

The Saddest Psalm

Psalm 88

Turn to Psalm 88. Heman, the composer of this psalm, had three troubles. One, he was sick enough that death was a real possibility; two, all his friends had left him; and three, he despaired.

When children of God have troubles we are in some ways worse off than if we were not God's children. One, we have the same losses and discouragement as those without God.

But because we call God "Father" we have a second problem – how does God fit into this? Scripture says God is powerful and he saves and he loves his children. He's my shepherd who protects me, he answers prayer. So, what went wrong? Does he not love me? Does he not see me? Does he not even exist? Is it my sin, is God punishing me for my sin?

So that's the second problem, which only God's children have – what about God? The first is the painful situation itself, and the second is the painful God problem.

Scripture takes this kind of experience seriously. Scripture does not make light of our discouragement and pain, Scripture does not say "get over it." God gives a voice to people in the hard times, and invites them to complain to him.

Psalm 88 is the best example of this in the Psalms. They call this kind of psalm a "lament" psalm, and of the six or seven different kinds of psalms in the Psalter, lament is by far the most common. The next two Sundays I intend to cover Psalm 19 and Psalm 139, two much more positive psalms.

The Psalter (the book of Psalms) has all these different kinds of prayer songs. At any given time among God's people, some believers are praying, "How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" and others are praying "I love the LORD for he heard my voice, he heard my cry for mercy." Psalms lead us in both kinds of prayer.

Now to Psalm 88. Three times in this psalm Heman reports his prayers, in vv1, 9, and 13. We'll take these prayer reports as dividing the psalm into three stanzas. Each stanza has a prayer and a lament, which in ordinary language is a complaint to God.

First Prayer Report – day and night (vv1-2)

*LORD, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you.*

<sup>2</sup> *May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry.*

Heman prays a lot. Day and night. He does not say what he prays, it's not complicated, he just cries out to God. This whole psalm is what he prays. But he opens with: *LORD, you are the God who saves me.*

From the rest of the psalm it is not clear why Heman thinks the LORD is the God who saves him, because he's not getting help. Heman has a lot of faith, remarkable faith. And that is why this dark prayer is in our psalms, and that's why godly Israelites sang this.

Heman knows that if he gets help, it will be because God helps him. But as far as Heman can tell, God is not listening. *May my prayer come before you, God. Turn your ear to my cry.*

### First Lament (vv3-8)

<sup>3</sup> *I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death.*

<sup>4</sup> *I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength.*

<sup>5</sup> *I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.*

Vv3-5 – In these lines Heman tells God what his life is like. “My soul is troubled and my body is nearly gone” seems the best way to summarize. People count me as someone on the way out, they have already set me apart with the dead. To them, it's over, they're just waiting for me to go. And I'm almost where you can't help me either.

<sup>6</sup> *You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.*

<sup>7</sup> *Your wrath lies heavily on me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.*

<sup>8</sup> *You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape; <sup>9</sup> my eyes are dim with grief.*

Vv6-8 –God. Your wrath is on me, your waters flood me, you took my friends from me. I am trapped and cannot see. In the last few lines of the psalm, Heman repeats these four things – your wrath, your waters, you took away my friends, I'm in darkness.

It never occurs to Heman anywhere in this psalm that he's done something wrong to deserve this, or that he's brought it on himself. He mentions God's wrath here and in v16, but he does not repent of any sin or ask forgiveness. But because of all the suffering God has brought into his life, he assumes God is angry at him.

Did you notice that Heman assumes all his troubles come from God? We usually blame our troubles on people. We blame ourselves, or we blame others. Have you got trouble you assume is your fault? Have you got trouble that you assume is someone else's fault?

Has it occurred to you to hold God responsible? What would it take for us to blame God for the hard things in our lives? If we were ill and dying and our friends left us because it was hard for them to be near us, we would have a lot of bad things to say about those friends. I've heard Christians talk like that, often. I think I would too, if it happened to me. We never blame God.

But Heman puts it squarely in God's lap. You have taken from me my closest friends and you have made me repulsive to them. In v18, you have taken from me friend and neighbour. All of it is straight from God. You overwhelmed me with your waves.

