

A pastor once asked me, "when would you ever sing Psalm 88?
How can you sing that song in the worship of God?"

I replied,

"Have you never had anyone in your congregation who struggles with depression?"

Often, we think of church music solely in terms of "praise" –
and while we are certainly to praise God in singing,
that is not the whole of our musical calling.

We are also called to lament and weep and mourn before the LORD.

Yes, we are to rejoice with those who rejoice.

But we are also to weep with those who weep.

But his question got me thinking –
because what he was struggling with is a common problem in our day:

we have bought into the modern myth that religion is supposed to make you feel better.

The religion of the cross is not really about making you "feel better" –
at least not right now!

Walter Brueggemann rightly says that Psalm 88
is "an embarrassment to conventional faith." (*The Message of the Psalms*, 78)

After all, Psalm 88 is a song from the pit –
it is the song of our Lord Jesus Christ from the belly of Sheol,
as he was abandoned by his friends –
abandoned by his family –
and even forsaken by God the Father.

Introduction: The Title

A Song. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah. To the choirmaster: according to Mahalath Leannoth. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

This morning we heard about the destruction of Jerusalem in one line.
Ezekiel could go on at length about all sorts of things,
but the most important event of his whole ministry
passes in a sentence!

In one sense, Psalm 88 might sound like it has nothing to do with Ezekiel 33.
Psalm 88 has often been taken as a personal lament.

But as it takes its place in Book III of the Psalter,
and as it is labeled a Psalm of the Sons of Korah,
we should remember that Psalm 88 is surrounded by Psalms of exile.

And so while I have no speculation over when it was written or why,
I can confidently assert that it is a Psalm of exile.

In fact, it is preeminently *the* Psalm of exile,
and for hundreds of years it was sung in the worship of God
by those who were exiles –
who felt deeply in their own lived experience
that Psalm 88 was *theirs*.

Psalm 88 is the only Psalm in the whole Psalter that ends in darkness and death.

I used to say that after the first line there is no hope in the Psalm –
but that is not quite true.

The whole Psalm is tinged with a *very faint* glimmer of hope,
because in the midst of despair and depression and death

I call on you.

From the pit – from the depths of the grave – we call upon the name of the LORD!

But Psalm 88 is also said to be “to the choirmaster.”

Augustine rightly points out that if Christ is the singer of the Psalm,
then we are the choir – those who sing in response to the cantor.

(In the early church, the Psalms were often chanted by a cantor,
rather than sung by the whole congregation,
and the congregation would respond to the Psalms with a refrain.

They didn’t have “hymnals” or “psalters” in those days,
so anything that the congregation was to sing had to be memorized.)

“Let us therefore now hear the voice of Christ singing before us in prophecy,
to whom his own choir should respond either in imitation or in thanksgiving.”

A note on structure:

Psalm 88 has three parts.
Each begins with a cry to the LORD,
is centered on a reflection on death and the grave,
and ends in darkness.
But unlike many, many other psalms,
there is no affirmation that God has heard.

I cry out – three times –
and yet there is no answer.

Or, maybe there is an answer!
The first and the third part also end with a statement
that God has *caused* my friends and family to shun me.

After I have cried out to you, and pled with you to hear me,
your only answer is to turn my loved ones against me!

1. Help! (88:1-9a)

a. I Cry Out Before You, O LORD (v1-2)

¹*O LORD, God of my salvation;*
I cry out day and night before you.

²*Let my prayer come before you;*
incline your ear to my cry!

There are more than 20 Psalms that speak of how the singer cries out to the LORD.
In virtually every case, there is some reference to how the LORD *has* heard,
or *will* hear.
Psalms 5, 17, 18, 22, 27, 28, 30, 34, 40, 57, 61, 77, 86, 89, 106, 119, 130, 142, 145
all have some explicit statement either of past faithfulness or future deliverance.
Psalm 39 is the only other Psalm where the cry of the Psalmist has no answer.

These Psalms are essential for us to sing –
because we need to understand that in the Christian life
there are days like this!

b. Because My Life is a Living Death (v3-7)

And that suffering is described in verses 3-7, as the psalmist gives 12 descriptions of death:

³*For my soul is full of troubles,* [“life is filled, saturated, with disastrous suffering”! (Kraus, 193)]

and my life draws near to Sheol. [the realm of the dead]

⁴*I am counted among those who go down to the pit;*

I am a man who has no strength,

⁵*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.

The description gets progressively worse:

it's bad enough to draw near to Sheol,
but to be "like the slain that lie in the grave" is worse;
though it is even worse to be forgotten by God,
cut off from your hand.

