

Psalm 88

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[0 : 00] Well, please do turn with me in your Bibles, if you have one with you, to this very remarkable Psalm, Psalm 88.

! I wonder if, like me, you often find the Bible deeply unsettling reading.

The Bible not only richly encourages us, it at times profoundly perplexes us. And that's because, I think, there is an intense honesty in the Bible about the life of faith.

The life of faith is lived before the God who is from everlasting to everlasting, whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts, whose ways are higher and holier and wiser than our ways.

We live our days out before Him who has ordained all things from the beginning to the end. And it shouldn't surprise us that life can be deeply, profoundly, unsettlingly perplexing.

[1 : 21] I wonder if you've ever realized that over 40% of the book of Psalms is laments.

59 of the 150 Psalms are laments. Songs in a minor key, sometimes so minor as Psalm 88, you can hardly lift your voice out of the depths to sing them.

I wonder if you've ever asked yourself, why are there so many laments in the book of Psalms? This was the songbook of God's Old Covenant Church. This was the songbook of our Lord Jesus Christ. He would have sung the Psalms. Why so many laments? Well, of course, the answer is very simple, isn't it?

The life of faith is lived out in a fallen, anti-God, anti-Christ world. The life of faith is lived out in a world where the evil one, the devil himself, holds remarkable sway under the sovereign, overruling power and purpose of God.

[2 : 40] And we have added to that the constant tension of indwelling sin, the sin that yet remains within us to humble us, and at times bring us so low, we all must wonder, Lord, is it possible that someone like me could really be a Christian?

Maybe you've never thought that. You would be an unusual beast if you never have. Indwelling sin can be so humbling, so disheartening.

You think, Lord, here I am again, after so many years, confessing the same sins. When will I ever learn? Have I ever learned? I've been thinking these past months somewhat about how the Lord Jesus Christ was always pressing on would-be disciples, the cost that would be involved in following Him.

We know these words so well, unless you take up your cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple. But I wonder if we really pause long enough to ask ourselves, what exactly is Jesus saying here?

He isn't saying that life will be full of minor inconveniences that will bring a little bit of disturbance into your life. He's saying, unless you're ready to die, and to die a cruel, viciously cruel death, for me, you cannot be my disciple.

[4 : 21] Imagine someone came to you tonight and said, I know you're a Christian. Tell me, what must I do to become a follower of Jesus Christ? And you say to them, well, our Lord says, unless you take up your cross and follow Him, unless you hate father, mother, wife, husband, child, friend, compared to your love to Him, you cannot be His disciple.

I just wonder what they would think. Are you serious? Do you not want me to belong to the community of faith to which you belong?

And you would say, with all my heart, but I need to tell you, because this is what our Lord Jesus tells us, that the life of faith can be profoundly, unsettlingly, deeply, pervasively, overwhelmingly, dark, and difficult.

Psalm 88 is an extreme song of lament. We're not told why this man of God is suffering so overwhelmingly.

Some suggest, some suggest, with the introduction, a song, a psalm of the sons of Korah to the choir master, according to Mahaloth, Le'anoth.

[5 : 44] Some suggest, excellent Hebrew scholars, that they are, that the words reflect something of mental disturbance. silence. But we're not told.

And we're not told, perhaps, so that the psalm can apply to God's overwhelmed people, no matter the reason for their desolation and desperation.

for this man is desolate and desperate. And do you notice how the psalm ends? I think our English versions tend to smooth out the Hebrew.

My companions have become darkness. I think probably better, darkness is my only friend.

Darkness is my only friend.

Verse 8, You have caused my companions to shun me. You have made me a horror to them. All I've got left is darkness.

[6 : 52] darkness. No spark of hope. No upbeat ending. You know, you meet Christians and they always seem to give the impression that everything will turn out fine.

Just believe. You want to avoid people like that, as you would avoid the plague. No upbeat ending. This is one man's experience, but God in His wisdom has inscripturated it in the songbook of His people.

Now, we don't know who this Haman was. There is a Haman who is mentioned in 1 Chronicles 6. He was one of the temple singers that David appointed to celebrate when the temple would be built.

Possibly it's him. We don't really know who he was. We don't know really the nature of his suffering. Was it mental? Was it spiritual? Was it physical?

Was it a combination of all three? What we do know is that his whole being is shrouded in darkness. God seems to have abandoned him.

[8 : 09] And darkness is his only companion. So, in this psalm, we are confronted with a man whose life is a life of unrelieved, unceasing, moment by moment, day by day, utter turmoil.

Every moment of the day he is bereft. Look what he says in verse 16 and 17. Your wrath has swept over me.

Your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long. There's not a moment where he finds relief from the desolations that have enshrouded him and overwhelmed him.

everywhere he looks, it seems that his God, the God of his salvation, look what he writes in verse 1, O Lord, God of my salvation.

Everywhere he looks, it seems to him from the providences of his life that the God of his salvation has abandoned him, turned against him, he is a broken man.