I urge you to pray like this. Why would we not? Is God not sovereign? Are these things not in his hand? Or are we too righteous, too polite, to speak to God like this? If so, we do not understand our God and do not pray properly. We have assumed something false, which goes against clear teaching of Scripture.

The Psalms, this and many others, leave us no doubt about this. We hold God responsible for the darkness and hardship in our lives. Which we all have in our lives. Have you asked God why he's doing this to you, and asked him to change it? Why not? Not doing so is lack of faith and lack of relationship. Ps 88 is to teach us, it is a model, use it.

Let's talk about complaining to God. Israel got in trouble in the wilderness for complaining, again and again. *They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done, Moses, bringing us out of Egypt?"* Ex 14.

*But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses [not God]. They said, "Why did you, Moses, bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?"* Ex 17

The biggest problem is that Israel held Moses responsible not God. If they had cried out, "God, we're thirsty and we need water, why have you not given us water?" they'd have been fine. If they'd have said to Moses, "Tell God we're thirsty and need water, ask why he's not giving us water," they'd have been fine. Tell God! Take your complaint to God! Make God responsible!

When we Christians are in trouble, we talk like atheists. "The problem is my body, my friends, my church, my doctors, my enemies, my employer, my family." "No problem with God?" "Oh no, not God, God is wonderful, I love God, but he has nothing to do with my troubles."

"I am in despair because of my body and my friends and my enemies and my troubles. But those don't affect my relationship with God." That is foolish thinking, not what Scripture teaches. If that's how we think, according to the book of Psalms we are living in a dream world and we have no faith. God wants a real relationship with us.

Heman the Ezrahite is as far from that as you could get, Heman said, "God, you've done all this to me." And God liked Heman's prayer-song so much that he made sure it was kept for thousands of years for all his children to learn from and to sing and pray. So learn.

### Second Prayer Report – every day, LORD, to you (v9b)

*I call to you, LORD, every day; I spread out my hands to you.* Heman tells God again how much he prays. To Heman it makes no sense that prays to a God that saves, but he gets no relief.

Heman does not understand that, but that's why he keeps reminding God about his prayer. No one understands why God does not answer. The Psalms do not answer that, and neither can I.

Second Lament (vv10-12)

<sup>10</sup> *Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do their spirits rise up and praise you?*

<sup>11</sup> *Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction?*

<sup>12</sup> *Are your wonders known in the place of darkness,  
or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?*

Heman has some physical illness that will take his life if God does not act soon. So Heman bargains with God. He would like to have a chance to stand up in the congregation and fulfill his oath and tell everyone how wonderful God is. Heman tells this to God. If you save me, I'll give you praise, if you don't save me, I'll be silent. It's in your own interest, God, to come help me.

Heman has great faith, remarkable faith, that's why this is in the Psalter. Remember that he opened with *LORD, you are the God who saves me*. Here in vv10-12 Heman knows that God does wonders (mentioned 2x), God does things that earn him praise, he's a God of love, he's a faithful and righteous God.

Heman does not know why God has brought these awful things into his life, and he does not know why God won't answer his prayers. But he knows that his God is a loving faithful God who saves and does wonders. And that's why he keeps praying.

Third Prayer Report – I cry to you, in the morning my prayer comes to you (v13)

<sup>13</sup> *But I cry to you for help, LORD; in the morning my prayer comes before you.*

He prays day and night, he prays every day, he prays in the morning.

Third Lament (vv14-18)

<sup>14</sup> *Why, LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?*

<sup>15</sup> *From my youth I have suffered and been close to death;  
I have borne your terrors and am in despair.*

<sup>16</sup> *Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me.*

<sup>17</sup> *All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me.*

<sup>18</sup> *You have taken from me friend and neighbor—darkness is my closest friend.*

V14 – why? Only once does Heman ask why. The real prayer is not that God would answer a question, but that God would save him.

Heman does not even consider that's he's done something wrong to bring this on himself. Neither his guilt nor his innocence are mentioned at all. He does not consider that this is his fault. God likes that about Heman. That's why this is in the Psalms. Like the book of Job, the lament psalms normally assume that the suffering person did not bring them on himself.

V15 – *from my youth* – this has always seemed to me the saddest line of this psalm. *From my youth I have suffered and been close to death.* This is Heman’s whole life. He’s been sick his whole life, barely hanging on, and scared and distressed the whole time.

