

PRAYING REVEALS LINGERING HOPE!

Psalm 88: 1-18 and Lamentations 3” 49-59 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

Nestled deep in the heart of the Psalms is this 11th of the 13 maschils or Psalms the Jews wanted everyone to memorize. Why would we ask our children to memorize the saddest psalm in the Bible, the saddest chapter in the Bible, the saddest prayer ever prayed and one of the saddest conditions of a Bible writer ever mentioned? Many of the psalms begin deep in storm clouds, but they end in the light. Some of the psalms begin in the light and they end in a hurricane or tornado. But Psalm 88 begins in dusky darkness and it ends in pitch-black darkness. Studying this psalm drives us to the conclusion that this man of God, one of the sons of Korah, specifically, Heman the Ezrahite, was experiencing some kind of physical, emotional or mental darkness or affliction, a condition that had him ever at the brink of death. In fact, the disease seems to have affected every area of this man of God—v. 3 tells us “My soul is full of troubles. My life draws near to Sheol, death or the grave.” Heman knew that those who knew him, v. 3 “counted him as already gone down into the pit.” It reminds me of families in a death vigil where the person keeps living in spite of hovering near to death. In fact, v. 4 tells us this man, Heman can’t remember ever having had any strength. To make matters worse, right or wrong, the psalmist felt like, true or untrue, that his affliction was God’s wrath lying heavy on him, v. 7, and as if it were God’s wrath that had swept over him with dreadful assaults destroying him.

It is wonderful that we have such a psalm in the Bible in the 1189 chapters. Why? How many of us have had lives or known those whose lives seem to have been without hope all their life? Heman’s experience is pathetic to the extreme. He tells us he has been in the same shape since his youth up—v. 15, as he incessantly suffered terrors and was helpless. He speaks of his life as a living death, vs. 3-6 and v. 15. Something about this man’s affliction rendered him an abomination to his best friends. Verse 8 tells us his companions shunned him because he was a horror to them. Verse 8 pictures Heman as living in isolation, shut in where he cannot escape from his affliction or its consequences. Rightly, many commentators have believed Heman was a son of Korah, an Ezrahite struck with leprosy since he was just a boy. Verse 9 tells us Heman truly believed God had hidden His holy face from him so that his eyes were waxing dim in his tears and sorrow. If we conclude Heman’s affliction was leprosy, the psalm may make more sense to some of us, but in fact, God refuses to tell us whether the affliction was physical, mental, emotional or spiritual. I tell you—God may want us not to conclude his affliction is leprosy to keep us from labeling Heman, or of limiting all the millions of people who have lived as Heman in mental, emotional and physical anguish all their lives.

If this affliction of Heman is leprosy, what do we know of leprosy? – Leprosy is an infectious disease, a hideous disease that attacks the skin, nerves and muscles. It mercilessly wastes away a person's body, until often parts of the body are numb and fingers and toes fall off. We know that leprosy back then in the Ancient Near East was incurable. It resulted in a person becoming an outcast: destitute and treated as wholly unclean. They were shut in, and unable to enter normal society in the market place, in worship, or in the home. Nevertheless, Job never had leprosy and he talked like Heman. Job cried out after the loss of his ten children and his body oozing with boils, he cried out like Heman, in Job 30: 20, 21, “I cry to You for help, and You do not answer me; I stand and You only look at me. You have turned cruel to me, with the might of your hand, You persecute me.” Doesn't prayer work? Is it possible for folks to feel like they have prayed all their life for one answer and it has never come? There are exceptions, anomalies, and enigmas that only God Himself could ever explain, but you or I or both of us may know in our own soul or body or mind, that at times, we seem to be an exception.

Under the discipline of the Lord, David cried out to God in II Samuel 12 for God to heal his child, but the child died. The Apostle Paul asked the Lord three times to remove his thorn in his flesh, but the terrible thorn remained with him (II Cor. 12). Jesus Himself, our Savior, the Son of God, in Gethsemane, asked for the cup of agony, for the necessity of His sacrifice on the cross in our place, to be taken from Him and God the Father refused to remove the agony of Calvary, Luke 22: 42. Does prayer work? James 5: 16 tells us, "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." What do we do with Jesus' promise? Jesus said in Mark 11: 24, “Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” What's wrong with Heman? Psalm 88 is the only psalm that ends without any expression of hope. It expresses only unrelieved suffering. Should we avoid Psalm 88 like the plague? Why should we want to be taught that sometimes God seems distant to us over our entire lifetimes? Why should we study about someone so sick that everyone shunned him because he was a horror to them? Does it seem right for this psalmist Heman, to claim that God's wrath lies heavy upon him and that he is suffering the terrors of God's wrath? Scripture insists that God ultimately, Romans 8: 28 works or brings good to his people through their suffering, no matter how difficult that suffering may be. Therefore, what are the lasting lessons of Psalm 88 for you and for me?

