

Down but Not Out

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[0 : 00] Seeking the Lord's help, let us turn back for a few moments this evening to the book of Psalms and the psalm that we read, Psalm 88.

And although we're going to consider most of this psalm this evening, maybe we'll just begin, we'll just read the first verse or two just simply to give us the context that we're dealing with.

O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you, let my prayer come before you, incline your ear to my cry.

er crying out to God and it ends with my companions have become darkness, darkness my old friend.

This writer Heman the Ezraite, he's been struggling with a trial for quite some considerable time. Verse 15 says that it's been since his youth.

[1 : 36] And nobody really knows what he's struggling with, what he's suffering from. Some people think it may have been leprosy but we're not told what the issue, what the trial, what the struggle, what the burden we're not told what it is. But it's clear that Heman sees this as a chastisement from God. We can see that in verse 7. Your wrath lies heavy on me and you overwhelm me with all your waves. Verse 16 your wrath has swept over me.

I want this evening for the short time that we have together I want us to focus on this suffering, this struggling man, on his pain.

This is a man who thinks that he's got no future. Look at verse 3 and 4. My soul is full of troubles, my life draws near to Sheol.

Sheol is the realm of the dead. He can't see any future except death. And he thinks he's got no friends. Look at verse 8. You've caused my companions to shun me. You've made me a horror to them.

Loneliness, it's a killer. I read somewhere about a lady who would listen to our radio till the shipping forecast came on every night at midnight just to hear the announcer say, we bid you a good evening.

[3 : 03] This man thinks he's got no foundation. He's got nothing to hold on to. He believes that reaching out to God is in vain.

And because of all of this he's struggling with his faith. There's no expectation. Look at verse 13. He's got no expectation as he's praying. He's got no expectation that God will answer his prayers.

There's no end to his misery. There's no let up to his misery as we go through this psalm. There's certainly no end in sight as we read through this. Heman feels condemned to struggle with his burden until death finally takes him.

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever had a burden like that? So heavy so long grinding you so far down?

Maybe that's how you're feeling tonight just now. Maybe there's something you're wrestling with maybe nobody else knows about it except God. But it's something that is taking you to the edge again and again and again.

[4 : 22] We all have dark times. We all face trials. Somebody said that suffering is standard issue for the Christian believer.

Standard issue for the Christian soldier. Because we follow the archetypal sufferer. We follow Jesus Christ. We bear his image to the world.

We are united to Jesus Christ and because we are united to Jesus Christ suffering and trials are inevitable. Look at what Paul says in his letter to the Philippians.

In chapter 1 verse 29 he says this for to you writing to the Philippians he says for you to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him but also to suffer for his sake.

In chapter 3 he takes it a little further. he says I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering becoming like him in his death.

[5 : 25] That is fellowship with Christ in our suffering and our trials and our burdens. Fellowship of suffering. I'm sure some of you know the poem that Amy Carmichael of Donavur wrote.

She was a missionary in India and then she fell and from her injuries she spent most of the last two decades of her life in her bed but she carried on a ministry of writing and she wrote this Hast thou no scar?

No hidden scar on foot or side or hand? I hear thee sung as mighty in the land I hear them hail thy bright ascendant star Hast thou no scar? Hast thou no wound?

Yet I was wounded by the archers spent leaned me against a tree to die and rent by ravening beasts that compassed me I swooned Hast thou no wound?

No wound? No scar? Yet as the master shall the servant be and pierced are the feet that follow me but thine are whole Can he have followed far who hast no wound or scar?

[6 : 41] Many of us can find ourselves in these words We're wounded We're scarred There is a fellowship of suffering with Christ Well Psalm 88 is full of help when we struggle when life hurts when we're down but we're not out Heman the psalmist he gives us an example to follow It's nothing difficult It's nothing exotic or unusual In this psalm we can pick out three things simple straightforward things They're not easy They're not easy but they are simple they are straightforward things that we can all do to lift us up to God when we struggle the first thing we can do is to keep praying All throughout his long drawn out period of suffering