[9 : 38] Now, before I say a number of things about the psalm, I want to ask a question. Is Henman a depressed believer?

believer? That would be the conclusion that we could perhaps most obviously jump to as we read through the psalm. Here is a man who is in the depths of depression.

And it may be the case. But I wonder myself if the truth is actually a little more profound than that. it's not that he is depressed. It is that he is a faithful believer who is experiencing the cost of faithfulness to the God of his salvation.

You know the Psalms 42 and 43, why are you cast down, O my soul? Why are you so distressed within me? You read most commentaries and they say, here is a depressed believer.

[10 : 44] I don't think it is a depressed believer. I think it is someone who has entered into the experience of the costliness of faithfulness.

Now don't get me wrong, depression is real and Christians can easily get depressed, overwhelmingly depressed. But perhaps here we are seeing a man who is where he is, not so much because of mental disturbance, or perhaps even of physical illness that has caused his companions to shun him as he puts it.

Some commentators think that he has a severe case of leprosy. But perhaps we're simply being confronted with a man who is agonizing over the fact that the Lord God Almighty is the God of his salvation.

But look at my life. How do I reconcile my circumstances, my overwhelming darkness, with the fact that God is the God of my salvation?

salvation. And it may be that he is simply living out as an old covenant echo the ultimate faithfulness of the faithful servant of the Lord, Jesus Christ himself.

[12:23] But we'll come to that in a short time. Let me make six observations very simply, very briefly. I know our time is hurrying on. Notice first of all that in his darkness, he prayed.

His darkness did not drive him from God. It cast him upon God. 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. He has not turned his back on God, though it seems to him God has turned his back on him.

He will not let God go. Life has become unrelieved darkness.

What does he do? He lifts up his heart to the Lord. Secondly, notice that he prayed as a man of faith.

[13:29] His faith is battered, perhaps it's even broken, but it's functioning. I don't think there's any suggestion in the psalm that it was his sin that had brought these calamities upon his life.

He's left with this conundrum. Why, O Lord, God, you're the God of my salvation.

I cry out to you day and night and you can almost feel the perplexity. Why? I sometimes wonder that that elemental cry of our Savior from the cross, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

That one of the implications of that cry is to tell us that even the holiest, purest, and sinless of men experienced a why that he could not resolve in his holy humanity.

I don't know any of you meaningfully at all, and your circumstances may be very different from mine, but perhaps for some of you there is this recurring, Lord, why?

[14:49] Why this? Why now? Why? The Bible does not promise us that this side of glory, our whys, will be resolved.

That's why the psalm ends, my only companion is darkness. There's no happy ending. Wouldn't it be lovely just to have happy endings all the time?

I've often thought of late when I've been praying, saying, Lord, if it were left to me, I wouldn't have one difficulty, trial, or trouble touch my children or my grandchildren.

I would want them to navigate this life safely and sweetly. The Lord, who is wiser, says, that will not be for their good, either for their present good or for their eternal good.

And so we live by faith and not by sight. We're Christians not because we've got answers for everything. You want to avoid people like that who have got answers for everything.

[16:00] The older I get, the more ready and willing I am to say, I don't know. But let me tell you what I do know. Thirdly, do you notice he prayed every day?

He says it in verse one. He says it again in verse nine. My eye grows dim through sorrow every day I call upon you, O Lord.

I spread out my hands to you every day. Do you see what this man is saying? I've got no one else to go to.

I've got no one else to turn to. I will not let you go. to whom else can I go?

Every day I call upon you, Lord. You know, you meet people occasionally who say, but if only you had more faith, if only you prayed more, and, well, please God, I need my faith enriched and deepened, it's shallow and shameful.

[17:08] I need to be praying greatly more than I do. Sometimes we're left with this. Lord, I pray every day, every day, every waking moment, and nothing happens.

Another new morning breaks and the darkness is there. But he won't let God go. That's one of the stellar, pristine marks of a man or woman of God.

They will not let God go. And then fourthly, notice he recognizes that the Lord is the one ultimately behind everything that's happening to him.

He knows that evil is not autonomous. Your wrath has swept over me. Your dreadful assaults destroy me.

He understands that Satan can do nothing beyond God's holy, wise, good, and perfect will. He understands that he's a creature under the sovereign, overruling will, purpose, grace, mercy, and kindness of God.

[18:32] And he traces everything back to its origin. He knows that God uses sin sinlessly for his glory and for the good of his people. And he's saying, Lord, I know that my life is not at the mercy of mere circumstance.

I know that my life is not at the mercy of mental turmoil or physical distress or of companions deserting me and rejecting me. I know that ultimately my times are in your hands, ways that you ordain the way that I have to take.

Paul prayed, didn't he, a little earlier, your ways are not our ways. You know, I sometimes think we, those of us in the Reformed tradition, we placard very seriously the sovereignty of God.

Do we really understand what we are placarding? The sovereignty of the God who sends in his wisdom pandemics?

You know, I hear people praying and they say, oh God, this awful disease, it's as if God has been benign and passive and it's as if he is to now catch up with this unexpected happening.

