



Psalm 88 - Prayer for Help in Despondency

A Song. A Psalm of the Korahites. To the leader: according to Mahalath Leannoth. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

Introduction

This is an individual lament, suited for a person who is so overwhelmed with troubles that even his friends shun him, and who wrestles with the dread that comes from suspecting that the Lord has shunned him as well. The psalm does not specify the troubles, only that they feel like expressions of God's relentless wrath; this allows the psalm to be used by the faithful for a wide variety of hardships.

Most laments let in a ray of sunshine, usually closing on a confident note; Psalm 88 is distinct from all the rest in that there is no explicit statement of confidence. There is an implicit confidence, however, in v.6 and v.14: the song confesses that it is God who has brought these troubles, implying that relief is also in God's hand. Further, there is insistent appeal to God; the psalm instils a tough faith in its singers by reminding them to keep turning to God, even during these times when it seems that there is no answer being given. The experiences of Job provide a good example of this kind of suffering. Sickness, bereavement, and persecution can easily lead to such distress. Since Psalm 88 is in the canonical Psalms, the faith of this psalm cannot be separated from the faith expressed in the rest of the book, and it helps its singers to see that faith can be real, even when it cannot arrive at strong hope after prayer. Those without such problems may pray this psalm on behalf of those suffering.

This psalm is a song, yet a remarkably sad song, and is often regarded as the saddest psalm in the entire collection. Mahalath Leannoth seems to refer to the musical instrument upon which the song was composed. Psalm 53 also mentions the Mahalath. It is also one of the thirteen psalms called a contemplation, which according to James Montgomery Boice might be better understood as instruction.

As for the author and singer of the psalm, Heman the Ezrahite, there are many mentions of a Heman in the days of David and Solomon. Assuming that they all refer to the same man, he was noted for:

- His great wisdom (1 Kings 4:31).
- His being a Kohathite, among the sons of Korah (1 Chronicles 6:33).
- His musical ability and service (1 Chronicles 6:33, 15:17-19, 16:41-42, and 25:1; 2 Chronicles 5:12, and 35:15).
- His many and exceptional sons (1 Chronicles 25:5-6).
- His service to the king (1 Chronicles 25:6).

The identity of the singer of this dark song helps the reader to understand it. Charles Spurgeon commented, “In this Psalm, Heman makes a map of his life’s history, he puts down all the dark places through which he has travelled. He mentions his sins, his sorrows, his hopes (if he had any), his fears, his woes, and so on. Now, that is real prayer, laying your case before the Lord.”

Psalm 88:1-2 - I Cry to You, O Lord.

The song opens by declaring its purpose: <<**Let my prayer come before you**>>. The psalm is therefore a petition; it belongs to a circumstance that is earnest (day and night, i.e. there is nothing easygoing here!) and urgent (I cry out, my cry; i.e. a great feeling of distress lies behind it).

- ¹ O Lord, God of my salvation,
when, at night, I cry out in your presence,
- ² let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry.

Psalm 88:1-2

O Lord, God of my salvation. The opening line would lead the reader to expect a much more optimistic psalm. When the psalmist begins by extolling Yahweh as the God of my salvation, it is presumed that he experienced that rescue, that deliverance in the moment. This was not the case. This title was both in past remembrance and clinging to a future hope. It is one of the small glimmers of light in an otherwise dark psalm. Spurgeon notes that this is “The only ray of comfortable light which shines throughout the Psalm. The writer has salvation, he is sure of that, and God is the sole author of it. While a man can see God as his Saviour, it is not altogether midnight with him.”

Let my prayer come before you. The prayer was passionate (cried out) and constant (day and night): <<**And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?**>> (Luke 18:7). The psalmist was desperate that God would bend towards him to hear and answer his prayer.

Incline your ear to my cry. Heman used expressive language to speak of his need. The idea - figurative, of course - is that God in heaven bows his head to earth to hear Heman's plea for help - Heman's cry, "Hear me." Elsewhere David expresses his confidence that God will hear his prayer: <<*I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words*>> (Psalm 17:6), and: <<*Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy*>> (Psalm 86:1), as did Asaph: <<*Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth*>> (Psalm 78:1).

Psalm 88:3-9 - My Soul Is Full of Troubles.

The next section describes the trouble in general terms, focusing more on the feelings <<*my soul is full of troubles*>> than on the external circumstances. Sheol may be a poetical name for the grave (refer to the comment made on Psalm 6:5), but since the psalm says <<*your wrath lies heavy upon me*>> (v.7a), confirmed by <<*like those whom you remember no more*>> (v.5c), it more likely refers to the place where the wicked go.

