

# Despairing

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Songs of the Spirit | Psalms for the Seasons of Life

Despairing

Psalm 88; 22.1-2

8.11.13

*O LORD, the God of my salvation, I have cried out by day and in the night before You. <sup>2</sup> Let my prayer come before You; Incline Your ear to my cry! <sup>3</sup> For my soul has had enough troubles, And my life has drawn near to Sheol. <sup>4</sup> I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit; I have become like a man without strength, <sup>5</sup> Forsaken among the dead, Like the slain who lie in the grave, Whom You remember no more, And they are cut off from Your hand. <sup>6</sup> You have put me in the lowest pit, In dark places, in the depths. <sup>7</sup> Your wrath has rested upon me, And You have afflicted me with all Your waves. Selah. <sup>8</sup> You have removed my acquaintances far from me; You have made me an object of loathing to them; I am shut up and cannot go out. <sup>9</sup> My eye has wasted away because of affliction; I have called upon You every day, O LORD; I have spread out my hands to You. <sup>10</sup> Will You perform wonders for the dead? Will the departed spirits rise and praise You? Selah. <sup>11</sup> Will Your lovingkindness be declared in the grave, Your faithfulness in Abaddon? <sup>12</sup> Will Your wonders be made known in the darkness? And Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? <sup>13</sup> But I, O LORD, have cried out to You for help, And in the morning my prayer comes before You. <sup>14</sup> O LORD, why do You reject my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me? <sup>15</sup> I was afflicted and about to die from my youth on; I suffer Your terrors; I am overcome. <sup>16</sup> Your burning anger has passed over me; Your terrors have destroyed me. <sup>17</sup> They have surrounded me like water all day long; They have encompassed me together. <sup>18</sup> You have removed lover and friend far from me; My acquaintances are in darkness. (Psalm 88)*

**(Psalm 22.1-2)** *My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. <sup>2</sup> O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer; And by night, but I have no rest.*

We've been looking at the Book of Psalms... and seeing it as a classroom where God takes His adopted children to teach them to pray. And within these *Songs of the Spirit*, we've followed the Old Testament scholar Howard Macy who's identified certain *Rhythms of the Inner Life*. Within the different genres of these prayers and meditations and songs we meet seasons, which all believers face in our walk with God. So, we looked at longing, waiting, trembling (last week) and today...despairing.

Now, you might think, right off the bat, that despair is not something that *readily* comes to mind when people think of the spiritual life. And if we had to choose just six or seven seasons or rhythms in our walk with God...why would we possibly look at despair?...seems like there are more important

things to discuss... However, it does seem to be a big category within the Psalms – *Psalms of Lament*. And if this is where God takes us *to teach our souls how to pray* maybe despair is something we need to explore – NOT that it's going to be a very pleasant inquiry but maybe...in fact, definitely loss and discouragement and despondency (as in John Bunyan's *Slough of Despond*) is something we do face and must learn to face in a particular way.

I think a lot of people would be surprised at how the Gospel would deal with it. So let's look at: 1) The Bad News About Despair 2) The Good News in This Apparently Dismal Psalm and 3) How to Deal Redemptively With Despair.

The BAD NEWS ABOUT DESPAIRING is... we all face it. Despair, lament, sorrow, abandonment, deep sorrow, loss is a part of life for everyone who lives past his or her second birthday.

And there are lots of different shades of this difficult emotion. It can range from sort of routine frustrations and simple regrets (“why did I buy this brand of \_\_\_\_\_....?”) and bigger regrets (“Oh! What have I done...?”) and discouragement with the loss of ability as one ages or the loss of certain freedoms as one matures and takes on obligations and responsibilities. And it can be sadness and very deep sadness and loss and ...it can go all the way down to the depths of loss and deepest sorrow that “gives up”... that utters those tragic questions like, “What’s the use?... Why go on?... Who cares?”

There can be physical symptoms like insomnia. Despair and despondency can mean the end of a marriage...or a friendship or relationship. We can get so discouraged that we give up on our health or our family or simply give in to destructive habits (“I just can’t fight it anymore! I give up...”) and *sometimes people even give up on life itself...suicide*. Under a sense of overwhelming discouragement, people will sometimes leave the church and give up on knowing God.

