

Crying to God in the Dark

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Preacher: Caleb Maloney

[0:00] For those of you who don't know me, my name is Caleb Maloney. I'm a member here at Shoreline. I was asked amongst a group of many other men to help out this summer in preaching through the Psalms.

And so this morning's psalm, this morning's text is going to be Psalm 88. So I feel like I had something I wanted to say, but it completely left my mind.

So forgive me if some of this is a little bit choppy. I don't do this very often. However, this psalm was really speaking to me as I was dwelling upon it and working through the sermon.

And honestly, this morning, I hope I can even just express 10% of the emotions that are expressed through this psalm. And at the end of the day, it's the spirit that goes out and does the work. So I certainly hope we can express that to you guys this morning.

So Psalm 88, we titled it this morning, Crying to God in the Dark. Living in this fallen world, suffering is an unfortunate inevitability. Since the fall of Adam and Eve, hardships, disease, pain, and even death have become a staple part of the human experience.

[1:24] So when we as Christians endure suffering, how do we do it? Or first, more specifically, what causes us to go through suffering? There are a whole host of things in our lives that can cause us to experience suffering.

We can have relational issues with friends or family. Husbands and wives can get stuck in the same patterns day by day, become resentful, unfulfilled, and even hurt their spouse. Tough, grueling work, or tight finances, wondering when the next paycheck is going to come.

Christians can experience religious persecution, both overt and secretive. Other people can experience great oppression or abuse. Suffering can also look like the death of a loved one.

A person can be suffering from significant sickness or disease that can last many months or even years. Then, some people, more than many might realize, are quietly suffering from things like chronic pain, waking up each morning and wondering if you can even get out of bed.

Unfortunately, this only scratches the surface in ways in which we can suffer and experience hardships in our lives. When we go through these things, how does it make us feel? At the very least, it can make us feel inconvenienced.

[2:37] Taking the situation and avoiding it, or thinking we just don't have time for this today. We often feel tired, exhausted, worn out from the mental and physical toll that the suffering can cause, especially when it seems to be a daily occurrence.

Deep, prolonged suffering inevitably affects all of us. Then, maybe it transforms into anger. Angry at the world. Angry at those around us. Angry at God, even.

Angry at whatever we see as the cause of our suffering. Or, suffering can turn into deep sadness. Going home after a long day and just crying into your pillow because we don't want anyone to see the toll it takes on our lives.

Or, it paralyzing us because we just don't have the strength to continue. However it makes somebody feel, sometimes we can find ways to make it through the suffering.

Sometimes we manage to make our own way through. Or, pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, as they say. Other times, someone can come alongside us who understands the suffering, or has suffered in the same way, and can help shoulder that burden.

[3:43] When people suffer together, they can grow closer. Walking with one another in our suffering often does wonders for our relationships and with each other. And for Christians, it can bring us closer to God.

Suffering can be deeply sanctifying when viewed through the proper lens. Yet, sometimes we lose sight of these things. And it feels as if we're going through it all alone.

There's no one around to help us in our time of need who could possibly understand what we're going through. We may feel isolated and alone. Even if we do reach out, no one's going to hear our cry.

As our suffering continues, we will fall into despair. There's no way forward, no way up, no way out. The suffering is unavoidable, and it can just wear down on us to our very core.

Possibly, a person can even feel like they don't deserve relief from their pain. Maybe we did something wrong and has been brought upon ourselves. These unhealthy thoughts can start to absorb us and are really difficult to navigate.

[4:45] Working through these feelings alone, without God, can be almost impossible. And it's how many people, even mature Christians, can become lost within their suffering.

With all this right now, I'm building to ask the question, when we suffer, are we doing it well? Are we losing our upward focus on God as our refuge during these times?

When we are brought to the point where it feels like God and everyone else has abandoned us, what do we do? Today's psalm gives us the path to walk on, perhaps even crawl on, when we are lost in the darkness.

Psalm 88 is a practice in these feelings, and how we can reach out to the Lord, even when we feel alone, abandoned, and like there's no way out. Psalm 88 is here, I believe, to help us process the pain and sorrow that comes with suffering.

Psalm 88 is possibly the darkest of all the psalms. It dwells within the deep, dark emotions of the human heart, and the psalmist laments in his suffering and wonders why the Lord has allowed this to occur.

