

Psalm 88

Topic

The psalmist describes his suffering
as being in total darkness

Title

"Hello Darkness, My Old Fiend"

Introduction

If you like to read books, it's getting harder to choose a good one. One estimate says that up to one million new titles are published each year.

Publishers try to entice you to read their books by putting endorsements on the back cover. If someone popular or knowledgeable, who you respect, endorses the book, you just might give it a one-in-a-million read.

In the Bible, we think of the Psalms as one book with 150 chapters. Let's imagine for a moment each Psalm is a stand-alone book on the shelf at Barnes & Noble. You're trying to decide which psalm to read. You grab Psalm 88.

If you looked on the back cover, these are the endorsements you'd read by reputable Christian commentators:

- Derek Kidner says, "This is the saddest prayer in the Psalter."
- H. C. Leupold says, "It is the gloomiest psalm found in the Scriptures... The psalmist is as deeply in trouble when he has concluded his prayer as he was when he began it."

- J.J. Stuart Perowne says, "This is the darkest, saddest Psalm in all the Psalter. It is one wail of sorrow from beginning to end."
- John Phillips says, "There is scarcely a glimmer of hope anywhere. It is full of dejection, despair, death. The very last word of the psalm is darkness."
- Marvin Tate says, "Psalm 88... reminds us that life does not always have happy endings."

Quick. Put that one back and grab Psalm 150.

Unless, of course, you, too, are in a dark time and feel as though you are as deeply in trouble when you have concluded your prayer as when you began it.

J. N. Darby said of Psalm 88, "one time this was the only Scripture that was any help to [me] because [I] saw that someone had been as low as that before [me]."

You're going to need Psalm 88; if not today, one low, dark day.

The psalmist mentions darkness twice. I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Look Through The Dark To Your Salvation, and #2 Live With The Dark In Your Supplication.

#1 Look Through The Dark To Your Salvation

(v1)

David did not write all of the psalms in the Book of Psalms. He wrote about seventy-five of them. Other authors include:

- Asaph, who wrote twelve.
- The sons of Korah, who wrote eleven.
- Solomon, who wrote two.

- Moses, who wrote one, and
- Ethan the Ezrahite, who also wrote one.

Forty-seven of the psalms are anonymous.

Then there's Psalm 88. Who is the psalmist in so much sorrow?

Psa 88:1 A Song. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah. To the Chief Musician. Set to "Mahalath Leannoth." a Contemplation of Heman the Ezrahite. O LORD, God of my salvation, I have cried out day and night before You.

Heman the Ezrahite, a descendant of Korah, is the most famous Bible character you've never heard of. Here is a synopsis of his life from one resource I consulted:

Heman was from from the family of Korah. He was the grandson of Samuel, the final judge of Israel who anointed King Saul and King David.

Heman's family was well known, mentioned in First Chronicles 25:4-6. His musical family of fourteen sons and three daughters was prominent during the reign of King David.

Heman and his family were present when the ark of the covenant was brought to Jerusalem: "All the Levites who were musicians - Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun and their sons and relatives - stood on the east side of the altar, dressed in fine linen and playing cymbals, harps and lyres. They were accompanied by 120 priests sounding trumpets" (Second Chronicles 5:12). Heman and the other Levites were formally dressed, sang, and played instruments at this time.

Heman worked closely with King David and is listed as one of three main musicians appointed by King David “for the ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals” (First Chronicles 25:1).

He was a songwriter and musician. He is named a "seer" in First Chronicles 25:5.

He was also a sage. It seems that Heman was still serving during the time of King Solomon, son of David. Heman was considered very wise. Solomon, the wisest of all, was compared to Heman: “He was wiser than anyone else, including Ethan the Ezrahite - wiser than Heman” (1 Kings 4:31).

Heman's only known song is Psalm 88, but he was no one-hit wonder. He had an amazing spiritual career as a Levite, a musician, a seer, a sage, a songwriter, a godly father, and a man of influence during the Golden Age of Israel.

He addressed God as, "O Lord, God of my salvation." It has been called "the only truly positive statement in the psalm." But it's a big one.

It's not just an opening line to Heman's prayer. It is his theology. It is what he *believes* that affects how he *behaves*.

Let's start with Heman's declaration, "God of my salvation." It's only four words, but worthy of many sermons.

