

Where Is God When Life Goes Sideways, Part 2

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Psalms 138, we are going to continue through our series of where is God when life goes sideways, because indeed it has gone sideways for so many of us, and we desperately need to hear from the Lord, don't we?

We desperately need a fresh word from Him, and I feel like I'm excited about diving into this psalm, so if you'll look with me there, Psalm 138, a psalm of the sons of Korah.

Verse 1, 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, for my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.

I am counted among those who go down to the pit. I am a man who has no strength, like one set loose among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand.

[1 : 26] You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavily on me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves.

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. My eye grows dim through sorrow.

Every day I call upon you, O Lord. I spread out my hands to you. 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 abandon?

Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? But I, O Lord, cry to you. In the morning, my prayer comes before you.

[2 : 29] O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors.

I am helpless. Your wrath has swept over me. Your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long.

They close in on me together. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me. My companions have become darkness.

It's the word of God. The only infallible word we possess.

In the early 1960s, doubts and questions of the faith came to readers from a most surprising place. C.S. Lewis, famous for his hope-giving stories and helpful books, defending the faith, wrote another book.

[3 : 36] After walking with his wife, Joy, through cancer and death, he wrote a book entitled *A Grief Observed*.

In it, he says, Talk to me about the truth of religion, and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion, and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the comforts of religion, or I shall suspect you don't understand.

He continued, In grief, where is God? When you're happy, so happy, you have no sense of needing him. So happy, you're tempted to feel his claims upon you as an interruption.

If you remember yourself and you turn to him in gratitude and praise, you'll be welcomed with open arms. But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain.

And what do you find? A door slammed in your face. And a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside.

[4 : 40] After that, only silence. You may as well turn away. Readers were obviously surprised and shocked to hear C.S. Lewis talking this way, and we might be similarly surprised and shocked to read some of the things we find in our Bibles.

Many of the things that shock us are the obvious sins of polygamy and whatnot. With our patriarchs are the wildly gory stories in Kings and Chronicles, or even the petty bickering among Jesus' disciples.

But there's few passages more surprising in our Bibles than Psalm 88. Like many other psalms, it includes a prayer for help.

The psalmist is desperate in his time of need. It details the darkness and the evils of the enemies. Unlike, though, any other song, it never turns.

It never transitions to praise. It never includes any confidence that God will hear and does hear and will answer. It looks into the darkness and sees nothing else.

[5 : 51] Yet this psalm and its surprising content gives us a song to sing when life goes sideways. When life is dark.

When it seems as if the Lord has turned away and He no longer listens and He no longer cares. When we can no longer see what He's doing.

Where is God when life goes sideways in a word? We know the Lord is working, but do not see. So we weep and pray. We know the Lord is working, but we do not see.

So we weep and pray. We're going to break this out in three points, as is our custom. First point is the world is full of trouble. The world is full of trouble.

Psalm 88 is placed in our Bible, so we wouldn't be surprised when life hurts. You know, the the the hymn writer are the sons of Korah. They were just choir masters in the temple of the Lord.

[6 : 52] And they immediately find trouble all around him. If you look down in verse four, they he's he the hymn writer is immediately maligned. He's counted among those who go down to the pit.

In verse five, he's he's dismissed. He's set loose like one who is dead. He's treated as if he's already dead. In verse eight, as we saw in the end in 18, he's he's shunned.

You've caused my companions to shun me. He's he's afflicted down in verse 15, and we don't we don't know the details of what's going on. Perhaps he had leprosy or some other disease that made him unclean.

Perhaps he was under quarantine, hiding from something. We don't know the details. But the one thing, the first thing we're to take away from this psalm is that all of us live in a troubled world.

David's experience or rather the sons of Korah, their experience is not unique. We live in a Genesis three world. You know, some parts of the Bible seem to present Christianity as as steps to follow for a happy, successful, stress, stress free life.

