

“A Prayer from the Darkness”
Psalm 88
(Preached at Trinity, November 27, 2011)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. “And they all lived happily ever after.” We love stories that end this way. We are introduced to the main character or protagonist. The story builds to a crisis and then the resolution when everything is resolved, the good guy is saved and all is well. “And they all lived happily ever after.”
2. Most of the psalms follow this course. The psalmist is carried through the crisis of adversity and then restored to hope in God. But not Psalm 88. The psalmist describes the depth of his suffering and the psalm ends suddenly without him finding any relief; it ends with him remaining in despair.
3. **Psalm 88** has a double superscription. It is designated as a “Psalm for the sons of Korah” upon “Mahalath Leannoth” which points to a “song of affliction.” Then it is designated as written by Heman who was from the family of the Kohathites. Finally, it is described as a Maschil. By now we have become familiar with the term. There are 13 such psalms and we have seen it in psalms 52, 53, 54, 55. It describes a psalm full of contemplation or instruction designed to teach.
The afflictions of one believer can serve to teach other believers
4. This psalm has been called the saddest psalm in the entire Psalter. The psalmist describes the suffering of ill health that persisted his entire life without relief. He describes being abandoned by all of his friends and loved ones. And he describes a lifetime of unanswered prayers.
5. Yet in the depth of his hopelessness there is a glimmer of hope. While this psalm is filled with sadness it speaks comfort to those who spend their life in suffering and sorrow.
6. We have to remember that this life is often paved with sorrow. The river that flows to eternity is often a river filled with tears. Suffering causes us to look to God for our strength and increases the intensity of our prayers. The suffering of this life is a constant reminder of the glories of heaven.
Revelation 21:4 KJV - "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."
7. Commentators have described many ways to outline this psalm which suggests that there is no one single correct outline. In fact, the entire psalm follows one theme – that of suffering, misery, and despair.
But I’d like to set it before you in three divisions: Each follows the Hebrew pattern of poetic parallelism and repetition.

- I. His suffering described – **Verses 1-8**
- II. His prayer delivered – **Verses 9 - 12**
- III. His unceasing darkness and despair – **Verses 13-18**

I. His suffering described – **Verses 1-8**

A. It was relentless – **Verses 1-2**

1. Paul said concerning his thorn in the flesh that he prayed three times
This poor soul prayed continually day and night
We find the rich Hebrew poetic parallelism in this Psalm
Psalm 88:1 KJV - "I have cried day *and* night before thee."
Psalm 88:9 KJV - "LORD, I have called daily upon thee"
Psalm 88:13 KJV - "But unto thee have I cried, O LORD; and in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee."
NASB – “my prayer comes before you”
2. The indication is there was no relief and he implies that his prayers went unheard so he pleads to be heard - "incline thine ear unto my cry"

B. He was continually on the brink of death – **Verses 3-6**

1. This speaks of the severity of his condition. He thought at any time it would take his life
2. The word for “grave” in **Verse 3** is שְׁאוֹל – sheol which refers to the abode of the dead. It corresponds to the Greek word Hades.
 - a. The Hebrew saw the grave as the end of all things, the place where all things are forgotten.
In fact, **Verse 10** seems to deny the resurrection.
 - b. At the same time the Godly were not without hope and expressed confidence beyond the grave.
Psalm 23:1 KJV - "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou *art* with me"
Psalm 23:1 KJV - "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever."
3. Yet, the psalmist here felt like a dead man long forgotten
The word “free” in **Verse 5** implies free from contact – in other words, “forsaken” - NASB

C. He felt like he was under the condemnation and wrath of God – **Verse 7**

1. We are likely to equate our outward condition with the blessing or curse of God.
2. We should certainly examine our heart and search our conscience during times of affliction, but not all affliction is the chastening rod of God.

D. He felt abandoned by all – friends and loved ones – **Verses 8-9a**

1. Perhaps because of the vileness of his condition
Like with leprosy when they are removed from the community
2. Cancer and terminal patients have often expressed this sense of abandonment.
 - a. On one hand people don’t know what to say and so they tend to avoid contact
 - b. On the other hand, people don’t like to see the reality of our mortality. They want to be around young people full of vitality.

- E. Perhaps this is the case with you
1. Perhaps you are suffering affliction
 2. It may be physical, it may be spiritual
Perhaps you think you've committed the unforgivable sin. Perhaps you are feeling forsaken.
God's grace is always sufficient – He always stands ready to forgive. As we look to the cross of Christ we only see grace.
“But you don't know my situation.” I do know that God's grace is sufficient. In the greatest of our weakness God is strong.