It is a declaration that God saves. He works in history, through providence, to save them for eternity, and to deliver them along the way there.

Heman could cite Noah and his family, during the flood. Or the nation of Israel being freed from bondage in Egypt.

On a more personal level, he could cite Job - a man who suffered incredibly, in the will of God, who was then delivered.

Our God saves. But you'll notice that in each of the cases we mentioned, there was a careful measuring out of suffering before God delivered His saved people:

- Noah worked on the ark many decades amid the ridicule of his peers. After they were safe in the ark, it must have nonetheless been a wild water adventure, as the springs of the deep burst open, and the rains fell.
- Israelites cried out to God four hundred years before He sent them their deliverer. And when God sent him, *he was a baby*. After Moses had grown to 40 years old, it would still be another eighty years before his confrontation with Pharaoh. That confrontation at first led to greater hardship for a time. Finally the death angel came, slaying all the firstborn. Sure, Jews were safe inside their homes, protected by the blood of the Passover lamb. But that had to be frightening.
- Job's suffering lasted at least a month; probably even longer. We can deduce that from internal clues in the book. It undoubtedly seemed like an eternity to Job.

Heman knew God as the One Who saves. He might deliver in a month... Or over several decades... Or over several centuries. But since it is His nature to save, He can't not deliver you.

I don't think we can ever stress too much that God saves. While admittedly the rest of the psalm will express incredible suffering, God's salvation is more than just a high point; **it is the point.**

It is why the apostle Paul could declare, and remind us, "our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory..." (Second Corinthians 4:17).

No matter the intensity, and the duration, of your suffering, it is all a "light affliction... for a moment" compared to eternity.

We must always look at our lives with the future as our starting point. It gives our suffering context and meaning. And it fosters endurance - patient endurance that can be infused with grace.

Heman called God, "God of **my** salvation." While Heman did not have the fuller revelation of God we enjoy today, he believed in a personal, living God, Who had a relationship with him.

Heman wasn't saved merely because he identified with God's chosen nation. He knew God, and God knew him, and saved him the way we are all saved - by believing Him. By grace, through faith.

It is because Heman was grounded in God's personal salvation that he called God, "Lord." It's a word of trusting submission. The God of my salvation has lordship over my life, and I can trust Him to order it for my greatest good, and His greatest glory.

He sees further than I, down the path I'm on, into my future. He knows what is needful, and what is necessary.

In the SyFy genre, a character often goes backward, or forward, in time, to change something. At first, they are elated to see the effects of their efforts.

But soon they find that much more has changed, and usually it's for the worst, causing even more suffering.

We cannot possibly see the far-reaching effects some of our prayers might have if they were all answered the way we desire them to be at the time. It's why the understanding within which we pray must always be, "not my will, but Thy will be done."

"Thy will be done" isn't a cop-out. It's not added to our prayers because we don't have enough faith. It's there as a safety feature - so we don't ruin God's plans for us by demanding our own will.

As we read Heman's prayer, remember that through it all he was submitted to the will of God - submitted to the lordship of the God Who saved Him, and Who therefore must sooner or later deliver Him.

#2 Live With The Dark In Your Supplication

(v2-18)

I got to wondering what kind of adjustments our bodies would make if we suddenly had to live in near total darkness. One researcher claimed we would eventually adjust to a 48hour day in which we would stay awake for 36hours and sleep for 12hours.

They said you would experience terrifying hallucinations because your brain isn't used to not seeing objects you'd normally see in the light, so it would create its own.

Nyctalopia is the proper name for night-blindness, a condition making it difficult or impossible to see in relatively low light. It can be described as "insufficient adaptation to darkness."

We will all experience darkness at times; by that I mean spiritual darkness, as we find ourselves in some severe trial. We don't want to have insufficient adaptation to darkness. Psalm 88 is a great eye salve to prevent night-blindness.

Without it, you will hallucinate terrible thoughts about God, and about yourself, as your mind fills up the darkness with images of things that are not there.

As verse one ended, we read, "I have cried out day and night before you." It's what we might call applied theology. Because God is my salvation, I can nevertheless "see" through the dark by praying.

As we read the rest of the psalm, we see Heman praying.

Psa 88:2 Let my prayer come before You; Incline Your ear to my cry.