So far the descriptions have focused on my condition – but in v6 he turns to what *God* has done:

⁶*You have put me in the depths of the pit,
in the regions dark and deep.
7 Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves.*

Selah

It's not just that I am suffering.
It's that *you* have put me here,
in the nethermost depths of the earth.

It's not just the grave – but the uttermost regions of Sheol –
the worst place in the underworld –
utterly forsaken by God and under his wrath and curse.

Rather than speculate on what the author was going through at the time,
I would rather point out how many uses this Psalm would have!

It could be sung as a lament over the destruction of Jerusalem –
as the exiles had been banished into the realm of death –
into the pit of captivity.

In Psalm 87 we sing of the glory of Zion.
In Psalm 88 we are banished from that glory
and dwell in darkness.

We are alone – far from Jerusalem – far from our glorious home –
far from the presence of God and his promises.
And you have done this!

It also certainly works as an individual lament.
When you are faced with depression, despair, when everything goes wrong,
Psalm 88 reminds you that you are sharing the experience
of the Lord Jesus Christ.
Whether you are experiencing alienation from friends,
or suffering of mind or body;
whether cancer is ravaging your body,
or your husband or wife is having an affair,
Psalm 88 speaks to all the most devastating situations in life.

Of course, what it says may not sound very encouraging!

Because it says that God has done this.

“You have put me in the depths of the pit.”

“Your wrath lies heavy upon me.”

Some would prefer to say that God doesn’t do this.

They would say that God would never put someone in this situation.

But think about how Psalm 88 would sound then:

“I am in the pit because of my enemies.

I know is that you didn’t do this to me.

You have the power to get me out –

to rescue me from my enemies,

but for some strange reason you won’t do it,

and so I’m still sitting here.”

If God does not “do” suffering and pain and humiliation –

if it is wrong to say that *God* did this to me –

then Psalm 88 would turn into a screeching cry of anger against God!

(and it does not surprise me that some have interpreted Psalm 88 in that way –

because they don’t pay attention to verse 6-7!)

But because the Psalmist understands that God *does* bring suffering and pain and humiliation,

he comes to God and says plainly and simply “*you* have done this.”

Notice that the Psalmist does not say *why* God is doing this.

Sometimes we don’t know.

Sometimes it’s obvious that God has brought suffering and pain

because of something we have done.

But other times, we don’t know.

How will you respond when God is silent in the face of suffering and anxiety?

The Psalmist does not shake his fist against God in rage.

But he does speak plainly and honestly to his God.

And in verses 8-9 he puts it even more starkly:

c. And You Have Caused My Friends to Shun Me (v8-9a)

⁸*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;
⁹ my eye grows dim through sorrow.*

It's not just that I'm suffering.
It's not just that you have done this to me.

But you have also caused my companions to shun me –
to go far away from me.
I am abandoned and alone *because of you!*

If you read this Psalm purely as an individual lament you will miss something here.

The language used here of causing to go far
is also used in Ezekiel 11 to refer to the exile.
And when he says “you have made me a horror to them” –
that word “horror” is Ezekiel’s “abomination”
(which Ezekiel uses 43 times)

He is not merely saying that they are horrified in some general sense.
He is saying that my companions shun me – you have caused them to shun me –
because you have made me an abomination to them.
There are very strong religious overtones to this word!

Likewise, the language of being “shut in” is the exact form used by Jeremiah
when he was imprisoned by the king during the siege by Babylon. (Jer 32:2)

At the same time, you can also see lots of parallels between Psalm 88 and Job.

Job 19 uses very similar language.
And we shouldn't be surprised.
After all, the same lesson that God teaches in Job
is the same lesson that Israel must learn.
- and the same lesson that we must learn:

There is no way to glory except through the cross!

Psalm 88 is a song of the pit – because it is a song of exile.
Sure, it works for those who are facing a “personal pit” –
but it is appropriate for any time and any people (this side of glory)
because the only way to glory is the way of the cross.

And so you see the whole of Psalm 88 – the exilic themes and the individual lament themes –
come together at the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,
where he was abandoned by the Father,
where God caused his friends to flee,
where God made him a horror – indeed, an abomination,
a curse – for cursed is anyone who is hung on a tree!

But Psalm 88 is more than just a song of the cross.
Psalm 88 is the song of the descent into hell.

And you see this in the second part (verse 9b through verse 12)

2. Are Your Wonders Known in Darkness? (88:9b-12)

a. I Call on You, O LORD (v9b)

Every day I call upon you, O LORD;

I spread out my hands to you.

Notice that the Psalmist calls out “every day.”

Even though there is no answer,
he does not give up.

In the words of Peter when Jesus asked if they also would leave him,
“Lord, to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life!” (John 6)

I spread out my hands to you because I have nowhere else to go.

