Psalm 88 :1-18

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Preacher: Phil Foster

[0:00] The Psalm 88. This is a psalm written, as we know from the superscript, by Haman the Ezraite, a wise man, the grandson of Judah, for public lament.

Like the psalms we are singing tonight, it is personal, but was intended to invite us all in. A song, a psalm of the sons of Korah, for the director of music, according to Mahalath Leonoth, a mascal of Haman the Ezraite.
O Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you. May my prayer come before you. Turn your ear to my cry.
For my soul is full of trouble, and my life draws near the grave. I am counted among those who go down to the pit. 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.
[1:08] You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily upon me. You have overwhelmed me with all your waves.

You have taken from me my closest friends, and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape. My eyes are dim with grief.
I call to you, O 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 in destruction? Are your wonders known in the place of darkness, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?
But I cry to you for help, O Lord. In the morning my prayer comes before you. Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?
[2:12] From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death. I have suffered your terrors and am in despair. Your wrath has swept over me. Your terrors have destroyed me.

All day long they surround me like a flood. They have completely engulfed me. You have taken my companions and loved ones from me. The darkness is my closest friend.
Lament. Scotland is known for its laments. On the Wikipedia page for lament, there is a special section just devoted to Scotland. However, this was our past.
What about now? We don't like to think about lament in our culture. In a culture that feels entitled to self-fulfillment and happiness, lament is the awkward relative who everyone hopes will skip the next family gathering.
We may join in lamenting something for a short while, but there's a cultural pressure to recover quickly, to get better, to become economically productive, to take care of yourself and have it all together.
[3:25] A 2015 BBC article begins by saying, The British funeral has been transformed. Increasingly, the ceremony pays tribute to the deceased's life instead of mourning their death.

Why? It may be the only thing that's inevitable in life, but death is changing. Now it's a time to be joyful. Instead of looking ahead to the afterlife, British funerals increasingly rejoice in memories of the deceased's triumphs, relationships, and their favourite songs.
There's a phrase for ceremonies like this, a celebration of life. The tone is happy rather than mournful, celebratory instead of sombre. Wearing black is commonly discouraged.
You're more likely to hear Monty Python's looking on the bright, always look on the bright side of life than Verdi's Requiem. Does this shock you?
What place does it leave for grief? Are we not allowed to hurt anymore? In essence, the message is, don't feel pain, recover quickly. Some of us may be dealing with loss, coming here in pain, with questions.

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[4:40] Perhaps we're facing the loss of a family member, or a friend, or facing other issues, such as ongoing illness or psychological distress. You may be wondering, questioning why you're going through these things.

The culture's response appears to want to shut off pain, to ignore it, to focus on the bright side of life, not to ask painful questions. But is that the way of the Bible?
Is that God's way? Please turn with me back to Psalm 88. What did you think of when you heard this psalm this evening? That was depressing.
What happened to him in the Ezraite? Did God answer him? This psalm is unique. As the one psalm with no happiness, no resolution.
Perhaps you're wondering why there is a psalm like this in the Bible. Let's consider together what it teaches us about lament. While we think about this, let's keep in mind what the superscript to the psalm teaches us.
[5:45] That psalms are not just for individuals. They are corporate songs. Therefore, we must not think only about the private, but the corporate value of lament.

This psalm is both for the suffering person, church, or people group, and for those who are not currently suffering, but know others who are. We are inevitably always part of one or both of these groups.
The first line of this psalm is vitally important to the whole psalm. It states a great truth, and is the whole reason why the psalmist cries out to God. O Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you.
Our Lord, he is the God who saves us. We'll return to that. Let's move on. A major theme of this psalm is crying out to God in our distress.
In the first two verses, we read, Day and night I cry out before you. May my prayer come before you. Turn your ear to my cry. And again in verse 9.
[6:52] I call to you, O Lord. Every day I spread out my hands to you. And again in verse 13. But I cry to you for help, O Lord.

