

A Psalm for Difficult Times

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[0 : 01] Well, please turn back to Psalm 88, and there should be an outline in the newsletter as well, just a simple one to help you follow along. Well, I know that not every one of you were able to get to the camp over the weekend, but our speaker, Pete Sorensen, spoke to us on the theme of Christian hope.

And yesterday afternoon, we had a chance to have a seminar. Sandra, Pete, and myself, Sandra Joint, were leading a seminar on the topic of depression and anxiety, and how to retain hope in the time of suffering.

One of the things we mentioned was how God's Word, and the Psalms in particular, continue to be a helpful resource for us, spiritual resource during such times.

So just as a doctor may prescribe medication, pastors or Bible teachers like me can prescribe the Psalms. And one of the more intriguing Psalms is this one that we're going to look at, Psalm 88.

Now, it may be that when you heard it just read, that you were struck by just how unusual it was. Most Psalms, even those which are called Psalms of lament, offer some hope in the end.

[1 : 23] But there doesn't seem to be any of this in Psalm 88. In fact, the last word there is something about death being my darkest friend or something. And at first, it only appears that, as you look at it, all it gives you is unrelenting doom and gloom.

Where is the comfort, you might ask? Well, if that's what you think, then I invite you to listen along, because I believe that, as with all of God's Word, it has a purpose to help us in Christian life.

Because it may appear, although it may appear that God is silent, and all we hear is the Psalmist's lonely voice, that God still has a Word for us.

Well, what might God then be telling us through this Psalm, even in the seeming silence? Well, firstly, I think we know from here that God is sovereign and in control.

As we read, the Psalmist certainly doesn't feel that way, but that's precisely the point. When things are going really bad, it seems like everything is going out of control.

[2 : 32] So, the truth that the Psalmist draws on is that God is sovereign, that somehow he's still in control. It's really the essence of faith, a drawing from his own deep-seated convictions that despite how he's feeling, despite what his eyes may be seeing around him, God is still in control.

So, that's how the Psalmist begins, on the premise that God is in control. He's sovereign. Lord, you are the God who saves me. Day and night I cry out to you.

May my prayer come before you. Turn your ear to my cry. God, despite what is going on, you are my source of salvation.

He's determined not to look anywhere else. He'll continue to plead for God to act, to hear. He'll not turn away from God.

And this is the vein in which he continues throughout the Psalm. In verse 9, in verse 13, again and again he says he'll keep crying to the Lord.

[3 : 43] He even dares to lay the cause of his trouble at God's feet. So, in verse 5, 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.

You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily on me. You have overwhelmed me with your ways. You have taken me from my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them.

I am confirmed and cannot escape. My eyes are dimmed with grief. And then right at the end of verse 16, he says again, 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 from me friend and neighbor. Darkness is my closest friend.

The Psalmist says God's hand is ultimately behind all that occurs, even in his woes. Now, it could simply be that he's not thinking clearly at this point and who can blame him.

[4 : 51] But I think the Psalmist is actually right in what he says. Because if God is sovereign and if God is the one in control, then he must be the one that has ordained all that happens in life.

That's the very definition of sovereignty, isn't it? He's not accusing God of being evil, even if his troubles arise from it. Let's be clear. But he understands that whatever happens, whether good or bad, God must be behind it in order for him to be sovereign.

And for me, this truth is actually a greater comfort in times of trouble than to think that there is no God, or to think that if he's there, he's not in control.

Because if God isn't in control, then how can he save? Then why pray to him at all? Why cry out if he's unable to rescue us? And so the Psalmist manages to hold both of these realities together.

Bad things can happen in life, and yet God is still in control. And that gives him hope, doesn't it? That no matter how bad things may seem right now, God, who is good and sovereign, will do what is right eventually.

[6 : 16] But of course, knowing that God is in control doesn't prevent the Psalmist from going through the trials in life, or experiencing the depth of emotion that he writes about here.

So take verses 3 and 4, for example, and see just how deeply he feeds these things. I'm overwhelmed with troubles, he says, and my life draws near to death.

I am counted among those who go down to the pit. I am like one without strength. I am counted among those who go down to the pit. I am like one without strength.

Later on in verse 10, he is seen to rationalize with God. Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do their spirits 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? Come on, God, he is saying. You don't want me dead, because if I am dead, I can't praise you.

