

Psalm 88

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[0:00] Let's pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable unto you.!

I know it's kind of hard to make this vibe shift right now in this service with so much joy and welcoming friends and connecting with each other. That's part of the beauty of this gift of the Psalms, is it does confront us with the realities of life.

The book of Psalms is like a collection of 150 songs, prayers, and poems graciously given to us in Holy Scripture. I love it because whenever you have to find it, it's always in the middle.

You know, you always open the Bible in the middle, you'll find the Psalms. And through this series, we've looked at Psalm 23. We found comfort in hearing, the Lord is my shepherd. And last week, we looked at strength in Psalm 46.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. But now, we enter into a prayer of lament in Psalm 88.

[1:23] Not just any lament, the lament of laments. And a lament, in a nutshell, is a crying out in a crisis. And here's the main idea. Psalm 88 is not a crisis of faith.

It's a crisis in faith. What it means is, it asks us the question, what does it look like to cling to and call out to God in the darkness?

To cling to and call out to God in the darkness. A crisis in faith. We're going to see this playing out in Psalm 88 in two ways. It plays out by keep talking.

Keep talking. And secondly, be honest. Keep talking. Be honest. Now, a warning here is necessary. I already said a little bit about that.

This is tough. This is a tough, tough Psalm. One writer described Psalm 88 as the suffocation of suffering. Another said there is no sadder prayer.

[2:24] One more said it's anti-therapeutic. So it's like the book of Job if the book ends before God replies. Now, of the 150 Psalms passed down to us, around 65 are laments.

That's like 40% of the book of Psalms. And most laments follow a similar pattern. First, the author cries out to God. Then they list their problems. You know, what's going on, why they're crying out. They ask God to do something about it, help me, heal me, save me. And then 99% of the time, 64 out of the 65 times we have Psalms of lament, there's some sort of positive turn, some sort of glimmer of hope or expression of trust, except Psalm 88.

There's no positive turn, no statement of trust or praise, nothing to give us relief. It literally ends with the word darkness. It's a traumatic Psalm addressing a traumatic situation.

So let's get into the text. Keep your scriptures open with me to 494, Psalm 88. We're going to look at what it looks like to have a crisis in faith as we keep talking to God and as we're honest with God.

[3:40] Psalm 88. So first notice, it says this is by someone named Heman the Ezraite. He was like the Emma of King David and Solomon's court, picking and choosing worship, arranging it for that community.

And he was known for his wisdom, but not much else is known about him. You know, why am I bringing him up? Well, there's a temptation to think, well, maybe he just had a really bad life. Maybe there's a specific reason and we can kind of like breathe a sigh of relief.

This is about him. This is about that situation. But actually, we don't know anything about what occasioned him, including this through the Holy Spirit.

What this means is that this desperate prayer wasn't about one situation or person. And it means it's for anyone suffering at a deep, seemingly unrelenting level. As someone put it to me as I was chatting with him about this passage, he said, The Bible contains the A to Z, the A to Z of suffering.

Most of us might only experience up to W. But Psalm 88 is Z. But in it being the worst, we find it is a gift.

[4:55] It speaks the truth that there really is this kind of suffering among us. The fact that it's in Holy Scripture is evidence that the desperate need for God's people was to have words for situations like this, to give voice to those whose suffering was bone deep and seemingly non-stop.

So again, it shows us what a crisis in faith looks like. We're turning now to talking to God. A crisis in faith looks like talking to God.

And faith is found in the continual calling out to God, even in the most desperate and dark of times. So look with me. Look at these three cries where we see this. The whole psalm is structured around these three cries.

In verse 1, we see him saying, Oh Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you. His basic cry here is, Hear me. Hear me.

His second cry is in verse 9, the second half. Every day I call upon you, O Lord. I spread my hands before you. I am pleading with you.

[6:01] And finally, in verse 13, he continues. But I, O Lord, cry to you. In the morning, my prayer comes before you. Notice, these cries are always directed to God.

And he always uses the possessive here. He says, You are my God, the God of my salvation. He's using the personal name of God again and again and again. A crisis in faith looks like continually crying out and talking to God.

What might this look like in a life lived, a grief observed? Well, hitting close to home, I'll tell you a little story about my own family line. My grandfather, who was also a minister, he died in his late 50s when I was five years old.

After a 10-year on-again, off-again battle with cancer. Now, our family story is more a story of grief than unrelenting suffering. But it's still instructive for us today.

Now, this is kind of coming full circle. I've mentioned this before. My dad's also a pastor. And he used to tell us, you know, whenever he would talk about us in sermons, that I'd get money. He'd pay me.

