

Psalm 88

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[0 : 0 0] Lord, we've not come to church just to check something off our schedule. We've come together to meet with you. And we pray that you would meet with us. Lord, we pray that you would speak through your word today.

Speak powerfully by the power of your Holy Spirit. Would you speak through your word? Would you speak through me? And would you convict our hearts? Would you encourage us?

Would you help us to get to know you more? That we might more perfectly love you and be more completely devoted to you. In Jesus' name, amen. So please be seated and please turn, if you have your bowels with you, to Psalm 88.

A couple months ago, I had the privilege of meeting up with a neighbor to talk about how he's doing. He's going through some really hard stuff. And he shared with me that it's been a whole bunch of months, maybe even a few years since he's prayed.

Because when he was trying to pray, the words would come out angry, dark, despairing. And so, as he would try to start out with happy prayers and they would turn dark, his voice grew quiet, his words became few, and he stopped praying altogether.

[1 : 1 0] And I sat there at the coffee shop in my neighborhood with him, thinking about how to reply, how to encourage him. I could have shared with him Jeremiah 29, 11. You know, for I know the plans I have for you to declare to the Lord.

Plans of, you know, plans of, et cetera. Out of context, but we can do that. Or I could try to share Proverbs 3, verse 5 and 6. Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not on your own understanding.

Et cetera. We all have these verses, some of them out of context, some of them in context that can be encouraging. But in God's goodness, that morning I read Psalm 88. And so, that is what I shared with him.

And we proceeded to wrestle through what we can learn from this dark psalm. And what emerged from our conversation is the basis of the sermon today. And just as I read it with him that morning, so also we'll read it again right now.

Psalm 88, a song, a psalm of the sons of Korah to the choir master, according to Mahalak Lenoth, a maschal of Haman the Ezraite. O Lord God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you.

[2 : 1 5] Let my prayer come before you. Incline your ear to my cry. For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the pit. I am a man who has no strength.

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. You have put me in the depth of the pit. In the regions dark and deep.

Your wrath lies heavy upon me. And you overwhelm me with all your waves. Selah. You have caused my companions to shun me. You have made me a whore to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape.

My eyes grow dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O Lord. I spread with my hands to you. Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you? Selah.

Is your steadfast love declared in the grave? Or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are your wonders known in the darkness? Or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? But I, O Lord, cry to you.

[3 : 12] In the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up. I suffer your terrors.

I am helpless. Your wrath has swept over me. Your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long. They close in on me together. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me.

My companions have become darkness. This is the word of the Lord. There are 150 psalms. One third of them are laments. And in all of those lament psalms, as dark as they may be, as frustrated and even angry as they may be, there's always this positive twist.

You'll have David in Psalm 22 crying out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? But then by the end he is praising God and declaring how the nations will remember and know the Lord.

In psalm after psalm, in all the lament psalms, indeed in all 150 psalms, there's always this praise. In all of them, but this one. In all of them, but this one. And as a result, for a lot of us, we don't really know how to handle this psalm, Psalm 88.

[4 : 20] I remember when I was 12 or 13, I was reading through the psalms, one psalm a day, and I'd read it as a prayer. I'd read it aloud to the Lord. And that works for like Psalm 27. The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Whom shall I fear? It's a beautiful, uplifting psalm. As a young man, and still today, Psalm 144, you train my hands for war and my feet for battle. As a young man, I love praying those prayers.

It's strong. It's uplifting. It's courageous. But then I'd get to a lament psalm, especially Psalm 88, and my words would all of a sudden drop. My voice would drop and my voice would grow silent.

I felt so uncomfortable, so even embarrassed to say these words aloud to God. They're so dark, brooding, and angry. And I believe that for a lot of us, we have this pressure as Christians, as Canadian Christians, that we're polite people.

As Canadians, we're polite. As Christians, we're supposed to be happy. So we're these polite, happy, clappy people. And we don't have a grid through which we can say a prayer like this out loud. And so, so often, you and me and our friends will be like my neighbor, where we have these prayers from our heart to God that come out angry, and so we just don't pray them.

[5 : 33] There's parts of our lives where we just won't go with God because we don't want to be rude to Him. But as we look at Psalm 88, we see that this psalmist, Heman the Ezraite, is very real and very honest with God.

Verse 3, For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. Sheol is a Hebrew word for hell. He's saying, God, I'm going through hell. He's being very real and very honest.