- [8 : 01] There seem to be rules to the Christian life. And if you follow them, life will go well to you. After all, the Proverbs say the diligent prosper, the lazy suffer.
- However, disaster pursues the wicked. The righteous are rewarded with truth. Even Jesus says in John 10, I've come to give you life and life abundantly.
- The prosperity preachers like to fill in what that abundant means. Well, the same thing goes on in all sorts of life. It goes on in English grammar as well. There's there's different rules to grammar as you learn or some of your moms are learning now that you're homeschooling your kids.
- There are certain rules to grammar to learn to read and write. But I before E except after C is not the whole story. There are exceptions to the rule.
- Just ask neighbor or neither or leisure or weird. Psalm 88 reminds us that there's exceptions to the rule for the Christian life.
- [9 : 01] Sometimes the diligent fail. The lazy succeed. The wicked prosper.
- The righteous suffer. Psalm 88 is a lament. One third of the Psalms are laments. They're prayers to pray when life goes sideways.
- When you find that the world is full of trouble and broken, laments our prayers for sinners and sufferers in a Genesis 3 world. Genesis 3 just tells us of Adam's fall.
- But then it tells us of God's curse on all of this world. And it's it's devastating. All this world is under a curse. Roman 8 picks that up for us and tells us what that curse is about.
- It says for the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself might be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.
- [10 : 01] For we know the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And so all of creation is subjected to futility.
- It just means things fall apart. They they flow through your fingers like sand. And and and it's a in bondage to corruption, to disease, to affliction, to all these things.
- And and such that the whole creation is groaning. We're not. I mean, it's not just us that are groaning. The whole creation is groaning. And if we could just take this in, take this verse at face value, we can see the groaning everywhere.
- Hurricanes haunt. Tornadoes devastate. Earthquakes shake. Heart attacks strike. Cancer spreads. Disease infects. Marriages fail. Fathers abuse.
- Mothers miscarriage. Girls are trafficked. Kids are bullied. Innocence is stolen. Leaders lie. Nations oppress. And every day brings more. You think you're living in a rosy world.
- [11 : 03] You're living in a Genesis 3 world. New mercies come every morning, but so too do sorrow. Shakespeare said, each new morn, new widows howl and new orphans cry.
- Men die and babies are pushed out into the street. If we could get a glimpse of all the suffering in this world for just a moment, we'd cry our eyes out for the rest of our life.
- Our world is broken. We groan too, though. Our hearts stray.
- Our friends fail. Our worst fears are realized. Our hopes continue to be delayed. Work bites back. Clients don't pay. Waiting rooms fill up. Dreams that we thought we were born for never materialize.
- Disappointments pile up all around us. And death, it seems, waits at the door. Laments are prayers to pray when we can't stand the brokenness of this world.
- [12 : 06] That's what the psalmist does here. Look in verse 1. He says, Oh God, God of my salvation, I cry out to you day and night. Let my prayer come before you.

Verse 9. He says again, Every day I call upon you, O Lord. I spread out my hands to you. I'm desperate for you.

Verse 13. But I, O Lord, cry to you. In the morning my prayer comes before you. We must learn to sing this song if we're going to make it.

We must have room for grief in our Christian life if we're going to make it. We will not always see. We will not always understand.

We must learn to lament. Point two, we know it's trouble. The world is full of trouble. Point two, we know it's trouble.

[13 : 05] Trouble in this world comes to us personally. You know, trouble doesn't enter our life in general categories. It comes to us in specific ways. Trouble doesn't hover over our lives like a storm cloud.

It rains on our house until the flashing gives way and the ceilings drip. Trouble is personal. The same is true here. He says, My soul is full of trouble.

Literally, the word there is sated with trouble. From the word we get satiated. The idea he's fed, fattened, and satisfied with trouble. Trouble is his only food.

That's all he eats. That's all he's fed. Eventually, it catches up. A diet of little Debbie's can't last forever. And the food of trouble makes him more and more malnourished.

Look down there in verse 3. My soul is full of trouble. Therefore, my life draws near to Sheol. I'm just fed trouble all the day long.

[14 : 06] And my life is grinding to a halt to Sheol. He continues to sink down. Verse 5. He says, I am set loose among the dead.

The idea is trouble picks him apart. Trouble singles him out. God sidelines him where everyone else is going along like there's no problem. And it sidelines him and singles him out.

Isn't that so often how trouble feels? The trouble seems to trouble us. Doesn't trouble anyone else around us. There we are alone. It sets him loose though. Look, it sets him loose among the dead.

It sets him loose from everything that is life. It sets him free, but only to die. Trouble attacks and promises the only freedom will come in death.

No wonder. In verse 18, look with me there. He concludes, My companions have become my darkness. Trouble has left him in a dark world.

[15 : 15] Darkness is all he knows. Darkness is all that really knows him. You can help but think of the Simon and Garfunkel tune, The Sound of Silence.

Hello darkness, my old friend. People talking without speaking. People hearing without listening. The whole song is saying what this psalm is saying.

