

# A God given psalm for the sorrowful believer

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*Psalms*

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We turn then, in the word of God, to Psalm 88. Psalm 88 and we can entitle our study, the sermon this evening, "A God-Given Psalm for the Sorrowful Believer." A God-given Psalm for the sorrowful believer. Every one of the Psalms has its echo in the experience of the people of God and this Psalm is no exception. It is undoubtedly the most sorrowful Psalm in the entire Psalter. There is no Psalm that is so thin, we might say, on the positive side, and so sustained in its sense of sorrow, as this Psalm is, and yet it has found a place, and must find a place, in the praise of God's people and in the history of the church.

I remember reading, and I was trying to find the reference and I couldn't find it, but I remember reading in the history of the Reformation a group of Reformed pastors, or I can't remember whether they were Huguenots or Waldensians, in the times of horrific persecution as they were struggling through the forests and they had to bury some of their colleagues who had died in the afflictions and in the journey, and they sang this Psalm to God.

A complacent church will be impatient with this Psalm. A church that is at ease in Zion, a people that are at ease in Zion, a people who are complacent in their low level of devotion to the Lord, will be impatient with this Psalm; they will clamor for light entertainment. But the exercised believer finds both the joys, the high joys of the Psalms, and also the deep sorrows of the Psalms, relevant to his own experience. That this Psalm has a place in the repertoire of the believer will be accepted unless we imagine that we have advanced beyond the godly Job. In the book of Job, there are several phrases that are very similar to this Psalm in varying degrees. In Job 14:10, we read, "But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he?" In Job 19 and verse 14, "My kinsfolk have failed, and my familiar friends have forgotten me." In Job 30 and in verse 10, we read, "They abhor me, they flee far from me." So these expressions are similar to what we have in this Psalm, and there are many other expressions where Job talks and complains of God's wrath against him and God's billows passing over him, and Job's experience, whilst in extreme case, is nevertheless, part of the experience of the people of God to varying degrees throughout the history of the church.

Now, this Psalm in the title is said to be, "A Song or Psalm for the sons of Korah, to the chief Musician upon Mahalath Leannoth," and it's not quite clear what that is, but it could mean concerning afflictive sickness, a "Maschil of Heman the Ezrahite." Now there are various Heman's mentioned in scripture. One of them is in 1 Chronicles 25 and verse 5, and he was one of those three men that David, under the direction of the Spirit, appointed to praise the Lord with the horn and with cymbals and with the harp, the others being Asa and Ethan, or Gedusan. And Heman, we are told, praised the Lord particularly with the horn. That's in 1 Chronicles 25:5, "All these were the sons of Heman the king's seer in the words of God, to lift up the horn." But there are other Heman's mentioned in Scripture.

At any rate, this Heman was afflicted severely in body and in soul. There are lessons for us in this Psalm. First of all, praying when we feel ghastly. Praying when we feel ghastly. "O LORD God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before thee: Let my prayer come before thee: incline thine ear unto my cry; For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draweth nigh unto the grave." A true believer can feel ghastly. A true believer can feel troubled and anguished and full of sorrow. A true believer can feel choked up with grief and with travail. Heman was full of trouble and he felt ready to die in the midst of overwhelming sorrows but he prayed to God, the God of his salvation, and he did so day and night. Surely this tells us that praying, even when we feel awful, is not wasted praying. Praying when we feel dreadful, praying when we feel full of anguish and destitute of comfort, is still prayer that can be heard by God and so we should not give up praying because we feel awful, or because we keep on feeling awful; whether on account of outward afflictions or inward anguish, we must cry to God.

But then, secondly, a second lesson is praying when no comfort comes from God or man. Praying when no comfort comes from God or man. The word grave, at the end of verse 3, is the Hebrew word sheol. and sheol really refers to the realm of death. Now, some modern versions simply leave it sheol in the text, but that really doesn't help an English reader a great deal. Sheol, let's go back to Genesis 3, when God said to Adam and Eve, "In the day thou eatest thereof," that is, of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, "In the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die." Now what did that mean? It meant that when they ate of that tree, they would become liable to physical death, they would become liable to all the miseries of this life, to death itself, physical death, and to the pains of hell forever. So death is used of physical death, bodily death, and it's also used of that conscious, eternal misery under the judgment of God. And the word sheol means the realm of death. Sometimes it's used of physical, the realm of physical death, that is, the grave, and sometimes the realm of eternal death and punishment, conscious punishment, in hell. But if we remember that it means the realm of death, and therefore can mean physical death, the grave, or it can mean eternal conscious punishment in hell, eternal death, then we will be clearer when we come across it in our Bibles, or when discussion arises because of it. So when the Scriptures say that all men go to sheol, it obviously means the grave, the place of physical death. When the Scriptures say that the wicked shall be cast into sheol, it obviously means hell, the place of divine judgment and eternal misery. So I hope that that helps in some way because there is confusion over this word sheol, and why in our Bibles it's sometimes translated the grave and sometimes hell. Well, that's the explanation. It's the realm of death, sometimes physical, the grave where

