

Lament

*You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me;
my companions have become darkness. (Psalm 88:18 ESV)*

*O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses;
you have been angry; oh, restore us. (Psalm 60:1 ESV)*

The Saddest Song

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Psalm 88

Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning!

I'm sure you've already been asked this question five times this morning, but let me ask you again: How are you doing? You're probably good, right? We're always good. We're supposed to be good. "A stiff upper lip!" as they say.

We've just come through two years of relational chaos intermingled with fear and loss. Some of you are sick. Some of you have been sick for years. Our marriages are under strain. Our kids are confused. Nations are at war and there is no sign of de-escalation. Thanks to the internet, we receive updates about every global crisis, and perhaps more than ever we realize how powerless we are to bring about any definable change.

How are you doing, really? The reality it is, some of us aren't okay this morning. Some of us are feeling really lousy. That's the truth, and there's nothing wrong with that. You're allowed to feel depressed. You're allowed to feel discouraged. You're allowed to be grieved by the brokenness of the world. And that brings us to our passage for this morning.

As we prepare our hearts for Easter, we're going to spend some time making our way through some of the Psalms of Lament. To lament is to express a complaint or a concern to God in faith. The Psalms of Lament give voice to the fact that – while we know that God is sovereign and while

we know that God is good – our circumstances are NOT always good! Our world is broken! Our hearts ache! That feeling of tension – that dissonance – is part of the human experience.

Those feelings don't disqualify you from the faith. Those feelings don't mean that you're "broken". Those feelings are part and parcel of living in a fallen world.

To that end, please turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 88.

Our text this morning is, without a doubt, the saddest Psalm in the Psalter. Unlike the rest of the Psalms of Lament, Psalm 88 does not end on a note of hopefulness. On the contrary, it ends with the line:

You have taken from me friend and neighbor—
darkness is my closest friend. (Psalm 88:18 NIV)

That's the closing line of the song! Doesn't it feel like the Psalmist has broken a rule here? Is a believer allowed to pray that way? Are we allowed to sing songs that don't end with a note of triumph?

Well, while it is *generally* true that our lament should give way to confidence – in fact, it's the pattern that we will see in every other lament Psalm that we consider this month – while that is *generally* true, Psalm 88 reminds us that there are exceptions. Here, in our text for this morning, God has given us a song to sing that doesn't end with a happy resolve.

And – let's think this through now – if God has given this song to us, then it stands to reason that we *need* it. If God has given it to us, then it stands to reason that we are actually *deficient* and *ill-equipped* without it. If God has written this song for you, then it stands to reason that you will face seasons in your life when the only worship song that you will be able to sing is the song that we have before us this morning – the saddest song in the Bible. John Calvin writes:

I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, ‘an anatomy of the soul;’ for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.¹

Some of you are presently in a season of sorrow. Others of you aren’t – and praise God for that! But I imagine that you want to be a useful counselor for your friends and your family who *are* despairing. For that reason, no matter how you presently feel, each and every one of us will be helped as we worship our way through the Psalms because, as one commentator notes:

As readers of the Psalms, we can feel ourselves understood and explained by them. They also make us sensitive to the emotional struggles of others.²

For the sake of your soul, and for the sake of the souls of your friends, we are going to do something uncomfortable this morning. We’re going to worship along to the saddest song.

Worshipping Along To The Saddest Song

There is a curious Hebrew word – Selah – which occurs frequently in the Psalms. The reality is, none of us are entirely sure what it means. My best guess is that it is a musical term that indicates a pause. For that reason, I want to look at the three sections in this passage that are divided by that pause. Look with me now to verses 1-7 where the Psalmist will lead us in the first verse of our song:

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!
³ For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.
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.
⁶ You have put me in the depths of the pit,

¹ John Calvin as quoted by W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 8.