As we read these words, there can be this feeling of embarrassment, like, how did this get in the Bible? Who let this in? But as we're honest with this passage, we remember that what is true of the rest of the scriptures is true about this.

The 2 Timothy 3.16 says that all scripture is breathed by God, and it's profitable for teaching, for rebuke, for correcting. It's profitable, and it's God-breathed.

And so I want to invite you today to open up your hearts with me as we study and plunder the depth of Psalm 88, these words that are God-breathed and included in the scriptures by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, by God himself, for you and for me, that we might know God more completely.

[6 : 44] So Haman the Ezra is crying out to God, saying, I feel like I'm going through hell. I have no strength. I'm like one who's among the dead. He's being very real and very honest.

And so the first truth that we can learn from this today is that our God is a God who's not easily offended. Our God is a God who's not easily offended. And as a result, we can be real, we can be honest, we can be raw with him.

Our God is a God with a big heart and thick skin. He is a God not easily offended. We can bring a real and raw, honest prayers to him. Haman the Ezra height continues.

Verse 6, He's speaking these real and honest words to God, saying, God, this, my broken condition, this is on you.

And I believe this is worship. And here's why. Who you complain to tells you a lot about who you think is in charge and in control. A lot of us have worked jobs where people will come to you and they'll complain about the prices, they'll complain about the product, they complain to you as if you actually have any say in the matter.

[8 : 02] My first job when I was a teen was McDonald's. People would complain about the prices. I'm just like, well, you know, thank you for your complaints. But the reality is if you have a complaint, talk to the manager. They're actually in charge. They actually have some type of voice in what we serve.

I, as a cashier, I don't. Okay? Who you complain to says a lot about who you think is in charge. Haman the Ezraite is complaining to God because he knows that God is in charge.

If you were one of his friends or a neighbor of his, you would see that his friends were abandoning him. You would see that he had no strength, that he was physically weak. You would see these things. But Haman sees that this is on God because he's the one that's in control.

There is no direct line to show that God was removing his friends from him. But he knows, God, you're sovereign. God, you're the king of the universe. God, you're in control and I'm going through darkness. Ultimately, this is on you.

There's various reasons that we'll go through darkness. A friend of mine gave birth to a baby and went into postpartum depression. Her hormones were off and there was a chemical imbalance in her and as a result, she was going through a time of depression, of darkness.

[9 : 08] Sometimes we're going through darkness because someone is making very evil decisions and they're exploiting us. Sometimes we're going through darkness because we've done some very foolish things. There's various reasons why we go through darkness and there'll be various ways through which to deal with the darkness, whether we need medication or we need forgiveness or to ask for forgiveness.

Different reasons why we go through darkness but in Haman's case, he understands that regardless of the reason that he's going through darkness, ultimately, God's in control. And so when he, in his lament, is bringing his complaint to God, he is actually worshiping God by that, by saying, God, this is on you.

You're the king. You're sovereign. You know, the people of Israel, as they're going through the wilderness after they exited from Egypt, they're grumbling and they're complaining.

They're lamenting. And Moses also laments. And yet, the people of Israel, a whole bunch of them are swallowed up in the ground, whereas Moses is blessed by God, a man after God's own heart.

What's the difference? Well, the people of Israel in this case, many of them were complaining and lamenting to each other, whereas Moses complained and laments to God. And if you read the scriptures, you'll see that the men and women of God throughout the Old and New Testament through history and even today are men and women who understand that our God is a God not easily offended and our God is a God who's in control and so they bring their complaints, not grumbling one to another, but they bring their complaints to God.

[10 : 30] The second truth we can learn from Psalm 88 is that it is worship to say these words, even sometimes these angry words, because we're saying, God, you're the one that's in control. Now, as he continues, first talking about how he feels like he's going through hell, second with these words, complaining to God, then in verse 10 he begins questioning God, cross-examining God.

Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you? Is your steadfast love declared in the grave or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are your wonders known in the darkness or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

And it's one thing to be like, God, this is on you, I'm going through brokenness and you're sovereign, you're in control, you're doing this, I feel upset, but then he has the audacity to question God, to confront God.

And as I sat there with my neighbor wrestling through this, through this section, I was brought back to last year, just about exactly a year ago. I was on a big epic road trip with my brother Josh.