GOD WANTS US TO KNOW HE ACCEPTS OUR LAMENTS WHEN WE CRY OUT TO HIM. (I.) Listen afresh to Psalm 88: 1-3 and hear the lament of Heman the Ezrahite. “O LORD, God of my salvation; I cry out day and night before You. Let my prayer come before You; incline Your ear to my cry! For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.” Notice also v. 13. “But I, O LORD, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you.” God the Holy

Spirit inspired Heman to pen these words. God accepts our crying, wailing, laments. Heman almost seems to be choking in despair, suffocating in his pain and suffering. Notice, that all the psalmists, when they have a complaint or a lament against God, they never complain about God to others. They always complained to God Himself; they took it directly to him. Remarkably, the psalmists, as Heman, are honest in expressing their complaints. We don't have to defend their theology, but we can defend their honesty. They cry out to God and pray as transparently and honestly and frankly as they can. It seems that these psalmists knew something about suffering that we need to know. Their pleading and complaining and crying out to God is so normal a part of their lives that they appear to act as if withholding their honest cries would be harmful to their walk with the Lord. God welcomes our laments and He can take it when we even tell Him it seems He isn't listening or answering or delivering us. God does want us to learn about His character and His promises and His past miracles, so that we will have hope. And God will even welcome our laments when we tell Him not to forget we are His own, His beloved, and that we sense He is passing us by. When life isn't changing or getting better, it is always right to lament before the face of our Father and before His throne in Jesus' Name.

This Psalm begins with distress and lament and then the gloom increases as it proceeds. The last word in Psalm 88 is darkness. It is one wail of sorrow from beginning to end. It is the only Psalm in which we see a poured out heart that does not receive relief and consolation. Notice with me a few details of this acceptable lament before God. Whatever you may say about this seemingly hopeless psalm, **(1) It had a purpose.** This lament and cry of distress gave Heman a deep desire to pray, and even in deepest affliction, what is wonderful is that our affliction drives us to the throne of grace. When the enemy drives us to our knees, the enemy will regret it. This is the cry of distress and yet Heman's distress gave him a desire to pray. **(2) It had a prayer that was personal**—v. 1—“O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out before You.” – **(3) It was a passionate prayer**—he had cried out. **(4) It was prolonged prayer.** --Day and night I cry before the Lord. v. 1. This broken psalmist keeps up his prayer. **(5) It was a persistent prayer.** This lament and prayer was night and day before the Lord, which shows Heman did pray in hope. **(6) It had a prospect.** Heman intended to reach the heart of God and to move Him to answer him. To pray or lament without expectancy is to pray without faith and we have every reason not to expect God to answer. **(7) It was a pleading lament.** Can you hear and sense the urgency of his need, the severity of his troubled soul, and the anguish of his body and spirit. Heman was without peace or joy or a song in his heart. **(8) It was a patient prayer.** This lets me know it was consistent and persistent—and Heman met God in the morning to lament to Him, v. 13. Secondly,

GOD WANTS US TO TELL HIM OUR CONDITION IN OUR CRIES, PRAYERS AND LAMENTS. (II.)

I read in verses 4-7, “I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am a man who has no strength, 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. You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and You overwhelm me with all Your waves. Selah.” Heman’s condition was many fold:

(1) He was calling, crying and coming to the conclusion that his cause seemed hopeless.

When Heman said he was already, v. 4 “counted as one who has gone down to the pit,” he was telling God he felt helpless, unheard by God, getting weaker and weaker, without strength. He told the Lord that other people he knew pictured him as over the hill, done in, done for, and as good as dead already. Heman told God he felt like God had left him to die in a graveyard, almost as if a man or woman were placed in a coffin before death. Would the lid be closed and would he be buried alive—and become like the rest of those, v. 5, who lie in the grave? In feeling like a dead man, Heman was also desperate and letting God know it was time to act now or he would really die. But in this lament, we can all feel the sadness of Heman whose only hope seems to be in the direction of death, as if he is already praying as a dead man. Notice verse 6. Have any of you been where Heman was? Are any of you there now? Just know, bad as such a place is, Heman is still crying out to God, and that in itself is a ray of hope, a sure sign of hope even if it be a most clouded hope.

(2) Notice He was clouded in his perspective of His condition.

Look with me again at vs. 6, 7. We don’t need to argue with Heman, but He seems to have a clouded view of God’s directive and His permissive will. God permitted Job to suffer, but He was not the author of evil or the one questioning Job’s testimony and saying that under trial, Job would cave in. God permitted a lot, but He did set limits. Beloved, I think most of us in our laments are often somewhat clouded in our perspective of our condition. Don’t many of us like Heman blame God and accuse Him of laying His wrath upon us? Don’t we accuse Him of putting us in the pit or disciplining us to within an inch of our lives? Many of us do this with God. Notice the extreme words Heman used in accusing God—v. 6—“You have placed me in the depths of the pit. This view of God’s wrath is that God had smitten him. Do you hear the extreme words—accusing God of laying him in the lowest place, unexplainably in the darkest place, humiliating him in the pit, severely laying His wrath on him like a man under a Roman scourge? In our laments, we all do well to know that many things God allows or directs in our lives will never be fully understood until we see Him face to face. This week I read wonderful words by a pastor, Jerry Simpson that just ring in my heart about God’s ways not being ours. They all begin with “God never!” Yet, I have a check in my spirit so that I want to