² Tremper Longman III, *How To Read The Psalms*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 71.

in the regions dark and deep.
⁷ Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves. *Selah* (Psalm 88:1-7 ESV)

In the first verse of this song, we worship along with the Psalmist as he sings:

1. **God, it hurts!**

Listen to the language that he uses here. He pictures himself as one with no strength, lying amongst the dead. You can almost see this picture in your mind if you try. You can see him lying wounded in a muddy trench, lost in a sea of forgotten corpses with no strength to lift himself out. Everyone else has moved on from the battle, and no one has thought to go back to look for survivors.

He's been sentenced to suffer in silent agony with only the darkness of death to look forward to. The Psalmist has a soul that is full of troubles, and William Plumer is right when he says:

Of all troubles, soul-troubles are the worst, and most loudly call for compassion from man and loving-kindness from God.³

You can reset a broken arm, and you can stitch and bandage a flesh wound, but an injured soul can only be healed by the hand of God.

And in this particular season, the Psalmist has lost hope that a soul-healing will come. He has been crying out to God night and day, but nothing is changing.

An atheist could simply dismiss this adversity as bad luck, but the Psalmist is no atheist. He knows that God is sovereign, and he knows that God is good, but that just makes his pain all the more confusing! God is not answering! God is not delivering! Therefore, he declares:

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**. (Psalm 88:6-7 ESV)

³ W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 822.

Do you hear that? Not only is the Psalmist saying: “God, it hurts!” He’s also saying: “And God, it was **YOU**.”

The devil can’t overpower or outwit You! He’s a dog on a chain and he reaches no further than You allow! He can’t so much as touch a hair on my head without permission from You!

Is cancer more powerful than You? Is Alzheimer’s more powerful than You? Is this depression more powerful than You? You could end my suffering with a word!

Is this marriage too complex for You to solve? Is my wayward child too far gone for You to restore? Am I forever sentenced to singleness? To childlessness? You are the God of miracles!

Was that job loss outside of Your control? Was that pregnancy outside of Your control? Was that accident outside of Your control?

God, it hurts!

And God... it was You.

Christian, hear me this morning: You are allowed to sing this song. In fact, God wrote it for you. Because He knows that you need it. Charles Spurgeon notes here:

It is well to trace the hand of God in our sorrows, for it is surely there.⁴

He is not the author of evil. He is never guilty of sin. He is good, and He is completely in control. And yet, for reasons that I can’t even begin to understand, He often gives us painful burdens to carry. But every hurt. Every trial. Every disaster. Every loss. Every sickness. Every tragedy that has ever left you reeling, first passed through the hands of your Heavenly Father who loves you.

⁴ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Treasury of David - Third Ed. Vol. 1 of 2*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), 211.

Some days that is a comfort. Other days that only heightens the lament. Nevertheless, it is the truth. Ours is not to understand. Instead, we declare with Job:

Though he slay me, I will hope in him; (Job 13:15a ESV)

Let's move now into the second stanza of this, the saddest song:

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.

Every day I call upon you, O Lord;

I spread out my hands to you.

¹⁰ Do you work wonders for the dead?

Do the departed rise up to praise you? *Selah* (Psalm 88:8-10 ESV)

In this second verse, we worship along with the Psalmist as he sings:

2. God, I'm abandoned!

The Psalmist looks out to his friends for support, but his suffering is off-putting to the world. He describes himself as a horror to his loved ones. As they look at his plight, he can see in their eyes that they simply don't know what to do with him.

People don't want to be around weakness. People don't want to witness the horrors of disease. People don't want to come to terms with death. We want to believe the lie that all is well with the world! We want to believe that we will live forever! But sick and hurting people *ruin the illusion*.

Tell me I'm wrong.

This is true of physical illness. But it's also true of spiritual maladies. Charles Spurgeon was the prince of preachers. He also suffered from serious depression. He observes:

Even to those who love me most, my pain and helplessness is now an accustomed thing, while to me it keeps its keen edge of suffering, but little dulled by use. My ills to them are a tedious oft-told tale which comes with something of a dull reutterance.⁵

Allow me to paraphrase what he's saying here. "Everyday, I roll out of bed with the same soul-crushing depression. It hurts just as bad today as it did on day one. But to the people who love me – even those who love me the most – this pain has become nothing more than an annoyance. They love me, but their empathy simply can't keep up with the pain."