[5:52] He's writing with the emotion that we often feel we may not be allowed to feel. And he puts them out on display within the context of worship. As we work through this passage, I want us to sit in this depressing, dark emotion that can point us towards the light in a very unexpected way.

The author of Psalm 88 is Haim and the Ezraite. He was a Levite, appointed to the lofty position of worship within the Jewish temple. And he is also referenced in 1 Kings as somewhat of great wisdom of his time.

Being in such a high position within the Levitical hierarchy, he was led by the Spirit at some point to pen what is now psalm-y-new. In practice, psalms were memorialized in scripture and tradition to be performed.

They were a public act of worship for the Jewish nation. And for modern Christians, they're often a way to worship the Lord and keep our focus on all he has done for us. Haim clearly experienced such significant suffering at some point that he wrote a psalm of women that dwells within the doldrums of human emotion and questioning through his name.

As we actually open up into Psalm 88, the passage can be broken up into three types of expression. You have the situation, you have the questioning, and you have the cause.

[7:11] This first type of expression, the situation. The situation type of expression throughout the psalm sets the tone for what the psalmist is dealing with. The situation verses create the foundation of the feelings he is processing.

He makes his current status known to the Lord, and he gives insight into why he's feeling the way he does. The first scene we see here is he is crying out and reaching out to the Lord.

Verse 1 says, His current situation constitutes the need to seek the Lord in his suffering.

Haim is starting his worship and his prayer by seeking God. Verse 9 then says, Haim is repeatedly highlighting that he is calling out to the Lord within his suffering.

In this case, the language of crying out expresses his emotion with his entire body. When you picture crying out, picture the whole body is tensing up. Maybe you scream out to the point of losing your breath.

[8:29] Often tears may be straining down your face. As a matter of fact, the Hebrew word that's used here, *rinah*, depicts a deeply piercing shout. If you were to hear somebody expressing this, it would likely make you,

the observer, uncomfortable.

Not only is he crying out, but he also seems to be doing so without stopping. Verse 1 is saying, Day and night, in verse 9 it says, Every day. And then verse 13 it says, In the morning.

Though the psalmist's suffering may seem unending, He chooses not to shy for the Lord and continuously calls out for the Lord that he sees as his only salvation, as is highlighted in verse 1. Next, he's describing the nature of his suffering. He states that his life is headed towards Sheol, that he is the one who goes down to the pit, and then that he is like the slain who lied in the grave. Haman is suffering to the extent that death seems inevitable. In verse 15, he's even directly saying, Afflicted and close to death from my youth up. And then lastly, he's expressing his feeling of, My beloved and my friend shunned me.

[9:42] My companions have become darkness. He has been cut off from those around him, so much so that anyone close to him will not have contact with him. He is alone, isolated, and without help it would seem.

These call-outs are deep and depressing. How bad could his situation be that this is how he prays to the Lord and cries out with his entire being?

Do we actually know what his suffering was? We're not entirely sure. But he could have been suffering from some form of chronic, contagious disease, such as leprosy.

Leprosy in ancient times was a terrible affliction. Highly contagious. The sufferer would be exiled from the community, and they would often suffer for years or even decades before the inevitable death.

However, since the psalm is meant to be sung in corporate worship, the allusion to his suffering seems to be intentionally vague. At the time of writing, the context of his suffering may have been understood by those around him.

[10:44] But after his time, the psalm would serve a different purpose. It is a great expression of the depths of human emotion in our suffering as we reach out to God. As the psalmist describes his suffering, he's opening up into the questioning of the Lord.

With the expressions of the questioning, the psalmist reaches out and questions God. He wonders the common, Why me, Lord? In verse 14, it says, O Lord, why do you cast my soul away?

Why do you hide your face from me? When we suffer, this is very often one of the first questions we ask. What about us have we done to deserve the situation? These questions often come from a place of denial, that we don't believe our suffering is justified.

In verses 10 through 12, he described, he questioned even further. 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? These are all statements questioning and begging God that if the psalmist were to pass away right now, how can they praise the Lord if he's dead?

[12:02] He does not ask these questions thinking that the Lord does not hold the answer. He is asking the questions weighing on his soul. He's wondering why God would allow him to suffer and die in this way.

He asks from the perception that God has withdrawn his presence from him, a feeling of emptiness in the midst of feeling suffering and despair. These questions parallel with Job.

