

“WHEN ALL YOU SEE IS DARKNESS”

I. Introduction

A. In a lecture delivered to ministers-in-training, the 19th century Baptist pastor Charles Spurgeon spoke of depression, saying, “Fits of depression come over the most of us. Usually cheerful as we may be, we must at intervals be cast down. The strong are not always vigorous, the wise not always ready, the brave not always courageous, and the joyous not always happy. There may be here and there men of iron, to whom wear and tear work no perceptible detriment, but surely the rust frets even these; and as for ordinary men, the Lord knows, and makes them to know, that they are but dust.”

1. Spurgeon knew this subject firsthand, as he struggled with depression all throughout his life.
2. Even if you do not experience depression in a clinical sense, there are going to be times in life when you are downhearted and disconsolate.
3. A time may come when you are going through a dark night of the soul and you cannot see any light on the horizon.
4. This is what makes Psalm 88 uniquely precious.
5. This is a psalm for the times when all you see is darkness.

B. Psalm 88 is the darkest of all the lament psalms.

1. Unlike the other laments, there is no turning point in this psalm.
2. Instead of ending on a note of hope, it ends with the statement, “my companions have become darkness.”
3. This psalm is somber and cheerless.

4. I heard one preacher say that a three-point sermon outline for Psalm 88 would have to look something like this: (1) misery; (2) more misery; (3) even more misery.
5. While I would not argue with that, I do think that the major sections of this psalm place an emphasis upon different aspects of the psalmist's misery.
6. That being the case, we will study Psalm 88 under these three headings: the misery of feeling overwhelmed; the misery of feeling trapped; and the misery of feeling alone.

II. The Misery of Feeling Overwhelmed (1-7)

- A. The first seven verses describe the misery of feeling overwhelmed.
 1. The psalmist begins by calling out to God for help, saying, "O LORD, God of my salvation; I cry out day and night before you."
 2. That line is what makes Psalm 88 a cry of faith.
 3. While it is true that the rest of the psalm is an expression of misery, the fact that God is the one being addressed makes all the difference in the world.
 4. This is not a matter of grumbling and murmuring against God.
 5. It is a prayer to God.
 6. In spite of the sore trial that this believer is experiencing, he looks to God and he cries out to him as his only hope of deliverance.
 7. John Calvin calls our attention to the rarity of this kind of faith when he writes, "It is common for all men to complain when under the pressure of grief; but they are far from pouring out their groanings before God. Instead of this, the majority of mankind [seek seclusion], that they may murmur against [God], and accuse him of undue severity; while others pour forth their cries into the

air at random.”

8. The fact that the troubled soul who wrote Psalm 88 cried out in desperation to the Lord is instructive for us in several ways.
 9. First, it affirms that believers sometimes experience unrelieved suffering, and and this may cause them to feel abandoned by God.
 10. Second, it teaches us that it is legitimate for us to express our feelings to God when we are distressed.
 11. And third, it shows us that we should not look for deliverance by turning inward but by crying out to the Lord.
- B. As the psalmist begins to describe his overwhelming misery, he says, “my soul is *full* of troubles.”
1. The word translated as “full” here stands out because this word is typically used in the Psalms to describe being *satisfied* by God’s blessings.
 2. We see one example of this in Psalm 65:4, where it says, “We shall be *satisfied* with the goodness of your house, the holiness of your temple!”
 3. The word “satisfied” brings to mind the sensation of having a full belly after an especially good meal.
 4. You can’t eat another bite.
 5. Your appetite has been fully sated.
 6. But in Psalm 88 it is troubles, not blessings, that have filled up this man’s soul.
 7. He can’t see how he has room for any more misery.