Heman kept praying But it wasn't just that he prayed It was how he prayed He prayed continually Look at verse 1 verse 9 verse 13 He prayed every day He prayed night and day He prayed first thing every day He prayed all day He never stopped praying He didn't let his suffering overcome his desire to pray And that's how we should be too Even when we don't feel like it Even when it's not easy to pray The Bible tells us again and again to keep praying Psalm 55 verse 16 and 17 I call to God and the Lord will save me Evening morning and at noon I utter my complaint and my moan and he hears my voice And of course there's the famous verse in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verse 17

Pray without ceasing Do not stop praying He kept praying continually He also prayed emotionally Look in verse 1 I cry to you Look at verse 9 I call on you I'm spreading my hands out to you He's like a child reaching out to his father to get his father to lift him His heavenly father He wants his heavenly father to lift him Heman's burden whatever it was was heavy It was crushing He was a broken man as he wrote this Psalm 88 is full of raw human emotion because as you read through it you can see Heman pouring his heart out to God he doesn't hold anything back he gets it all out there to God emotions are a vital part of our prayer life of an effective prayer life

Psalms as you look at Psalms as you read through the Psalms you'll see you'll see that they are poems yes but they are poems that are full of emotions how would emotions touch God's heart did you know that how would emotions touch God's heart Psalm 6 verse 6 I'm weary with my mourning every night I flood my bed with tears Psalm 56 verse 8 you keep track of all my sorrows you've collected all my tears in your bottle you've recorded them all in your book not one tear that you shed that you spill does God miss he records them all he keeps them all how do I know that our emotions touch God's heart because the Bible tells me so Hebrews chapter 4 verse 15 and 16 tells me so we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses but we have one who in every respect has been tempted like we are yet without sin let us therefore with confidence draw near the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need he understands

Jesus our high priest he understands how because he's been through it joy sorrow rejection loneliness isolation physical pain spiritual pain beyond anything that we can even imagine all that raw human experience is at his disposal the dust of the earth at the right hand of God the father it's at his disposal as he intercedes for us as he prays for us right now this moment this minute in the courts of heaven and you know that when you and I when we pray and we run out of words we hit the wall and there's nothing left that we can say there's no words no vocabulary that we can use to express our emotions the

[12 : 21] Holy Spirit that dwells within each of us who are followers of Christ the Holy Spirit he actually takes over that's an amazing thing God the Son intercedes for us in heaven God the Holy Spirit who dwells in us he takes over Romans 8 26 27 we do not know what to pray for as we should but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words and he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God not only is God the Son interceding for you and for me God the Spirit is too isn't that wonderful isn't that an encouragement as we struggle day to day the

Spirit and the Son are united in intercession in prayer on your behalf what more could you ask for Haman also prayed intelligently look at verse 1 who's he praying to who's he praying to he's not praying to an idol on the wall he's not praying to a false God he's praying to almighty God because almighty God doesn't just promise to hear our prayers he promises to answer our prayers as well Isaiah 65 verse 24 before they call I will answer and while they're yet speaking I will hear but sometimes sometimes we pray and we pray and we pray and we pray and there doesn't seem to be an answer well there's a special assurance for children of God for believers there's a special assurance given to us in revelations chapter 5 you know where John pictures the throne room in heaven and the lamb is before the throne between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders

I saw a lamb standing as though it had been slain and he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne and when he had taken the scroll the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the lamb now here's the point each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints golden bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints that's not just the prayers of Abraham and Isaac and Moses and Isaiah and David and Solomon and Peter and Paul and John you if you are a believer in Jesus Christ you are numbered among the saints these are your prayers these are my prayers they might not have been answered yet but they have reached heaven they are before the throne

God hears your words God collects your tears he is not unaware he hears and he answers so take encouragement from that and there's more see in here the way Haman four times he calls God Lord in capital letters in verse 1 verse 9 verse 13 verse 14 now the capital letters they're significant because this is Yahweh this is Jehovah this is a name that means the covenant keeper the God who keeps his promise the God who never fails never deserts his own the God who is able the God who does the impossible anytime anywhere the God who wants to give his flock his little flock who wants to give them the kingdom