Josh is one of my closest friends. I was going to be a best man at his wedding the very next week and we had driven down all the way to St. Louis non-stop and about at the third kilometer from Ottawa, he did something that offended me and I decided that I'm the younger brother, I'll be the bigger brother, I'll be the bigger guy, the bigger man and so I decided to just keep it inside, just let it go.

[11 : 48] We kept driving, something else he did really frustrated me, I kept it inside. By the time we drove all the way to St. Louis, I was so frustrated and by the time we eventually got back to Ottawa, I didn't want to be in a conversation with him, I didn't want to be in a car with him, I just wanted out and so I got out frustratingly, so I was fuming, I was just angry and I met up that day with a friend of mine named Sid and I said, Sid, I don't know what to do, he's one of my best friends and I'm supposed to give a best man speech at his wedding next week but I just am so frustrated and I'm trying to be a godly man here, I'm not getting mad at him and my friend Sid said, Daniel, when you're dealing with conflict, when there is a problem between you and someone else, you have two choices, either you can do exactly what you're doing and keep it inside, don't deal with it, move on, or you can go through the mess and the headache and even sometimes the heartache of confronting him and being honest with him and dealing with it and both have their places, the reality you need to know, Daniel, he said to me, is that if you choose to keep it inside like you're doing and not deal with it, you're going to inevitably go apart from each other, you'll go your separate ways, you just won't want to be in the same room as him, you'll be apart, but if you go through the headache and the mess of confronting him, know that there's actually hope for reconciliation, the question is, he said, do you value this relationship enough to go through the mess?

If this isn't a very important friendship to you, just keep it in, don't go through the mess, you'll go your separate ways, but if this friendship matters to you, deal with the mess, go through that, for there's hope of reconciliation.

Lament is worship, even these questions, these rhetorical questions, these angry questions to God are worship, because it's actually saying, God, you matter so much to me, my friendship matters so much to me, that I will confront you, I feel like you're crushing me, I feel like you are indifferent to me, I feel so far from you, and I will not take the status quo happily, I will come to you, and I will complain to you, and I'll go through the mess, I'll go through all that, because, because he loves God.

Look at these questions again, he's saying, is your steadfast love declared in the grave? Are your wonders known in the darkness? Even though it's coming out very angrily, what he's ultimately saying is, God, I want to know your steadfast love, I want to declare your goodness again.

These words that seem so angry are the best Haman has right now, he doesn't have the strength to try to put on a happy face, he's being real knowing that our God is a God not easily offended, he's confronting God knowing that God is the one in control, your sovereign God, and he's confronting him and questioning him, expressing hope for reconciliation with God, a desire to be close with God again.

[14 : 42] Notice that he's praying day and night, he's not, he will not be silenced, he will not take the separation, he will fight for being reconciled with God.

Now as he continues from these questions, verse 16, the psalm wraps up, your wrath has swept over me, your dreadful assaults destroy me, they surround me like a flood all day long, they close in on me together, you have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me, my companions have become darkness.

The final word is darkness, and unlike these other psalms we have in the Bible, from beginning to end, the psalm is dark, with the very last word being darkness.

That's no mistake, it's intentional, darkness. And this feature of the psalm which makes it an anomaly and makes it so disconcerting at first, I think is one of the most precious features of the psalm.

Because one of the darkest things about going through darkness is that feeling that the darkness is going on too long. say you're going through a time that you feel so dark inside, and you go for a jog through your head, and you come back home, it's still dark, you're still feeling turmoil inside, and so you go and you hang out with positive people, encouraging people, people of God, and even in the midst of being with these people, and they're such wonderful people, inside you still feel so isolated, so alone.

[16 : 15] You go to church, or maybe you go to your own bedroom for devotions, and you go through the right things, you worship God, you sing songs of worship, you say prayers of gratitude, you read the Bible, you're doing all the right stuff, yet the darkness remains.

So often, as you already know, so often you have the darkness and the trauma that you're going through, and then you have this added darkness that you're going through darkness, like this guilt, I shouldn't be going through darkness, I'm a Christian, I should be a happy person, and so it's this added darkness upon darkness.

Psalm 88 is a gift to us because it shows us that the children of God do go through dark times. Haman was one of the worship leaders in the temple. He's one of the priests whose job it was to lead the nation of God in worship.

This is a man who knows God, and he wrote a lot of other psalms too, he knows God, and yet his darkness extends so long that his prayer begins and ends in a place of darkness.

