

A voice for the darkness

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[0 : 0 0] I want to ask you a question. See if you can remember. When was the first time you picked up a Bible? Just think back. I praise God that was a long time ago, but I've seen it in movies and I've seen other people do it. How do you approach this? Where do you start? Do you start at the title page? Do you start somewhere in the middle? Do you flick through and pick?

Maybe you started the New Testament. The first Bible I remember receiving from someone was a little New Testament. So it started in Matthew. But because I wanted to do a little experiment this week, I got one of our church Bibles and I opened it up and I did the old flick, flick, flick, flick point. And this is the verse where I landed.

How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? Psalm 13 verse 1. Imagine those being the first words you ever read in the Bible. These questions that you might have of God at that point would be fair. What kind of God is he? Does he even care about people? Why is his special book seemingly complaining to him? Is being forgotten by God what I should expect if he's real? There are some parts of the Bible that just don't seem to belong.

I described this psalm to one of our fellow staff members this week, Veronica, just over a coffee in the morning. And she said, oh, that's a bit strange. Is that what you thought when Psalm 88 was being read out?

There are more parts of the Bible like it. There are more weird parts. There are more parts of the Bible like Psalm 88 and they're called laments. They're difficult. They're outpourings of pain and grief, loss and fear. They can seem really strange. They don't pull punches. They often contain questions in complaints and complaints against God himself. So how do we read those without skipping past or just shutting our Bibles? How do you sit here right now in church, hear Psalm 88 and not walk out the door again? Is there anything to be gained by reading and praying with or joining in with a lament like this? I don't know about you, but when I first read this psalm, I didn't expect to see it in the Bible. Before we dive into it right now though, let me say something with confidence. All of the Bible beginning to end is there on purpose, even if it looks like it's warts and all. Each week at St. Paul's we preach a small part of all of it on purpose and without leaving any of it out as we go. And we value what the Bible says as it says it. And to leave any of it out would be a big mistake. It may be that Psalm 88 is exactly what you need right now.

[3 : 3 5] It will push you to think differently, maybe challenge the way you think about God and perhaps expose a shallowed or sheltered idea about him that you might have or about his path for you as a follower of Jesus. Or this could be exactly how you're praying in your life right now.

But I believe that we all need lament in our lives, as difficult as they may seem in your season of life right now. So as we tackle this, don't be afraid. Don't expect some sort of scandal. Oh, Steve's away.

Nick's doing whatever he wants. Rather, God's Word is a beautiful tapestry. It's woven together with a skill unmatched by any human mind. It's planned and laid out with grace.

It's stitched together with the history of our world as we know it and painted on purpose with all the colours of the spectrum, even the dark colours. If you were an artist and you had to pick a book in the Bible to study, you would pick Psalms.

Psalms is a book of poems and songs and prayers gathered up over hundreds of years of Israel's history, crafted together and bound as a prayer book for God's people and for us too.

[5 : 13] There is wisdom to be found in there as Israel's history is taught through its pages. Every expression you'd expect from an artist is in there. Exuberant praise, love and devotion, darkest lament, they're all in there.

As the Psalms express joy in God's deliverance in Israel's history and excitement for his coming salvation, they don't leave out anything true about God or about their situation.

They don't leave out authentic thoughts and feelings, all while they waited for God's promised king to come. So prayer for Israel was always a balance of remembering God's victories and hopefully praising matched with this authentic outpouring out of where they were truly at.

And if you've ever read some of the Old Testament, heard about what Israel went through, they were a country who were well acquainted with pain and struggle and suffering.

And many would say that that has never stopped for them. As you peel back the pages of Psalms, you see pain and joy.

[6 : 34] You see their lament and you see their praise. As a young Christian, a very long time ago, I was taught that laments in the Bible always go up at the end.

Most do, like Psalm 42. Psalm 42 has this kind of up and down. It's reflected in the song that we sing, Bless the Lord are my soul.

It sounds like this. Things are going very wrong for the person singing this Psalm or praying. But they decide to yet praise God and look forward with hope.

Verse 3 and verse 5, you can see it. Day and night, my tears are my food. That is a desperate lament. In verse 5, it's followed by, Why are you a downcast soul within me?

No, no, no, no, no, soul. Hope in God. For I will yet praise him. That movement from pain to praise is a decision.

[7 : 45] A decision that the prayer makes because of who God is. For all he has done for them and his people in the past, and because of his great promises to come. And the book of Psalms itself kind of has this trajectory where there are a lot of laments at the beginning and lots of praise Psalms at the end.