Throughout the book of Job, while Job never loses faith, he questions his situation. He questions what he did to deserve his suffering, and even considers should he have been born at all.

He eventually reaches out begging the Lord to answer him. Lastly, we have the cause. The cause is the third form of expression in this psalm, and it shines a spotlight on the sovereignty of God in all situations, in spite of anything we may think or desire.

This includes all of our suffering. The cause of his suffering is displayed in a multitude of verses. It's displayed in verses 6, 7, 8, the second half of 15, and verses 16 through 18.

[13:07] Ultimately, he states that the cause of his suffering is God. The phrase is like, you have in your wrath, don't leave any question. After he states that he is counted among those who go down to the pit, he says, you have put me in the depths of the pit.

Then he says, your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with your ways. He places the Lord right in the middle of his suffering. For Haman, the cause of his suffering is without question.

The other suffering that he attributes to the Lord is that his companions are shutting him. In verse 8, they say, you have caused my companions to shun me. You have made me a horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape.

Not only have those around him left you to whatever ailment he is suffering from, he is stating up front that the Lord is the reason why they are leaving him. How often have we done this?

How often have you looked up and said, Lord, it is your fault I am suffering in this way. Maybe some of you, by God's grace, have not really done this. Or maybe some of you have done this more than we like to admit.

[14:24] I need to be clear here though. Haman is not yelling out in vindictive anger towards the Lord. Yes, he is lamenting towards the Lord. He is complaining about his current suffering. Yet he is crying out with the understanding that no matter the tangible cause of his suffering right now may be, God is still in control of all things.

So this begs the question, is God truly the cause of our suffering? Is God the cause of Haman's suffering? Is he the cause of our suffering?

The simple answer is yes. God is sovereign over all situations in all creation. God may not be the direct, primary cause of our suffering in our lives, but he lords over all of it.

God both allows the suffering to take place, and he is ultimately the one who provides the way of life. Once again, one of the best examples, in direct parallels to Psalm 88, is going to be found in Job.

In Job 1, verses 1-12, God is setting the stage for Job's suffering, and that while God is not stretching his hand out to be the actual cause of Job's future suffering, Satan must work within God's permitted authority.

[15:39] After God praises Job for being a faithful follower, God allows Satan to cause Job's suffering. And then later in Job, even Job says, Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?

In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind. There is no doubt in Job's mind that everything is in the hand of the Lord, both the suffering and the salvation, both the justice and mercy for God's to give.

And later on, for us, in the New Testament, you have Ephesians 1-11, and it says, In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.

It's very clear here. It says all things. It does not say some things. It does not say only the things he chooses. It's the Bible says, all things are in God's control and under his sovereignty.

So yes, ultimately, this includes our suffering. In Psalm 88, we're having the context of the psalmist's suffering. He's reaching out and questioning why should he be the one to deserve this and why God has pulled his presence from him.

[17:04] Then he calls out and laments the fact that God is the cause of all his suffering. Going so far as to say, God's wrath, his terrors, and his assaults are upon him. And then once again to read in verse 18, he's saying, You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me.

My companions have become darkness. This is some dark and depressing language. It shows no clear resolution to the suffering or glimmer of hope in the distance, at least not on the surface.

By now, you may be wondering where the resolution of this psalm is. When compared to all other works in the psalms, it is the only one that does not directly show praise to the Lord.

Hope in God is our refuge. He who delivers us from our suffering and shall be praised and thanked for all that he has done. It ends stating that God is the cause of the psalmist being outcast and isolated from those around him.

As I like to say, it's not tied up with a pretty bow that makes us feel uplifted and better than when we started reading it. Once again, all psalms do this in some capacity.

[18:13] A few years ago now, I preached on Psalm 73. Asaph, the psalmist, is lamenting the prosperity of the wicked and how he feels hopeless in spite of his own integrity.

However, he says, my flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and portion forever. Those who are far from you will perish. You will destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the sovereign Lord my refuge. I will tell of all your deeds. It's ending with a picture of beautiful hope we have through God. He will see us through all things, and we should tell others of those things. In comparison, Psalm 88 seems unresolved. It just sits in the pit of these dark emotions. It makes a home there. And when we read this passage with intentionality, not passing over it during our daily Bible readings, it should make us feel uncomfortable. Maybe we start dwelling on our own suffering at that time.