One commentator I read described the character of his upcoming prayer this way:

It seems that the psalmist here ransacks the vocabulary of gloom and bitterness to describe his hopeless plight. His is definitely a terminal case, he feels - as if he were on the critical list in the isolation ward of a hospital for incurables. The only thing left is the morgue, and it is only a matter of time before the sheet will be drawn over his face and he will be carted away.

If you think it is somehow wrong, or sinful, to be this low, remember Heman was no spiritual lightweight. I read you his resume. As Darby said in his quote, there are times it helps us to realize someone else, someone spiritual, was this low.

To borrow a line from the country song, we "have friends in low places." Heman may be the lowest, but there are others, scattered on the pages of both Testaments.

We don't know what Heman was suffering from, or with. I think it's good we do not know, because it allows us to relate to him in our suffering.

You know how people like to go to groups where the other people have experienced, or are experiencing, the same condition or illness? If we knew Heman's situation, we might not think we can relate.

Psa 88:3 For my soul is full of troubles, And my life draws near to the grave.

We want to be free from anxiety, and resting in the Lord. Suffering robs us of rest by multiplying troubles as we attempt to deal with it.

Heman's suffering was terminal. He had gone from thinking, "we're all going to one day die," to facing the prospect of his imminent death.

We're told to live each moment as if it will be our last. It might be great advice, but it's hard to apply. I believe I could die at any moment. But if I get a diagnosis I am definitely going to die soon, that's a whole lot more real than my philosophical perspective.

Psa 88:4 I am counted with those who go down to the pit; I am like a man who has no strength,

Psa 88:5 Adrift among the dead, Like the slain who lie in the grave, Whom You remember no more, And who are cut off from Your hand.

These Old Testament statements about "the pit" and "the grave" need to be understood in the context of what had been revealed by God to His people. There's no doubting that they had a limited knowledge of what happens after death.

Even so, David, a contemporary and a collaborator of Heman's, knew that after the baby he had produced with Bathsheba was dead, he would be united with him in the afterlife.

Job, who Heman was familiar with by his book, knew that his Redeemer was alive, and that He would stand upon the earth, in triumph.

I think Heman was lamenting that, if he died, what use was that? He would no longer be "remembered" by God in this sense: Someone else would take his place as a servant, writing songs and dispensing sage counsel.

He uses the analogy of soldiers "slain" in battle. They are no longer useful in the ongoing warfare.

Like a soldier whose fighting days were ended by death, Heman would be "cut off" from God's hand. God's hand would no longer be upon him, to use him as a tool of ministry.

We can easily relate to this sentiment. Whenever someone is sick, and we think it's premature, we can't see how their death serves God. We **can** see how their continued life would serve Him, so we pray that they would live to fight on as His soldier.

Psa 88:6 You have laid me in the lowest pit, In darkness, in the depths.

Psa 88:7 Your wrath lies heavy upon me, And You have afflicted me with all Your waves. Selah

Heman felt like he was already dead, and he attributed it to God's "wrath" lying heavy upon him.

First, cut him some slack. In the Old Testament, things were a lot more physical. By that I mean God had promised Israel material blessings if they obeyed, but physical discipline if they disobeyed. Heman was applying that principle to his own situation, and concluding he must be being disciplined.

Even today, with our fuller revelation of the grace of God, it is common for a believer to think that his or her suffering is none other than God's hand of discipline upon them.

You know, it can be; there *are* cases in the New Testament where God caused believers to be sick, or to die, as a discipline.

But they were in obvious, notable sin. While it's a good idea to search your heart in your suffering, chances are it isn't the wrath of God lying upon you.

It is because we live in a fallen world, who's god is the devil. Sickness and death will exist until the return of the King.

"Selah" seems to be a notation for the reader, or listener, to pause momentarily, and give what was just said or sung some further thought. Heman has just struck a note that needs our most serious contemplation.

We're told to Selah some more in the next set of verses:

Psa 88:8 You have put away my acquaintances far from me; You have made me an abomination to them; I am shut up, and I cannot get out;

Psa 88:9 My eye wastes away because of affliction. LORD, I have called daily upon You; I have stretched out my hands to You.

Psa 88:10 Will You work wonders for the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise You? Selah

Heman sees himself as a prisoner, "shut up," locked away in his cell, receiving no visits from his former "acquaintances."