[7 : 20] There is some logic to that, isn't there? And finally, in verse 14, he gets closest to an accusation of God. He says, Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

Now, I don't know about you, but if you've gone through tough times, then these will probably be quite familiar thoughts and feelings to you. You often do, don't you?

Bargain with God. You try to think your way out of your troubles. And those feelings, when they come, they just seem so overwhelming and uncontrollable.

Well, I think the fact that they're actually here in the Bible, these very feelings and thoughts, I think that's God's way of acknowledging them when you go through them.

God is saying, It's okay to feel and think like that. It may not always reflect the truth, but God's not particularly bothered by it. There's no sense in which God is saying, How dare you feel that?

[8 : 22] How dare you think like that? Rather, because the words are here, it's an acknowledgement that He knows that we are human, that we're frail.

God is big enough to handle our frustrations and our anger and our thoughts. Which means, if you ever feel like that or think like that, then, actually, it's okay to bring it to God in prayer.

I mean, this psalmist's prayers in it and you hear these very words come from this psalmist who's struggling. It's okay to be brutally honest with God. In fact, if you're lost for words, God has even given you this psalm as a resource to pray to Him.

You can use the very words that the psalmist used back at God and He's okay with that. And in fact, Jesus did the same thing, not with Psalm 88, but if you recall Him on the cross, He cried out, My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

And that's from Psalm 22. So Jesus uses the psalm to quote it back to God. And so we can too as well. We can use Psalm 88 when we're really down in the dumps and we don't know whether we've got the right words.

[9 : 39] Well, pick up Psalm 88 and cry out to God with it. So I think this psalm gives us not just permission to cry out to God to express freely how we are feeling and thinking, no matter how outrageous it may seem.

I think He might even encourage us to do so. That in times of great difficulty, God is saying, please turn to me, pray to me, cry out to me, tell me exactly how you feel.

I know already, but express it to me. I would love to hear you say it. And praying and crying to God is actually an act of faith, isn't it?

Even though the words may be really strong, but when we're turning to God, that is an act of faith because we're ultimately trying to trust in Him. It's an act of dependence on Him.

It's a plea for help from Him. And we can be sure that God does hear us. Even if He might not say much in the circumstances.

[10 : 43] Why am I confident of that? Again, because this psalm is preserved for us in His Word, His Holy Word. This is not some lament that sits outside the Bible, which is a cry of, you know, perhaps vain hope.

No, these very words here are God-breathed. They're in the Bible. This psalm is authoritative, if you like, because it's God's Word.

And I think the fact that the psalm itself gives no immediate relief, because it would have been very easy for God to attack, you know, a last verse at the end, I've heard you, or whatever, just to make you feel better.

But no, there's no such assurance, is there? Yeah? No assurance that God would come to the rescue. But the fact that it's structured like that, I think shows us that if that's the same thing that you're going through in life, then it's not a sign that God has forgotten you.

If the psalmist can cry out of Psalm 88, and yet that doesn't seem to be a word from God, and yet this whole psalm is in the Bible, shows us that, no, God has actually heard us, even though He may not have spoken just yet.

[11 : 58] So here's a psalmist, actually at the very top it says his name is Haman. Haman is a psalmist that believes that God is sovereign, and therefore cries out to God independence.

In fact, is inspired by God to record his own desperate plea in the Bible, and yet hasn't heard from God as yet by the time this psalm is written and preserved for us in the Bible.

All of that says that if you go through that, then it's normal. That if you're a Christian, and that is your experience, then it's a normal thing for God's people to go through.

So if you're going through depression or anxiety, any other form of suffering at the moment, don't think that it's because you lack faith that God hasn't answered. Don't think it's because God doesn't love you or He's punishing you that you haven't heard from Him.

He may not choose to act right at the moment, and He will have His reasons, but you can be assured that He's heard you, and He knows that your cry has not fallen on deaf ears.

[13 : 12] Now, of course, I do say that that's where the psalm ends. You know, darkness is my closest friend, but what is even more comforting for us is that Psalm 88 is not the only word from God on this matter, is it?

Yes, Psalm 88 is there to normalize our experiences in suffering, but Psalm 88 sits in the whole of the Psalter, and the Psalter itself sits in the whole of the Bible, doesn't it?

And so we have the rest of the Bible to give context to this particular psalm, and what the rest of the Bible says is that Psalm 88 may be one aspect of what we go through in life, but it is not all of what God has to say on suffering.