all men go, sometimes eternal conscious death under the judgment of God in hell. That's where only the wicked go.

Now in this Psalm, the context indicates that it should indeed be rendered the grave and so in verses 4 to 6, Heman is saying that he feels like a man near dead, among the dead, cut off from the living. If you can imagine a man mortally wounded in battle, dying, surrounded by corpses, with none of the living taking any notice, as he says in verse 8, "Thou hast put away mine acquaintance far from me; thou hast made me an abomination unto them," if you can imagine that situation, that is the way he felt. He felt as though he was being brought to the grave in misery and trouble, and that the living had abandoned him and forgotten him altogether as if he was in a deep pit, a pit of misery and unable to get out. So in verse 8, "I am shut up, and I cannot come forth." As if he's in a pit or in a dungeon and he cannot get out. So he felt closed in to affliction, despondency and depression and his conscience is in turmoil. Verse 7, "Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and thou hast afflicted me with all thy waves."

The child of God cannot experience God's judicial wrath because his sins are forgiven, but God's correction can still be dreadful to experience and so Heman has all of this trouble, and he's in despair, but not quite. Not quite. Verse 9, "Mine eye mourneth by reason of affliction: LORD, I have called daily upon thee, I have stretched out my hands unto thee." He's saying that despite all that he's still calling upon God, despite all his afflictions, all his mental anguish, all his sorrow, yet still he's calling upon God. He's still praying, because a true believer can be afflicted in all of these ways, and be near to despair, but kept from despair.

Our Westminster Confession of Faith, and I do urge you to read it, in the chapter 18 on assurance of grace and salvation, says this, "True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it; by falling into some special sin, which woundeth the conscience, and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation; by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light: yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may in due time be revived, and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair." I urge you to read that excellent chapter in its entirety.

But then thirdly, we have in this Psalm praying when it all seems pointless. Praying when everything seems pointless. Verse 10, "Wilt thou shew wonders to the dead? shall the dead arise and praise thee? Shall thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave? or thy faithfulness in destruction? Shall thy wonders be known in the dark? and thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?" These verses do not deny the reality of heaven or of the bodily resurrection of the last day. Though Heman in his anguish, in his trouble, in his sense of God's displeasure, in his doubts and fears, no doubt, the hope of these things did burn low but what he's complaining about here is that he feels he must soon die in the midst of his troubles. No doubt he was physically afflicted as well as

being in inner turmoil and if he dies without relief, how will that magnify the Lord? How will God's name be glorified if Heman, as it were, just disappears off the scene in this world in the midst of trouble and sorrow and grief, despised, rejected, and without God coming to his aid? But even in the midst of this, we see the grace of God in this man and it is a marvelous thing that the godly soul, the soul that habitually thinks of the glory of God, still thinks of the great name of God in the time of anguish. And I'm sure many of us have seen that, godly people who habitually in the time, in better times, think of the name of God and the honor of God in the time of their great sorrow and anguish and trouble, still they think of the glory of God in the midst of the earth. And Heman does so here.

It seems pointless. It seems as though he's going to be brought to the grave. What will be achieved? What purpose will be served by this child of God being overwhelmed by trouble and soul distressed right until he dies? And so he thinks of the cause of God and truth on earth if he should die uncomforted and apparently unheard by God. He is urging God to haste to answer, because the Lord will not quarrel with such wrestling with him. For it all seems so meaningless but he still prays. Verse 13, "But unto thee have I cried, O LORD; and in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee." That word prevent in the old sense of go before or come before; we talk about something being prevented, we mean something coming before it and blocking the way but the older sense is more general, of coming before. Despite all this bewilderment, he still prays and his prayer will come before God.