God is our refuge God is our strength God is a very present help in our time of trouble Haman knew where his help was coming from Haman knew where to direct his prayers and he kept praying to God and so should we so that's the first thing keep praying don't stop praying second thing keep persevering keep committed to God you know sometimes in some of the Psalms as you read through them it can seem like a dialogue the Psalmist speaks and God replies Psalm 88 God is silent all the way through this God is silent there's no response to Haman's most heart rending cry there's not even a hint that God's listening as far as Haman's concerned now that doesn't mean that God doesn't care it just means that

[17 : 42] God has chosen not to answer not get anyway and Haman questions God's silence in verse 14 why do you cast my soul away why do you hide your face from me how often have you felt like that as you prayed and poured your heart out why aren't you answering my prayers it's tough to keep going when you feel that your prayers are just bouncing off the ceiling Haman doesn't quit in the book of Job as Job goes through everything that he goes through God doesn't answer a single one of his questions on Calvary on the cross God didn't answer Jesus when he shouted why have you forsaken me a question from the son to the father why have you forsaken me the only answer was silence and darkness but what

God did there on the cross in his silence by pouring his hatred of sin like a funnel onto the focal point that was his son was surely the most significant work of the father God spoke the cosmos into being there's power in God's speaking he said let there be and there was but sometimes his greatest work is done in silence in Job God is silent until the end of the book and his work is done and he speaks at the end of Job it's difficult when God is silent isn't it it's hard when there seems to be no answer when the conversation seems to be one way it's always difficult having a conversation when nobody will speak back to you it's particularly difficult when you're praying to

God but our duty is to follow him to resist the temptation to try and be the fourth member of the trinity and try and tell God how to fix things how to sort things how to make things easier it's a temptation I'm sure that many of us have succumbed to I certainly have will you tell God how this could be this situation could best be sorted God's plans God's ways aren't like ours and when he does what he does when he moves in the way he's going to move then we'll see that his ways are always the best Jeremiah 29 11 that verse that so many people hang on to I know the plans I have for you says the Lord plans for your good not for evil to give you a future and hope doesn't mean to say that our lives are going to be lived happily ever after that was written to the

Israelites in captivity who still had two generations left in captivity but God had a future in mind for them God was at work and he knew what he was doing he was giving them a future and hope no matter how huge our problems appear to us they're never what they seem it depends on our perspective a few years ago I was in Pendleton with a group of kids from the school and as we were leaving South Carolina we spent a night or two in Atlanta and I remember standing on I think it was Peach Street standing and looking at a building and as I craned my head back the building was so big and so tall I couldn't see all the way to the top it was massive it was huge this great edifice of stone and steel and glass next day we took off in our plane heading back to Scotland and as we flew over

Atlanta the same building looked tiny it was exactly the same building exactly the same materials exactly the same construction but it seemed that small our perspective on what's happening in our lives is critical that's key to how we deal with what we're struggling with our trials feel extreme look at Heman in verse 6 you've put me in the depths he says to God our trials feel confusing in regions dark and deep says Heman to God our trials are severe verse 7 he says God your wrath lies heavy on me they're exhausting you overwhelm me with all your waves you know the way with waves we've seen them over the past few days waves come one after another after another after another Heman is exhausted from what he's been through that's his perspective but from

[23 : 18] God's perspective for believers our trials are really light doesn't feel like it to us I know but look at what Paul says in 2nd Corinthians chapter 4 this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond compare these trials are really God's work in our lives because we know we're told in God's word that for those who love God all things work together for good not just some things not just the good things not just the highlights everything without exception and our trials are strengthening us that God's work strengthening us Paul again 2nd Corinthians chapter 12 for the sake of Christ I'm content with weaknesses insults hardships persecutions and calamities he's happy with these things he's content with these things why because when I'm weak then I'm strong in Jesus

Christ I'm strong and God's not afraid of asking of us asking why doesn't mind us asking why why now why this why is this taking so long how often when you're going through something dark do you want to press the fast forward button do you say to God okay I've learned the lesson let's move on but our trials and sufferings are God's lessons dealt with at God's speed our questions aren't a threat to God and when we experience sustained unresolved long-standing anguish we can take it to God not just once but again and again and again and he's not going to grow tired of us he doesn't roll his eyes and go not again not you again with this because God wants us to understand that even when we can't see him at work even when we can't see his hands his fingerprints at work we can't hear him through his word we're reading it but we're not getting anything he wants us to know that we can trust him so no matter how difficult our storm we can be sure that

