

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

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Psalm 88 — A Gloomy Psalm

1.0 Introducing Psalm 88

- This psalm is the last of the psalms of the sons of Korah (Psalms 42, 44–49, 84, 85, 87, 88).
- Psalm 88 is unique in the Psalter, because of its gloomy outlook and the lack of solving the psalmist's problems. "This is the darkest, saddest Psalm in all the Psalter. It is one wail of sorrow from beginning to end."—J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, 2 vols. (reprinted; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), 2:140.
- Similarities between Psalm 88 and the Book of Job are striking: neither individual appears to have discovered the reason for their suffering.
- This psalm reminds the reader that life is not all rosy and cheery—problems arise for which we might not have any resolution.
- ✓ William Cowper (pronounced "Cooper"), friend of hymn writer John Newton and hymn writer himself, penned the words to "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood," "O for a Closer Walk with God," and "God Moves in a Mysterious Way." In 1799 Cowper composed his last poem, "The Castaway," telling the story of a sailor lost at sea when he is washed overboard in a storm. In the poem's final two stanzas, Cowper's personal identification with the sailor is clear:

I therefore purpose not, or dream
Descanting on his fate,
To give the melancholy theme
A more enduring date:
But misery still delights to trace
Its semblance in another's case.



No voice divine the storm allayed,
No light propitious shone,
When, snatched from all effectual aid,
We perished, each alone:
But I beneath a rougher sea,
And whelmed in deeper gulfs than he.

[See John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, The Swans Are Not Silent 2 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 101-2.]

- “It is true, he is aware, and firmly clings to this thought with trembling hands, that it is the God of his salvation to whom he cries (v. 1a); but that vestige of his former religious experience and former yearning hope vanishes in the darkness of the present dreadful reality of his suffering and of his mortal terror which threatens to engulf him, forsaken as he is, like one who, lonely and unheard, sinks in the frightening expanse of the ocean.”—Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. by Herbert Hartwell, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 587.

2.0 Reading Psalm 88 (NAU)

88:1 A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

O LORD, the God of my salvation,
I have cried out by day and in the night before You.

88:2 Let my prayer come before You;
Incline Your ear to my cry!

88:3 For my soul has had enough troubles,
And my life has drawn near to Sheol.

88:4 I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit;
I have become like a man without strength,

88:5 Forsaken among the dead,
Like the slain who lie in the grave,
Whom **You** remember no more,
And they are cut off from Your hand.

88:6 **You** have put me in the lowest pit,
In dark places,
in the depths.

88:7 Your wrath has rested upon me,
And **You** have afflicted me with all Your waves.

Selah.

88:8 **You** have removed my acquaintances far from me;
You have made me an object of loathing to them;
I am shut up and cannot go out.

88:9 My eye has wasted away because of affliction;
I have called upon You every day, O LORD;
I have spread out my hands to You.

- 88:10** Will You perform wonders for the dead?
Will the departed spirits rise *and* praise You? **Selah.**
- 88:11** Will Your lovingkindness be declared in the grave,
Your faithfulness in Abaddon?
- 88:12** Will Your wonders be made known in the darkness?
And Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?
- 88:13** **But I,** O LORD, have cried out to You for help,
And in the morning my prayer comes before You.
- 88:14** O LORD, why do **You** reject my soul?
Why do **You** hide Your face from me?
- 88:15** I was afflicted and about to die from my youth on;
I suffer Your terrors;
I am overcome.
- 88:16** Your burning anger has passed over me;
Your terrors have destroyed me.
- 88:17** They have surrounded me like water all day long;
They have encompassed me altogether.
- 88:18** You have removed lover and friend far from me;
My acquaintances are in darkness.

3.0 Understanding Psalm 88

3.1 Outline

- I. Death: The Expectation of the Afflicted (vv. 1-7)
- II. Despair: The Experience of the Afflicted (vv. 8-12)
- III. Darkness: The Expulsion of the Afflicted (vv. 13-18)



3.2 Notes

- **v. 1** “A Maskil”
 - Maskil = an artistically composed wisdom psalm. See notes on Psalms 32 and 42.
- **v. 1** “Heman the Ezrahite”
 - Heman, a wise man, son of Zerah (of the line of Judah): see 1 Kings 4:31; 2 Chronicles 2:6. If this is the author of Psalm 88, the psalm would not be a product of the sons of Korah.
 - Heman, a singer, descendant of Korah: see 1 Chronicles 6:33; 15:17, 19 (mentioned together with Asaph and Ethan [see Psalm 89]); 25:1-6; 2 Chronicles 5:12; 29:14; 35:15.
 - Ezrahite: see Psalm 89:1 (cp. 1 Kings 4:31). Uncertain reference: could refer to Zerah or could mean “native.”
- **v. 1** “O LORD, the God of my salvation”
 - This address is the only real positive conceptualization in this psalm.