In the morning my prayer comes before you. The first thing this psalm teaches us is to cry out to the Lord when we are distressed. To do this early in the morning.
And to do this constantly, day and night, every day. What do you do when you are in distress? Do you cry out to the God who saves you?
When Jess was six months pregnant with our daughter Marty, her sleep was very disturbed. She kept waking up with pains in her abdomen. Eventually, at around 4.30 in the morning, fearful, she woke me up.
What would you have done then? The first thing we did that morning was cry out to God for help. Straight afterwards, Jess started bleeding.
[7:53] Mari was born that day, three months early. So small that my wedding ring could fit around her entire foot. We didn't stop crying out to God for her during her ten weeks in hospital.

What happens when Haman the Ezraite cries out to God? What response does he get? We don't find out in this psalm. He calls out three times with no reply, no resolution.
Have you ever felt like that in the deepest pit? Haman sounds like he's crying out in depression.
When I was in year 11 in Australia, the equivalent of S5 here, I became stuck in a cycle of months of depression.
It was a horrible pattern of self-guilt and self-hatred, crushing intense loneliness of every second of the day. During that time, I almost continually told myself I was worthless.
If I didn't feel like getting up in the morning, it was because I was worthless. If I forgot to brush my teeth, I was worthless. Any minor thing you can think of, I was worthless.
[9:01] The only joy I found in life was during some few fleeting moments in the company of friends, but everything always faded to dust. This psalm was a great comfort to me then because it described my own experience, crying out in pain to the one who saves.

I regularly cried out, God, help me, and he did. He didn't sweep me out of my situation, but he led me and guided me slowly through and out of the pain.
Here's the reason I'm still here. I'm a great fan of Tolkien's Middle Earth. I liked the Lord of the Rings movies, but I love the books.
There is one moment that I think captures this feeling of depression well. Sam and Frodo are nearing the end of their quest to destroy the evil ring of power.

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They're in Mordor, a dark, hot wasteland, the land of the Dark Lord. As they near the end of their quest, they realize they are unlikely to return.
[10:07] Sam, feeling nostalgic about throwing away some cookware, says, Do you remember that bit of rabbit, Mr. Frodo, and our place under the warm bank in Captain Faramir's country, the day I saw an elephant, which is basically an elephant?

Frodo replies, No, I'm afraid not, Sam. At least, I know that such things happened, but I cannot see them. No taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower, no image of moon or star are left to me.
I am naked in the dark, Sam, and there is no veil between me and the wheel of fire. I begin to see it, even with my waking eyes, and all else fades.
Have you ever felt like that in some way? What do we do when we're in such a place? We cry out to God, and don't give up. That's what Haman the Ezraite did.
That's what Job did. Even when it feels like he isn't listening, we keep crying out to God because he is the God who saves us. No matter how long the pain lasts, he will save us if only we trust in him.
[11:29] This psalm helps us when we feel that way. It gives us words to use to cry out. God has put me in the lowest pit.

In the darkest depths, his wrath lies heavily on me. Have you ever heard anyone speak that way? If you did, what would you think? Would you think, you can't say that?
If so, you would be wrong. This psalm teaches us it's okay to cry out in pain like Haman the Ezraite. We can take his words and make them our own.
Many of God's people have found comfort in using these words in the midst of their pain. We may know that God cares for us and died for us, but that doesn't mean we always feel that.
God gave us these words to let us know we can voice our pain and seek comfort from him. And even with Haman to question God in the midst of our pain.
[12:30] In verses 10 to 12, Haman boldly questions God. And in verse 14, he even dares to say, why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

Most of us will feel like this at some point in our lives. And this psalm encourages us to ask these questions, to pour out our pain before God.
I myself have used words like this, even this year, when constantly plagued by sickness, feeling like I was getting nothing done on my PhD, being daily disturbed in sleep.
One day, I felt I had reached the end of my tether. I literally fell down before God saying, why are you doing this to us?
How does this serve your will? Be honest before God. He knows what's on your heart. Even before you speak, do not be afraid to speak boldly before God.
[13:31] Haman wasn't. Let's share our pain with God and pour out our hearts to him. It's what he wants. That's why he gave us these words. Did God answer Haman directly?

