense not beside us not intimate with us not hearing us through it when we feel like we're hanging on with our fingernails and struggling just to feel any sense of

God's presence those are times when it often is hard to pray and the reminder of this psalm is that at those times we need to pray more than ever we need to put ourselves into the companionship of God the language is sometimes used I've come across it recently in a book by Philip Yancey called Reaching for the Invisible God but there are times when we need to practice the presence of God when God feels far from us it feels as though as the psalmist says he has turned his face from us or hidden his face from us and that at times like that we need to practice the presence of God to deliberately spend time in prayer even though we feel like our prayers are going no further than the ceiling and that it's important not simply to do that now and again but to discipline ourselves to do it even though we feel like our souls have withered inside us again look at the language that the psalmist uses in verse 9

[21 : 37] I call to you O Lord every day I spread out my hands to you this person feels that God has turned his face from him and yet every day he puts himself deliberately into a posture of prayer before God and prays and that's a model to us of what we must do when we feel far from God there is a certain discipline involved in that when we feel like we're praying to no one but ourselves but it's a discipline that we need to engage in nonetheless that's the first thing then prayer the second thing and in a sense this is part of prayer is that we need to reflect upon and pray in view of the character and the nature of God look at the language of verse 1 oh lord the god who saves me day and night

I cry out before thee that language oh lord the god who saves me now that to me I may be wrong but to me it has the ring of something that's almost almost like a confession or a creed almost like something that's a kind of byword within the believing community similar perhaps to the way that we perhaps often pray heavenly father our father in heaven that kind of thing something that is said that is almost a common way of speaking about God and that it is a natural way to begin a prayer but that in and of itself is pregnant with meaning about God's character now I say that because this statement of faith at the beginning of the psalm this statement of conviction that God is good and is the

God who saves me is really the only point where the psalmist speaks with such faith and such a sense of God's goodness and love for him in the whole psalm the rest of the psalm is essentially complaint and suffering and woe and this almost feels like a token gesture towards the goodness of God almost and I think it's the fact that coming at the beginning of the prayer it is the foundation and the reference point for everything that will follow everything that follows in this psalm as the psalmist pours out his grief before God is poured out to the Lord the God who saves me is poured out to the good one to the

Saviour to the one who is committed to his people in covenant and that name Lord which is the translation of the name Yahweh or Jehovah is a name so intimately connected with God's covenant with his people with his commitment to his people made to Abraham ratified to Abraham confirmed again in the giving of the law to Moses the commitment that I will be your God and you will be my people the commitment to be the God of deliverance of salvation and that is the reference point to which everything that follows in this psalm is aligned against that everything the psalmist says is poured out before the Lord the God who saves him and so even though it's something that the psalmist may be saying without investing his whole heart in it because he feels far from God it's something that constantly rings in his own ears and echoes through his own prayer as he pleads and prays before God again there's a tremendous amount of pastoral significance there because often those times when we pray to

God when we feel far from him and when we feel overwhelmed by life are times when we feel that we can't say with any real earnestness or with any real conviction that we believe in God's love and God's goodness and God's kindness we feel as though we're almost speaking these words as a token gesture as though we're almost speaking these words without really meaning them and the danger is that feeling like that we can simply go back to the television continue watching whatever it is that takes our minds of how far we've grown from God rather than sitting before God and praying beginning perhaps with words that are almost a token gesture through us but that if we speak them to ourselves and if we speak them in prayer before God can eventually come to take root within our souls and to remind us that yes

[27 : 15] God is good God is the God who saved me and even though I'm struggling to believe it now given time it will come to mean something real to me once more that's the second thing then you see the psalmist praying and reflecting on God's nature let me just say one more thing actually before we leave that because of course the whole psalm reflects another aspect of God's nature and that is that God is in control and that ultimately God is the solution to the problem that the psalmist is experiencing and again the very act of prayer of actually coming before God and there is perhaps a case for allowing our physical posture to mirror the language of kneeling before God to actually kneel before God in order to remind ourselves of the fact that the one into whose presence we come is the sovereign