Trouble comes for all and leaves us alone. But the worst trouble of the trouble is feeling God has abandoned you.

There is trouble that is worse than death. Feeling that God is no longer for you. And David is emphatic. Look in verse 6.

He says, You have put me in the depths of the pit. Your wrath, verse 7. You overwhelm me with your waves. You have caused my companion to shun me.

[16 : 16] You have made me a horror. It's you who has done this. Verse 16. Your wrath has swept over me. Your dreadful assaults destroy me.

You have caused, verse 18. My beloved and my friend to shun me. Your wrath, your ways. You are the one who has done this. He even says in verse 5.

If you look back there, he says, You remember me no more. You cut me off from the land. Now, the psalmist knows that God doesn't forget anything.

And he knows that. But what he's saying is, You remember me no more because you no longer act for me. You've put me out to pasture.

You've cut me off. You've begun to treat me like one of the Gentiles. You've put me out to death. You're no longer for me. Ever felt like that?

[17 : 16] He cries out in agony. Look in verse 10. He says, Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you?

Is your steadfast love declared in the grave and your faithfulness in abandon? Are your wonders known in the darkness or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? Do those who you forget praise you?

Do they render the praise due your name? I just love this. He doesn't merely want to be rescued. He wants to be remembered. He wants to be known. He wants to be loved.

He wants to praise God for good again. The musical Les Miserables tells the story of a revolution in France in the early 1800s.

But the story centers around Jean Valjean, an ex-convict, and his redemption.

[18 : 24] You know, much of the musical tells the story of this Valjean and his care for a young woman named Fantine and her child. I don't know if you've seen the movie or maybe seen the play or something like that.

If you want to know the best version, in my humble opinion, is PBS Masterpiece released one last year. It's not a musical, but it's very, very good at this story.

And so it's talking about this woman, Fantine, in the first part of the story. After losing her job and being forced to prostitution, to survive and provide for a child, Fantine sings the song, I Dreamed a Dream.

It's the saddest song I've ever heard. The song begins bright, discussing the day when dreams were coming true. She talks about how men were kind to her.

The world sang a song. Love would never die. These are the quote of her words. No song was unsung. No wine was untasted.

[19 : 26] But she said, then trouble came. She said, the tigers come at night. They tear your hope apart. They turn your dream to shame.

What she's talking about is her lover came and stole her innocence and left. And her life just spirals down from there. She loses work and begins working the streets.

It ends, I dreamed a dream. My life would be so different from this hell I'm living. Life has killed the dream I dream.

Trouble moves in personally just like that. We have dreams, don't we? We have longings. We have things we feel like we were born to do and want so much.

Love and kids and safety and a job where we feel important and valued. A father who cares. A long marriage. And most of our dreams are wonderfully good things. And yet life has a way of crushing them and leaving us alone.

[20 : 29] Forgotten by everyone, including it seems God himself. I'll never forget years ago, Kim and I visited the Holocaust Museum and I wept, which is probably no surprise to you, as I walked through that museum.

But as I came to the end, I was utterly broken. I read the quote there on the wall, the very last exhibit from Elie Wiesel, a Jewish man who endured the Holocaust.

And he wrote, Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night.

Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget the flames which consume my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nightly silence which deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.

[21 : 37] Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul. Turn my dreams to dust.

Never shall I forget these things, even if I am consigned to live as long as God himself. Never. Life is harsh.

And it's personal. It's pain. It's seemingly hand-tailored.

Point three. So we weep, but pray. We weep, but pray. You know, we don't see what the Lord's doing, so we weep.

You know, Ecclesiastes says there's a time to laugh and there's a time to weep. Weeping in your emotions are not an indication your faith is weak, according to Scripture. God has given you times to weep and your weeping is an indication that you see the world right.

[22 : 48] If you can stand and look down the barrel of these things without tears in your eyes and you have something wrong with you, is what Solomon would say. In many ways, now is the time to weep.

We weep and grieve the effects of COVID-19 on us globally. The spread of infection, the number of deaths, the bankrupting of good businesses and the dreaded long-term effects on our economy, the endless finger-pointing from the right and the left that just makes it miserable.

In so many ways, the hysteria and panic of so many living as if there is no God. We weep and grieve these things. This is not a funny or simple matter. It is deeply grieving to God and so we weep and grieve with Him.

Second, we weep and grieve the effect of COVID-19 on us personally. The loneliness, the canceled plans. I don't know how many things I've deleted off my Google calendar.