II. His prayer delivered – **Verses 9- 12**

- A. We find a parallel to **Verses 1-6**
Psalms 88:9 KJV - "LORD, I have called daily upon thee"
1. Once again we find his persistence in prayer
 2. Once again we find him looking to the emptiness of the grave
- B. He places his argument before God
1. His first argument: **Verse 10**– “Wilt thou shew wonders to the dead?”
Psalms 88:12 KJV - "Shall thy wonders be known in the dark? and thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?"
 - a. The word “wonders” implies something to marvel at, something that causes man to stand in awe before the glory of God.
 - b. The consistent testimony of Scripture is that God is a wonder working God.
Exodus 15:11 KJV - "Who *is* like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? who *is* like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful *in* praises, doing wonders?"
Deuteronomy 26:8 KJV - "And the LORD brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders:"
Psalms 77:14 KJV - " Thou *art* the God that doest wonders: thou hast declared thy strength among the people."
 - c. God loves displaying His glory and splendor.
 - d. The psalmist's argument is if he is dead how shall he behold the wonders of God?
 2. His second argument: **V.10** – “shall the dead arise *and* praise thee?”
The psalmist looked upon death as the end of all things. Praise was directly connected with the Temple. How could a dead man enter the Temple for worship?
 3. His third argument: **V.11** – “Shall thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave? *or* thy faithfulness in destruction?”
 - a. How could he declare God's gracious covenant love from the grave?
 - b. The implication is that all of God's people make it a part of their existence to declare God's love and covenant faithfulness
 4. It is good to present our arguments before God. We aren't being irreverent or disrespectful to lay our case before the throne of God.

III. His unceasing darkness and despair – **Verses 13-18**

After all of the gloom and doom we expect the psalmist to close with something like, “but Thou art my Rock and my Fortress and I know that thou shalt deliver me from my time of affliction.” Instead, the psalmist descends into ever deeper depths of despair. It is full of repetition – of parallelism

- A. The psalmist lays out his third parallel plea
Psalm 88:13 KJV - "O LORD; and in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee."
- B. Again he cries out his sense of abandonment from God
Psalm 88:14 KJV - "LORD, why castest thou off my soul? *why* hidest thou thy face from me?"
- C. Again he stresses that he is near unto death
Psalm 88:15 KJV - "I *am* afflicted and ready to die from *my* youth up"
1. Often during times of affliction we can look back to better times to find comfort and assurance that God will deliver us.
 2. Not so with the psalmist. He looks back and sees only affliction.
 "I *am* afflicted and ready to die from *my* youth up"
 3. He cannot recall when things were better
 4. Whether or not this is so, during times of affliction we behave as if it is true. That we've never known God's blessings.
 A child's complaint: "You Never let me do Anything."
- D. Again he pleads before God as one suffering under the wrath of God
Psalm 88:16 KJV - "Thy fierce wrath goeth over me; thy terrors have cut me off."
1. There is no greater agony than the thought of God's displeasure
 2. The psalmist was certain that God was scourging him with His rod of affliction—only, it was unending, with no mercy.
 Wave after wave of torment:
Psalm 88:7 KJV - "Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and thou hast afflicted *me* with all thy waves."
 3. The truth is, in this life all suffering is tempered by mercy
- E. Again he weeps at his utter desolation and abandonment from the face of every lover and friend.
Psalm 88:18 KJV - "Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, *and* mine acquaintance into darkness."
1. The psalm ends in the doom and gloom of darkness
 2. CSB - **Psalm 88:18 CSB** - "darkness is my only friend."
 3. The final word of the psalm is מַחֲשָׁךְ machshak – “darkness”

Conclusion:

1. **Psalm 88** ends with no hope in sight.
Psalm 88:18 KJV - "Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, *and* mine acquaintance into darkness."
2. But the hope of **Psalm 88** isn't to be found in the last verse but in the first.
Psalm 88:1 KJV - "O LORD God of my salvation"
The entire psalm has been a lament of grief and despair. Yet, the experience of it all has been tempered by hope in God - "O LORD God of my salvation"
 - He suffered long but he prayed without ceasing.
 - He was continually at the brink of death but he never ceased remembering "O LORD God of my salvation"
 - He was forsaken by both friend and loved one, yet God did not cease to be his hope - "O LORD God of my salvation"
3. There is always hope for the people of God
Psalm 112:4 KJV - "Unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness: *he is* gracious, and full of compassion, and righteous."
4. **Psalm 88** is indeed a sad psalm. But it is not a psalm void of hope. We find in it a glimpse of Christ. He was forsaken and abandoned by all. He suffered greater than any human being has ever suffered, and yet He embraced the suffering.
Hebrews 12:1-2 KJV - "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset *us*, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, ² Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of *our* faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God."
5. We too can find great comfort in the purposes of God. If God had promised us a life free from suffering then in suffering we might be driven to despair. But we have no such promise.
 - A. In fact, the opposite is true. This life is filled with adversity.
This psalm displays unrelieved unrelenting suffering with darkness as the final word.
 - B. Yet the people of God are never forsaken. We can find hope in Christ.
Psalm 18:2 KJV - "The LORD *is* my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, *and* my high tower."
Psalm 27:1 KJV - "The LORD *is* my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the LORD *is* the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"
Psalm 28:7 KJV - "The LORD *is* my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him."
Psalm 94:22 KJV - "But the LORD *is* my defence; and my God *is* the rock of my refuge."
Hebrews 13:5-6 KJV - "*Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.* ⁶ So that we may boldly say, The Lord *is* my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me."
Psalm 88:1 KJV - "O LORD God of my salvation"

6. And so for the people of God there is a “happily ever after”