And the bottom rung of the descent into discouragement is despair.

Now, none of this is new to any of us but what may be new to you is how common this theme is in the Bible and in the Book of Psalms. In the Hymnbook of Israel and of the Christian Church are all these songs and reflections on discouragement and loss and on despair. The main one we’re looking at today is the saddest Psalm in the book but definitely not the only Psalm of lament...in fact it may be the most popular theme in the book! One easy way to find three of the deepest is 22 – 44 and 88.

This one, Psalm 88, doesn’t even have a happy ending. The sense and dread of impending death and the idea that all is lost pervades this psalm and never lets up... we want to turn the page and read the happy ending because it must be here somewhere... maybe our dumb copier (which seems always broken lately!) maybe the copier deleted happy ending but...nope...it’s not there. No resolution, no final note of hope is sounded in this Psalm. . . AND...it’s not simply a matter of bad things just happen... but that God makes them happen.

It's one of the many laments that complains *TO* God *ABOUT* GOD! "You have put me in the lowest pit, in dark places, in the depths. Your wrath has rested upon me and You have afflicted me with all Your waves." (v. 6-7) Notice the repeated pronouns, "You" and "Your". AND we find these complaints throughout the Psalms like Ps. 44: "You give us as sheep to be eaten and have scattered us among the nations. You sell YOUR people cheaply, and You have not profited by their sale."(11-12) .

So, what should we conclude from it all. Are the existentialist philosophers right...is life so meaningless that the best option is despair and death... Are the words from Macbeth the truth when he says, " "Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." (Act V, Scene V).

And the Psalm ends, "You have removed lover and friend far from me; my acquaintances are darkness."

I wonder what we would say to this writer, whoever he was ("Heman") or what we'd say to a person who is facing deep loss and despondency... I'm afraid that...wanting to be positive...we might resort to slogans, "Look on the bright side..." and we have plenty of religious ones too, like "Let Go and Let God" or "Praise the Lord, anyway!"

Seems like when we face really deep grief and this sense all is lost and that God is forgetting us and forsaking us... mostly people either capitulate and turn to some form of escape like shopping or addiction...living for the weekend...victim mentality where this becomes the basis for a person's identity...all the escape mechanisms we've discussed thus far in this series...or the ultimate escape (which is really NO ESCAPE) i.e. suicide. OR there's that obedient, dutiful, John Wayne/ Jillian Michaels, "Hey, you just have to push through...a few more reps...soldier on..." and there's definitely a bunch of religious and spiritual forms of this response too.

Point is ...we may find the realism of the Bible to be too... real because these writers, along with Job and Jeremiah and others, they really grieve...they struggle...they sit down amidst the potshards and ash-heaps and the wreckage of life and they cry...And now...believe it or not we are moving from the bad to the good...There's real good news embedded in this most dismal of all the Psalms.

It's screaming to us that to be in real deep communion with God – to really know God and be a believer we don't have to live in some "happy-clappy" fakeness where we suppress our emotions and put on our spiritual blinders and repeat some stupid mantra about "I will be happy...I am happy...I must be happy..."

This Psalm is shouting to us to be real and open and honest BEFORE THEFACE OF GOD. It's saying that there are real believers who have struggled with loss and discouragement and even with depression and despair like few of us have known. God's people have known this and if you are

passing through this season you're not alone. It's ok to be very open and honest about it. . . even in your prayers... especially in your prayers!

If you ask a Jewish person what he or she makes of these prayers...and for instance what she makes of Isaiah 53 where it says, "He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him." (Isa 53.3)...A standard Jewish interpretation is to say "That sufferer is Israel...the Israelites are representing God to the world and the Israelites get despised for it." Or to say, "This is Isaiah, the prophet who was the hated messenger of the Lord – who was put to grief because he was obedient."

And Christians will say, "No...that's a prophesy of the Messiah...He's despised and suffering for the sins of the world". And we could ask the same questions of this 88<sup>th</sup> Psalm – Who is this writing? Is this a singer writing about his own struggles? Is it a singer writing about Israel's being in a vice, squeezed by the Gentiles, crushed by the nations? OR is it the Messiah who's in mind? And, as we always say, "The correct answer is yes!"