We do not know. We may not receive an answer when we want it. When he does answer us, we may not receive the answers we wanted. Who's read Job, that thick, depressing book?
In many ways, it's the long version of this psalm. But unlike this psalm, God answers directly. After 37 chapters, God answers Job.
But not in the way Job expects. Job has been crying out, saying, what did I do to deserve this? How is this justice? But God answers him, saying, Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?
I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me if you understand.
[14:39] And again he says, Would you discredit my justice? Adorn yourself with glory and splendor. Clothe yourself in honor and majesty. Unleash the fury of your wrath.

Look at every proud man and bring him low. Crush the wicked where they stand. Then I myself will admit to you that your own right hand can save you.
The answer God gives is that what is happening is beyond Job's comprehension and power. He has to trust in God, the one who saves. This is something that I and others have found immensely comforting.
The reminder of God's power, that he is in control, not us. That he has everything in his hands. That he is the God who saves.

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Does this mean we shouldn't ask questions because we have God's answer to Job? Or that we should fear God's answer and stay silent? Of course not.
[15:42] As I was just saying before, Psalm 88 gives us a model. It gives us words to frame our pain when we can't find the words. By all means, cry out to God and ask him.

Say to him with Haman, why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me? His answer may pain us in some way, but we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.
How much more when he talks with us? We can trust him. It is healthy to bear our soul to God and he welcomes it.
If he did not, would he give us this psalm specifically for our corporate use? He shows us that we are not alone. There are others feeling and asking the same things.
There will be others in the future. And what does this psalm mean for the congregation? The brothers and sisters in Christ are the one who's such us. How does it teach us?
[16:51] Apart from teaching us that it's okay for our brother or sister to speak like this, it can also teach us their pain to help us mourn with those who mourn as God commands us through the words of Paul.

Let's dwell on that for a wee bit. What does this psalm have to do with mourning with those who mourn? Where are Haman the Ezraites' friends in this psalm?
In verse 8 we read, you have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. Again in verse 18, you have taken my companions and loved ones from me.
The darkness is my closest friend. Where are his friends? Did they comfort him initially and get sick of him? Did they decide that it was getting them down to be around him?
That it was too depressing? That it was too hard? And they didn't have time for that kind of negativity in their lives. How did they try to comfort him?
[17:59] Were they like Job's friends accusing him of sinning, suggesting the answer was simple, repent and all will be well? Were they like the prophets at the time of Jeremiah crying out, shalom, peace, when there was no peace?

What about us? Are we trying like these friends, like those prophets, to heal the wounds of God's people lightly? This psalm highlights something people often do, abandon the sufferer to their suffering, especially when it lasts a long time.
This should not be. We should not fear to share the pain and to mourn with those who mourn. This is what God has called us to. James writes, religion that our God and Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look on orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from, sorry, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.
And again, he writes, what good is it, my brothers and sisters, if a person claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can that faith save them?
Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing for his physical needs, what good is it?
[19:35] In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. Is our faith living faith? Do we help out those who are afflicted when we can?

Will we, in the future, care for those who are suffering around us? Some of us will have seen the movie The King's Speech. It's set between the world wars. It centres around King George VI and a man named Lionel Logue.
King George had a stutter and Lionel Logue was the King's speech therapist. However, before that, Logue worked in Adelaide, Australia, with Australians who came back from the First World War with speech problems.
At one point in the movie, he talks about this time saying, Those poor young blokes cried out in fear. No one was listening to them. My job was to give them faith in their own voice and to let them know a friend was listening.
This is something we can do for our brothers and sisters in Christ. We can give them faith in their own voice. To encourage them in crying out to God.
[20:44] To let them know a friend is listening in and through their pain. But we can do even more than that. We can join with them in crying out to God.