The extra burdens at home, the unemployment, the missed opportunities of celebrations, of vacations, of sports seasons, of family gatherings.

[23 : 51] All of those things we grieve. They're good things that have been snatched away from us. They're good things that we grieve the loss of them. You know, in so many ways, the memory verse of our quarantine may be verse 8.

If you look down there at the end of that verse, it says, I'm shut in so that I cannot escape. Right? That is our life right now. I'm shut in. I cannot escape. Help me get out of here.

I mean, that's what it feels like day in, day out. And so we weep. We grieve. My prayer is that after this weeping and grieving, we would see the world and other people differently.

That we would be changed. That America would be changed. Most importantly, we weep and grieve over our sin. I saw a tweet this week that we have for you from Jackie Hill Perry.

She said, I don't know about y'all, which I like that. Amen. I don't know about y'all, but God has been doing a work on me while I've been home. You never realize how much busyness can keep you from seeing all the idols your heart has been collecting.

[25 : 00] In so many ways, that's what it is right now. God's just pulling back the curtain to let us see how many idols we've accumulated in our hearts. And we weep.

We're a fool if we just weep about all the things outside of us and don't see what God's doing within us. We weep over our selfishness, our complaining, our finger pointing, our justifying, our bitterness, our lust, our worry that we think is okay because the virus is bad.

It's not okay. Our disregard for the vulnerable as a society, our frustration, our independence. We weep. We grieve our sin.

These things offend God. but we also pray. I just love this psalm for so many different reasons but the psalm contains no praise, no thanksgiving, no expression of trust and yet it's packed with prayer.

We've already noted all these but verse 1 he says, I cry out to you day and night. You know, we see the desperation in me. He addresses the Lord. Oh Lord, God of my salvation, I call to you.

[26 : 15] He says day and night. That's just a metaphor to say I call to you all the day long, all my life long. I am only praying. Now every day I call upon you.

Verse 9 and verse 13 he says, Oh Lord, I cry in the morning my prayer comes before you. I lay it before you, Lord, because if I lay it before you, you'll hear me. You'll love me.

You'll remember me. You'll respond to me. And so while his life is falling apart and breaking at the seams he's crying out to the Lord. And I love it. We weep but we also pray.

We refuse to cower in fear. We will pray. We will stand up and stand before the Lord and cry out to Him. He's a bigger God than all our trouble.

We pray because we want our weeping and our grief to bring forth godly fruit. Godly fruit. Worldly grief weeps over the worldly things we lost and there's lots of worldly things we're losing right now but godly grief weeps over eternal things and produces the fruit of true change, joy, and godly fear and wisdom so we weep and we pray.

[27 : 25] We want to learn from this trouble and so we weep and we pray. in 1987 the whole nation was listening I'm sure you remember or at least some of you that were born remember listening to the reports about Jessica McClure an 18 year old baby stuck in a well shaft in Midland, Texas.

Left in the backyard of her aunt's house for just a few minutes Jessica dangled her feet over a seemingly harmless eight inch opening in the ground. She tried to stand up fell into a shaft there she sat wedged above the water but 22 feet below ground.

All of America watched on in this rescue attempt rescuers dug a 29 foot vertical shaft beside the well and then a horizontal tunnel through solid rock to get to the shaft of the well.

It took way longer than anticipated 58 hours Jessica sat wedged in this shaft. 58 hours little Jessica was stuck on the ground with no food or drink.

Can you imagine the cries? Health professionals worried she might die of dehydration or shock inside this shaft. Finally the rescuers reached Jessica but they couldn't pull her out.

[28 : 56] she was wedged just perfectly that they couldn't get her leg out and get her out of this shaft and so they immediately went back to the health professionals talking about what could they do.

They went back down and checked her vitals I guess something that they dropped down and they checked her vitals one last time and then the health professionals gathered together and they said pull hard she does not have much more time you may have to break her to save her you may have to break her and thanks be to God they yanked her to safety and to life I don't know what God's doing in all this trouble but sometimes he must break us to save us he must slow us down and sideline us to see the idols at home he must stop all the gatherings of the whole world to see that the biggest trouble is not the trouble around us but the trouble of our sin against God the trouble this trouble is just a warning of bigger trouble that's coming for all those who are outside of Christ and references to death just fill this psalm shield the pit the death the grave the dark the abandoned the land of forgetfulness the depths it's not death though that we ultimately fear it's the just judgment of God and so this trouble is a trouble that God might be breaking us but he may be breaking us to save us because we're sinners we've gone astray our hearts are idle factories and the just judgment of God is coming for all those who are outside of Christ who experience the full fury of God's wrath and so we weep and pray for our eyes to be open and our hearts to be soft psalm 88 is placed in our