biblically add the word, “God often never.” Why? It is because there are some Hemans who seem to be left behind, like James, Christ’s disciple who was beheaded and John the Baptist too. Here are 3 of the 22 examples he gave. Remember: (1) God often never lets a John be exiled on an Island without showing him a glimpse of what’s going to be hereafter. (2) God often never lets a Ruth lose a husband without giving her a Boaz with handfuls of purpose. (3) God often never gives a woman an issue of blood without letting her touch the Hem of his Garment.” I love these 22 examples, but in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11: 32-38, there are Hemans who won’t understand it all better until by and by. Thirdly,

GOD WANTS US TO TELL HIM ABOUT OUR TERRIBLE REJECTIONS BY FRIENDS, RELATIVES AND BROTHERS AND SISTERS WHO CUT US OFF. (III.) Notice Psalm 88: 8,9, 18 “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; my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon You, O LORD: I spread out my hands to You... You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness.” Bad as this is, Heman is still praying, crying and lamenting to the Lord. But Heman’s own beloved, his spouse, his wife and his best friend now shunned him. Perhaps no earthly rejection is higher than the rejection of our wife or husband. What do all of us need? We need and we expect the loyalty and faithfulness of our relatives, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, no matter what. Friends are needed. Companions are precious. One of life’s worst tribulations is to be cut off, forsaken. To be banished from those we pray for daily, those we know & love. Heman was afflicted physically, mentally spiritually, and there is no sign of bitterness against those he loves. Rather, v. 9— “Every day he called to the Lord and spread out his hands to Him.” This rejection and being cut off was doubtless one of Heman’s greatest Gethsemanes. Fourthly,

GOD WANTS US TO ASK HIM OUR DIFFICULT QUESTIONS IN THE MIDDLE OF OUR LAMENTS AND PRAYERS. (IV.) Notice verses 10-12. “Do You work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise You? Selah. Is Your steadfast love declared in the grave, or Your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are Your wonders known in the darkness, or Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?” These difficult questions show clearly Heman had a truly Old Testament understanding of death. In spite of not sensing God had answered him, he kept on talking to the Lord and laid out five tough questions. I believe God was pleased, and today we know most of these answers that Heman died without understanding because we live on the other side of the cross of Christ, on the other side of His death, burial and resurrection. Most of the Old Testament saints had only a dim knowledge of the hereafter and consequently, they had only a marginal faith in what was to come after death. We know that after David’s infant son died, He cried out, in II Samuel 12: 23, “Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him,

but he will not return to me.” David knew a glimpse. Job seemed to know even more in Job 19:25-27, saying, For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.” Heman spoke as honestly and as realistically as he knew. God the Holy Spirit had his lament recorded so we can be so thrilled that we know that Jesus is alive and we will live with Him. We know that when we die, we are not relegated to the ground in soul and spirit. Only our dead bodies are placed in the ground. When we die, we are “absent from the body, present, at home with the Lord.” (II Cor. 5: 8) Fifthly, and lastly,

GOD WANTS US TO LAY IT OUT OPENLY TO HIM WHEN WE EVEN FEEL REJECTED BY HIM! (V.)

Notice verses 14-17. “O LORD, why do You cast my soul away? Why do You hide your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer Your terrors; I am helpless. Your wrath has swept over me; Your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together.” In every way, this final desertion in Heman’s mind was the worst, as he was not just feeling deserted by his spouse, his relatives and his closest friends; he sensed he was deserted by God. God doesn’t answer all our why questions, Heman’s questions or even the lament of Jesus, the Son of God in the Garden of Gethsemane. Certainly added to Heman’s sense of God’s desertion was his distraction of studying his life and realizing this rejection by God seemed to have been life long since his youth. That’s hard to get our arms around and Heman’s conflicting emotions must have ranged from dire depression to despair. Realizing in the midst of the desertion and distraction of knowing how long the desertion had gone on, Heman coupled God’s apparent leaving of him with the leaving of his wife and family—and then all that was left, v. 18 was darkness. In verse 17 Heman laid it out not to himself, but to God. Even in feeling deserted by God, Heman was crying it out to God—that was his hope. Heman told God he was surrounded as Jesus was on the cross by dogs, surrounded by dreadful assaults like a flood all day long—wolves attacking and closing in on him together—closing in for the kill. Heman ended his lament with loneliness and darkness, but I rejoice to see it was still his prayer to God, the God he confessed as he began his lament as the God of his salvation. Never quit talking to God. Never quit telling Him all about your struggles. I thank God He included this sad psalm in His divine word. It has found a place because God wanted none of us to ever be in a place where His word does not give instruction to us, especially if any of us feel our life mirrors Heman’s life. For you, I dedicate this psalm and call you to keep crying out to the God of your salvation. He will make a way, if only in death. We know the last two chapters of Rev. He will make a way.