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Entering into their pain and their cry with them. Truly showing them that they are not alone. We can make the last line of Psalm 88.
The darkness is my closest friend. We can make that line untrue for them. There is something deeply comforting about knowing people are dedicated to praying to God for you and your situation. When babies are born three months early, they are incredibly fragile. The healthiest 27-week-old can be dead in hours if they catch a virus. After Marty was born at 27 weeks, we had hundreds of people over Australia praying for us.
We had at least four churches and two theological colleges and their supporters praying for all of us. We were blessed with a healthy baby, but she was fragile. And there was the ever-present fear of that phone call, come quickly to say goodbye.
[21:56] It was so comforting knowing that so many people were joining with us in our traumatic situation and asking for God's help.

Come, let us mourn with those who mourn. Let us share in the pain of our brothers and sisters and comfort them in their distress. Let us use the words of this psalm to cry out on their behalf and let's not limit ourselves to those in our immediate area.
Most of the people praying for me and my family when Murray was born did not know us personally. We can lament with and cry out for all those who are suffering or in distress in Scotland, in the UK and around the world.
I've been mostly talking about the individual who suffers but we should think also of families, churches and people groups who are suffering. We should also lament for those who suffer who do not believe.
Let us not be like Jonah who wished for the destruction of Nineveh but instead let us be like God who cares for everyone. He says to Jonah and to us, should I not pity Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons?
[23:31] We've asked how this psalm teaches the sufferer and those who are not personally suffering. Now I want to turn back to that first verse. Why was it so comforting for us after Murray was born to know that there were others crying out to God on our behalf for one reason?

We know our God is the God who saves and he's not just the God who saves. He's more than that. He's the God who came and dwelt among us, who bore our weaknesses and now we can say with the author of Hebrews that we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses but we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are yet was without sin.
Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.
Jesus was tempted while starving in the wilderness. He had people seeking him for only what they could get out of him. He faced the infirmities of human existence but greater than all those was his betrayal and death.
He experienced great anxiety and distress leading up to his arrest. On the Mount of Olives before he was arrested Jesus said to his disciples my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.
[25:07] Stay here and keep watch with me. But what did they do? They promptly fell asleep. Jesus knows what it's like to have friends who do not support us in our distress.

He also knows what it's like to go through hard times. He knows what it's like to not want to go through those times. He actually asked for a way out.
He prayed to God saying my father if it is possible may this cup be taken from me yet not as I will but as you will.
And again he prayed my father if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it may your will be done. He knows what it's like to be deserted by his friends.
After praying these prayers he was arrested and all his disciples deserted him. Peter disowned him three times. All his friends deserted him in his hour of need not one stood by him.
[26:21] Jesus even knows what it's like to feel forsaken by God. While he was on the cross Jesus cried out which means my God my God why have you forsaken me?

Does Jesus understand our troubles? Does he understand our mortal pains? Yes in every way. It is this God this Jesus who saves us.

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God is God is God who is God is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses but we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are yet was without sin.
let us approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.
So what does Psalm 88 teach us? When we're in distress remember you're not the only one who's felt this way. Many of God's people have. Cry out to God and entrust yourself to him because he is the God who saves and more than that the God who feels and understands your pain.
[27:46] This Psalm gives us words to use and lets us know it's okay to voice our distress. It's okay to show our distress. When others are in distress do not be a false friend.

Mourn with those who mourn. Join with them in crying out to God on their behalf. We should by our actions make people feel safe to share their distresses with us.
This Psalm gives us words to use to share and understand the distresses of others and bring their distress before God. Remember God is the one who saves.
He knows and understands the pain we're going through. He understands the pain of the one who follows him as well as the one who does not follow him. If you do not yet follow him why don't you turn to him the God of all comfort and receive his perfect comfort in your troubles too.
Let's put this into practice now. Whether you're struggling yourself or know someone who is or just know of people who are take a minute to pray where you are to share your pain or their pain with God asking him to help us all through our weaknesses and draw us closer to him.
[29:04] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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