It actually ends with this repeated Hallelujah Psalm theme. It's like by the end it's just one genre just dominating the mixtape.

Hallelujah Psalm. Hallelujah Psalm. It ends, the book ends on a huge up. And that is the pattern that I expect when I read a Psalm. Then how does a lament like Psalm 88 fit that pattern?

When it ends, as you would have heard before, darkness is my only friend. Does Psalm 88 belong?

Does Psalm 88 belong? What is it trying to say? Let's take a dive right in and step through it.

[8 : 57] We're going to do three things. We're going to discover what the Psalm is saying so that we can answer the question, does it fit? And that will help us discover what Psalm 88 and laments like it mean for us right now as God's people.

For me, Psalm 88 is a huge challenge. I always saw myself as quite in touch with my emotions, but through seasons of depression and crippling anxiety and fear, I can say that I have never been able to pray like this.

Psalm 88 eats my understanding and expressions of grief for breakfast. And I want to say that's good news for me and it's good news for you.

The Psalm reaches people who understand pain, like Israel did and maybe like you do. It gives us these words as a gift.

For when it is true that darkness is your closest friend, because life really does suck sometimes. And if it didn't, we'd only have praise Psalms.

[10 : 14] But laments are for the darkness. So let's discover what this prayer is saying and how it says it. For those of you taking notes, there are five parts to this Psalm.

That's not like the Psalmist goes through them in order. Let me just give you the quick picture. Praying to God, sharing the situation with Him, calling Him to do something about it, ascribing the blame of what is happening and questioning God Himself.

First, Psalm 88 is a prayer to God. Verse 1, verse 9 and verse 13, all together. Lord, You are the God who saves me.

Day and night I cry to You. I call to You, Lord, every day. I spread out my hands to You. I cry to You for help, Lord. In the morning, my prayer comes before You. This is very significant because you bring your complaint to the person who can do something about it.

Here at St. Paul's at the moment, we're not receiving any parcels. I have no idea why. It doesn't make any sense. But I didn't go to the police with that problem.

[11 : 36] I didn't go to the Ghostbusters. I didn't even go to my mom. I know there's only one source to go to for that problem to be fixed.

Wisdom says go to the one who can do something about it. And that's what praying right looks like when we're hurting and when we're in need. We come to the God who saves.

Have a look at verse 1 there. The psalmist summarizes God's previous faithfulness. He doesn't say, God, I know you can save.

Rather, he says, God saves. He has shown himself as capable of the past and he'll be faithful with our future.

This prayer even reminds God of his own character. Remember, do you say, hey God, you're the God who saves? It's pretty bold.

[12 : 39] And this prayer is not doing what I have found myself doing. I'm not... This psalm is not calling God to do the right thing like a whinging entitled teenager does to a parent.

It's not like that. Rather, the psalmist says, Lord, you are the God who saves me. I'm coming to you and you save me. I believe you will because you have and you can.

Faith in God expressed in the middle of the hardest of times is what God wants to hear when we pray. God doesn't need your recovery from an accident or your healing after grief already done to be ready for your motions of words.

No, he actually wants them in the middle of your tears and your pain. Take note, there's no line in this psalm that says, now God, fix this. Even though it's a desperate prayer, it's not a list of things that God must take away.

It's a statement of faith first, dressed up as an authentic expression of emotions and fears and questions. So is this permission to say what we really think to God?

[14 : 05] Yes, I think this psalm is that permission. Go to God and tell him how you feel when you feel it. Let's see how this prayer is told to God.

Go to verse 3, 4, 5 and 15 and this is the summary of how the psalmist prays. They are overwhelmed with trouble. Their life draws near to death.

They're weakened in a ditch. They're set apart for slaughter. They're bleeding out and buried alive. Their youth means nothing because their sickness remains. They're near enough to touch death and darkness is their closest friend.

This prayer has few real strong details and it kind of is as vague as it is extreme. But remember, this book is songs and poetry for a nation of people, all living unique yet connected lives.

And I think this extreme yet general set of situations are invitations for the one who laments to insert their pain into those lines and have those verses echo with their own experiences.

[15 : 19] When Adrian read Psalm 88 out, did any line grab you? Did it give life to a memory long buried?

Have you ever felt close to death in some way or trapped and unjustly excluded? I can look out on this room and know that that's true for some of you right now and has been in the past.