Again, this isn't the only psalm he wrote, but in this prayer, in this song, from beginning to end, there's darkness. And so I want to encourage you, my brothers and sisters in the Lord, that when you're going through darkness, whether that's now or in the future, or if you're walking with a friend through a dark time, that God understands that he's included this prayer, this song in the Bible, Psalm 88, on purpose, to let us know in part, that sometimes our prayers will end where we're still in a place of frustration, and God gets that.

[17 : 51] God understands that. God is okay with that, that he's for us. Now, as we're wrestling through these words, one of the things we must ask ourselves is, are these words expressing an objective truth or a subjective truth?

When Haman is saying to God, my companions have become darkness. Darkness is a better friend than you, God. When he's saying these things, is it true? Is he really, really alone?

Or is this just an expression of how he's feeling? To answer that question, we must look at the whole Bible, the whole canon of scripture, and what we see is that we know that God has said in various passages that he's with us in our brokenness, that he is near the brokenhearted, that he'll never leave us nor forsake us.

We know that God is a better friend than darkness, that darkness will never actually be our closest friend. And the primary way we know that is something that Haman would have only ever seen in part, and that is that these words he says about darkness being his closest friend are actually true, objectively true for someone else.

That was Jesus. We see in Matthew 27, as the crucifixion is taking place, darkness descending on the whole earth. And Jesus experiences this darkness and isolation that no one else will ever fully experience.

[19 : 12] That Jesus on the cross, as the world became actually dark, there was more than just a lack of light, though that was also present, and that was dark. But that he experienced the full and complete wrath of God.

Full and complete isolation and darkness. darkness as he took and conquered death with his own body. And as Jesus in Matthew 26 is in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the darkness is descending on him, and he knows what's about to happen, and he's praying earnestly and struggling and even sweating blood, he says, not my will but yours be done.

And if Jesus would not abandon us in his time of objective darkness, of utter and complete darkness, then you and I can have confidence that even in those seasons where life seems so dark, and it will feel so dark, you and I can know objectively that he will not abandon us in our darkness.

If Jesus did not abandon us in his complete and utter darkness, he will not abandon us in our partial darkness. He will be faithful. Haman the Ezraite, even as his words are so dark and so brooding and so angry, is crying out day and night to God, saying, God of my salvation.

In doing so, in lamenting to him, he's saying, God, you're my hope. I want out. I want this to be dealt with. He's crying out. And he counters a reality of God, which I think is best expressed by C.S.

[20 : 45] Lewis and the Magician's Nephews. Two weeks ago, I read, I've been preparing the sermon, and I was reading through the Magician's Nephew with my little sister, Abby. The Magician's Nephew, one of the Chronicles of Narnia, begins with the little boy, Diggory, crying, in C.S.

Lewis' words, blubbering, because his mother is sick and dying. And isn't it true that for a lot of us, at times, the greatest darkness will be not only our own pain, but the pain of someone we love, out of our control.

So he's crying. By the time you get to the 12th chapter, a lot has already happened, and his mother is still sick. The darkness seems even darker, if that's possible. And Diggory is standing before the lion, Aslan, who in these books represents Jesus, and he's been looking down, and he's silent.

And then finally, he opens his mouth, and he speaks to the lion, to Aslan. And this is what he says. He, Diggory, thought of his mother, and he thought of the great hopes he had had and how they were all dying away.

And a lump came in his throat, and tears in his eyes, and he blurted out, But please, please, won't you? Can't you? Give me something that will cure mother. Up till then, he had been looking at the lion's great feet and the huge claws on them.

[21 : 54] Now, in his despair, he looked up at its face. What he saw surprised him as much as anything in his whole life, for the tawny face was bent down near his own. And wonder of wonders, the great, shining tears stood in the lion's eyes.

Diggory's darkness did not evaporate when he saw the tears of the lion. But something did change. He knew that he was no longer alone. And there's something about when you're silent and you're looking down.

When you cry out to someone for help, you instinctively look at their face. Haman the Ezraite, unlike my neighbor, refused to grow silent in his despair.

But he, knowing our God is not a God who is easily offended, knowing that God is the one who is in control and that his darkness is ultimately on God who's sovereign, expressing to him as a worship that he wanted reconciliation, even though it was angry prayer, knowing that the darkness may last longer than a psalm or a prayer.

He's crying out to God. And he knows, as it says in verse one, that God, you're the God of my salvation. He's looking to him knowing that God is the one who saves.