So praying when he felt ghastly, praying when he felt no comfort from God and man, and praying when everything seems so meaningless, and fourthly, praying in a life of trouble. Verse 14 to the end, "LORD, why castest thou off my soul? why hidest thou thy face from me? I am afflicted and ready to die from my youth up: while I suffer thy terrors I am distracted." And then he goes on again to describe his sorrows. "Thy fierce wrath goeth over me; thy terrors have cut me off. They came round about me daily like water; they compassed me about together. Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness." Everything reminded him of his sin, everything suggested that he was cut off from God but in verse 15, he says that this was no new thing. It indicates that this man, Heman, had had a troubled life, that this was not just a flash in the pan. I'm not saying he felt like this all his life, but he was no stranger to this kind of trouble and there are some believers who do have vastly more trouble both in degree and duration than others, even others of the Lord's people, and certainly more than many of the ungodly. There are some believers who seem to have a life of trouble, either of outward affliction pressing upon them, or of anguish of spirit, and of troubles, and doubts, and fears. And this Psalm doesn't even tell us how Heman got out of this. It just leaves us, verse 18, "Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness." We're left with Heman in the midst of his trouble, he's been crying to God every day. Here he is, still troubled, still abandoned by friends, still uncomforted by God, and we're left.

And that brings us, fifthly, to why this Psalm was written. Why this Psalm was written? It was written for our learning. In the title it's called a maschil, which means a Psalm of

deep instruction. God didn't cause Heman to go through all this sorrow and to write this Psalm for nothing. The experiences of believers, especially the biblical writers on the inspiration of the Spirit, are for our encouragement. The Apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians 1, talks about "the God of all comfort, the Father of mercies, who comforteth us in all our tribulations, that we may be able to comfort them that are in any trouble, with that same comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God." The apostles experienced both the tribulation and comfort he would use to help the afflicted people of God.

We don't read of Heman's comfort, but just knowing his sorrows helps. Just knowing that a true child of God can feel like this helps. At least I think it helps. Great sorrow is not a sign of being unconverted. Great trouble and great sorrow and great anguish are not a sign demonstrating that a man is not a Christian. Job's friends said it was, and they were wrong, and God himself showed that they were wrong. They were totally wrong. They said, "Oh, the reason Job's in this mess, this trouble has come upon him and he's in anguish and distress, it's because whatever he may seem to us, there's something behind this. He's really a wicked man." But they were wrong.

And Heman was a believer. Troubles with assurance of salvation are not a sign of being unconverted. A true believer may be troubled with doubts and with fears and with a sense of God's displeasure at his sins. Genuine believers can struggle with many doubts and fears, and sometimes have little comfort in the gospel, and sometimes so for a long time. They shouldn't rest in that. They should seek to have their doubts and fears resolved through the word and through prayer. But a genuine Christian can be troubled and greatly troubled, and troubled for some time with doubts and fears about whether he is a Christian or not. Now I realize that there are many people, even in this part of the world, who would dismiss what I am saying to you. As far as they are concerned, if someone is a Christian, they know exactly when they became a Christian, and they never doubt from that point in time that they are a Christian. If that is your experience, be thankful to God but it is not the only experience of true believers. And if you do have troubles in this direction, if you do struggle with assurance of salvation, you know the gospel, you know that those who believe are saved, you think you believe and yet you're troubled with doubts and fears, then it does not automatically mean that you are not a Christian. Heman was troubled and he was troubled not only with outward affliction, but with a sense of the displeasure of God. But he was a converted man.

And then we also learn from this Psalm that God's chastenings are not in proportion to sin. By that I mean, that whilst all our tribulations, all the tribulations of the people of God, are for our good and for the purifying of our faith, all affliction is sent for our sanctification and our growth in holiness, yet some believers have much more troubled times than others, and yet we cannot say that the more that a believer is troubled in the providence of God, then it must mean that he stands in need of chastening and sanctification more than this other Christian who has less trouble. That patently is not the case. If that were the case, then the more holy a man is, the more trouble-free his life would be and, of course, that isn't true. Despite what the proponents of the health and wealth gospel would have us believe, it isn't true. Holy men are sometimes troubled men. There is a mystery of God's sovereignty in his dealings with his individual children which

we cannot fully penetrate. Why some believers' lives are full of trouble, and others much less so, we cannot often tell. It is so, and all those troubles are sent for the good of God's people, that tribulation that worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope, but why one more than another we just do not know. God exercises his sovereignty in these things. Why some, in some, the length of time in this world between conversion, between the new birth and death, is a long time and others a short time, why some have much trouble, some little, why some make great strides in holiness, some seem to only inch along, we do not know. It's the sovereignty of God in his dealings with his children but we do know that it is for the good, that all that he sends upon his people is working together for their good.