How might we relate? When we suffer, others do care; they care a lot. But their lives generally go on. They have jobs to go to, dinners to cook, vacations to enjoy. The contrast is stunning. They are relatively free, while you are locked a cell of suffering.

When he says, "my eye wastes away," it's a poetic way of describing the effect his much crying is having on him. His eyes were constantly red with tears.

Once again Heman wonders what good his death can accomplish. It would seem only to detract from his otherwise important service to God.

We want to give every suffering, and every death, some profound earthly meaning. It's just not always possible to find an earthly meaning.

I'll tell you the most profound meaning of death: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints" (Psalm 116:15). A grand entrance is supplied into Heaven, as angels bear us home.

Nothing on earth can compare to our going home.

Psa 88:11 Shall Your lovingkindness be declared in the grave?
Or Your faithfulness in the place of destruction?

Psa 88:12 Shall Your wonders be known in the dark? And Your
righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

As a singer-songwriter, Heman extolled God's "lovingkindness,"
and His "faithfulness," and His "wonders." In death, he'd have no
more songs to write, to lead worshipping hearts to God.

We all want our lives, and especially our service, for God to
impact others. Heman wanted more time to serve the Lord.

Psa 88:13 But to You I have cried out, O LORD, And in the
morning my prayer comes before You.

Psa 88:14 LORD, why do You cast off my soul? Why do You hide
Your face from me?

This is Heman's version of the "Why" question, that asks for a
final solution to the problem of pain and suffering. Since God can
stop our suffering, why doesn't He?

It's the number one complaint of nonbelievers. They see God as
either unwilling, or as unable, to alleviate human suffering.

Sad that they cannot see He is longsuffering toward **them**, not
willing they perish, but that they receive salvation.

Our God suffered for us, in our place, to be the Savior of all men -
especially those who believe. He has a decisive plan to end all
suffering; but when it is implemented, it will also end all
opportunity for nonbelievers to be saved.

Psa 88:15 I have been afflicted and ready to die from my youth; I suffer Your terrors; I am distraught.

If there is a clue to Heman's affliction, no one can find it. Whatever it was, it had followed him through his entire life.

What this tells us is that, in some cases, you can have a lifetime of suffering, in the will of God.

It would seem Heman had made the most of his life, despite his affliction. But in his heart, this was his daily struggle.

Psa 88:16 Your fierce wrath has gone over me; Your terrors have cut me off.

Psa 88:17 They came around me all day long like water; They engulfed me altogether.

Another analogy, this time a shipwreck that everyday kept him thinking he was drowning.

In the 2014 feature film, *Edge of Tomorrow*, a soldier fighting aliens (played by Tom Cruise) dies every day, only to relive each day, the day restarting every time he dies. Of course, he figures out what to do, getting a little further each time, until he is victorious.

Heman started each day suffering, but there was no physical progress; no happy ending. His ship sunk every time.

With this, we've arrived at the point in a psalm where the psalmist gives us his climactic words of hope and strength. Here is what Heman chose as his climax:

Psa 88:18 Loved one and friend You have put far from me, And my acquaintances into darkness.

Not at all what we were expecting.

Heman seems to have outlived all those who were once dear to him. Do you detect a note of morbid sarcasm? It's as if he was suggesting an earlier death would have been preferred over an old age lived suffering and alone.

We are fickle, are we not? We can simultaneously want to be healed to live a longer life, and wish we had died sooner.

We last see Heman in "darkness." But I think we understand he saw through the dark, to God. Verse one more than makes up for the darkness of the next seventeen verses by its declarations of God's salvation.

Heman never quit praying.

Praying may or may not alter the outcome; that's on God to determine. But whatever the physical outcome, spiritually it causes me to see my great and mighty God, and to see beyond into the glorious future He has in store, filled with His light.

There may not be a way out of your troubles, but God is the way **through** them.

Psalms 88 isn't hopeless. For one thing, when we are called upon to suffer, I'm encouraged that Heman suffered before us, and left a record, which in-and-of-itself encourages us.

For another thing, Heman reminds us that this present world is passing away. We are looking forward to the city whose builder and maker is God; and to an eternity where there will not be so much as a single tear.

Don't succumb to night-blindness. See through your darkness, in prayer, to the God Who saves. His deliverance must come; and if it isn't in this life, it certainly will be in the next, where angels bear you to Him and to a grand entrance into Heaven being prepared for you.