God's people can pray these prayers and yet we do so knowing that ultimately these prayers are fulfilled by the Man who was Israel personified. The Good News of This Psalm is that I am not alone in my despair...God's people have experienced it and do (see Rom 8.36)...it's ok to be VERY open, honest and expressive... because ultimately Jesus Christ took our despair and carried it on the Cross. As He screams out the words of Psalm 22 "My God, My God why have you forsaken Me?" all the laments of all God's people in all ages are all condensed and compacted and compressed into one laser-beam of DESPAIR and it all falls on Him.

He is actually forsaken by the father in that moment so I would never be forsaken...And if God leaves me to my own devices for a moment so that I get a taste of what life without Him would be like – it's NEVER that He's punishing me or mad at me. As a person who was represented by Jesus Christ I have that promise that there is no condemnation.

There's an ancient interpretation of one verse in this dismal 88thPsalm. In v. 4-5 it says literally, "I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit; I have become like a man without strength, FREE among the dead..." and this ancient interpretation is that Jesus Christ is reckoned guilty on the Cross but free in death, i.e. death could not hold Him...the grave could not keep Him from rising again... He moves unencumbered among the spirits and announces the liberation of all those who have, through the ages believed...

The Psalm doesn't have a happy ending...at least at the end...because in this Psalm the Happy Ending is at the beginning, the opening words are, "OLORD, the God of my salvation, I have cried out by day and in the night before You"....These are the words of a believer who walks not by shallow slogans, not by denial and yet not by sight but by faith. He or she is simply trusting in what cannot be seen; trusting the God of our salvation who at a moment of time stepped into our situation and absorbed all of our despair.

And NOW in the shadow of the Cross and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the real question at the end of the Psalm is not our question to God "O LORD, why do you reject my soul and why do you hide your face from me?" ...but rather God's question to us, "Since I hid My face from My own Son FOR YOU...will you trust me in the midst of this present despair...even if it does not subside...even if you see no relief in this life...will you trust Me...will I be the God of your salvation and your Father? Do you believe?"

Here's some help in developing a strategy for dealing redemptively with discouragement and despair – i.e. not just managing it but getting changed by it for the better.

You always find questions in the lament psalms and you have to know a few things about the questions you ask in moments of deep loss or discouragement.

For one thing, people commonly say that all our questions will be answered in heaven but it ain't so... and that's because some questions (though we don't see it now) but some questions don't make any sense. It's like C.S. Lewis wrote, "*How many hours are there in a mile? Is yellow square or round? Probably half the questions we ask— half our great theological and metaphysical problems – are like that.*" (*A Grief Observed*)

And, ultimately, it's not so much that God will give us the answers but that He will BE the Answer. When we see Him, in Jesus Christ, absorbing our despair, when we see Jesus Christ subjected to undiluted cosmic despair and asking the question, "*Why?*" *then MY despair can become redemptive and it can have a deepening, strengthening effect on my character.* I'm rescued from futility and absurdity and I can reclaim a reason to go on. When I'm seeing Jesus Christ ask that despairing question, "*Why?*" *in my place* and I'm trusting Him...then I lose my dependency on slogans and escapes and will-power and I rest in "the God of my salvation".

2) What's the difference between redemptive lament and whining or pessimism or Eeyore? Well, this prayer, with the happy ending at the start is still soaked in "the God of my salvation". If your complaint doesn't originate in Him or (as most of the Psalms do) doesn't return to Him then your lament is just complaining and will probably lead to deeper levels of pessimism and bitterness. See? We need to feel real discouragement and loss and even despair if we're going to be deep people but it's not automatic. *Not every person who faces loss and abandonment gets improved by the experience...*If there are no answers, the experience may just leave you broken and bitter. But the cry of Jesus Christ is the best answer there is...

Finally, if you are not yet believing in Jesus Christ let me prompt you a bit by saying without Him, without a belief in "the God of my salvation" the existentialist philosophers and Macbeth are about as good as it gets. Life really is a "tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury and signifying nothing". Despair and nothingness wins out in the end UNLESS there IS a God who enters our condition and speaks for us... questions for us and screams on our behalf, "Why?"

But if there IS that God... wouldn't you want to know Him...to make Him the God of YOUR salvation?