This psalm is for praying word for word while the images in it spark remembering an emotion within us, helping us express our situations, the things in our hearts that really hurt, so that we can lift them up to God.

And we want God to fix these situations, right? We want his action and justice, yeah? Look and see what the psalmist does in verse 2. As they call God to action, they say, may my prayer come before you.

Turn your ear to hear my cry. And that's it. That's all they ask God to do. Just look and listen.

[16 : 43] When we first started parenting, our little then three-nager, Judson, he wasn't very good at listening sometimes after he did something wrong, especially when he'd done it wrong on purpose.

And I learnt for him that listening required looking. I remember gently touching his cheek and saying, look in my eyes, and if I didn't do that, there would be no listening.

But if he turned his face to mine, he would take in what I needed to say. And I, or Sam, could start resolving the problem that he or we had created.

But that's what it took to get action. I think that's what's being asked here. The prayer knows that God hears, but is so desperate that they're saying, God, look in my eyes while I say this.

I need you to listen for real and take action. In the original language, the word cry is actually a stronger word than cry in English.

[17 : 57] It's more like a wail and a scream together directed at one person. The expectation of the prayer is that God saves.

So then if he truly hears a prayer like God save me, it follows that he would act to do so. The prayer believed this and I believe this, but is God doing anything at all?

Is he taking action? In fact, the psalm answers by saying that God is taking action, just not in the way that we might expect.

In fact, the prayer reckons that God is doing this to them. Here's where we take the step together, right into the confusion about this psalm, feeling out of place.

Psalm 88 doesn't lead us around the discomfort around this. It says it out loud and pushes us right in. I'm going to read some verses now and these for me are the hardest bits to hear.

[19 : 07] Verse 6, You have put me in the lowest pit in the darkest depths. Verse 7, Your wrath lies heavily upon me. You have overwhelmed me with all of your waves.

Verse 8, You have taken me from my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. Verse 15, From my youth I have suffered and been close to death. I have borne your terrors and am in despair.

6, 10, 7, 8, 10. Your wrath has swept over me. Your terrors have destroyed me. All day long they surround me like a flood and they've completely engulfed me. You have taken from me friend and neighbour.

God, you are doing this to me. It's a big step to say God does the bad things in our lives to us.

But in the way this psalm expresses prayer, can you step around that? While God may not be the one deciding to pull the trigger, very often he's the only one who could stop the bullet.

[20 : 28] Is God really a control at that level? Or is it safer to think that God is only in charge over all things when over all things means just the good things that are happening in our lives?

He does promise that he will work for the good of those who love him. It says that in Romans 8, 28. But his good for our lives is woven through a sometimes horrific mess of selfish human horridness and circumstances.

And it can feel like those things are the only thing in our lives that is real. But God but God's good for you for me and for all believers through that mess is real and true.

Even if it's unseen for now for a while or even if you don't get to know what is going on until you can ask him face to face.

I mentioned my boy Judson he is named after a famous missionary who in the days of the quill and sailing ships and unknown lands decided to give up a life of riches and go to one of those unknown lands and tell them about the gospel.

[21 : 59] The gospel had never been to Burma so he just went there. he spent his life translating the Bible into their language.

He preached and he taught and through his ministry that country as a whole heard about Jesus. There are 10,000 churches and up who can trace their existence back to his ministry.

but it came at a cost. Incredible persecution torture and sickness mourning and lamenting the loss of his wife and then his second as well the lives of many of his children more than I have fingers on my hand and eventually his own life as he got sick he wrote to his friends back in America and they sent a ship when it arrived he was so unwell and in such pain that he could barely speak they put him on the boat to send him home to get well and he died somewhere as they circled around the bottom of Africa and they didn't have anywhere to bury him so they chucked him in the sea he did see some of his children live and grow he saw a flicker of light in his ministry but it was not the good that he expected no but we saw the good once he was gone

I can say that God was good to Adoniram Judson because I see from my place in time how the good Judson desired was multiplied with eternal good and life saved but I'm sure that Psalm 88 was on the lips of that dear man more readily than it is mine as he battled with the truth in the midst of horrific pain that God was being good to him do you know a shade of Judson's darkness surely it would be easier if God just fixed everything let me say God has fixed two of the only important things and he will soon fix everything once and for all but while those things are true and worthy of your full acceptance and confidence we still battle reality mess and pain and unknown every single day and sometimes there is no apparent good of God in our lives at all so if God has the control then how should we proceed with questioning him what can we say to God in our mess that he is in charge of in our lives how do we question him well here's how it sounds in the psalm verse 10 11 12 and 14 do you show your wonders to the dead do their spirits rise up and praise you is your love declared in the grave is your faithfulness in destruction are your wonders known in the place of the darkness or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion why Lord do you reject me and hide your face from me there are two parts to this questioning first it has