[7:16] So now I owe my dad one for talking about my family in a sermon. My grandpa, he was full of joy. He had an incredible sense of humor, even on his deathbed.

He loved my grandmother and my dad and my aunts and uncles dearly. He was a faithful minister. He wasn't perfect. But like the psalmist, he was so eager to live, to tell about God's faithfulness and wonders among the living.

He fully expected he would be healed. In fact, days before his death, he looked at those gathered around him and said, What are you doing here? I'm going to kick this thing.

But he died. And when I asked my dad about his experience, he shared that it shook his belief that our family was somehow exempt from this kind of thing.

That we were different or special in some way. It was my grandmother who processed this. I was emailing with her this week. She told me that she had also fully expected, had faith and expected that grandpa would pull through.

[8:24] But he didn't. And as she processed his death, I remember her telling me once that she remembered the first time she went to her mailbox and opened it and found it empty. No more condolence cards.

No more I'm thinking of you and praying for you. She told me she prayed in that moment. Well, I guess it's just you and me now, God. So while not shunned by her friends like this psalmist, she was experiencing the isolation, the loneliness of suffering.

And during that season, she told me that she cried all the time. This is her saying this now. One night, I stayed up all night playing through the hymn book.

I was angry with God for not healing Jim. I believed God could and would. I said I was angry with God and I was. But habit still kept me reading the scriptures, going to church, praying.

If you can call my griping to God, praying. It's a little bit of her sense of humor there. This is like the story of Job trying to make sense of all that is happening to him, crying out to God, asking to be heard.

[9:37] And while Job's friends talk about God, only Job talks to God. My grandmother, even in the depth of her grief, kept coming before God, crying out to him.

Friends, this is what a crisis in faith looks like. It looks like talking to God, keeping the dialogue open. It's faith worked out in the habit of ongoing praying to God.

And I want to be careful to say this isn't just like a quick fix. It's not like if you do this ten times, it'll make everything feel better. This is just what faith looks like in the dark, continuing to call out, continuing to cry out.

That's our first point. That's our first point of what a crisis in faith looks like. It means keep talking to God. Keep calling out. Bring your complaints before him. Because, friends, we know that he does hear.

He will hear. Now let's move on to the next point. Let's talk about what we can cry out to God about. So if we're to cry out continually, if we're to keep talking to God, we see here brutal honesty.

[10:46] We're to be honest with God. And the content of the cry here is actually quite shocking. It forces us to ask the question, are we even allowed to talk to God this way? Do we have permission to use this kind of language, to ask these kinds of questions?

So look with me. As we look under each cry, we see what kind of suffering is going on. And it's just truly terrible. The first nine verses, the author says, I am near death.

I've got one foot in the grave. It's like he's tasting death early. And worse, notice in verse 5, who is he blaming for this?

Who is he holding accountable? God. He's saying, you've done this to me. You've put me in the depths of the pit. Your wrath lies heavy on me. And in verse 7, it's an image of getting hit by wave after wave.

And any of you who have been tumbled in the surf before know exactly what this is like. Like hardly catching a break, struggling to come up for air. And finally, verse 8, utter isolation, loneliness, rejected by those closest to him.

[11:55] He's saying in a sense, I'm the lowest I can be in this first cry. You've done this to me, God, and I'm all alone. We move to his second cry, verses 9 to 12.

And he switches to a series of pointed questions or rhetorical questions. Notice, he says, do you work wonders? For the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you?

If you look at this, you'll notice it's interesting that he is assuming that God can work wonders. He is worthy of praise. He does have steadfast love. But he's saying, can't you do something before it's too late?

I know you can do these things. Why won't you do it now? So his fear really wasn't of death. It was the end of experiencing and witnessing to the goodness of God among the living.

His fear was worse than death. It was oblivion. Phelan's seen the Odyssey this summer. There's a scene set in Hades in the land of the dead, and it's truly terrifying.

[12:52] It captures this sense of oblivion, of a land of forgetfulness. His third and final wail, and this is the most desperate, starts in verse 13 onward.

And notice in verse 14, he's not asking. He asks in verse 14, oh, Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? He's not asking, like, why is this happening?

But why are you rejecting me? Why are you casting me off? It's a wail of the experience of personal rejection. And the verses that follow serve like an exclamation point on everything that has come before.

So to recap, his wail is the three soul-wrenching statements. Everything is terrible, and I'm holding you responsible, God. Can't you do anything before it's too late?

And finally, why are you doing this to me? Which, again, leads us to, like, can we really talk to God this way? Can we really be this brutally honest? So I was at Regent this week, Regent College, looking through some condolence cards, doing some research, some sources.