Lord as we come into his presence in that way as we pray in time again our souls can return to the point where we are truly filled with a conviction and a belief that God is sovereign and that God is the solution to my problem the final thing that the psalmist does is to complain he complains before God many of the psalms are actually categorised as psalms of complaint by scholars because in them essentially the psalmist says why is all this stuff happening to me I am not happy with all this stuff that is happening to me and laid it before God something in us balks at that because something in us feels that we can't bring compliance before God because after all he is God he is sovereign he is in charge and to bring complaints before him looks almost blasphemous it's like saying you don't really seem to know how to run this universe and you don't really seem to know how to run my life that's how we can feel about the act of complaining to God but I think the truth is that what the psalmist does here reflects a very important principle that the place for our doubts the place for our anxieties the place for our complaints is precisely before God precisely before the one who can hear those complaints and respond to them that the response to our suffering and our sense of overfillment is not to complain to ourselves or to complain to others about God but it's to bring our complaints before God with a full awareness that we see life from an earthly perspective that we don't understand this world and that we need God to help us to understand it when we come back to the passage before us in Psalm 28 we see the line was in verse 9 of the psalmist almost arguing with God

I call to you Lord every day I spread out my hands to you do you show your wonders to the dead do those who are dead rise up and praise you is your love declared in the grave your faithfulness and destruction are your wonders known in the place of darkness or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion we'll come back to those words as we close in just a moment but the point is that they take the psalmist's earthly perspective and earthly logic and they plead that logic before God because the place for the doubt that such logic brings into our souls and into our minds is in front of the God who is able to comfort us and to console us the point is simply to pick up on the language that Paul uses that we are not to hoard our anxieties to ourselves but in all things we are to make our petitions made known to

God that in all our doubts in all our questioning in all our struggling we bring these things before God and offload the burden of them onto the God who hears us our time is almost gone let me close with this thought we thought about the problem and we thought about the response and that response involves prayer involves reflecting on God's character and involves bringing our complaints to God I think in some ways if we ever feel this way ourselves we could do an awful lot worse than simply pray our way through Psalm 88 as a model for our own prayer to echo it and bring it before God but I also think that it's important as believers as Christians as those who have a greater insight on reality than the psalmist did because we have a complete Bible we have the full revelation of God's character in

Jesus Christ and because we have been told more about how the story ends that as believers who know these things we have something more than the psalmist of Psalm 88 had we know because the Bible tells us how the story will end we know that the story will end with the transformation of this world with the final destruction and abolition of sin from this world and with the renewal of heaven and earth into true perfection filled with the glory of God we read earlier in Revelation chapter 7 and I want to close by returning to this language because I'm conscious that this has been an extremely bleak sermon in the sense that it's been a sermon about bleakness but at times when we experience this it's important to remind ourselves that even though we can't see the light at the end of the tunnel which is not incidentally in gospel terms it's switched off for budgetary reasons even though we can't see the light at the end of the tunnel we know that the tunnel has an end and let's close by reading the language of

[34 : 30] Revelation chapter 7 again and particularly the language from verse 15 where we read of those who have suffered in the service of Jesus there before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them never again will they hunger never again will they thirst the sun will not beat upon them nor any scorching heat for the lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd he will lead them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes I want to close with this last thought and that's that the tears will not be fully wiped away or abolished until God himself wipes them away in the new heavens and the new earth there is no place in the Christian life for the assumption that within this period within this time of our lives we will ever be free of anxiety or suffering or doubt or whatever these things are part of the experience of living between the advents of Jesus and it's important to remind ourselves that tears will only be fully wiped away when God returns and restores all things but it's also important to remind ourselves that that day is coming and that our experience in the present is not an eternal or permanent experience but it's one that will ultimately in the end be displaced with the new heavens with the new earth when the lamb is at the centre of the throne when we are led to springs of living water and when God himself wipes the last of the tears from the next close with thets through as as joyful as as mu as