God's fame and reputation in mind in the midst of your pain are you saying to God hey God this looks bad for you in verses 10 to 12 the unknown benefit of God's sovereign ravaging in their life brings first questions about God's care for his power and the world's perception of him how is the good and the greatness of who you are going to be received it's a first call on God to stand up for himself stand by his promises and purposes in full view of everyone around is that what you pray first when life falls apart God act to preserve your reputation for the sake of your name and your fame I care more about that I'm not reflexively going to care about

[26 : 49] God's kingdom if I'm bleeding out in a ditch but personal grief here is articulated alongside a fully Christ centred world view where the life we live is lived for God with his priorities always in view namely that the people who see God working in my life at every stage of my life would respond in repentance and faith and know God too this is something that I believe that's in this psalm to be learned it's written in on purpose as God's word builds our reflexive care for the people around us that they would know this great God who we come and worship even in the midst of incredible personal pain but it's still personal pain the understated simple line in verse 14 is

I feel rejected God and you aren't seeing what I'm going through and this is where I think we need to be encouraged into lamenting how often have you felt hard done by or cheated or defeated or overwhelmed with debt overwhelmed with what we often flippantly call our own misfortune how God in this psalm undoes that word this psalm is your permission to ask those questions of God without polished words or manners or formality for he is willing to hear you speak them he knows that we're sinful and emotional and brittle Jesus himself felt the same he knows and understands exactly how a human feels rejection he knows the pain of injustice in our hearts and in our fragile bodies and while those around us suffer those who we love our father identifies with us he knows the pain of losing those who we love or seeing them suffer as he watched his son die on a cross he can be trusted and relied upon as gracious with the worst you have to share with him in the middle of the mess from every day from now to the end of your life here on earth even if it seems he isn't hearing you or that he's turned away every day that is dark and there might be many he wants your lament until the dark comes to light is that what you expected to read in the bible a tool for processing pain and expressing yourself to an apparently absent god that's not what i expected let me take this a step further everyone grab your bible that's got psalm 88 open if you don't do it right now because this for us right now is the hardest part to hear because it means that we have to do something have a look at the title of this psalm psalm 88 a song this was written to be sung in the temple by everyone gathered in worship not just an item to be processed and prayed through by the listeners but as something to sing to pray and to learn together can you imagine standing up in church and singing and darkness is my best friend no certainly a weird choice for a

Sunday worship song or is it is it counterproductive to find this in the Bible is it counterproductive to sing this in church what is this let's just quickly go back over our five steps that we've been through so far looking at this psalm remember questioning God is a step of faith and authenticity we go to our God who we know has saved us and say that he can save secondly we share what is going on because we trust that he sees third we call on him to hear our prayer because we trust he wants to and will for we acknowledge his sovereignty over all things not just the easy to explain happy bits of our lives and five we bring exactly where we are to him even if it seems like he isn't there or doesn't care humbly with the truth of our life our love for others and his grace in full view that sounds like a prayer for the

Christian to use in a season of trial and trouble our God knows how hard life is and how it works and has shown us a path toward recovery namely that we go to him wherever we are with all that we feel to be heard and heal I believe that lamenting rightly before God like this should be in the Bible as it's a treatment for the silence of pain that our culture says is normal and permits and equips words to fill our mouths to get out as we grieve and process the horrors of our lives so how do we know what to say after hearing Adrian read it do you now remember this psalm certainly not one we've taught with a snappy memory verse in kids church yet let me say a few things about lamenting your life and our life as a church we need to practice in our seasons of joy and blessing for the lamenting in our seasons of horror and hardship

