

Psalm Sundays

Text
Psalm 88

Topic
**The psalmist portrays his lifelong suffering
as a palpable darkness**

Title
"Hello Darkness, My Old Friend"

"I've had mosquito bites that were more passionate than this undead, unrequited, and altogether unfun pseudo-romantic riff on *Romeo and Juliet*."

The critic who penned that was Marc Salov, of The Austin Chronicle. The movie - *Twilight*.

Some movies are so bad, the reviews are the best part.

"I'd rather wake up next to a severed horse head than ever watch *Gotti* again. The finished product belongs in a cement bucket at the bottom of the river."
Johnny Oleksinski, New York Post.

Catwoman is considered by critics to be one of the worst movies ever made. Keith Phipps of the AV Club wrote, "The film could have turned out worse, but only via the addition of an accident in which the actors caught on fire."

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Bible commentators reviewing Psalm 88 are not sarcastically critical, but their words *are* quite stunning:

- 👤 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."

That makes it a perfect psalm - an appropriate song to sing - for our own times of darkness and despair.

Some people, important people, are saying that our entire country is in just such a dark time. US Surgeon General Jerome Adams told FoxNews host Chris Wallace, "This is going to be the hardest and the saddest week of most Americans' lives, quite frankly. This is going to be our Pearl Harbor moment, our 9/11 moment, only it's not going to be localized. It's going to be happening all over the country. And I want America to understand that." You're going to need Psalm 88; if not today, for what has befallen us all, for sure on some tomorrow when darkness assaults your own life.

The psalmist mentions darkness twice. If you are listening closely, there is light in his darkness - light that overcomes.

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I'll organize my thoughts around two points: **#1 There Is Light For You To Look Past The Darkness**, and **#2 There Is Light For You To Live In The Darkness**.

#1 - There Is Light For You To Look Past The Darkness (v1)

I know some of you are binge watching disaster movies. There's a line in *World War Z*, uttered by the top physician working on a vaccine. He says, "Mother Nature is a serial killer. No one's better [or] more creative."

I know some of you are binge-reading the Psalms. There's a line in Psalm 88 that must be meditated upon. It is in verse one. It's right at the beginning, highlighted as it were, because things were so bad the psalmist could not wait to express it.

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...

That's a lot of introduction before we get into it. Who was the psalmist that was in so much sorrow?

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 the grandson of Samuel, the final judge of Israel who anointed King Saul and King David.

His musical family of fourteen sons and three daughters was prominent during the reign of King David. They were present when the ark of the covenant was brought to Jerusalem. Heman worked closely with King David and is listed as

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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. Heman was considered very wise. Solomon, the wisest man of all, was compared to Heman: “He was wiser than anyone else, including Heman” (First Kings 4:31).

Heman's only known song is Psalm 88, but he’s no one-hit wonder. It remains at the top of the charts for sad songs to sing when suffering.

Psa 88:1 ... O LORD, God of my salvation, I have cried out day and night before You.

This has been called "the only truly positive statement in the psalm."
Since we know the Lord as full of grace and mercy, there must be sufficient hope in it for the darkest night, the deepest valley.

"God of my salvation." It's only four words in English, but it’s worthy of many sermons. Sometimes less is so much more.

There is a God Who saves. Do you realize that you need saving? Not from a global pandemic, but from something far worse: A universal preexisting spiritual condition.

Your preexisting condition is sin. If you want to sound more technical, I’ve heard it called SOAD - Son of Adam Disease.

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Everyone conceived inherits a sin nature from our original parents. We see it manifest as we commit individual acts of sin throughout our lives.

God gave Adam and Eve a choice. You know why: He had to give them a real choice because love cannot be forced; it must be freely chosen.

They chose badly, sinning, and thereby plunging God's perfect creation into ruin.

Is COVID-19 a judgment from God? No; it is par for the course here on the fallen earth. It is the most recent evidence that mankind needs saving. I don't say that in a way to minimize it's impact. But for our purposes today, it is proof that we brought sin into God's perfect Creation, and that we need saving.

Enter - *literally* - Jesus. He was God in human flesh, God incarnate. He came to offer Himself as a Substitute for the human race. He died on the Cross to draw mankind to Himself. He is the Savior of the world - **not** the one responsible for evil in the world.

