

## “Darkness is My Closest Friend”

If you’ve been a Christian very long at all you’ve heard the name, Charles Spurgeon. Spurgeon was a remarkable man. Often called the “prince of preachers” he preached over 600 times before he was 20 years old. His sermons sold about 20,000 copies a week and were translated into 20 languages. His collected sermons fill 63 volumes, and those volumes still stand today as the largest set of books by a single author in the history of Christianity.

In 1858, at the age of 24, something happened for the first time that would be a recurring difficulty in Spurgeon’s life. Listen to Spurgeon in his own words as he describes his struggle with depression. “My spirits were sunken so low that I could weep by the hour like a child, and yet I knew not what I wept for.” He struggled within his own mind with questions about his condition, as well as going to God in prayer trying to come to grips with this great burden. And yet, he found no simple answers. He once wrote, “Causeless depression cannot be reasoned with, nor can David’s harp charm it away by sweet discoursing. As well fight with the mist as with this shapeless, indefinable, yet all-beclouding hopelessness... The iron bolt which so mysteriously fastens the door of hope and holds our spirits in gloomy prison, needs a heavenly hand to push it back.”

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when this debilitating problem had yet to be studied extensively, Spurgeon expressed both shame in himself, and *hope* in God. He saw his depression as his “worst feature.” “Despondency,” he said, “is not a virtue; I believe it is a vice. I am heartily ashamed of myself for falling into it, but I am sure there is no remedy for it like a holy faith in God.” Today, we begin a new series from Psalm 88. In this Psalm, we’ll look at times of deep discouragement and despair in our Christian lives. Although it’s true that a Christian should know joy, there can be times when we may experience real sadness and discouragement and even some degree of despair and feelings of *spiritual desertion*. As we go through this Psalm, I’m not holding this up as an exhaustive treatment of the topic, nor am I discounting what may be diagnosed as clinical depression. But for most of us, we’ll fall far short of that. Our emotions may follow differing degrees of real sadness, discouragement, and even despair as we’ll see in this Psalm.

Psalm 88 is in the category of “individual lament” which is just to say that it’s an expression of deep, *individual* sorrow or mourning. As you think of all the Psalms that you’ve read—certainly including the deep sadness that David experienced—you may be surprised to hear that this Psalm has been called “the saddest Psalm in the entire Psalter.” Reformed scholar, and former President of Westminster Seminary in California, Robert Godfrey, concurs with that statement when he writes that Psalm 88 is “the bleakest Psalm in the whole Psalter. Here is the *crisis* of faith.” John Calvin writes that this psalm “contains very grievous lamentations, poured forth by its inspired penman when under very severe affliction, and almost at the point of despair.”

Unlike other Psalms where the Psalmist is in anguish, but later God comes to his rescue by means of resolving the problem or, at least, encouraging the Psalmist in some way

even if the problem still exists, from verse 1 ‘til verse 18, this Psalm is filled with despair and darkness. Marvin Tate who’s written extensively on the Psalms states that, “Psalm 88 stands as a witness to the intent of the Psalms to speak to all of life, to remind us that life doesn’t always have happy endings.” There’s no real consensus among scholars on dating this Psalm historically, but like the other Psalms, it’s written in such a way that it continues to be a help to God’s people throughout the entire time of the history of the church, from the time that it was written until now. To the question, “how do we deal with real sadness, deep discouragement or even despair,” let’s begin our look at this Psalm under my first heading:

### —Persistence in Prayer

As we look at this Psalm from the Sons of Korah, our heading today has a couple of elements that I want to call attention to. This Psalm begins by stating that it is a Psalm of the Sons of Korah, but this Psalm adds, according to Mahalath Leannoth. It’s been suggested that “Mahalath” may be the name of the tune while “Leannoth,” is a Hebrew word that means “to humble or afflict.” Following this we have the name “Heman the Ezrahite.”

Although there’s more than one man named Heman in Scripture, this is likely the “Heman” that we see in 1 Chronicles 6:31-38. He’s listed with a group that was put in place by King David as singers in the Tabernacle. Heman—a descendant of Levi—is listed as a “singer” and his ancestry is traced to Korah. Let’s look now at the first phrase of verse 1: “O LORD, God of my salvation....” This could also translate, “God who delivers....” The Psalmist begins by calling on the name of *Yahweh*, the God of the covenant. This is very important. As we’ll see, there’s a great deal of despair and despondency in this Psalm and yet, the Psalmist consistently shows that—no matter what he’s facing—he hasn’t lost his faith in the God of the covenant. In fact, as the Psalm progresses, Heman is very clear that if there’s to be any help for his situation, it will have to come from God.

This is so important that, as I’ve divided this Psalm, each division begins with a reference to the God of the covenant. So, then, this *first* section goes from verse 1-9a. The *second* section begins in 9b with the same reference, “O LORD” and the *last* section begins in verse 13 with the same phrase, “O LORD.” Notice now the persistence in prayer that’s first mentioned in the second phrase of verse 1. “I cry out *day and night* before you.” As we progress in the Psalm, we find that one reason for such persistent prayer is because God gives no *immediate* answer. Beginning in verse 2, Heman pleads with God: “Let my prayer come *before* you; incline your ear to my cry.” The beginning of this verse reads literally, “Let my prayer come before your face.” The “face” of God in Scripture speaks of the blessing of God. We’re reminded of the benediction of Aaron in Numbers 6:24-26, “The LORD bless you and keep you, the LORD make his ‘face’ to shine upon you....” The Psalmist is crying out for the blessing of God and there’s no obvious answer. How will Hemen deal with his sorrow and despair? Truly, in times like these, darkness can seem to be our closest friend. We’ll look further at this topic of depression next time.

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