[19:19] What is making us experience some of these same emotions? We can start thinking why God would include this psalm as a part of Scripture. Without a clear picture of hope and praise, does Psalm 88 feel incomplete?

One text I read alluded to the idea of maybe there is an unwritten response out there to Psalm 88. Since this was a performance, this was a form of worship, maybe there was a second half, there was a call and a response form of worship going on that would have answered some of these questions.

There we go. But at the end of the day, all of that is just speculation.

We don't have this common response depicted to us in Scripture. What God has provided for us is Psalm 88 verses 1 through 18. There's no secondary response.

There's no proclamation of hope. And if God had desired for that to be included, it would be there. Psalm 88, as it is written, is here to teach us something. Something about ourselves and how we should approach God.

[20:32] And with that, what is Psalm 88 even here to teach us? What are we supposed to learn from the fact that this passage has been included in thousands of years of tradition? At its heart, Psalm 88 is a practice in deep honesty with ourselves.

When we approach God with our sufferings, with our troubles, with our trials, we need not have a filter with the Lord. We must not exclude aspects of ourselves that contain momentary questions about God's plan, about why we are suffering in the moment.

God is inviting us to pour ourselves out completely before Him. That He already knows what's on our hearts and what's on our minds. So why would we edit ourselves before the Lord?

We already read it this morning, as a matter of fact, but in Psalm 139 verses 1 through 2, it says clearly, O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit and when I rise. You understand my thoughts from afar. Knowing this, you can lay out your feelings completely before the Lord. Another thing we can often do, both personally and corporately with each other, is we often cater our prayers to what we think should be said at the time.

[21:42] We're masking our feelings under the guise of what we think our struggles should be presented as before the Lord. Oftentimes, we are either afraid or ashamed to be open and honest about our feelings.

In spite of all this, we as humans are going to experience these emotions. These thoughts and these feelings, these doubts and questions are unavoidable even to the most mature Christians, particularly in times of suffering and lament.

For some, it's going to look like anger at those around us or at God. For some, it's going to look like tears of sadness until our eyes grow dry and weak. For some, they're going to moan and complain and wonder to the Lord, why would you cause me to suffer in this way?

We are going to suffer in ways that test our faith and our resolve or even test our desire to live and continue on. Throughout all of this, Psalm 88 is presented to us showing us that God is inviting us and imploring us to reach out to Him in this manner.

Because He already knows what is on our hearts and already knows the struggles that we are working through and already knows the plan that He has for our lives, He is asking us for complete and open honesty with Him in these moments.

[23:01] He wants us to reach out and ask for His salvation. The Psalm is written, it's evidence of God's mercy towards us that even as we cry out and question God's will, He has proven time and again that He is strong enough to handle our raw and honest emotions.

Once again, I ask you, do not filter your prayers before the Lord. As I touched on, as I touched on Haman's posture towards God, is one, as I touched on, Haman's posture towards God is one that we should mirror in these times.

This is not an excuse to lash out in anger or in bitterness towards God. Yes, God wants our complete and total honesty in these moments, but that's not to say we can just yell out at God in unrighteous anger at the moment of our suffering.

Psalm 88 is a practice in worshiping the Lord as we reach out to Him and ask for His love and His mercy for us to seek Him as our salvation. Throughout the entirety of Psalm 88, Haman is crying out in a complete, honest faith by bringing these things to God.

He makes it clear in verse 1, O Lord, God of my salvation, and then repeatedly the thought of I am crying out to You and crying out to the Lord.

[24:17] He is continually returning to God in spite of this feeling of a baby. So what are we to do when it feels like there is no resolution to our suffering? What should we as modern Christians do in response to these times of despair?

For us as modern Christians, we already have the ultimate response to our suffering in the world. God has already delivered our eternal salvation and hope to us. It has been provided to us in the form of Jesus.

Christ was sent as a direct response to our suffering and to the fall. Christ suffered tremendously during His time on earth. He experienced deep emotional pain that wrecked His body before the crucifixion.

In Luke 22, it says, In being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. This is even after He momentarily asked God to take His cup away from Him.

Jesus, while in private, is putting His full emotions on display. He is already suffering so greatly that His body is starting to show it to Him. Then later on in Matthew 27, He experiences the worst suffering there is.