- C. In the remainder of this first section, the psalmist describes his condition by essentially saying that he is as good as dead.
1. He has been so utterly weakened by the onslaught of troubles that have crashed over him that it seems that he has no more strength than a person who is already in the grave.
 2. But he goes even further than that, referring to the departed as those whom God remembers no more, those who have been cut off from God's hand.
 3. In saying this, he is not denying teaching that is found elsewhere in the psalms that says God will not abandon his people to Sheol.
 4. The writer is speaking phenomenologically, or from the standpoint of the way things appear to him.
 5. The crisis that he is going through is causing him to wonder if his lot is with the wicked in hell.
 6. This is why he says, "Your wrath lies heavy upon me."
- D. There is truth in the saying, "Misery loves company."
1. There is a sort of comfort to be found in the fact that the writer of this psalm experienced sore trials.
 2. But if the only thing that Psalm 88 has to offer us is the consolation of knowing that other people suffer too, then it is of little help to us when we are stuck in darkness.
 3. The good news is that the primary speaker in this psalm is not Heman the Ezrahite.
 4. The primary speaker of Psalm 88 is Jesus Christ.
 5. No one who has ever lived has known the misery of feeling overwhelmed as well as Jesus did.

6. When he was with his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane on the night when he was betrayed, he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death."
7. And as he prayed in Gethsemane, the sweat fell from him like great drops of blood.
8. And when he was arrested and put on trial, it was as if he could see the tidal wave of suffering that was about to fall upon him.
9. And as he hung dying on the cross, he felt the wrath of God crashing down upon him and crushing him.
10. Jesus put himself through that overwhelming misery for our sake.
11. He bore the wrath that you and I deserve so that we could be set free from condemnation and be reconciled to God.

III. The Misery of Feeling Trapped (8-12)

- A. We turn now to the next major section of this psalm, which begins in verse 8.
 1. Here the prevailing theme is the misery of feeling trapped.
 2. The first thing that stands out in this section is that the psalmist says that *God* has brought this trouble upon him.
 3. He says, "*You* have caused my companions to shun me; *you* have made me a horror to them."
 4. We also saw this back in verse 6, where he said, "*You* have put me in the depths of the pit."
 5. In saying this, the psalmist is acknowledging that his suffering has not happened to him by chance.
 6. He knows that God is sovereign over everything.

7. God sends adversity as well as prosperity.
 8. While it can be disturbing to think that God is the one who brings troubles into our lives, this is ultimately the one thing that gives us hope amidst our troubles.
 9. God has a purpose in adversity.
 10. If we are believers in Jesus Christ, the purpose is for our ultimate good.
 11. This is what enables us to go to God for relief when we are in distress.
- B. The notion of being trapped finds expression in the second part of verse 8, where the psalmist says, "I am shut in so that I cannot escape; my eye grows dim through sorrow."
1. Here is a man who feels mired in a desperate and hopeless situation.
 2. The sorrows from which he cannot escape are wearing him down.
 3. Like Christian in the Slough of Despond, the more he struggles, the deeper he sinks into the mire.
 4. Anyone who has had to deal with unrelenting pain or sorrow or adversity or depression knows what is being described here.
 5. As the ordeal drags on and on, the hope of finding relief fades away.
 6. There seems to be no way of escape.
- C. Yet notice how the psalmist responds to his experience of feeling trapped.
1. He does not give up.

2. He calls upon the Lord every day.
 3. He keeps wrestling with God in prayer.
 4. And as he does so, he gives an argument for why God should answer him.
 5. He says, "Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you? 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?"
 6. "Abaddon," by the way, is a Hebrew word that means "destruction."
 7. Here it is being used to refer to the grave.
 8. The point the psalmist is making is that if God lets him die, he will no longer be able to declare God's praise.
 9. He understands that this is his chief end in life, and he wants to keep on living so that he can continue to pursue it.
- D. The interesting thing about verses 10 through 12 is that, while the psalmist poses these as rhetorical questions that assume a negative answer, the actual answer to each one of these questions is "Yes."
1. God does work wonders for the dead.
 2. The departed do raise up to praise him.
 3. His steadfast love and faithfulness do extend to the grave, and beyond it.
 4. God showed all of this when he raised Christ from the dead.
 5. And Christ's resurrection assures us that death will not separate us from the love that God has for his redeemed in Christ.