God's in charge he's still the master he's still at the helm of our ship and no matter how things look your life may look chaotic the wheels may be coming off at an alarming rate but God is still in control so when God doesn't answer keep praying keep crying keep calling to him persistence gives up persistence does not fail it pays off never give up in world war ii the autumn of 1941 was a dark time a particularly dark time in that period britain stood alone everything looked bleak nazi germany had rolled over most of europe and occupied almost all of the countries of europe america hadn't come into the war and it seemed like just a matter of time until hitler crossed the english channel and invaded the british mainland in october of 1941 winston churchill made a speech at his old school and he said this he said you can't tell from appearances how things will go sometimes imagination makes things far worse than they are but without imagination not much can be done those people who are imaginative see many more dangers than perhaps exists certainly many more than will happen but then they must also pray to be given that extra courage to carry this far reaching imagination but for everyone surely what we've gone through in this period this is the lesson never give in never give in never never never never in nothing great or small large or petty never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense never yield to force never yield to the apparent overwhelming might of the enemy never give in

Churchill used this speech to ask Britain to persevere to keep going to stay committed they'd already had two years of war they'd had Dunkirk the battle of Britain the blitz the war in the Atlantic fighting in North Africa that was the constant threat of invasion but he wanted them to grit their teeth and keep going it was a big ask a big ask six weeks later the tide turned on the 7th of December America entered the second world war after Japan carried out the surprise attack on Pearl Harbour so Britain no longer stood alone against the apparent overwhelming might of the enemy Britain under Churchill Britain persevered kept going her commitment didn't waver under

God just like Heman neither should ours so we keep praying we keep persevering and thirdly we keep praising now Psalm 88 is dark isn't it it's deep it's black it's plumbing the depths of human emotion this man is in a pit of suffering and it doesn't seem like he can see any release from it but there's one bright brilliant shaft of light that illuminates the whole psalm that gives us a context that we can read this psalm in did you notice it it's easy to miss but it's there did you notice it oh lord god of my salvation god of my salvation haman knows god's beautiful personal saving grace this is the god of his salvation the god he trusts the god he loves the god of whom job said though he slay me yet i will love him so this dark psalm comes from a place of supreme confidence in god haman thought he had no future but his hope was an almighty god who had plans i know the plans i have for you for a future haman thought he had no friends but his closest friend was the creator of the universe almighty god who heard his prayer the yahweh jehovah the god who keeps his promise to never leave nor forsake he poured his heart out to god a believer a christian is never truly alone i will never leave you nor forsake you no early closing no evenings off no long weekends no going on holiday i will never leave you nor forsake you haman thought he had no foundation that his life was all over the place but he was standing secure on the god of his salvation and although he was struggling with his faith he was holding on to almighty god but more importantly god was holding on to him god if you and i are saved if we can say god of my salvation when we're praying at night or in the morning or whenever things may be difficult but we have every single thing that we need to rejoice no matter how dark the valley how deep the trial how heavy the load we have every reason to praise god rejoice we're told in luke chapter 10 rejoice because your names are written in heaven that was christ speaking to the 72 who were sent out who couldn't believe that they could command spirits and he said don't rejoice because of that rejoice because your names are written in heaven that's the bottom line if you're a believer in god if you're a child of god your name is written in the book the lamb's book of life in heaven so rejoice praise maybe won't take away all of your pain it maybe won't take away the cause of your pain but it certainly will bring you into god's presence when

