

Out of the Depths I Cry to You – Psalm 88

By Ian Hamilton

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Bible Text: Psalm 88
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The Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah
207 Bull Street
Savannah, GA 31401

Website: ipcsav.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/ipcsav

Be seated.

Ian, again, Ian and Joan, we're grateful to have you with us and look forward to hearing from you again.

Well, if you have a Bible with you, then please turn to the 88th Psalm, Psalm 88. John Calvin famously described the book of Psalms as an anatomy of all the parts of the soul. It's a very insightful description of the psalter and when we lose the psalter, we lose, I think, vital religion. We need the psalter to remind us of the variegated nature of the life of faith. The life of faith is capable of extraordinary highs and as we shall see this evening, of extraordinary depths.

The 88th Psalm, it's entitled, "A Song or Psalm of the Sons of Korah," who were more noted for jubilant Psalms, "To the choirmaster: according to Mahalath Leannoth," we don't know what that is, "A Maskil," possibly a liturgical direction, "of Heman the Ezrahite," and we really don't know who he was but he writes,

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! 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, in the regions dark and deep. 7 Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. Selah 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 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; 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; darkness is my only companion.

In the year 1552, five young men who had been studying theology in the Reformation city of Lausanne in Switzerland traveled to the city of Leon, their home city in France. They had come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ and for some time they had studied the Reformation truths recovered for the church by God in the years of the Reformation. On route to Leon, the second city of France, they spent a little time in Geneva probably speaking with John Calvin. When they arrived in Leon, they were immediately arrested. They had gone to serve the cause of the gospel in Leon which was still a staunchly Roman Catholic city. They were arrested and for the next year the various Reformed cities mainly in Switzerland sent letters to Leon and to Paris to King Francis pleading for the lives of these young men but they were sentenced to death, and during the months leading up to their burning at the stake in Leon, John Calvin wrote them a number of letters, mainly he wrote to encourage them to stand fast for the sake of Christ in the face of this great trial that was about to engulf them. He pleaded with them in one memorable letter to rest their lives on the paternal kindness of their heavenly Father. But as the day of the execution drew near, Calvin wrote one last time to them and in that letter he wrote these words, "God has prevented your release." I wonder how you might have reacted if you were receiving such a letter as that, "God has prevented your release."

Calvin understood and actually these young men in their responses understood also that their times were in God's hands, that what was happening to them was not happening simply because the civil and religious authorities in Leon had conspired their arrest and their trial and soon their execution. They understood that the life of faith was deeply variegated. They understood that the life of faith had dark valleys to walk as well as high mountaintops to traverse. They understood that God's ways are not our ways, and this is what confronts us in this 88th Psalm. It's one of the Psalms of lament. I wonder if you know that 59 of the 150 Psalms are Psalm of Lament, 40% of the psalter is lament?

Now the reason for that should be obvious, that while the life of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is a life that knows the comforts of God, the consolations of God, while the life of faith at times experiences what the Apostle Peter calls joy unspeakable and full of glory, so much of the life of faith is shot through with trouble and trial. The sufferings of this present time we're not excused from. Life at times can be overwhelming with unimaginable trials and troubles and in this 88th Psalm we have one of the songs from the songbook of the old covenant people of God. It's one man's song but the Holy Spirit has seen fit to inscripturate it in the word of God. When we lose the psalter, what are poor, cast down, brokenhearted believers to sing?

We don't really know anything about this Heman the Ezrahite. There are various conjectures, one of David's temple singers? Well, possibly, and we really don't know who he was. We don't know the nature of the sufferings that have overwhelmed him. The very

last word in the Hebrew text is "darkness." Darkness, "my only friend is darkness." We don't know the circumstances. We don't know who his companions were, who his beloved where who have shunned him and given up on him. We don't know for how long he's been in this condition but he is in the depths, de profundis, and it's out of the depths that he is crying out to God.

Let me just ask a question before we look very briefly at the Psalm with six simple points: are we confronted here with a depressed believer? Now believers do get depressed for all manner of reasons, physical, psychological, chemical, circumstantial. I've never been persuaded that this is a depressed believer. A despondent believer, absolutely. I've long wondered whether actually he's living out what we read in Romans 8:36, "For your sake we are experiencing death all the day long." You may know that Paul is actually quoting from the 44th Psalm, another Psalm of lament, and in that 44th Psalm the psalmist is bewildered with God, he cannot fathom God's ways with him or with his people and it comes to something of a crescendo when he says, "Lord, do you not see that for your sake we're experiencing death all the day long?" He doesn't really get it, that that which he spoke was profounder than he knew. All that he was experiencing was not because God had abandoned them or because their sins had caused God to stand back from them. He and God's people at that time were experiencing the cost of being the covenant people of God.