- Here is the psalmist's hope, even if he cannot see how God will save him out of his current circumstances.
- "He believes in a God who saves, who delivers, who helps (see 3:8), but who now seems to be of no help—a God who is present, but present now only destructively in the psalmist's experience (cf. vv. 6-7, 15-17). . . . Here is someone who prays and keeps on praying (v. 2; cf. 86:1) while everything in his life seems to scream out against his belief that there is a God who delivers. . . . Yet this is faith, not merely rebellion or gloomy depression."—Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 290.
- **v. 3** "my life has drawn near to Sheol"
 - Heman not only looks at himself as near death, but at the verge of entering into the realm of the spiritually lost.
 - ✓ "Here there may be a darker shadow still: a sense of being treated like the wicked . . . , for whom death is indeed the end. This doom is stated clearly enough in another Korahite psalm, 49, especially verses 13-15."—Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 317-18.
- **v. 4** "those who go down to the pit"
 - It might be better to translate, "those about to go down to the pit," with a sense of imminency.
- **v. 5** "Forsaken"
 - Literally, "free" or "set loose." Perhaps Heman pictures death as a condition free from the duties and the despair of life.
 - Some commentators associate this word with "a separate house" (2 Kings 15:5) where King Uzziah/Azariah lived out his life as a leper.
- **v. 6** "the lowest pit"
 - Because Jeremiah uses this terminology in Lamentations 3:55, some commentators take it as but a reference to confinement.
 - This may be the same as "the lower parts of the earth" (Isaiah 44:23; Ezekiel 26:20; 32:18 ["the nether world"], 24; cp. Ephesians 4:9).
 - See "earth beneath" (Ezekiel 31:14, 16, 18).
 - Scripture writers depict the realm of departed spirits as deeper than the grave.
- **v. 7** "all Your waves"
 - David used this imagery in speaking of the "waves of death" (2 Samuel 22:5). It depicts drowning in either the sea or in a flood.
 - Psalm 42:7 (the first Korahite psalm) employs the same picture of suffering.



- **v. 10** “the departed spirits”
 - The word is the same as that transliterated “Rephaim” (Genesis 14:5; 15:20; Deuteronomy 2:10-11, 20; 3:11, 13; Joshua 12:4; 13:12; 1 Chronicles 20:4 [“giants”]).
 - A parallel passage is found in Isaiah 26:14-19, where it appears that the *Rephaim* (verse 14) have no resurrection, but the *rephaim* (departed spirits of Israelite believers) will have a resurrection (verse 19).
 - “Even the mighty among the dead (the Rephaim; . . .) are incapable, or unwilling, to rise and praise Yahweh.”—Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, Word Biblical Commentary 20 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 403.
- **vv. 11-12** “lovingkindness . . . faithfulness . . . wonders . . . righteousness”
 - Even though Heman suffers in darkness and despair, he realizes that God is a God of steadfast love, faithfulness (truth), wonders, and righteousness. His God-centered faith gives impetus to his prayers.
 - These same four terms are used to describe divine character and action in Psalms 40:10 (“truth” = “faithfulness” in 88:11) and 98:1-3.
- **v. 11** “Abaddon”
 - Only used here in the Psalms, “Abaddon” means “destruction.” It is found parallel to or joined with “Sheol” in Job 26:6 and Proverbs 15:11 and 27:20. In Job 28:22 it is joined with “Death.” See, also, Job 31:12. Compare Revelation 9:11.
- **v. 13** “But I”
 - Heman contrasts God’s actions with his own.
- **v. 18** “darkness”
 - This is the last word of this psalm in both the Hebrew and in the NAU English translation.
 - The psalmist sees no light at the end of his dark tunnel of despair.

4.0 Singing Psalm 88

Lord, the God of My Salvation (Tune: “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms”)



Lord, the Go-od of my salva-ation, day and ni-ight I-I cry to Thee;
Let my pray-er now find acce-ptance, in Thy me-ercy-y answer me.
Full of troubles and affliction, nigh to-o death my soul is brought,
Helpless, like one cast forever from Thy ca-are a-and from Thy thought.

Thou hast bro-ought me down to da-arkness, 'neath Thy wra-ath I-I am oppressed;
All the bi-illows of affli-iction overwhe-elm my-y soul distressed.
Thou hast made my friends despise me, and companionless I go,
Bound, and helpless in my bondage, pining i-in my-y bitter woe.

Unto Thee-ee, with hands upli-ifted, daily I-I di-irect my cry;
Hear, O Lo-ord, my supplica-ation, hear and sa-ave me-e ere I die.
Wilt Thou wait to show Thy wonders and Thy-y mercy to the dead?
Let me live to tell Thy praises, by Thy lo-ovi-ingkindness led.

Still, O Lo-ord, renewed each mo-orning unto Thee-ee my-y pray'r shall be;
Cast me no-ot away fore-ever, let me no-ow Thy-y favor see.
All my life is spent in sorrow, grief a-and terror always nigh,
Waves of wrath have surged about me; show Thy me-ercy-y ere I die.

Friend and lo-over are depa-arted, dark and lo-onely-y is my way;
Lord, be Thou-ou my Friend and He-elper, still to Thee-ee, O-O Lord, I pray.
Lord, the God of my salvation, day a-and night I cry to Thee;
Let my pray'r now find acceptance; in Thy me-ercy-y answer me.

— Author unknown

5.0 Praying Psalm 88

- How I praise You, Lord, for being the God of my salvation! [v. 1]
- O God, when everyone forsakes me, hear my prayer. [vv. 5, 8, 18]
- Lord, how I thank You for being no longer a child of Your wrath. [vv. 7, 16; Ephesians 2:3]
- Father, allow me to praise you in life and in death. [v. 10]
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6.0 Applying Psalm 88

- God does not always give us relief from suffering.
- The God of our salvation is still the God of our salvation, regardless of our suffering.
- "... we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for *our* adoption as sons, the redemption of our body." (Romans 8:23)

How shall entertaining worship services — with the aim of feeling lighthearted and friendly — help a person prepare to suffer, let alone prepare to die?

. . . faith-filled suffering is essential in this world for the most intense, authentic worship.

— John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, *The Swans Are Not Silent 2*
(Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 168, 169