[23 : 09] A couple of years ago, a friend of mine was horrifically abused. She was sexually abused. And I remember being in my bedroom praying. I was praying a Psalm 88 type prayer, angry, brooding, dark prayer.

I was saying, God, like, I wish I could have been there to fight away, to fight away the rapist. I wish I could have been there. And even if I couldn't have fought him away, like, I wish that I at least could have taken the rape in my flesh, that it would have been me and not my friend.

I was so frustrated. As I prayed, I remembered one of the names of God, Emmanuel, God with us. And you'd think that'd be comforting, but actually in this context, it was not comforting.

My prayers turned even more confrontational. God, you're with us. You're with me. You were with her. You were there. What on earth were you doing? Like, what on earth were you doing that you would be there and this would still happen?

Psalm 88, confrontational prayer. And then in God's mercy, he brought me to Isaiah 53, which says, by his wounds, we are healed.

[24 : 17] And that day in my bedroom, my view of the cross expanded. My view of what Jesus did on the cross became more complete. You and I both know that on the cross, Jesus took the punishment for our sins.

But Jesus did more than that on the cross. He took our woundedness in his flesh. What I came to see that day is that that Jesus did for my friend what I had wished I could have done.

That he took her woundedness. He took the rape in his flesh. And that doesn't mean that my friend wasn't hurt. My friend was hurt.

But Jesus took that hurt in himself, which means that darkness no longer has the final word. That woundedness no longer has the final word. That our brokenness no longer has the final word. Because Jesus has taken it, and he's overcome it on the cross, in his death, and in his resurrection.

And so you and I can have the confidence, as a result, that when we're going through broken times, and we're going through darkness, that Jesus has actually taken it, that he's with us, and he's overcome it.

[25 : 23] When it says that his name is Emmanuel, God with us, it doesn't mean like when someone's talking to you, and you're talking to someone, and they say, I'm with you. It means that they understand what you're saying.

Maybe they have sympathy for what you're saying. When the scriptures tell us that God is with us, it doesn't just mean that he understands, or that he gets it, or that he has sympathy. It means he's with us. That he's in the chaos, and the darkness, and the madness with us.

And so we can have the freedom to pray these very raw prayers. And our prayers don't always need to end happy-clappy, like a lot of prayers do. They can actually end even with the word darkness, as Psalm 88 does.

But we can have the confidence that Haman had, that God is the God of our salvation, and that he's with us in the chaos. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, nothing, nothing can separate us from God.

We can have that confidence. And you'll find that as you cry out to God, that like diggory, it doesn't mean that darkness will disappear right away, but that you will encounter the tears of God. You may not be able to feel it right away, but that God's with you in it.

[26 : 26] And that's an objective truth. I was sitting there with my friend at the coffee shop, and we wrestled through these truths from Psalm 88. And as we wrapped up, I got to have the privilege of hearing my friend, my neighbor, pray for the first time in a whole bunch of months, maybe even a few years.

It was a real, it was a raw, it was an uncomfortable prayer. But it was grounded on the reality that God is not easily offended. It was grounded on the reality that God is the one who's ultimately in control, and so he brought his pain to God, saying, God, you're the one who's sovereign, and I'm going through this, and I don't understand how if you're king and you're good, I can go through this, but God, I'm looking to you.

And in doing so, he was expressing hope for reconciliation with God. I got to sit there and witness it. And he understood that just because he is praying that the darkness might continue longer than he wants it to, but just because he's praying that might not change that right away, but that's okay.

But I also got to see in my friend's own face and hear in his own words that he understood once again that God is the God of his salvation, that God is with him in it, that he's with us in it, that darkness is no longer the final word, that the final word is Jesus.

Jesus, would you stand with me in prayer? Heavenly Father, I stand before you right now feeling like diggory before the lion, saying, can't you, won't you give me something to help my friends?

[28 : 02] Lord, would you be with us and our loved ones in our darkness? Would your presence be with us in a tangible way? Would you show us that you are God who's with us, Emmanuel?

Lord, would you do more than that? Do more than just be with us in our darkness. Lord, lead us out of the darkness into your glorious light, that we might again be able to declare your praise and your steadfast love.

We want to know you evermore completely. Lord, would you help those of us who have conversations we need to have with you and share prayers and parts of our lives with you that we are, that we're shying away from because it's uncomfortable, because we're afraid those prayers might come out angry.

Help us to go there with you, being real, being honest with you, because you are in control. You are sovereign. You are the God of our salvation.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.