And so Paul is able to take those words in Romans 8 and say, "Lord, for your sake we face death all the day long but we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." But this Psalm doesn't end on an upbeat note. Most, in fact, all the other Psalms of Ascents, the other and 58 Psalms of lament all end on an upbeat note. Not this one. "My only friend is darkness." But there is hope embedded in the words of this despondent yet faithful servant of God. Notice just six very simple things with me, that in his despondency, in his distress, in his anguish of soul, 1) he prayed. His circumstances did not drive him from God, they drove him to God. Is there a greater mark of faith and godliness than that? John Bunyan wrote you can do more than pray after you have prayed but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed. He cried out to God. The language is intense. His prayers were not formal. They arose out of an anguish of soul. "I cry out day and night before you." He took it to the Lord in prayer.

And secondly, notice he prayed every day. It says in verse 1, "I cry out day and night before you." Verse 9, "Every day I call upon you, O LORD; I spread out my hands before you." Every day, morning, noon and night he was crying out to God. He had nowhere else to go. It's as if he is saying, "Lord, to whom else can I go? Who is there in the heavens above or on the earth beneath who can help me but you? Hear my cry, O Lord!" He will not let God go. Prayer was not perfunctory, it was not supplemental, it was not peripheral, it was absolutely central and principal to him. It's the very pulse-beat of authentic religion. You know that great statement in the book of Acts just comes to mind, Acts 9, when the Lord says to Ananias, "Go to Strait Street in Damascus because Saul of Tarsus is there," and Ananias says, "Lord, this man has come to kill, like a white boar in the vineyard he's come to trample and destroy." And the Lord says to Ananias, "Behold,

he prays. Prayerlessness is practical atheism. In this man's extremity he would not let God go.

Then thirdly, notice he prayed as a man of faith. You see the opening words of the Psalm introduce a note of hope that lingers throughout the language of this man's extremity. "O LORD," Yahweh, Yahweh. I wish we would translate what was there. "Yahweh, covenant God, you who have come and made yourself my God and made me part of your people. Yahweh, God of my salvation." It's as a man of faith that he is praying. Was it not Martin Luther who said that the Christian religion is all about personal pronouns? "The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me. Our Father, who art in heaven." And here "God of my salvation." Now this man's faith is bruised, it's battered, it's bewildered, but it's functioning. You know, it's not great faith that takes you to heaven, it's faith in a great God and Savior. Samuel Rutherford once wrote in a letter, "My faith hangs by a thread but may I say a thread of Christ's spinning." He prayed as a man of faith, his faith was functioning in the darkness.

Then fourthly, notice throughout the Psalm as we look a little more carefully at it, that he recognizes that his God, Yahweh, the God of his salvation, is personally behind everything that is happening to him. Look at verses 6 through 8 again, "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." Again in verse 16, "Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me." Here is a man who understands that his circumstances are not ultimately the result of evil and behind evil Satan conspiring because evil and Satan are not autonomous. They are able to do what alone God permits them in the holy, wise, ineffably mysterious purposes of the counsel of his will to do. Satan cannot touch a hair of your head but by the sovereign will, good pleasure, gracious purpose and lovingkindness of your heavenly Father. And this is what, in a sense, perplexes this man Heman the Ezrahite. He's trying to square the circle, if you like, Yahweh, the covenant Lord, the God of his salvation, but he is ultimately the one behind all that is happening to him.

You know, the sovereignty of God is placarded to us in the Bible but it's placarded to us not as a puzzle to solve but as a comfort to be nourished by. The sovereignty of God is intended to be a pillow on which to rest our weary, perplexed and bewildered minds and hearts and heads. He understands that evil isn't autonomous. The reality is that God's ways are not our ways. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. You know, I'm often asked and I'm sure Terry and other preachers are asked, "What do you think you will say when the Lord brings you into his nearer presence?" Well, who knows. Who knows but I would like to think I might say this, "Lord," in that moment of epiphanic glory when all is revealed, "Lord, you did all things well, the darknesses, the trials, the troubles, the bewilderment."