I believe that's why this prayer is a song look back at the title it's written by the sons of Korah the hit makers of the time written for the music pastor to the tune of Mahalaleth I'm sure it sounds better in Hebrew but it's taken from the main praise and lament charts of the time I deliberately made that a bit silly because we like to downplay art in our churches as a sideshow as something to use in the rest of our life but not in the important bits yet God really cares that we use art he's created for us strategically and not leaving anyone out the activity of singing praise and prayers and proclamations to and about God are worthwhile they're never the afterthought of the corporate worship pastor because he's worried that Steve won't have the time in his sermon to fill the quota of a service no God has given us time together each week to train us and teach us and let him speak to us through these songs all together in song every week at St. Paul's unity of song disarms spoken and unspoken but unhelpful rules about emotional honesty in our community all culturally driven misguided theological expectations about how happiness should work for those who do the right thing they help undo hopes that God does not promise in his gospel and together we declare as we sing that if God is for us as the gospel shows as we sung before that none can stand against us but we do stand with enemies against us as Christians there is nothing that can take our salvation away but we can lose it life and it can be unfair as Australians we can't abide by that a fair go is part of our values but that's not what

[35 : 56] God promises in fact we get something better than a fair go from God we get the reality check of the gospel that unifies man under the banner of sinful and in need and divides us only by those who believe in Jesus and receive his salvation immeasurable blessings and riches now and forevermore in Jesus or not that is the promise when we sing a lament like blessed be your name on the road marked with suffering though there's pain in the offering blessed be your name we start to turn the corner of grief together encouraging movement through the process of pain taking with us who we don't even know yet are hurting amongst us giving endurance a chance to continue and remind us of the need to support one another emotionally this psalm is meant to be sung together so what's the benefit is this how to do lament well it's the start to sing psalm 88 together is practicing this type of lament prayer and for some while we practice it and learn it it's going to be their real time cry to god this psalm is here for you any time of the day every day we're devoted to pursuing prayer as a daily life goal here at St Paul's and so bring laments like this into the way that you speak to god every day in your prayer and practice and pray for real psalm 88 pray laments with a struggling friend when you don't know what to say give them the gift of words that are full of pain but directed rightly pray them in your marriage when things are going badly own it together and bring it to god in lament demonstrate their value with your children lament together and share your heart and turn together to our saviour it's only then that we begin to normalise what is counter-cultural in this that humble authenticity in the area of declaring need for help in the hardest of times are you ready to start practicing today we're going to sing psalm 88 together and that might be a curveball for you it was a curveball for me today we're going to first before we do that be reminded of why we can say you are the god who saves me as we pray and sing we can say that because god has already delivered us from the worst thing that has happened it's already happened to all women and men the world over from birth namely that we've cut ourselves off from the living god through our sin sentencing ourselves to a spiritual death in this life and for eternity but god so loved all peoples that he sent his only son to die that spiritual death for us and

to be forsaken by his father as he put on our sins while he felt and endured our punishment for sin and died upon the cross while he cried out why have you forsaken me to his father so that we would never be forsaken no matter what you face as you process your grief and loss you know that you have a god who saves who's rescued you from sin and done the impossible to redeem your life from hell he is worthy listening and even if he is silent for now he will not stay silent he has not always been silent and he will always be working for your god for your good this hymn a recording of it is available on our website today and on our facebook take it into your life and learn it so it's ready on your lips to pray in the worst seasons of your life as you turn to the god who saves let this be your voice for the darkness and if you need to go further today with your grief and pray with a brother and sister i'm here after the service and many more here would love to pray with you and speak with you we are all here to share whatever has happened and whatever will happen in this life together why don't you stand and join me in this all day and night i cry for you allow my prayer before you incline your ear to hear my plight lord turn your gaze to me see my weary hands like shadows touching death itself where is your voice in this darkness lord are you faithful to me where is your love that you promise you are the god who saves me you send me out abandon me to deep despair forgotten you drown my screams with ceaseless waves and pinned me to me to despair you send me out abandon me to deep despair forgotten you drown my screams with ceaseless waves and pin me down with wrath blind and chains with ceaseless waves and pin me down with wrath blind and chained with grief and sorrow near my grave from you oblivion i call my home with shame to sooth my fears where is your voice in this darkness lord are you faithful to me where is your love that you promise you are the god who saves me

will your assaults and horrors heal your praise swell while you slay me shall i proclaim your righteousness if all i love are love nh drierowa Your prayers heal your praise well while you slay me.

Shall I proclaim your righteousness if all I love are lost?

Lord, why turn your back and shun me? Where are you, my God?

[44 : 54] Your terrors strike and flood with doubt and darkness is my friend.

Where is your voice in this darkness? Lord, are you faithful to me?

Where is your love that you promised? You are the God who saves me.

You are the God who saves me. You are the God who saves me. You are the God who saves me.

You are the God who saves me. You are the God who saves me. You are the God who saves me.

[46 : 00] You are the God who saves me.