The idea of vv.3-7 is, 'it feels like I am dying, and worse than that, dying under your wrath, with no hope either now or ever.' The psalm allows the singer to lay out these despairing feelings; it does not claim that such feelings correspond to reality. Indeed, anyone genuinely singing this to the Lord, however miserable he may feel, can be assured that he is still expressing true faith. And yet these despairing feelings produce genuine pain, whether or not they correspond to reality: and the fact that he believes that God has caused his companions, who ought to have stood by him to shun him (v.8) only makes it harder to bear. The pain keeps building: he feels shut in; his eye grows dim through sorrow. And yet, tough faith will not let go: <<*every day I call upon you, O Lord; I spread out my hands to you*>> (v.9b). The members of the singing congregation are learning here to keep coming to the Lord, even when they feel this way.

- 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 like those who have no help,
- ⁵ like those forsaken 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.

Psalm 88:3-5

For my soul is full of troubles. The agony was not superficial. It went down deep to the soul. It was inward in the soul and outward threatening his physical life, i.e. my life draws near to Sheol. Others expected the psalmist to die for he says I am counted among those who go down to the Pit.

Sheol is a proper name in Hebrew; sometimes it serves as a poetic name for the grave, to which all go, for example: <<*Like a rock that one breaks apart and shatters on the land, so shall their bones be strewn at the mouth of Sheol*>> (Psalm 141:7), and other times it names the dim destination to which the wicked go but not the faithful: <<*Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; straight to the grave they descend, and their form shall waste away; Sheol shall be their home. But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me*>> (Psalm 49:14-15). If it refers to the grave here, the idea is that the dead do not have the privilege of recounting God's praise in public worship. The verse expresses the fear that the psalmist's sins, if not forgiven, would separate him from God's presence.

Like those forsaken among the dead. The psalmist was so weak and afflicted that he felt he felt and others regarded him as practically dead already. Death seemed to pull on him as he was passively adrift and like the slain.

Like those whom you remember no more. The singer dreaded death, fearing that it would mean being cut off not only from earthly relationships, but also from his relationship with God. As with Psalm 6 and other passages, it is wrong to take these agonised words as evidence that there is no life beyond this life. The OT has a shadowy understanding of the world beyond. Sometimes it shows a clear confidence: <<*For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth*>> (Job 19:25), and sometimes it has the uncertainty shown here.

Paul says that Jesus brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel: <<*Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory*>> (2 Timothy 2:10). The understanding of the after-life was murky at best in the OT; but Jesus let the world know more about heaven and hell than anyone else could. Jesus could do this because he had first-hand knowledge of the world beyond: <<*No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man*>> (John 3:13), and: <<*When it says, 'He ascended', what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things*>> (Ephesians 4:9-10).

The psalms and the OT in general do not present a comprehensive theology of the world beyond. The psalms express the agony, fear, and uncertainty of death's doorstep. The singers in the psalms often know they can remember

God and give him thanks now, but do not have the same certainty about the world beyond.

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

Psalm 88:6-7

You have put me in the depths of the Pit. Boldly, the psalmist tells God what he feels and experiences - that God himself has caused his downfall, setting him in the regions dark and deep. This is a theme found elsewhere: <<*I will exalt you, Lord, for you lifted me out of the depths and did not let my enemies gloat over me*>> (Psalm 30:1 NIV), <<*Do not let the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the Pit close its mouth over me*>> (Psalm 69:15), and: <<*I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit*>> (Lamentations 3:55); something reflected by Jonah when he thought he was drowning in the Mediterranean Sea: <<*You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me*>> (Jonah 2:3).

Your wrath lies heavy upon me. It seemed that the source of the affliction was the righteous wrath of God. The psalmist had a deep sense of his own sinfulness. Even as he felt himself sinking under all your waves he did not protest that God's wrath was unfair. Spurgeon commented, "The wrath of God is the very hell of hell, and when it weighs upon the conscience a man feels a torment such as only that of damned spirits can exceed."

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect. Spurgeon said, "There was need to rest. Above the breakers the swimmer lifts his head and looks around him, breathing for a moment, until the next wave comes. Even lamentation must have its pauses."

⁸ You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a thing of horror to them.
I am shut in so that I cannot escape;

⁹ my eye grows dim through sorrow.
Every day I call on you, O Lord;
I spread out my hands to you.

Psalm 88:8-9

You have caused my companions to shun me. In his affliction, his former friends wanted nothing to do with him. This also was seen as God's doing as it was by Job: <<*He has put my family far from me, and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me*>> (Job 19:13).