And we notice in this Psalm Heman's confidence in the providence of God. Psalm 88:6, "Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps." Verse 8, "Thou hast put away mine acquaintance far from me; thou hast made me an abomination unto them." And so on. Every part of his circumstances he ascribed to God, his inner feelings, his afflictions of body, his afflictions of mind, his abandonment by men. And that's something that comes out in all the Psalms, but the psalmist, whether it's David or Asaph or Heman, under the inspiration of the Spirit, they address God as the one who is in control of all that comes upon them, inwardly, outwardly, at the hand of man, whatever.

In multiplied troubles, we are not dealing with several random events and circumstances. We are dealing with the providence of the one living and true God. We tend to think, this happens, that happens, the other happens, and in our foolishness, we try to deal with this problem and that problem, the other problem, as if they're just random, isolated events. Heman didn't do that. He addressed God about all, because God is in control of all. And however isolated events may be in the minds of men, however what happens on this hand may be isolated from what happens on this hand in the sense that there is no human mind that is involved in both, they're all part of the providence of God and his dealings with us. And so in our troubles, when our troubles are multiplied, and when they seem to come from various directions, we're dealing with one providence, one plan of one living God. That's why Job, whose troubles came from all directions, he said, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him."

And in this Psalm, the genuineness of God's power and God's grace is demonstrated. You remember what Satan said about Job before the Lord, "Doth Job serve God or not? Thou hast put a hedge about him." In other words, "Yes, Job's very religious. Well, of course he's religious, he's doing very well out of it. Take away the hedge, afflict him, and then see, he'll curse God to his face." But he didn't. Yes, he was distraught, of course he was distraught. He was a man bereaved, a man destitute, a man physically afflicted in his body, and distressed in his mind, but he didn't curse God. "In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly." And what that was demonstrating to the confusion of Satan was that the kingdom of grace is real, that there is such a thing as the new birth, that God can, through his Son Jesus Christ and through his gospel, change the heart of a sinner by his Spirit so that he believes the truth and he begins to serve God even when, as far as the immediate situation is concerned, the material and physical benefits appear to be not. And that's what the book of Job is about. I've mentioned that before, but that's what the

book of Job is about. That's why we're given that opening chapter, and we're taken into what is going on, the things unseen, the spiritual battle that is going on, as it were, and God is vindicating the reality of the kingdom of his grace, the kingdom of his Son, which will destroy the works of the devil. He's demonstrating that in the life of Job, that even when all the fringe benefits seemed to be taken away, Job still feared God.

There is such a thing as genuine Christianity that doesn't disappear when circumstances change. Satan would desperately want it to be otherwise, he would desperately like to believe that it's all a sham, but it isn't. There are people whose hearts have been changed, and who actually love God, and who even love God in the midst of anguish and distress and affliction and doubts and fears and trouble. And so did Heman. If you're a troubled believer, this Psalm is a message from God to you. He's included it in the Psalter to encourage you that your troubles are not unique and are not a disqualification from the kingdom of God.

But you know, Christ suffered more than Heman. When we read this Psalm, our feeling is this man suffered, and so he did. When we read of Job, we feel the same. But no man in this world suffers as Christ suffered. And the believer never will suffer as Christ suffered. In Psalm 22, David complains of the chastening of God, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent." David complains of the chastening hand of God as Heman did, and yet these words were fulfilled by the Lord Jesus Christ far beyond anything that David experienced. David experienced the chastening hand of God. The Lord Jesus Christ experienced the judicial wrath of God, the full wages of sin, and even in the deepest moments of sorrow and distress, the believer does not experience anything like that. The Lord Jesus Christ uniquely and absolutely bore not the chastening wrath of God but the unmixed vengeance of God and his sorrows exceed all that is expressed in this Psalm. And when we remember that, let us not allow the hands to hang down, let us not be weary in well-doing. The ungodly man often has a trouble-free life, not always, but often. "But what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" The believer, he, through much tribulation, enters the kingdom of God. But we know that if we suffer with him, we shall also reign with him. Heman's misery was not total, it was not final and ours, if we're in Christ, will never be total, and it certainly will not be final. Whatever affliction we suffer in this world, it will seem light compared with that eternal weight of glory which shall be revealed in us.