And indeed, when we come to the New Testament and when we come to the revelation of Jesus, that puts our suffering in its widest context, and we understand fully, not maybe not fully, but as fully as God has revealed to us why and how we're going through suffering.

So God may not have answered the psalmist directly in Psalm 88, but if we turn to the rest of the Bible and into the New Testament in general, and look at Jesus in particular, we find God's answer to the questions that Psalm 88 raises.

[14 : 32] So the psalmist cries out in hope in verse 1, Lord, you are the God who saves me. And how does God answer in the rest of the Bible? Yes, I will save you in Christ.

Verse 2, May my prayer come before you, the psalmist requests, turn your ear to my cry. Well, God's answer is, yes, I will hear you in Christ Jesus.

In fact, when we look at that other reading today in Romans 8, God does more than that, isn't it? In verse 26, we read that in the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes us through wordless groans.

In other words, God doesn't just hear our prayers in Christ, but he sends us his Spirit himself to pray for us, to intercede on our behalf when we are lost for words.

You may not realize this, but in those difficult times when you can even barely find the words to pray, God is with us by his Spirit to intercede for you as you look to him.

[15 : 41] And those words that you sort of can't even say are actually the very prayers that the Spirit answers on our behalf. And in Christ, we also know that there is certain hope of deliverance because in Christ, God has saved us from sin.

God has assured us that his Son's resurrection, resurrected life, will be given to us so that we will not be left in the lowest pit as the Psalmist had wandered, nor will we remain in the place of darkness forever, nor will we be in the land of Oblivion.

We may yet have to endure just a little while longer because of this fallen world, but God has not abandoned us to the grave. A day is coming when we will rise up in glory, as those of us who are at the camp have been listening and reflecting on us at that certainty, the security of the resurrection hope.

But the main point then is to hold on to that, stand firm, not settle for anything less as we heard, and put our faith in Jesus, to be patient through suffering and not give up on God.

The Psalmist in this Psalm didn't give up on God, did he? Even though he was right at the end of his tether. And so neither should we. In some ways, we actually have more resources than he did, didn't we?

[17 : 09] We know more because we know of his son, God's son, Jesus. And we know of God's great love for us through the son. And we know what the final goal is more than what the Psalmist did.

I don't know about you, but I sometimes find myself in a situation where I regret just not waiting long enough. I'm just too impatient and I give up just before I get what I want.

And the biggest regrets are always when I quit at that point that if I had just waited one more minute, I would have gotten what I want. For example, like waiting for a table at a popular restaurant.

You know, the ones that are so popular they don't take bookings so you have to line up outside in the cold and the line barely seems to move and you're hungry. nearly an hour.

I remember one time when we first got to London and we moved there that was this famous roast duck restaurant. Four Seasons it was called in base water. Doesn't take bookings and our friend said, oh, you've got to have it.

[18 : 19] And so we were standing out there for two hours and, you know, it was just so tempting, wasn't it? But imagine if I'd just given up just before I would have gotten that table.

And that's the point with our life, isn't it? That sometimes in the temptations that we face, we are tempted to give up on life.

We're tempted to give up on God in the midst of our trials. That we've pried day and night to God and it just seems that He doesn't hear. And you feel like, I don't think I can do this anymore.

I just can't keep prying. God, you're not answering. Well, the words of Psalm 88 comforts us to know that God hears and so we shouldn't give up.

We may think it's a long while more, but actually, the time of God's rescue, well, God has already rescued us in Christ, but the time of God's rescue is actually very near.

[19 : 23] Nearer than we think. And so it's okay to keep pouring out our grief and anger and disappointments to God, but let's not give up because the day of rescue, when He comes to save us, when Christ returns, is very near.

Let's pray. Father, we pray for those who are really struggling in life at the moment and they might not even be with us. those who aren't able to shake off feelings of anxiety or depression, who can't seem to overcome one obstacle upon other in life.

Father, as we read this psalm tonight, may you help us, may you help them to know that you have heard our cries. That even if their cries don't amount to anything meaningful or coherent, that your Spirit is with us, interceding for us through the tears and the groans, through the pain and the heartache, that your Son, Jesus, went through all of this and more for our sake to save us not just from this present ordeal, but from the ultimate threat of death and eternal separation from you.

comfort us in that knowledge and give us the strength to persevere with faith. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.