I am shut in so that I cannot escape. Perhaps worst of all, the psalmist felt that there was no escape: <<*Why is light given to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in?*>> (Job 3:23). Life was draining from him and if God did not respond, there seemed to be no remedy.

Every day I call on you, O Lord. The psalmist reminded God of his constant prayer, made in the familiar Hebrew posture of spread out hands to God: <<*If you direct your heart rightly, you will stretch out your hands towards him*>> (Job 11:13), <<*I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land*>> (Psalm 143:6), and: <<*I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land*>> (1 Timothy 2:8).

Psalm 88:10-12 - Do the Dead Praise You?

The mention of dying under God's wrath (vv.3-7) leads to the question: 'Do you work wonders for the dead?' The purpose of this question is not to deny that the OT has a hope for the after-life (refer to Psalms 49 and 73) but rather to allow worshippers who feel the pain of vv.3-9 to continue expressing their fears. If one were to die under God's wrath, then he could not anticipate any experience of God's wonders, or any chance to praise him, in Abaddon (the place of destruction). The person who sings this in the worshipping congregation obviously does not want to perish in this way (an important component of faith), cut off from God's steadfast love and faithfulness (v.11).

- 10 Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do the shades 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 saving help in the land of forgetfulness?

Psalm 88:10-12

Do you work wonders for the dead? Because the psalmist was uncertain of the world beyond he diligently asked God to answer his prayer and meet his need soon, when he knew that he could receive God's wonders and speak of the steadfast love and faithfulness of God.

The way these verses refer to the world beyond is a good illustration of the uncertainty that the OT often has regarding what lay beyond this life:

- The dead.
- The grave.
- The place of destruction.
- The dark.
- The land of the forgotten.

Christian understanding is that the world beyond is not any of these things, but the psalmist did not yet have that revelation.

Psalm 88:13-18 - I Continue to Pray but Feel No Reply.

And so the prayer goes on; this section recapitulates the previous themes. Earnest and urgent prayer continues (v.13), the feeling of abandonment by God continues (v.14 and vv.16-17), and the fear of death under God's wrath continues (v.15). The psalm ends with an echo of v.8: his family and friends will continue to shun him, and his companions (as in v.8, the people from whom the psalmist might have expected help and sympathy) have become darkness and not the light that is needed. This sombre word 'darkness' is the last word in the psalm; and yet, as the preceding notes argue, even this does not mean that the ultimate outcome will be totally bleak. The faithful know that there is no alternative but to keep seeking the Lord in prayer.

- ¹³ But I, O Lord, cry out to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
- ¹⁴ O Lord, why do you cast me off?
Why do you hide your face from me?
- ¹⁵ Wretched and close to death from my youth up,
I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.

Psalm 88:13-15

But I, O Lord, cry out to you. After a brief focus on the terror and uncertainty of the grave, the psalmist once again set his focus on the Lord. Like others in the psalms, he sought God in the morning; refer also to Psalm 5:3, 55:17, and 59:16.

Why do you hide your face from me? The sad idea from earlier in the psalm is repeated. The worst of the psalmist's afflictions was the sense that God had in some way forsaken him; that his soul was cast off from God. He simply sang: I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.

- 16 Your wrath has swept over me;
your dread assaults destroy me.
- 17 They surround me like a flood all day long;
from all sides they close in on me.
- 18 You have caused friend and neighbour to shun me;
my companions are in darkness.

Psalm 88:16-18

Your wrath has swept over me. The thought from the previous lines is continued, the psalmist understood that in some way God was the source of his present affliction. If he suffered terrors, he could say to God they were 'your terrors.' This is a crisis, but it is a crisis of faith, not of unbelief.

They surround me like a flood all day long. Afflicted and alone, i.e. you have caused friend and neighbour to shun me, the psalmist felt overwhelmed, as if he were about to drown in his misery. The psalm here ends, with no answer but a continued cry to God who alone can rescue from such distress and despair.

My companions are in darkness. Many take this phrase in a different sense, such as the NIV: <<***the darkness is my closest friend***>>. The agonised cry of this psalm together with its absence of anger or bitterness against God shows that there is a real sense in which the psalmist's darkness has been a friend. It has - in a deep and even terrible way - brought him into closer trust and relationship with God. When Paul Simon began the song Sound of Silence with the phrase, 'Hello darkness, my old friend', he was not the first to express the idea. This seems to be Heman's sense. When it is remembered that Heman wrote this psalm, who went on to live a blessed life in many ways, it can be realised that God used even this painful season for good and: <<***We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose***>> (Romans 8:28).