[32 : 51] you praise god you're drawing near to god and when you draw near to god he will draw near to you it's his promise it's his obligation he has said it he will do it so even when we don't feel like it we must praise god and if you feel like crying then cry weep pour all the bitterness and sorrow out of your heart in front of god do what heman did lay it all out for god for god to see he can see it in your heart anyway see it with your mouth and then praise god for everything that he's done for you he saved you he's blessed you he's prepared a place for you in the house of many mansions in god's time and in god's own way he will lift your burdens before we run away with the idea that heman was this really down really doer guy if you actually let your eye run further down the page and you look at psalm 89 which begins i will sing of the steadfast love of the lord forever with my mouth i will make known your faithfulness to generations for i said steadfast love will be built forever and in the heavens you will establish your faithfulness a song of covenant praise to god who's the author who's the psalmist who's the writer of this hymn of praise ethan the ezraite ezraites they were not doer people they were men who knew god and who praised god and who lifted god up and who loved him and who worshipped him that's how we should be in god's own time and god's own way god will work to meet god's own glory and your own good first thessalonians chapter 5 verse 18 give thanks in all circumstances this is the will of god in christ jesus for you we need to give thanks in all our circumstances not just some not just the high days not just the good days not just when we're on the mountaintops but in all circumstances without exception and that's not easy that's not easy but we have a power to play in this we must decide that come what may we will praise god simply because he's worthy to receive our worship our glory and our honor our former associate preacher and back alistair i mcleod he put it like this he was walking down london road in edinburgh to his flat and it was a sunny day and as he walked he felt the warmth of the sun and as he got closer to the flat he crossed over from one side of london road to the other and all of a sudden he was in the shadow of the buildings and it was cooler it was colder and he had to zip up his jacket and he felt the coldness of the shadow of the building and he thought it was warmer on the other side it was better on the other side so he took the decision simply to cross so that he was bathed once again in the sunlight and in the warmth we have a part to play in this we are told by Paul in

Philippians to rejoice in the Lord always and again to rejoice he says it twice he stresses that's what we must do rejoice and again rejoice rejoice and keep on rejoicing and it's straightforward it's not complex it's not easy keep praying keep persevering keep praising three things C.S.

Lewis said God whispers to us in our pleasures speaks in our conscience but he shouts in our pains it's his megaphone to rouse a deaf world the simple fact is the plain truth is that life hurts but when it does there's hope there's help for the people who know and who love the Lord who trust in Jesus for their life and for their death and when life hurts we need to do what Heman did we need to keep persevering keep praying keep praising maybe it won't change our circumstances but it will change us in our circumstances but what if you're here tonight and I've been speaking mostly to believers this evening what if you don't know the God of my salvation if you can't say the first line of this psalm with conviction what's here for you it's not just

Christians who go through suffering it's not just Christians who have trials and problems and dark times and valleys we're all just one phone call one diagnosis away from the darkest of times wouldn't it be better so much better not to walk that dark valley alone whatever it is not to bear that burden alone whatever it is wouldn't it be better to have the company of the God of your salvation who loves you who cares for you who cares for you enough to give the very best that he had his only begotten son to save you wouldn't you love to be able to see to say in the darkest night I cry to you God of my salvation amen let's pray eternal father we thank you for the strength and encouragement that we find in your word that we are not alone in the darkness that you hear our prayers that you want us to persevere and that our praise brings us close to you we ask father that each one of us here this evening would find rest in you would find peace in you would be able to say

God of my salvation I cry to you and that we would know that you are the God who not only hears prayer but who answers prayer powerfully majestically to your glory and to our good all these things we ask in Jesus name and for his sake amen we will conclude by singing from the sing psalms version of psalm 34 verse 4 stands as of the psalm at all times all times without exception page 40 all times I will bless the Lord I'll praise him with my voice because I glory in the Lord let troubled souls rejoice verse 7 the angel of the Lord surrounds and guards continually all those who fear and honor him he sets his people free isn't that a wonderful promise a wonderful promise we are guarded and surrounded by the angel of the Lord and he sets us free these four stanzas of psalm 34 to the tune

[41 : 16] Evan to God's praise at all times I will bless the Lord I'll praise him with my voice because I glory in the Lord let troubled souls rejoice let trouble souls rejoice together let us pray the Lord exalt his name with me I sought the Lord his answer came from fears he set me free they look to him

I shine with joy they are not put to shame this suffering man cried to the Lord from him deliverance came the angel of the Lord surrounds and guards continually all those who fear and honor him he sets people free I'll go to the main door after the benediction now may the grace of the

Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the fellowship of God the Holy Spirit abide with us all now and forever more amen