Vv16-18 And again he says God did this. In v15 and again v16 he speaks of terror. *I have suffered your terrors* (15), *your terrors have destroyed me* (v16). He’s afraid. Because he does not have faith? No, he’s afraid because God has sent terrifying things into his life.

We have the same four troubles in vv16-18 as we had in vv6-8: God’s wrath, flood, loss of friends, trouble seeing (here from darkness).

Heman’s life had not gotten better by time the psalm ends. God might have done something later, but not during this psalm.

What does this teach us about praying to God?

First, notice the heading to this psalm: “A song. A psalm of the Sons of Korah. For the director of music. According to *mahalath leannoth*. A *maskil* of Heman the Ezrahite.”

The heading is full of musical instructions. On a regular basis Israelites sang this to God as a congregational song. And on the same Sabbath they sang happy thankful songs. Psalm 88 is worship song just like the praise songs, because it is full of faith that honours God.

Second, tell God what’s wrong with your life. Some of us don’t tell anyone, some of us tell only other people. Both are wrong. According to Psalm 88, we tell God in front of other people. If you are not talking to God about the hard things in your life, why on earth not?

Third, make God responsible. Heman was sick, and not getting better. He considered that entirely God’s doing. He was repulsive to his friends. God had done that to him. His friends had left him, which was God’s doing. He was often terrified, because God overwhelmed him with terror. You, God, have put me in the lowest pit.

He did not think his troubles were his doing, and he did not think his troubles were the fault of others. God alone was responsible, and God loved Heman for that!

There is a theological tension in psalms like this. On the one hand, since Ps 88 and others like it are in the Bible, we learn that this is part of the normal experience of God’s people. We should not be surprised. Nothing has gone terribly wrong, God’s people have had times like this from the start.

On the other hand, the whole psalm IS surprised. How can my life be so hard when I have a God who saves and to whom I pray? Something has gone very wrong – this can’t possibly be normal.

How can I have a faithful God who loves his people hears prayer and does wonders, but when I pray to him I get no relief? And that is why Heman keeps praying, which is why God gave us this psalm.

*Father in heaven, among us are people who are flooded with troubles from you. We have prayed to you about these things, but you have turned away. You have sent physical illnesses that you would not heal. You have taken away our friends and loved ones, and sent loneliness. You have sent us fears and anxieties that plague us. Why, God, have you left us in these hard places? We pray to you now about these things. May our prayer come before you. We know that you are the God who saves, the God who loves and does wonders, the God who earns praise. We all have parts of our lives that show your kindness and faithfulness to us. But at other times we are overwhelmed with troubles. Show us your wonders, God, so that we can give you praise.*

*Thank you for giving us Heman's sad prayer. You have shown us that his kind of praying pleases you and honours you, and that your people should pray this way. We ask for help to pray as he prayed. Amen.*

Added Note: Counselling and the Psalms [I did not have time to do this in the message, and am not sure I'd have done it had there been time. I'd have to change churches to make this work, and that I cannot do, though we are inching in this direction.]

Counselling is a worthy discipline. It is good to have people who are trained to help us sort out our personal disorders and relational problems. I do not know why going to a counsellor should be different than going to a doctor or a physio-therapist.

My question: what about before counselling? Counselling has been around for three or four decades. God's people have been around for three or four millennia, and so have human troubles. What did God think his people would do about their troubles before there was counselling? There must have been something. The crises and loss that cause personal and relational problems have been around for as long as God's people. And God has cared a long time. What were his people to do before counselling? How did they deal with their pain? That's the real question.

Ultimately of course I do not know. But surely the answer is in the Scriptures, and an important part of the answer is in the Psalter, particularly the lament psalms. Ps 88 was a congregational song; the title leaves no doubt about that. Faithful Israelites found it meaningful to sing this song and others like it to God. It is an individual lament, one person in great pain and despair, but the whole congregation sings and prays this together. Weep with those who weep.

It is no magic solution, but counselling is no magic solution either. So imagine a congregation of God's people singing and praying Ps 88 along with the anxious and despairing, and also singing and praying Psalm 116 (for example) with the rescued and restored, all in the same gathering. Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:15). This would be an important part of how God intended his people to deal with pain before there were counsellors. Let us encourage our churches in this direction.