Bibles when life goes sideways and is trying to take us out we know he's working we don't see but we weep and we pray but you know what psalm 88 was also placed in our Bible so we would understand all the trouble our Lord Jesus endured so that we would ultimately never be alone today is Palm Sunday it is the Sunday in which the church remembers that Jesus Christ came he is the king who comes riding on a donkey and all the palm branches were lining the ground everybody was saying Hosanna the king the son of David has come and you know the story as the week slowly passed by the praise fell silent and the opposition rose up he was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief but there were no griefs like the griefs of this week he was arrested on false pretenses he was falsely accused and convicted he was mocked and beaten and spat upon he was betrayed and forsaken by every one of his friends he was strung up between two criminals and nailed to the cross but that wasn't the worst of it you know so many ways we trace the sorrows of holy week not to get overcome by all those sorrows but to see the greatest sorrow of all the sorrows of holy week which is the sorrow of Jesus

Christ hanging on the cross he was treated as a sinner as a thief as a murderer as an adulterer as a rebel as a blasphemer as an entitled brat as a complainer as a conceited punk he was ridiculed by the father you see we can't understand psalm 88 until we understand it was sung firstly by the lord jesus himself on the cross it is his prayer more than it's our prayer because he's the one who said your wrath is heavy on me you overwhelm me with all your waves you made me a horror your wrath has swept over me you've left me to the dark it's no wonder he cries out my god my god why have you forsaken me why have you left me why have you put me out one author said do you want to know what calvary is do you want to know what calvary is do you want to know what calvary is it is damnation and he took it lovingly rc sproul says that cry is the shriek of the damn is the cry all of us deserve and the all of us who don't hide in christ will scream why why why why all this so that you might never say you're alone through this little screen the free offer of the gospel of jesus christ and if you confess your sin and you hide in him you trust in his punishment on your behalf you will be saved you will be set free you will have no fear of future wrath than the confidence that you will spend eternity with god this is the eternal life that we know god now through jesus christ he has sent you know all this covid 19 seems like lousy timing i mean this is holy week easter is next week i mean virtual easter you gotta give me a break lord but maybe it's perfect maybe it's just what we need maybe it's perfect time to shift your eyes off all your trouble and onto his maybe it's perfect time to shift your eyes from digging into all of your heart and all of the news and into the heart of jesus christ who endured death on your behalf maybe it's the perfect time to shift our joy from circumstances to the finished work of jesus christ perfect for us to find our peace solely in his death and just because i love this quote so much i'm going to read this in conclusion because what we're talking about when we talk about jesus christ standing in our place and bearing the penalty for our sins just a term that the the penalty just means he was substituted to bear the penalty that stood against us j.i.

packer sums this up for us in a wonderful way he says the notion which the phrase penal substitution expresses is that jesus christ our lord moved by a love that was determined to do everything necessary to save us endured and exhausted the destructive divine judgment for which we were otherwise inescapably destined and so won for us forgiveness adoption and glory see to affirm penal substitution to affirm this doctrine is to say that believers are in debt to jesus christ specifically for this and that this alone not anything in our circumstances is the main spring of our joy peace and praise both now and for eternity that is what we celebrate this holy week that jesus christ was completely alone and made to be our sin and to bear the punishment for our sin that we might never be alone and might know so let's pray this prayer yes because life goes sideways and because this week's gonna hurt but let's pray it with jesus christ who suffered for us so that ultimately our darkest moment might never be a moment where god is not with us let's pray father in heaven we thank you we praise you god we thank you that you who are rich became poor so that in our poverty we might become rich that you who are almighty and wonderful and your eyes are too pure to look upon evil would take on our sin and suffer in our place lord we pray that this week you would well up in our hearts gratefulness for all that you've done in christ and lord we pray i pray that for everyone on the listening to this that you would help our hearts be more captivated with jesus christ than coronavirus this week lord help us protect us have mercy upon us god give us peace lord let us rest in the certainty that he who did not spare his own son will not withhold any good from us now we hide in you lord we need you and we trust you in jesus name amen you've been listening to a message given by walt alexander lead pastor of trinity grace church in athens tennessee for more information about trinity grace please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com