And I have questions for you – in your silence!
I think I know the answers –
but I’m going to ask them anyway...

b. Because I Have Questions about the Grave (v10-12)

¹⁰*Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do the departed rise up to praise you?*

Selah

¹¹*Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,
or your faithfulness in Abaddon?*

¹²*Are your wonders known in the darkness,
or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?*

In the first cry, the Psalmist had made 12 affirmations about the grave,
and particularly, how close he was to it!

Now he asks six questions.

All of them expect a negative answer.
All of them pit the saving works of God against death.

Your wonders	vs.	the dead
Your praise	vs.	the departed
Your steadfast love (hesed)	vs.	the grave
Your faithfulness	vs.	Abaddon (destruction)
Your wonders	vs.	the darkness

Your righteousness vs. the land of forgetfulness

What can stand against the grave?
What endures beyond death?

Are God's steadfast love and faithfulness found in the grave?

The Psalmist says no!

And, quite frankly, he was right!

God's steadfast love, his saving wonders, *are not found* in the grave.

Shorter Catechism 37 understands this:

“the souls of believers are, at their death, made perfect in holiness
and do immediately pass into glory;
and their bodies, being still united to Christ,
do rest in their graves until the resurrection.”

If you are in the grave – *apart from Christ* – then there is no steadfast love in the grave.

If you descend into the land of forgetfulness apart from Christ,
there will be no one to praise his wonders there!

God's saving wonders are found in the land of the living!

That is why Psalm 88 is most profoundly the song of the descent into hell –
because it was only in the death of Christ
that the grave was conquered.

3. Why Have You Forsaken Me?

a. But I Cry to You, O LORD (v13)

¹³*But I, O LORD, cry to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.*

The third cry comes “in the morning.”

We are not yet to the morning of the third day.
Rather, we are in the morning *after* the crucifixion,
as our Lord Jesus Christ remained under the power of death for a time.

Some have said that being forsaken by God only lasted for the few hours on the cross.
But the body of our Lord lay in the grave for three days.
His soul and body were divided for three days.

He experienced the dissolution of soul and body.

What that was like for the incarnate Son of God, I will not pretend to know!

But the third cry of Psalm 88 reveals something of it!

b. Because I Am Helpless Before You (v14-17)

And first of all he asks two questions:

¹⁴*O LORD, why do you cast my soul away?
Why do you hide your face from me?*

Notice that the Psalmist does not appear to have the slightest clue
as to the answer to these questions.

It's okay to ask God "why?"
It's okay *not* to have the answer!

All God expects of you is that you will bring your questions to him.
He doesn't promise that he will answer you anytime soon!

Because even Jesus asked the question:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!"

Some have said that he just said that for us –
so that we would see that Psalm 22 was about him!
But while he knew – and had told his disciples –
that he must die and be raised up on the third day,
that did not moderate the grief and agony of that hour!

Psalm 88 does not express a mere intellectual statement of Christ's suffering,
but the visceral lived experience of the descent into hell:

¹⁵*Afflicted and close to death from my youth up,
I suffer your terrors; I am helpless.*

¹⁶*Your wrath has swept over me;
your dreadful assaults destroy me.*

¹⁷*They surround me like a flood all day long;
they close in on me together.*

And once again – *you* have done this to me.

It is your terrors that I suffer.
It is your wrath that has swept over me.
Your dreadful assaults destroy me.

The imagery of verses 15-17 echoes the language of an invasion:

the dreadful assaults of Yahweh
and the waters surrounding me like a besieging army
(the prophets often speak of the nations as the waters,
the floods that come raging against the city of God).

c. And You Have Caused My Friends to Shun Me (v18)

¹⁸*You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me;
my companions have become darkness.*

For a second time, now, we are told that not only has God done this to me,
but he has also caused my friends and loved one to shun me –
to go far from me.

Psalm 88 ends in darkness
(the same word used earlier in verse 6).

It is not the ordinary word for darkness.

This word is used for a place of darkness –
for almost a realm of darkness.

It is only used 7 times in the Bible (twice in this Psalm).

Lamentation 3:6 says

“he has made me to dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago.”
That’s no ordinary darkness!

Psalm 143:3 says

“For the enemy has pursued me, he has crushed my life to the ground,
he has made me sit in darkness like those long dead.”

Psalm 74 and Isaiah 29 and 42 also use it to refer to dark places
that only God can illuminate.

My companions are darkness.

The story is told of a man who is going to the funeral of a friend who committed suicide.
On the bus, as he sits there in utter misery, he meets an elderly black woman
who, after hearing of his friend,
speaks the only words that are appropriate:
she lines out Psalm 88.

Remember that there will be days like this.

For you.
For your loved ones.
For the church.

And our only comfort in such days
is there was a day like this for our Lord Jesus Christ as well.