We live in a world where you need to paint on a smile and cover all of your wounds if you want to belong. Whatever you do, **don't ruin the illusion.**

Don't remind us that life is hard and that our days are numbered.

Don't remind us that every season of prosperity inevitably gives way to a season of adversity.

And whatever you do, don't bring your broken, afflicted, suffering self into our carefully-curated, closely-guarded illusion of unending bliss.

If you want to love a person who is suffering, then you need to understand that in one shape or form, they are wrestling with this feeling of loneliness. They're sad about the way that their suffering impacts your life. They notice that they are often perceived as a dark cloud in a world of celebration. And it is a helpless, lonely feeling. The Psalmist laments:

I am shut in so that I can't escape. My eyes grow dim with sorrows.

Worst of all, the Psalmist cries out in his despair to God, but even God appears distant and aloof. He asks, "Do you work wonders for the dead?" It's a sarcastic question that expects a negative answer.

⁵ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Treasury of David - Third Ed. Vol. 2 of 2*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), 17.

“Of course You don’t!” is the implied answer. “Why would the God of light pollute Himself by descending into my darkness? If my sinful friends are put off by my brokenness, then how much more must the Holy God of heaven be repulsed by me? I am utterly alone in my despair. Abandoned by everyone that I long to turn to.”

That’s how the Psalmist feels. Sometimes, that’s how you’re going to feel. This Psalm reminds us that we are allowed to feel that way sometimes. But, before I move on, I want to clarify that the grieving Psalmist is right about how he feels, but he’s wrong in his conclusion. In spite of how the Psalmist feels, God IS there with him in his grief. Sometimes God seems silent. But He is never, ever absent.

I also want to say that, if you find yourself feeling abandoned like this Psalmist, you need to fight the temptation to push away from your friends. William Plumer is right when he says:

We sometimes double our sorrows by nursing them in secret.⁶

One of the things that I hope to accomplish by God’s grace in this series is to reinforce that you can bring your pain with you to the worship service. God has called us to weep with those who weep, and we intend to do that here. We will do it imperfectly, to be sure, but we’re going to grow in this.

Let’s look now to the third and final verse of this song. The Psalter has declared that he is hurting. He has declared that he feels abandoned. And now he sings:

- 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?
¹³ But I, O Lord, cry to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
¹⁴ O Lord, why do you cast my soul away?
Why do you hide your face from me?
¹⁵ Afflicted and close to death from my youth up,
I suffer your terrors; I am helpless.
¹⁶ Your wrath has swept over me;

⁶ W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 823.

your dreadful assaults destroy me.
¹⁷ They surround me like a flood all day long;
they close in on me together.
¹⁸ You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me;
my companions have become darkness. (Psalm 88:11-18 ESV)

In this final verse, we worship along with the Psalmist as he sings:

3. God, I'm so disillusioned!

To be disillusioned is to be disappointed. It's to be brought down by the awareness that life is simply not what you had hoped that it would be. This brother is feeling that.

If you look at the title of Psalm 88, you will find that this song was written by one of the sons of Korah named Heman. We meet him in 1 Chronicles 6:

³¹ These are the men whom David put in charge of the service of song in the house of the Lord after the ark rested there.³² They ministered with song before the tabernacle of the tent of meeting until Solomon built the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, and they performed their service according to their order. ³³ These are the men who served and their sons. Of the sons of the Kohathites: Heman the singer the son of Joel (1 Chronicles 6:31-33a ESV)

Did you catch that? The man who wrote Psalm 88 – the saddest song in the Bible – was one of the worship leaders in the tabernacle. He was selected by King David himself!

Think about that for a moment. Every day Heman dressed up in the sacred garments. Every day he took his position and led the Israelites in their corporate worship. And, according to this Psalm, every day he went home and cried out to God:

O Lord, why do you cast my soul away?
Why do you hide your face from me? (Psalm 88:14 ESV)

Do you think he felt like a hypocrite as he stood up to lead the worship songs each day? Do you think he felt some disillusionment as he watched the worshipers depart each day with a joy that was seemingly unattainable for him? I suspect that he did.