[20 : 00] He ordains all that comes to pass, mysteriously, profoundly, unfathomably. You're left your head spinning. If your head doesn't spin, I sometimes think, can you really be a Christian?

What kind of world are you living in? Our heads spin. We cannot begin to begin to begin to fathom the ways of the Almighty. That's why I love those words at the end of Romans 11.

Where Paul having so gloriously, and you'll come to it in about five years' time, where Paul says he so wonderfully explained the gospel and you're swept along and then he ends and he says, oh the depths, both of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable are his judgments.

His paths are beyond tracing out. You see, when we preach the cross of Jesus Christ, we must never preach it as some kind of mathematical theorem.

Here are all the parts, and when you put them all together, you see marvelous, propitiatory, sacrificial atonement. We should be so out of our depth, we hardly know what the next word is to speak.

[21 : 13] And we speak, Augustine was right, we speak so that we don't remain silent. You say, well God's given us his word. Absolutely he's given us his word. Absolutely true. God, but it takes us out of our depths.

God, become man. I was sharing this with someone recently, I was ministering Cambridge, one of the girls who started attending church, she'd been brought along, she asked if she could meet with me for coffee, and I remember yet sitting with her in Starbucks, and I could see she was building up to something, and she's a bright girl, and she said, can I ask you a question?

I said, yeah, you can ask whatever you like. She says, do you believe in Noah's Ark? And I burst out laughing, and I could see she was a little disconcerted.

I said, believe in Noah's Ark. I believe the creator of the cosmos became a zygote in a virgin's womb. You think Noah's Ark's a problem? Of course I believe in Noah's Ark.

But the gospel takes us out of all our intellectual categories and canons. Who has known the mind of the Lord? God become man? Jim Packer was right.

[22 : 35] He says, we simply bow down and worship because we don't know how to speculate. And the early church was wonderful. It got some things wrong, but my, it got some things right.

But when it came to explicate the union in Jesus Christ of God and man, they just used negative adverbs. They didn't know how to use positive adverbs because they couldn't fathom the inexplicableness, so they simply said it was without confusion, without division, without separation, without mixture.

life is unfathomable at times. But here is a man who understands that behind all the providences that are overwhelming him, it's the Lord.

Like Psalm 42 and 43, all your waves and breakers have swept over me. just two things to go. Number five, the Psalm reminds us that the believing life may be marked by unrelieved darkness. You know the verse in Isaiah 50, let him who walks in the dark and who has no light trust in his God.

[24 : 02] God, I'm sure like me there have been periods of darkness in your life. I've never known what it is to have unrelieved darkness. I have a friend who once told me he envied the lampposts of Glasgow because they had light.

But in Isaiah 50, let him who walks in the darkness and who has no light yet trust in his God.

There's much I would like to say but I know our time has gone.

You know this is one reason why the church needs pastors and elders who are gentle humble physicians of the soul, who are slow to speak and who are quick to listen, who are patient and kind, who don't offer slick answers to people who are walking in darkness.

That's why we need to take the greatest care that the men we set apart to shepherd the flock will shepherd them with gentleness, tenderness, thoughtfulness.

Yes, at times with clarity and conviction but most often almost saying nothing, slow to speak and quick to listen.

[25 : 23] not giving slick answers and maybe, you know, maybe the best thing you could ever do is simply to sit and weep with those who weep and to pray with them and to break your heart with their breaking hearts.

And they look to their pastors and elders and you say, I've got nothing to give you except this. The God who spared not his only son and who delivered him up for us all is a God we can cast ourselves upon in our extremity, knowing that one day he will wipe every tear from our eyes. And he'll make all things new. well, one last thing, and I'm sure you would be expecting this. In your darkness, whatever that darkness may be, if you were a Christian believer, you have a companion who knows what it is to be consumed by darkness.

On the cross, all the lights went out for Jesus Christ. There wasn't a pinprick of light in the cosmos of God's creation for the Son of God.

[26 : 54] All the lights went out. He is able to help us, not by the wonder of divine omniscience and divine omnipotence, which he has, but he is able especially to help us, because he knows our frame, because it is his own frame.

There is dust on the throne of heaven, and that dust knows darkness personally. It knows darkness intimately. It knows darkness that no one of his people will ever, ever, in 10,000 times, 10,000 years, begin to begin to understand.

His darkness was a diameter removed from all our darkneses. And because he entered into darkness, he is able to help those who are going through darkness.

And ultimately, that's the comfort the gospel gives. You're not alone. you're not alone.

He may feel alone. He may feel that darkness was his only companion, but actually, actually, there was one with him who was keeping him from apostatizing, who was keeping him from turning his back on God and blaspheming him.

[28 : 36] darkness was not his only companion. So let me just say to you, as I say to myself tonight, however dark your days may be, number one, there is one who knows your darkness because he has been in your darkness.

darkness. And secondly, there is one who said, I will never leave you nor forsake you. He may seem far off, but God would un-God himself if he abandoned one of his blood bought children. let him who walks in the darkness and who has no light yet trust in his God.

May the Lord bless his word to us this evening. Let him let him