You see, believers aren't excused the why's of life. The man of faith, the prototypical man of faith, Jesus Christ, cried out, "My God, my God, why?" And we are not excused the why's, the mysteries and the perplexities of life. It must be 40 years or so ago now that I

first read these words of John Calvin when he says, "Better to limp along within the way that leads to life than to run headlong outside of it." Brothers and sisters, we're all limping along. Some of us limp with a greater degree of limpness than others but we're all limping along, living by faith, seeking to understand poorly often but trying to understand the mysteries and the profundities and the ineffabilities of God's ways with us. It is a great thing to know that though his ways are past finding out, his ways are good. Do you know why they're good? Because he's good. As the 199th Psalm round about verse 65, "You do good because you are good." God would un-God himself if he didn't do good to his people. Maybe you're here tonight and you're going through or have gone through and perhaps at the prospect of going through difficulties and darkness that threaten to overwhelm you and the devil will seek to say to you, "God has given up on you. He's forgotten you. You have sinned yourself out of his favor." God would un-God himself if he did not do good every moment of every day of any of his children's lives.

And I think often that's what it means to live by faith because at times our circumstances are all in opposition to the promises of God. He pronounces us just but outward signs threaten his wrath. He says that he is kind and good and life seems just an unending struggle. And so this man takes his circumstances back to the very foundation of all things. He's saying, "Lord, you're behind everything." And he's puzzled and perplexed. There's such honesty in the Psalms, isn't there? That's why if we lose the psalter we lose vital religion. There's such honesty. He is able to pour out his heart cries to the sovereign Lord who is Yahweh the God of his salvation.

The fifth thing we see is that the life of faith may be marked by unrelieved darkness. This is one man's experience. It's an extreme experience. It's the only Psalm of its kind in the whole psalter but it's there. I don't know what it's like for all the lights to go out. I've a friend who once told me he envied the lampposts of Glasgow because they had light. You know the words of Isaiah 50:10, isn't it, "Let him who walks in darkness and who has no light." I can't imagine. You know, like most of you perhaps have known times of spiritual desertion in thy soul, but to have no light, for all the lights to go out?

Just in passing, that is why, brothers and sisters, we need pastors in our churches who are gentle, who are gentle, because so many of the people of God know what darkness and difficulty and trial and trouble are. Isn't it remarkable that the first servant song in Isaiah 42, the first thing we're told in this escalating portrait of the servant raised up by God, anointed by God, indwelt by the Spirit of God who will bring atonement to the people of God, what's the first thing we're told about him? He will not break a bruised reed or snuff out a faintly burning wick. He'll be gentle and tenderhearted with the weak, the poor, the needy. The servant of the Lord must be gentle. Yes, we must be bold and courageous and faithful and true, but in the midst of it all people should be able to say, "Oh, you need to meet our pastor. He's kind to those who fall. He's gentle with those who struggle. He comes alongside you."

We need to understand that the life of faith has dark valleys to traverse and for some people those dark valleys occupy the whole of their Christian experience. Maybe believers in China or Iran or North Korea would be nodding and saying, "Amen, brother.

Amen. How right you are." But the last thing I want to say before we leave this Psalm is that the psalmist didn't grasp it when he wrote, "my companions have become darkness, or darkness is my only companion." He didn't really grasp that there was a companion with him in his darkness. "Never will I leave you," said the Lord, "never will I forsake you." And that comes to its omega point, doesn't it, in redemptive history in the Lord Jesus Christ. For him all the lights went out. We need to prize the holy humanity of the Savior as much as we prize the holy deity of the Savior, for in his holy humanity he experienced all the lights going out. He knew what darkness was as no one ever knew it and he is able, therefore, says the writer to the Hebrews, to sympathize with us in our weakness for we do not have a high priest who is untouched by the feelings of our infirmities but who was tempted in all points such as we are. He was tempted to abandon God. He was tempted to walk out on God. He was tempted to assert his own will over that of God. He entered into the darkness of humanity. We will spend the whole of eternity marveling, pondering what must it have meant for the Holy One to have all the lights go out, and if we were to ask, I've little doubt the answer would come back, "All the lights went out for him that they might never eternally go out for you."

It's a dark Psalm but the opening words cast a shadow through the bewilderments, the perplexities, the mysteries of the psalmist's experience. "Yahweh, covenant God, God of my salvation," that's where he's anchoring himself. His faith was bruised, it was battered, it was bewildered, but it was functioning. He refused to let God go, and the deeper truth, God refused to let him go. Amen.