Day after day he served and led. Day after day, a cloud of darkness overwhelmed his soul. And this wasn't a temporary spell. In verse 15 he talks about how his affliction went all the way back to his youth! As Alec Motyer describes it:

Here is trouble without explanation: lasting as far back as the eye can see; seemingly stretching ahead without relief; and likely to be overtaken, still unsolved, by death.⁷

The worship leader ends his song – not with a glimmer of hope – but with a whimper of despondency.

You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me;
my companions have become darkness. (Psalm 88:18 ESV)

That's how the saddest song ends. Life is hard. Life has been hard for as long as I can remember. And life is not going to get any better. My friends have left me. My God won't answer me. Darkness is my only friend.

And I want to make sure that you don't miss this: That song is in your Bible! It is in the Holy-Spirit-inspired hymnal of the church! God gave us this song. Therefore, it is not inappropriate for us to sing this song when we are in the valley.

Some of you have been singing this song for as long as you can remember. Perhaps, like Heman, it takes every last bit of will power for you to get dressed and to bring your family to corporate worship. Maybe it's a physical affliction that has left you feeling this way. Maybe it's a relationship that feels like it will be forever broken. Maybe your soul is troubled.

But you're here. You feel misunderstood, but you're here. You feel like God's forgotten about you, but you're here. You feel like you are a horror to your friends – like darkness is the only place where you really belong – but you're here.

⁷ Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), 248.

I want you to know that you belong here. I want you to know that God has written a song for people just like you in situations just like this. I want you to know that we will worship alongside you and that we'll sing this song together with you for as long as it takes.

But even in the saddest song, there is a sliver of hope. Look again at verse 1:

O Lord, God of my salvation,
I cry out day and night before you. (Psalm 88:1 ESV)

Even in the pit of despondency, the Psalmist knows that he is not bringing his lament to a powerless God. Nor is he bringing his lament to a disinterested God. No, while God may seem silent, and while He may subject us to the waves of despair and despondency, even still, we can call out to Him: "O Lord, God of my salvation!" Charles Spurgeon says here:

While a man can see God as his Savior, it is not altogether midnight with him.⁸

The saddest song in the Bible still contains more joy than the happiest song that the world has to offer. Because, even when I am acutely aware of the pain of a broken world – even when all I can muster is a cry of despair – I know that I can bring my sorrow to the God of my Salvation.

If you're living in Psalm 88, then you are well positioned to prepare your heart for Good Friday. I want to invite you to spend the next month marvelling at the fact that the pain that you so desperately want to escape from is the pain that your God willingly entered into. Isn't that remarkable?

Jesus had every opportunity to avoid the cross! He could have summoned a host of angel armies to strike down the soldiers who blindfolded and beat him. He could have opened up the earth to swallow those bystanders who mocked and spat at him while he hung from the cross. He could have aborted the mission as soon as he felt the unbearable weight of my sin, and your sin, and the sins of the entire world.

⁸ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Treasury of David - Third Ed. Vol. 2 of 2*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), 16.

Instead, he hung naked in the dark. Even the sun couldn't look as the Saviour breathed his last. The Lord Jesus who has and will forever exist in perfect unity with the Godhead cried out in anguish, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me!"

He felt the anguish of Psalm 88 more acutely than any other human being in the history of the world.

And through his death and resurrection, he shone a light of resurrection hope into our saddest song.

The God of our salvation has entered into our lament and he has proven definitively that death will not have the final word.

As we conclude this morning, I want to invite you to call out to the God of our salvation. Bring Him your pains and your burdens. He can handle them. Tell Him honestly about your fear and your frustration. He already knows. Ask Him to forgive you for your sin. The price has already been paid. Ask Him to give you a resurrection hope. The victory has already been won.

And then rest. Rest in the reality that, even in the valley of the shadow of death – even when you can't see Him or hear His voice – even when it feels like the darkness is your only friend – the Good Shepherd is with you.

Let's pray together.