- E. As we reflect upon this psalm's picture of the misery of feeling trapped, we are reminded of how Jesus experienced this during his lifetime.
1. Though he pleaded with his Father, asking that the bitter cup that was before him be taken away from him, he submitted his will to the will of his Father.
 2. It was Christ's own will that trapped him.
 3. When they came to arrest him, he made no attempt to flee.
 4. As he stood trial, he made no attempt to defend himself.
 5. When his body was nailed to the cross, he let his life be gradually wrung out of him, until he breathed his last breath and succumbed to death.
 6. In all of this, it was not anything external to Jesus that bound him to this fate.
 7. No one took his life from him.
 8. He laid it down of his own accord.
 9. He laid down his life for the sake of his sheep, for those given to him to save.
 10. And once he had laid his life down and secured our redemption, he had the authority to take his life up again, and he did exactly that.
 11. Our risen Lord does indeed have the power to work wonders from the dead.

IV. The Misery of Feeling Alone (13-18)

- A. This brings us to the third and final section of our psalm, which begins in verse 13.

1. Here we are given a picture of the misery of being alone.
 2. The first way in which the psalmist expresses this is by saying that the Lord seems to be hiding his face from him.
 3. Though he persists in crying out to God for help, there is no answer.
 4. The only thing that God seems to be directing at him is his wrath.
 5. Like Job, the writer of this psalm feels as if God has placed a target on him and has made him the special object of his assaults.
 6. To have God against you is to be as alone as a person can be.
 7. It doesn't matter how many friends you have if you have God as your enemy.
 8. But the psalmist doesn't even have any friends left.
 9. As he says in verse 18, "You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me."
 10. His only companion is the darkness that is swallowing him up.
- B. We might wonder how a psalm that concludes in such a bleak manner can be an expression of faith.
1. Here are some helpful thoughts on this from John Calvin: "It is true, that when the heart is in perplexity and doubt, or rather is tossed hither and thither, faith seems to be swallowed up. But experience teaches us that faith, while it fluctuates amidst these agitations, continues to rise again from time to time, so as not to be overwhelmed; and if at any time it is at the point of being stifled, it is nevertheless sheltered and cherished, for though the tempests may become never so violent, it shields itself from them by reflecting that God continues faithful, and never disappoints or forsakes his own children."

2. Though this psalm ends on a seemingly hopeless note, this was not the end of the psalmist's story.
 3. At the time when he wrote this, he could not see any way out of the darkness that was engulfing him.
 4. But in the end, in one way or another, the Lord proved himself to be the God of his salvation.
 5. By giving us a psalm that ends on such a dark note, the Lord teaches us that there may be times when we too feel overwhelmed, trapped, and alone.
 6. Yet even if such times do come, we can be confident that the Lord is still the God of our salvation.
- C. Jesus certainly knew what it was to be utterly alone in facing the wrath of God.
1. One of his closest friends betrayed him into the hands of his enemies.
 2. At his arrest, his other disciples deserted him.
 3. Peter denied him three times.
 4. As he stood trial, there was no one to defend him.
 5. As he hung on the cross, he experienced total isolation as the divine wrath fell upon him.
 6. The darkness that covered the land at that hour was symbolic of the darkness into which Jesus was descending.
 7. The one who had no sin was made sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God.

V. Conclusion

- A. The fact that the primary speaker in Psalm 88 is Jesus means you always have hope, even when the darkness is your only companion.
- B. If you belong to Christ, you are never alone, regardless of how things may appear.
- C. And because you walk by faith in him, and not by your feelings, you can be confident that you will not stumble when you feel alone in the dark.
- D. As Charles Spurgeon once said, "Any simpleton can follow the narrow path in the light: faith's rare wisdom enables us to march on in the dark with infallible accuracy, since she places her hand in that of her Great Guide."
- E. Or, in those precious words from the twenty-third psalm, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." (Psa 23:4 ESV)