And here is the Easter message: Jesus rose from the dead, proving His sacrifice was sufficient to save any and all who believe Him.

I don't think we can ever stress too much that God saves. While admittedly the rest of the psalm will be filled with tears, 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, or the duration, of your suffering, it is **all** a "light affliction... for a moment," compared to eternity.

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We must always be looking at our lives from our promised future. It gives suffering its context. And it fosters endurance - patient endurance that can be infused with grace.

Heman identified the Lord as "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.

If you are not a believer; if you have not been saved; you will die in your preexisting spiritual condition. You will be committed to eternal, conscious torment in the absolute darkness of the Lake of Fire.

Salvation is a "light" in many ways, including these two we've discovered in these few words:

- 👤 It illuminates a path that will always end with our glorious entrance into Heaven.
- 👤 It renders all our troubles a light affliction that is but for a moment.

Heman established his base, his foundation, for "[crying] out day and night before You." The remainder of his song describes his crying.

#2 -There Is Light For You To Live In The Darkness (v2-18)

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

Darkness serves as an apt description, not just of our sufferings, but of the true condition of our planet. The apostle John said of Jesus' coming to earth that He was the singular light shining in the darkness (John 1:5).

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We can't afford to have insufficient adaptation to the darkness. Think of verse one as the eye-salve that counters spiritual night-blindness. These remaining verses are the application.

"I have cried out day and night before you." Because God is my salvation, I can nevertheless "see" Him through the dark. He is thus my companion and comforter at all times.

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

One commentator I read described the character of Heman's 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. His song is a sad song we will all need to sing.

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].**"

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

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

Heman's suffering was terminal. He faced the prospect of his imminent death.

We're told to live each moment as if it will be our last. It's great advice, but it's hard to apply. I believe I could die at any moment. Once I get a diagnosis I am definitely going to die, or that I am diseased, 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 thus far revealed by God to His people. There's no doubting that they had a limited knowledge of what happens after death.

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 and seeing into the future.

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.

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

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

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 might 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.

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" is an unknown musical notation. Heman has just struck a note that needs our most serious contemplation.

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

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

When we suffer, others do care; they care a lot. But their lives generally go on. The contrast is stunning. They are relatively free, while you seem locked a cell of suffering.

One thing COVID-19 can teach you: You have some small experience of what it is like for shut-ins, whose whole experience of living *is* sheltering at home.

When he says, "my eye wastes away," it's a poetic way of describing the effect his much crying is having on him.

Heman wondered what good his death could 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. Establishing funds or foundations in someone's memory - that's great. But it isn't the reason they died.

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?

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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, leading worshipping hearts to God. It would be the day the music died.

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 about 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 beyond suffering that God is longsuffering toward **them**, not willing they perish, but that they receive His offered salvation.

God has a decisive plan to end all suffering. He's put it in writing, in the last book of the Bible.

When it is implemented, in full, it will end sin and death and suffering for eternity. Believers will be in glorified bodies, fit for eternity. We will have genuine free will but not be capable of sin.

But 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.

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If there is a clue to Heman's affliction, no one can find it. Whatever it was, it's as lifelong.

You can have a lifetime of suffering, in the will of God.

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 progress. If anything, his situation worsened.

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.

Heman laments he outlived all those who were once dear to him. Not at all what we were expecting. It almost reads as unfinished.

We last see Heman in "darkness." But we know that he saw through the dark, to God.

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In *The Lord of the Rings*, Galadriel gifts Frodo with a vial that, as she put it, would be “a light in dark places.” It saved him in Shelob’s lair. It enabled him to live in that darkness.

When you are in the dark, don't succumb to night-blindness. See through your darkness to the God Who saves. Live in it with the light provided for your journey home.

- 👤 If Jesus is your Savior... He’s coming, any moment, for you. Keep looking up. And look down, as it were, upon the earth from your spiritual position of being already seated in Christ in the heavenlies.
- 👤 If Jesus is not your Savior - personally - what are you waiting for? When the Gospel is presented, He is the light freeing your will to respond to His gracious invitation.

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