[14:03] So I opened it, I looked around, and I saw one that said, there are no words. A card that said, there are no words. So I picked it up, and I opened it, and it was blank inside. So I kind of thought, like, are you supposed to send it this way?

Right? Like, but if you write something, then there are words. So why does the cover say there are no words? So it, like, reaches a conundrum here. What are we supposed to do in the word? What are we supposed to say? What are we supposed to do?

And this is often our deepest fear. Second, from experiencing this, it's like, what do we say to anyone who's going through this? So I looked a little bit more into this, and I came across an article written by a couple who had tragically lost their children in a drunk driving accident.

They were on vacation. They were driving back. Both kids gone. And they noticed in the weeks that followed this terrible event that as their friends came to them to give them well wishes, they noticed something here.

A number of them would keep saying, there are no words. They'd send an email. There are no words. They'd send a card. There are no words. Now, don't get me wrong. They, too, noticed this, too. They know that people meant well. If you received a card like that and found it comforting, that's wonderful.

[15 : 12] If you sent a card with best intentions, I'm not meaning to shame you here, but what they noticed that the effect had on them when they received this note, there are no words, is that it basically meant it was a conversation stopper.

It didn't open things up to unpack their grief. It didn't create a point of contact for a conversation to continue. It just ended things. And this is what they said.

They said, because the truth was that my wife and I desperately wanted someone to talk to, wanted someone to talk to, wanted words to say. And I think Psalm 88 is here in part because it contains the words when we have no words, when we're desperate to talk to God and wondering if we can really be honest.

You see, I think sometimes we're just so afraid of directing our anguish towards God for whatever reason that it comes out as either like misplaced anger at people in our lives, or maybe in ways like dumping our trauma on those who just don't have any capacity to handle it.

Now, we need one another to lift each other up, but sometimes we don't know if we can be really honest with God. But notice if we return to Job briefly, at the end when Job has heard a response from God, God then responds to Job's friends.

[16 : 34] And God says later, he says, you have not spoken to me what is right, Job's friends. But Job has. Job has spoken rightly.

See, his friends continued to talk about God, the philosophies and wax eloquent, but Job poured out his honesty and desperation to his God.

This is what Psalm 88 shows us. It shows us a crisis in faith, crying out, talking to God, being honest, because we know that God knows.

But here's the thing. God doesn't require us to clean ourselves up before we come to him. He doesn't have limited capacity. He can handle the things you might wonder if you're even allowed to say, let alone think.

Because when you slow down and notice, we see a profound faith underneath this brutal honesty. Even as he cries out, he names him God of my salvation.

[17 : 38] He knows he is a God who works wonders, is faithful, has steadfast love. The very act of coming before God and being honest before God is a profession of faith.

So friends, this is what a crisis in faith looks like, what faith in the dark looks like, talking to God, being honest. I just want to say two things as we close. Look at verse 8 briefly.

Look at verse 8. You have caused my companions to shun me. Friends, let us not fulfill verse 8. Notice the deep anguish of the isolation here.

I heard from someone who had suffered greatly during a prolonged crisis season, and he spoke of just how alone he felt, hanging up the phone after getting a really difficult phone call and thinking, God, there is no one who understands what I'm going through.

Let's not leave each other alone to suffer in silence. I've heard stories of people who come to church and they lie about how they're doing. They're just not sure they can really be honest with others about how things are going.

[18 : 47] And I know this might sound overly simplified, but it's actually profoundly true, and it's what this psalmist most wants from God. What he wants from God and what we can offer to each other is to listen and to be present.

To listen and to be present. Let us be the answer to that cry for one another. And trust that the Holy Spirit will give us the right words, especially as we bring one another into God's word.

And secondly, the second thing I want to leave us with is the reason why we had Matthew's account of Jesus' crucifixion. It's just a brutal reading. It's to leave us with the reality that Jesus went through Psalm 88.

He lived this. He breathed it. He experienced it in its fullness before any of us have. His body and soul were full of trouble.

His beloved friends had abandoned him. He took on the fullness of God's wrath. But through the cross of Christ, the terror of death is defeated.

[19 : 54] The judgment of God is satisfied. Our isolation from God is overcome. And darkness will not have the last word. I'll leave you with some words my father shared with me as he reflected on his experience of God in that season.

He told me, I love Psalm 88 because it is real and raw. He continued, life is that way.

It's easy to tie a bow to try to wrap it up all nicely at the end. But sometimes questions are left hanging. Just like Will's answer phone 3000.

Raw emotions are just that. But what it does is it throws us onto the cross and to our faith. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.