[25:33] Christ literally cries, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus is experiencing the separation from God. He is bearing the sins of the whole world and the fullness of God's divine wrath upon sin.

He would experience this feeling until His death. The ultimate suffering is to experience the pain and death of this earthly body. Does this sound familiar?

Does not the author of Psalm 88 do the same thing? Why have you hidden your face from me, afflicted and close to death? Jesus, our perfect example, experiences this and then more.

Whether we are suffering from or in our sin or suffering as a result of the imperfect world, Jesus' death, His resurrection, and the delivering of the Holy Spirit are the answers to all of our suffering. we are still going to experience suffering that wears us down. Jesus tells us directly that we are going to suffer as Christians. Jesus is clear in John 16 when He says that we will experience the suffering in this world.

[26:40] We are going to experience suffering that even causes us to question God. We are allowed to feel this way. Lament should be a natural reaction to suffering. As a matter of fact, one in three of the Psalms is a Psalm of the man.

There is even an entire book in the Bible called Lamentations. Feeling sorrow and suffering is not a sin. What we as Christians need to remember is what comes after.

The other half of John 16, Jesus promises us that after sorrow comes joy. He is promising us that we can experience joy, such pure and ending joy.

How does this happen? It happens because of His resurrection and His future coming back. He promises eternal salvation for only the price of belief and repentance.

When we have hope in the eternal salvation through Christ, when we repent and turn to Him as our Savior and Lord, even when we don't see the resolution in this life, we know that Christ will set all things right for eternity for those who believe in Him.

[27:47] Amen. Honestly, in my preparation, in my study, in my review for this sermon, I was reading multiple commentaries, listening to multiple other people deliver talks on this particular song.

There was an interesting piece of literary history that I came upon that I think was fitting to touch on at the end. Yes. We all know the story of the girl that meets the prince and they fall in love and then they live happily ever after.

It's become a staple in fairy tale literature that all these events happen in the story and they put a nice tiny bone on the end of it and they live happily ever after. What I learned is where this phrase actually comes from.

The original phrase was adapted to these stories and many of us have forgotten where it actually came from. The earliest uses of the phrase, happily ever after. Don't say happily ever after.

It was a response between Christians to highlight the hope in eternity. In reality, the meaning within the original phrase was happy in the ever after. It was an expression of a Christian's eternal perspective and hope that comes only through salvation in Christ.

[29:04] I pray that you all will be happy in the ever after in spite of your suffering. So for all of us here, take time whether in private or in a group with a pastor or elder and bring your suffering before God.

As is often the phrase, lay it down before the foot of the cross. Jesus is inviting us to do this before him. He already sees our struggles and what's on our hearts. He wants us to meet him in our despair and lift us back up again until the day we join him in heaven where there will be no more tears or suffering.

As we bring it to the closing thought, I honestly have to credit my wife with this ending quote that I'm going to read off. As we were prepping and I'm bouncing ideas off of her, this particular hymn just kept coming to mind and I thought it was a fitting place to end the sermon.

It says, what a friend we have in Jesus. Oh, what peace we often forfeit. Oh, what needless pain we bear. All because we do not care everything to God in prayer.

Dear Lord, I just, I just thank you for today. First and foremost, Lord, I thank you for you. Thank you for this time and I just pray that in our time of need and our suffering that we are just pouring ourselves out in front of you.

[30:26] That we are opening up our deepest and darkest emotions in spite of any shame we may feel and that we present those things to you with the picture of the host that is in eternal salvation.

I thank you for Christ who experienced the ultimate suffering and then presented us the way out of our own suffering and I just pray that even when we feel alone and abandoned that we recognize that there is the Spirit, there is you, there is Christ, there are Christians around us that can shoulder these burdens with us that we are not truly alone in our suffering in spite of how long it takes us to process these feelings.

I just pray these things to you in our name. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Thank you for that, Caleb. What a good word for Psalm 88. And we now get to go to the Lord's Supper together as a body right now.

and I just want to quote on this song called Christ's Lower Still that I think captures the gospel truths that Caleb was just proclaiming towards the end of the sermon and here's how the chorus of this song goes.

[31:46] It says, Let the king descend, living word made flesh. Lift this heavy heart to your throne, O God. In your wounds I find room for all of mine when from grace I fell, Christ was lower still.

You know what? The psalmist of old could not